



# **Picking Up the Pieces**

**The Caldor Chronicles  
Book Eight**

**Floyde Leong**

## **Picking Up the Pieces**

Books in the Caldar Chronicles Series

*Upsetting the Balance*

*The Wheels of Justice*

*Taming the Demon*

*Back to Work*

*Unhide the Past*

*The End of the Road*

*An Unfortunate Decision*

*Picking up the Pieces*

# Picking Up the Pieces

The Caldor Chronicles  
Book Eight

Floyde Leong

This is a work of fiction. All names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to any person, place, or situation, either current or in the past is purely coincidental. No part of this work is intended to be an endorsement of any particular religion, race, or creed, nor is it intended to espouse any particular set of behaviors for or against any particular person, group, or society. Given the wide expanse of what passes for "normal" human behavior in our world, it is anticipated that some may feel uncomfortable with the contents of this story. Get over it.

Revision history:

01-01-19 – First Edition  
12-01-20 – Formatting tweaks  
12-31-21 – Formatting tweaks  
05-06-22 – Formatting tweaks  
10-01-22 – S and G tweaks  
01-20-23 – S and G tweaks  
04-18-23 – Real G tweaks  
04-18-23 – Reformatted for Obooko

Picking Up the Pieces  
The Caldar Chronicles Book Eight  
First Edition  
Copyright © 2017 Floyde Leong  
All rights reserved.  
Published by Shoestring Productions  
Menlo Park, CA  
ISBN-13: 978-1-79767-602-9  
Independently published

## ***Foreword***

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

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

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

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

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

All of these authors, and many, many more, have contributed to the stories playing out in my imagination, and it is to them that I dedicate this (hopefully) final chapter in the Caldar Chronicles series.

As an author myself (as my trifling Royalties would seem to indicate) I sincerely hope no one will be terribly disappointed by the end of this series.

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

## Words of Wisdom

Don't fear to be wrong.

*"A man should never be ashamed to own that he has been in the wrong, which is but saying... that he is wiser today than yesterday."*

Money is useful. Love of it is hazardous.

*"A wise man should have money in his head, but not in his heart."*

Dig where you stand.

*"Although men are accused of not knowing their own weakness, yet perhaps few know their own strength. It is in men as in soils, where sometimes there is a vein of gold which the owner knows not of."*

Go further than you think you can.

*"I've always believed no matter how many shots I miss, I'm going to make the next one."*

Put down the extra, unnecessary baggage you are carrying.

*"The latter part of a wise person's life is occupied with curing the follies and false opinions they contracted earlier."*

Be good to yourself in simple ways.

*"The best doctors in the world are Doctor Diet, Doctor Quiet, and Doctor Merryman."*

Be open to the idea that you can always learn.

*"No man was ever so completely skilled in the conduct of life, as not to receive new information from age and experience."*

Jonathan Swift (1667-1745)

*In Memory of Joan Lee*

*1922-2017*

*At a critical point in Stan Lee's career, Joan provided him with the support and guidance that eventually grew into the cornerstone of the Marvel Universe. To her own credit, she had only one story to tell, but she told it with heart and soul ... and then decided that once was enough.*

*R.I.P*



## Picking up the Pieces

### ***Prologue***

*Lord Rondal Caldar sai Caldarous se Earth ne Kantor was dead.*

*That had been confirmed at the very highest levels of Commonwealth authority, and at that point, the fate of Rondal Caldar was sealed.*

*The only problem now, was how to keep reports that his “official” demise was somewhat premature from becoming public knowledge.*

*Given his native tendency to get into trouble would seem to make that a rather difficult task, even after changing his appearance and hiding him on his planet of birth...*

### ***September 6, 2005, Earth, The Annex, Afternoon, In Donald’s Room***

*“\*They should be back soon, Kiki,\*”* Mary assured her again, having successfully fended off the Kee’s advances for the last thirty minutes.

It hadn’t been terribly difficult so far, although watching the little woman lick the top of her nose with her own tongue a few minutes ago had actually made her quiver, and she’d felt her juices begin to flow from that point forward.

She supposed she should be grateful Kiki had not demonstrated that little feat when they’d *first* settled in to watch a sleeping Donald.

Kiki let out another dramatic sigh while looking lovingly into Mary’s eyes, but was distracted by a moan coming from the sleeping Donald.

*“\*Maybe Donald will want to play with me!\*”* she said happily, and almost jumped out of her chair before Mary caught her and held her back.

*“\*Let’s just watch a while, first. All right?\*”* Mary asked her, and Kiki shared a sad face with her that she *almost* wanted to kiss to make her happier. She compromised by hugging her and kissing her forehead instead.

*“\*Okay! We watch! And then we play!\*”*

*“\*Huh?\*”* came a voice from the bed.

Mary and Kiki turned to look at Donald while he lay there, staring up at the ceiling.

They watched as he slowly looked around, then turned his head and looked at them sitting there, looking back at him.

*“\*Who ... who are you?\*”* he asked them clearly.

*“\*DONALD! DONALD! It’s ME! Kiki! Do you want to PLAY with me?\*”* she asked cheerfully while nearly bouncing in her seat.

*\*Ling ... Lady Sai ... Donald is awake!\** Mary pushed out strongly, hoping *someone* would hear her, then waited for him to make the next move.

### ***In the Residence***

Jaiying up looked at her mother's surprised face and dropped her sandwich. She was about to bolt from the house, but Laisee caught her before she could leave her seat.

*'You can observe just as well from right here, my girl'* Laisee shared on their higher band, before extending out to Mary to see what was happening.

### ***In Donald's Room***

*\*Ladies... Who are you?\** Donald asked again, then began awkwardly struggling to sit up. Mary recognized the symptoms of excessive bed rest and stood up to help him.

*\*Move slowly, Donald. Just move slowly and try to keep your balance,\** she instructed him while getting a grip on his arm and keeping him steady. *\*My name is Mary and her name is Kiki,\** she added, knowing he'd just keep asking until she told him.

*\*How... Where am I?\** He looked around the unfamiliar room, then looked up to see a skylight above him. He was *planet-side*?

*\*You are in a safe place, Donald,\** Mary continued while standing next to him and keeping him from falling off the bed. *\*The report said you had an accident on board ship and you suffered some injuries to your head. They brought you here to rest and get your strength back.\**

He looked up at her, then at the little woman sitting there beaming at him for some reason. He didn't see a window, just the skylight overhead, but there were two doors in the room. One was in the middle of a wall, and the other one looked like it opened into a closet – or perhaps...

*\*Facilities?\** I need to pee," he muttered, then pointed hopefully to the closest door.

"I'll help you," she said, then waited for him to get his feet planted on the floor before walking him to the door and opening it for him, but he shook her off at the door and closed it in her face.

"Kiki, I want you to find Lady Sai and get her here, quick," she said quietly, but got a confused look back from the Kee when she turned and faced her.

*\*What?\**

## Picking up the Pieces

"I said..." She stopped and turned to stare at the door before turning back to Kiki.

*"\*Kiki, please find Lady Sai and tell her that Donald is awake and talking... Talking NORMALLY,\*"* she said, then watched as the little woman zipped from the room to complete her mission.

Mary turned back to the bathroom door and considered the client in a slightly different light. Not that many aliens spoke both Standard and English. She gave it little thought while she heard the toilet flush and the water start running in the sink before deciding things needed to be escalated.

*"\*Ling! Lady Sai! Lady Laisee! Lady Spring Blossom! Donald is awake and speaking clearly – and he also speaks\* English!"* she sent loudly, then sat down to wait for backup to arrive.

### *In Déjà's Room*

Spring Blossom heard that plea for help, so she carefully placed the baby girl in her crib before tucking her support package in next to her.

*"\*I have to go, Déjà, but I'll be back. I – I'll send someone to stay with you,\*"* she said, then abruptly turned and left the room.

She hurried to Donald's room but didn't bother to knock before entering. Mary waved at her from the side of the bathroom door.

*"\*He's in there,\*"* she said in a whisper. *"\*He said he needed to pee. He said it in\* English."*

Spring Blossom's expression was guarded while she pulled Mary away from the bathroom door.

*"\*Will you please see that someone sits with Déjà and the babies? I will take care of Donald for a while.\*"*

She directed Mary to the door, then leaned against it after it closed. Donald was awake and speaking recognizable sentences – at least *one*, anyway. She walked over to the chair and sat down. In the silence of the room, she heard the water in the sink draining out, and then a few heavy breaths coming from the room's tiny bathroom. She could only imagine what he was experiencing.

~~~

Donald was maintaining control, but just barely. He'd managed to avoid hyperventilating, at least. He was still looking in the mirror over the sink and wondering just who in the hell was looking back at him. Waving his hands around proved it was *him* he was looking at, but it was a him he didn't recognize. Then he let his jumper fall to his waist and looked at his body in the mirror.

No scars, save for that old one. No *obvious* injuries, at least. His skin was ... it *seemed* like it felt like the right shade of ... *dark*? The hair on his head was between dark and gray but ... shouldn't it be *all* gray? gray like his *eyes*?

He looked closer in the mirror. His eyes *were* gray. His eyes were gray, and yet ... it seemed *that* was right, too.

He stood up straight and raised his hands to his face, closing his eyes and feeling all around his face and head, but detecting strange lumps where they didn't seem to belong. Of course, since he didn't recognize himself to begin with, he had nothing to compare them against. He took stock of the situation and considered that, of all the *nasty* things that could happen aboard ship, being alive at the end of the day was a *definite* plus ... although it would be a lot better if he knew who he *was*.

He let out a sigh while pulling his jumper back up, but not before noticing that it needed to be changed. He'd have to mention it to his keeper... *Mary* was her name. And there was Kiki of the smiling face.

He shook his head, grateful that it didn't hurt at all, and opened the door to ask his keepers some pointed questions – starting with...

*"Who are YOU?"* he asked the stranger sitting at the small table in the room.

### ***Just Outside the Door***

Ling and Shu had been returning from the tribal center after an urgent sick call, and Sai had gone along with them to observe. They were just minutes away when Mary had sent out her first call for help, and their driver had stopped the van at the front of the Center to let them out. Less than a minute later, all three of them were standing outside Donald's door and extending within to feel what was going on inside.

### ***In Donald's Room***

*"Hello, Donald. My name is Spring Blossom,"* she calmly told him, smiling while she remained seated. *"Mary and Kiki are visiting with another client at the moment and asked me to come sit with you."*

He stopped and stared at her, sensing something familiar about her, but wasn't able to figure it out at the moment. He nodded politely anyway, then shuffled back to his bed, where he sat down heavily, then wobbled just a bit, causing her to jump out of her seat to hold him steady so he wouldn't fall.

*"You've been out for quite a while, Donald. How are you feeling?"*

## Picking up the Pieces

He'd not had time to react when she came at him, but didn't seem all that concerned about it for some reason. Her question finally managed to work its way far enough through his thought processes to let him formulate an answer.

*"I feel ... weak... And a little tired. How long have I been out?"*

*"Tell him almost five months, Spring Blossom"* Sai reached out to her from the hallway.

*"You were injured almost five months ago, Donald. I was not told exactly how you became injured"* she told him.

*"Where—"* His question was interrupted by the knock on the door.

*"Come in,"* Spring Blossom called out, and Sai was the first person to step into the room.

She carefully watched for any sign of recognition from him but saw nothing to indicate he had the slightest clue as to who she was.

*"Hello Donald. I am Senior Sai Tal and this is Senior Shu Song,"* she said in greeting. *"Behind Shu is Senior Ling Wen. You are at a new Healer Cluster that was set up a mere five years ago by the grace of the Elder. Here is where you've been assigned for your convalescence."*

She waited to see if any of what she'd said got a response from him, and was pleasantly surprised to see him slowly nodding his head before he looked up at her again.

*"Senior Tal ... do YOU know who I am?"*

### ***Friday, September 9, Ambulatory Again***

Donald was being escorted by Mistress Kiki this early Friday morning while accompanied by Lady Caldarous and her child. For some reason they wanted him to walk out along the service road and back every morning to help him build up his strength.

Personally, he'd much rather spend his mornings lying in bed with Senior Maya Tal. He'd been drawn to her ever since she'd shared contentment with him after feeding him the morning after he *sort of* came to his senses. Then again, he hadn't been getting *laid* for almost five months, so that might have had something to do with it.

On *this* particular morning there was an effort being made to practice a language he appeared to already know. The best reason he could blame it on was to help the cheerful little woman who was learning it from scratch...

"Rock," Jaiying said while holding out a fist-sized lump of hard stone in her palm.

“Rock,” Kiki dutifully repeated.

There was a slight delay before he remembered his cue...

“Rock. Different from dirt in that it is usually very hard and not easily crumbled. It can be any combination of hardened materials, from compressed sand to granite,” he muttered absently.

Jaiying dropped the rock, picked up a thumb-sized piece, and held it out.

“Pebble,” she said.

“Pebble,” Kiki repeated.

“Pebble. Hard like a rock, only much smaller,” he muttered. “It sorta depends on your interpretation of size, I suppose.”

They continued like that, speaking the oddly barking sounds of the local native language while strolling along the service road.

At the head of the long driveway, they stopped and watched the main road as a vehicle approached and passed in front of them.

“Truck,” Jaiying said.

“Truck,” Kiki echoed.

“Pickup truck. Think it was a Ford.” Donald froze, then watched as the letters on the tailgate faded into the distance.

“Donald?” Laisee said quietly, then waited patiently for him to speak.

“I... It appears I can *read* this ‘English’ as well as speak it,” he finally said.

“Yes, Donald. You remember what Lady Sai told you? You were here once before in a support role and had immersed yourself into the society. That was before you took up a *shipboard* assignment. It was while you were on the ship that you became badly injured and lost most of your memories. We were quite saddened when we researched the history of the Cato family and learned you were the last survivor of it.”

That last was not exactly true, as there were several *thousand* members of the many different Cato families already living on Earth.

The fact that the manufactured back story implied Donald was all alone was simply a means of keeping things under control; in this case, making sure his back story wouldn’t be compromised by having him unexpectedly searching for relatives who might pop out of the woodwork before he could handle it.

## Picking up the Pieces

Kiki was nothing if not unattendant to a man's moods – or a *woman's* for that matter – and picked up on his melancholy, then suggested a simple cure for it.

“Donald ... you wan *play* wif me?” she asked hopefully while batting her eyelashes at him in accompaniment with her big smile...

Something *else* unexpected was how quickly Kiki was picking up a form of pidgin English in order to fit in. Lady Sai had said they were quick learners, and Kiki could already express herself well enough to seduce nearly half the garrison and their wives or girlfriends, not to mention the sexually mature offspring who were willing. That had prompted a general sick call to have individual enzyme receptors neutralized so that no one *else* experienced a catastrophic “lost time” episode such as had affected Mistress Mary the first time she'd dallied unsupervised with Kiki...

“Perhaps later tonight, Kiki. If you're not busy,” Donald almost promised her.

“Oh! Oh *yes! Pese! Than you!*” she answered cheerfully, with everyone knowing she'd most likely forget all about it in a few minutes.

They turned and headed back to the Center while continuing their lessons with the flora this time. A short while later, a car passed them on the long driveway and stopped at the Center's parking area.

“That's Nascha,” Jaiying said. “She's coming to talk to Ling and Sai about that special project.” Jaiying realized after the fact that she should have kept her mouth shut, but figured it couldn't matter to anyone but her Mother anyway, and dismissed her concern.

“What special project is that, Miss Jaiying?” Donald asked her.

She almost blushed at that. Grandfather had started using the Earth equivalent of the Mistress title with her just two days ago without having a clue of how close he was to reality.

He was also paying *way* more attention than she thought.

“Ahhh... Nascha's husband is missing, and the Ladies are thinking of how to find him to tell him she has a baby on the way,” she contrived clumsily. Even *she* recognized it was clumsy.

There was silence for several seconds until he let out an, “Oh,” before recusing himself into his own thoughts once again.

### ***In the Center, In Donald's Room***

“How was he this morning, Maya?” Spring Blossom asked her in English, having gotten into the spirit and adopted the current local language of choice.

Maya looked up from the linen she was changing and turned to look at Ronnie's mother standing there in the doorway.

Once switching into clothes suitable for the current era, Spring Blossom looked like any other middle-aged woman from the tribe.

"He ate well, then initiated contentment with *me* this time," she admitted, but for some reason almost felt like blushing.

"Good. Perhaps that will help bring him back to..." Spring Blossom paused while looking at her son's former lover. "Do you still love him, Maya?"

Spring Blossom watched as the young Senior, who was nearly a Standard decade *older* than herself, slowly sat down on the rumpled linens and folded her hands in her lap.

Maya looked up at the woman standing in the doorway and nodded slowly while tears started gathering at the corners of her eyes.

"I do, my Lady. Gods forgive me but I do," she said, then looked down at the floor. A moment later, she brought her hands up to wipe the tears from her face.

Spring Blossom stepped in and walked over to sit next to her, reaching her arm around her shoulders and resting her other hand atop her thigh.

"You know... He almost got me *stoned* to death," she told her in a whisper, but continued more loudly. "His father had charmed me after my man died, then left me with child. He was such a *precious* gift to me, my little T̩T̩L̩SQ̩S̩É̩ B̩YIG̩É̩. I named him that after I counted the moons since my man's death. My tribe was *very* upset with me, allowing myself to be soiled by a *white* man." She looked into the distance as the memories flooded back to her.

"We finally had to run away. Rakel's men caught up with us and put us in a big metal box. After a long journey, we were given to Radatel as 'spoils of war' – but not really. Rakel wanted his *son* to live on Kantor, but did not want the responsibility of *raising* him. Typical Kantite *arrogance*," she muttered bitterly, then let out a suppressed burst of dark laughter, followed by a relieved sigh.

"Thank the *Gods* Lili became so enamored of me. She learned to speak to me, and then taught me to speak to the others. She's *very* good at that," she said, then let out another chuckle. "She convinced Radatel to take me as concubine ... not that I could have *prevented* it, even if I'd wanted to. Rad is... Well, you *know* how accommodating he can be," she murmured warmly, even getting a chuckle out of Maya over their shared experiences with the Emperor, before going on.



## Picking up the Pieces

“Even after Lili found her little Kita, she *still* called me to her bed,” she murmured wistfully, then hugged Maya a little tighter. “Did you know Kita has become the first *ever* Balese Healer? That was *after* our Ronnie ‘Gifted’ her back at the platform. I suppose she and Lili had much to catch up on during their trip back to Kantor.”

Maya knew Kita had left Lili’s employ, but did not understand that last reference.

“Kita was on *Sectorus* just ... a few *days* ago?” she asked, and got a stream of giggles to flow from Spring Blossom.

“Kita has been assigned to support the crew of *Sectorus*. My understanding is she serves the crew, but is there primarily to manage *Karl*.”

“You mean...”

“Yes. Just as Lady Shu serves our Wilber, Kita is now bonded to Karl. Lili *never* fails to reward those most loyal to her,” she said with finality.

Maya had a momentary impulse to remind her of Lili’s threat of imminent death a few years ago, but wisely decided to let it pass. After all, she *had* provoked her.

“Maya ... however things turn out, Donald will need our support in the days to come. If he continues as he is, then it should be a simple task of maintaining his health and vitality. If, as I *hope*, he *truly* returns to us, then he will need guidance to avoid the wrath of the Elder’s Council. Earth is an easy place to remain hidden, and he may *still* find useful work for himself here.”

She turned and looked at Maya’s skeptical expression before letting out a heartfelt sigh of her own.

“And yes, I do not forget the *mischief* he is capable of getting into on his own,” she added dismally, and got a hug from Maya this time.

### ***The Residence, Wilber’s Office***

Wilber looked down at the registered letter in his hands, but dreaded opening it.

It was postmarked from Washington, D.C. and was the *preferred* method he and Dwayne had worked out several years ago to convey somewhat sensitive personal information between themselves; information that *bypassed* Imperial scrutiny.

In order to do so, they utilized the relative obscurity of the US Postal System to accomplish that task. Even the sender was misdirection, as Agent Sparks used the obscure code name “John

Carter” to send mail to Wilber, while Wilber used the name “Carson Napier” for his messages to Dwayne. Ronnie would have loved it.

Given the recent circumstances surrounding the Center, whatever was contained within probably did not bode well. Could it be that Lili had had *second* thoughts about Deloris and her family? Were Howard Wells and his wife being considered for an all-expenses-paid *permanent* vacation at a beautiful Kantite resort? Gods forbid ... was the *Center* in danger of a shutdown? He dismissed that last, along with the issue of the mentally challenged individual he could see outside his office window.

It looked like Donald was being walked back to the Center’s grounds by the little Kee and Lady Laisee. He saw the child, Jaiying, looking around the grounds, before suddenly zeroing in on him watching them from his office window. She held his eyes for a moment, then turned away – almost as if he’d been dismissed as currently unimportant to her. It was very unsettling. He shivered once before looking down at the letter again while trying to dismiss his worries.

A perforated tear-strip made short work of the flap, and he pulled out two items – a card and a letter. He read the card first, finding it was a *personalized* birthday card. Dwayne had obviously been busy with his computer, as the message was both heartfelt and yet somewhat depressing.

### **Happy Birthday Wilber!**

**It is hard to believe the years have gone by so quickly. Almost sixty years old next month ... it seems like only half of that. I sincerely wanted to thank you for giving me the opportunity to experience for myself this most incredible of all possible jobs. Never in my wildest dreams would I have guessed that a crazy man from Washington D.C. could convince me to take a chance on such a challenging career, and yet – here I am.**

**However things turn out, I want you to know that I am and will always remain your loyal friend.**

**John Carter  
September 2005**

## Picking up the Pieces

“Dandy... Just. Fucking. *Dandy*,” he muttered after reading the words over again. “I’m only turning fifty-*nine*. He didn’t have to choose such an old fucking *font* just to make a *point*.”

He tossed the depressing card to the side while considering the remaining sealed envelope on his desk. Normally this would be where he began sweating, but at least the card seemed to be the punch line to what they’d talked about upon occasion...

The *upside* of Imperial service was a long and healthy life – provided you *lived* long enough to enjoy it. The *downside*, however, was *also* a long and healthy life, but without a reasonable explanation of *why* you weren’t getting any older.

He and Dwayne had laughed about it a few times, as the prospect of not getting older while the decades rolled by seemed very attractive – right up until the issue of eventual retirement, and the specter of the *FERS* reared its ugly head.

If only he’d been born Asian, or some *other* ethnic race that lived historically well-preserved lives well into their seventies or even *eighties*...

### ***Outside in the Parking Area***

Shu had finished with the Taylor’s lessons and was walking them out to their car...

Instead of a solid cast, Doctor Wells had authorized a removable brace for Deloris’ leg that went all the way up to her hip.

He’d come all the way out to the Center to make the transition for her just two days ago, so she now used a cane while in public, which was actually needed to help keep her balance with the awkward arrangement. Once at home, she was allowed to loosen it a bit, but that was just a simple dodge for her children – thus maintaining the fiction of a serious injury still under repair.

Of course, once behind closed doors, removing it all together made it *much* easier for her and Henry to practice their homework...

As they walked to their car, a short procession led by an *impossibly* cheerful little woman crossed their path.

“*Hello* Henarry! *Hello* Deloriss!” Kiki called out to them before rushing over to hug them both, almost knocking Deloris down in the process before letting them go and rushing back to the man she’d been holding hands with.

“How were your lessons this morning, Deloris?” Laisee asked politely, while Jaiying continued to the Center with Donald and Kiki.

For obvious reasons, the Taylor's blushes couldn't be seen, but both Laisee and Shu felt them. Jaiying did, too, but didn't care.

"T-They went ... w-well ... I-I *t-think*," Deloris stuttered, while glancing at Shu for confirmation.

"Oh! They did *very* well, my Lady," Shu confirmed for them. "They might be ready to learn what Ronnie and Ling developed together in another few weeks."

Deloris looked away, while Henry stared at the ground awkwardly, *both* of them remembering what had happened to her when Laisee demonstrated what they were striving for with their lessons without actually touching *either* of them in the process.

"That is *wonderful*, Shu," Laisee told her, which brought the Taylor's attention back to her smiling face. "You children run along now and remain positive. Please drive carefully."

At that, she raised her hand in farewell, then headed for the Center behind Jaiying, Kiki, and Donald. As she walked away, Henry turned to Shu with a question on his lips that he was almost afraid to ask.

"Is everyone ... where she comes from, is *everyone* so well ... *trained*?" he finally asked her.

"Oh, of *course*, Henry. On Kantor and Cletus, we take our responsibilities to our children *very* seriously. Lady Caldarous is still a young woman, about the age of Ron Cal before he," she glanced away for a moment, before continuing. "Well, as a young woman, she was raised in the Imperial household, while I was raised elsewhere, and yet the training is the same from the time we could feel the desire for it. It is the basis of our training program for the sexually active younger members of the tribe. We teach it here to prevent the abuse of those who do not desire sexual activities, yet provide guidance to willing participants so they are *properly* skilled to give simple pleasure to each other without playing destructive emotional games."

"And it teaches *birth-control*," Deloris added quietly, now wondering if they should be considering giving their older son and daughter the opportunity to come to the Center for "training" in responsible sexual behavior.

Shu smiled when she felt that from Deloris, but another feeling was overwhelming her from the house and she needed to go and deal with it. She got them headed towards their car and bid them farewell, before turning and making a beeline towards the house and her anxious Wilber.

Henry helped his wife get settled into the passenger side of the rental, then went around to the driver's side. After sitting down, he

## Picking up the Pieces

kept fumbling with the key before Deloris reached over and rested her hand on his arm. He looked up at her and saw her warm smile, but felt the chagrin within himself as he remembered how she'd reacted during the demonstration Laisee had given them.

He'd never *seen* such an expression of pure joy and passion on her face before, and was beginning to doubt if she would still find him a suitable companion if he failed to provide even a *tenth* of the pleasure Laisee had given her earlier that morning. He looked away in embarrassment until Deloris reached up and turned his face towards her again.

"You know I love you," she murmured, then leaned in while pulling his head to hers and kissing him gently on the lips. It lasted several seconds until he quivered a tiny bit and pulled away from her.

"Deloris, I—"

"Shhhh..." she whispered, "It felt *really* good – especially when Laisee did it again after you were *inside* me. Let's go home, lover. This brace is chafing and I want to take it off. Of course, you'll have to *help* me ... in the *bedroom* ... if you *want to*?" she teased him.

He visibly gulped, but considered the alternative – of which there really was none. It sounded like his wife wanted to play some more, and Shu had told him he was to do his very best to provide for her pleasure, so he would receive pleasure in kind. He wasn't sure if he was physically up to it but had also been taught several *other* techniques involving fingers, thumbs, lips, and tongue – something he'd paid scant attention to in the past – but if it kept his wife happy and content with him, then it was a worthwhile endeavor on his part. Besides, it was still summer break at school and they both had plenty of time.

### *In Wilber's Office*

Wilber looked down at the photocopied sheet in front of him, then at the letter lying below. He picked up and reread the photocopy from the Federal Employees Retirement System one more time, just to see if he'd missed a little bit of wiggle room in there somewhere.

"At least it didn't say '*Greetings*' at the top of it," he muttered to himself.

"My Wilber, are you not well?" Shu asked him from the office door. She stepped in and walked over to stand behind him before wrapping her arms around him and kissing him on the neck, getting an "Ummm" out of him for her efforts.

"My love, I am *always* well with you by my side," he murmured, then slowly swiveled his chair so he could hug her with both arms

before finally letting out a sigh and pushing her away so he could turn back to his desktop.

“Dwayne sent me a birthday card ... and a letter,” he said, but his voice indicated it was a *less* than joyful occasion this year. He handed her the card, but the font was too obscure for her to read, so he read it aloud and tossed it back on his desk.

“He sends you birthday greetings, my Wilber. He also sends an affirmation of his continued friendship with you,” she said, while completely missing the implicit underlying context of the message.

Wilber laughed as he pulled his wife into his lap, then reached around her to pick up the photocopy.

“This is a form letter from the DHS telling me that I seemed to have slipped between the cracks of the bureaucracy. My ‘suggested’ retirement date is past due and they’re wondering when I plan to retire and open up this position to a *new* hire,” he muttered bitterly before putting it down and chuckling at the absurdity of it.

“But... My *Wilber*, you are still young and *healthy*! You are *much* too young to retire!” she said, then kissed him on the cheek.

“Yes,” he agreed, but picked up the *other* letter – the one Dwayne had written to him.

“Dwayne tells me that Lord Caldarous had already anticipated this situation way back when I first joined as the Embassy liaison. I have the option of retiring and drawing my pension – which is just plain *crazy* – or staying on as a direct *civilian* employee of the Embassy. Either situation would mean that I’d lose many of the benefits I now have,” he said, then hugged her a little bit tighter.

“But ... but *Wilber*! We are *bonded*, almost *married*! They *cannot* take me away from you *now*!” she cried, and hugged him even tighter, which caused him to laugh out loud.

“You’re not a *benefit*, my love. You’re my *wife*. I mean that I wouldn’t have access to the resources I’ve used over the years to keep the Center safe. Do you remember when you and Xiaoli were arrested and how I kept the State Troopers from crossing the Reservation boundaries again? I wouldn’t be able to do that anymore.”

She leaned in and pressed her head to his shoulder, thinking of what he could do instead.

“You can always ask *Dwayne* to do that for you, can you not?”

He took a breath to say something, but stopped. In an emergency, it didn’t really matter *who* called for reinforcements as long as they

## Picking up the Pieces

showed up in time. That could be handled from almost *anywhere* as long as the caller had some authority to begin with. Hell, Ronnie had called on Walter, David, and even *Deloris* several times over the years while relying on nothing more than a good *working* relationship with the Sheriff's department to back him up, and Walter and David hadn't even been *covered* by the NDA.

He thought about it while considering that both he and Dwayne had access to the same contacts within the government, something that was an absolute *necessity* for being an Embassy liaison to begin with, and came to the tentative conclusion that they could probably work something out in the long term.

"I will take your suggestion under advisement, my Healer," he murmured as he stroked her cheek gently, then raised her lips up to his for a kiss.

The kiss lingered, then deepened, and he decided the *rest* of the letter could be ignored for the time being while he and his wife got up to practice their *own* lessons.

### *The Center, In the Dining Room*

Donald sat in the dining area by himself and ate sparingly of his late morning brunch. Looking around, he again had the sense that he'd been there before, but couldn't quite pin it down. As he finished his sandwich, he glanced to one side, but only saw a door where he felt a sink of some sort should have been. With a shake of his head, he got up and bussed his plate through the door to the fully appointed meal preparation area containing food storage systems, cooking devices, and at least one sink that looked like it would do for cleaning his plate – which he did. That's where Maya found him.

"Hello Donald. You do not have to do that. They have kitchen staff who will take care of it."

"It's no bother Lady Tal. Your mother tells me I used to have a support role here ... or someplace like this, somewhere," he said while rinsing off his plate and setting it in a drying rack on the counter.

He saw what he *thought* was a familiar looking machine under the counter and opened the door to see a dishwasher with clean dishes inside it. Then he looked up at the cupboards in front of him and started opening the doors to find out where to put the dishes.

"Donald, the kitchen staff takes pride in managing their kitchen," she said. "They will be displeased if something is put away in the wrong place."

He turned slightly and gave her a questioning look, but finally shrugged and closed the dishwasher.

“Just tryin’ to help,” he mumbled, then turned to the door to leave.

“Donald... Are you thirsty?”

He stopped and turned back to see her raise her palms up to cup her heavy breasts meaningfully.

“We have two newborns here and they do not drain me completely. It would be helpful to me if you would finish what they cannot. I like to keep my milk fresh. Please, Donald?”

She held out her hand and took his before leading him back to his room and lying down with him, finally opening her shirt to allow easy access. They settled in so he could empty her and ease the pressure from her breasts, but he didn’t remember much after that.

### *In Déjà’s Room*

It was past noon and feeding time again in the new mother’s room.

“How is he, Mommy?” Déjà asked Sai, while holding her daughter close to her breast. The little girl seemed to know what she wanted and how to get it – not at all like her little brother.

“He’s all right for being a *little* early,” Sai told her calmly, while the “he” in question was slowly nursing from his grandmother and managing to take the pressure off one side, while Kiki was draining the other as if she were *starving*.

Little Ronnie had been early, but hopefully not as critically as they’d all suspected...

The Wednesday visit from Doctor Wells included an invitation for him to visit the newborns, and he’d listened to Déjà’s pregnancy history before suggesting a few alternative theories about it.

The simplest was that the babies were conceived at the same time, but the female had enjoyed the lion’s share of nourishment in the uterus while the male had essentially been starved. It wasn’t particularly common, but it did happen. Next was the suggestion that little Ronnie was genetically different than his sibling but, according to the Ladies, aside from appearing developmentally delayed, he appeared to be completely normal – both inside and out.

That led to the *third* suggestion, which was superfetation – not uncommon among *certain* Earth species, but something *extremely* rare among humans.

It involved getting an *already* pregnant woman, pregnant once again; with a new ovum, new sperm, and a successful implantation in the already occupied uterus – something the human body was specifically engineered to *prevent*.



## Picking up the Pieces

Howard had mentioned hearing of only a handful of cases in the medical journals he'd read, and the results had been mixed. If the other two situations hadn't actually occurred, it would certainly explain the delayed development of the male baby. There was a test that could be performed related to bone growth, and the Ladies promised to look into it.

After they'd left Déjà's room, Howard, Sai, and Ling continued the conversation over lunch, and he'd learned from Sai the extremely harsh reality of the native Kee life and their reproductive cycle. After a considerable amount of discussion, he'd finally conjectured that it might be an evolutionary adaptation to counter the extreme mortality rate for both newborns and female adults of the species. Ling had taken notes, while Sai sent a quick message to Lili for distribution to the research group at the Elder's office. Information was precious and too valuable to be squandered on just *one* planet...

Kiki finally unlatched and sat up straight – smiling at her Mommy while wondering if her new little ... *something* or other was gonna finish the other side or not. A light tapping at the door drew her attention, and she twisted her body to look that way – which unleashed a loud belch in response.

The tapper must have taken that for permission to enter, and Donald poked his head into the room to see the three women in there. The little Kee smiled at him brightly, but burped again before she could say anything.

"I beg your pardon, my Ladies. There is a stand in the dining area with a vessel under cover. The name on the vessel... Who is Rondal Caldar?"

### *At the Residence*

It was mid-afternoon, and Rose and Jaiying were hanging out in the house – apparently the *only* location in the Reservation Annex having an entertainment system installed – and considering this strange new development...

About an hour earlier, Donald had come to the house and asked to borrow some blank paper and pencils from Wilber. He'd been happy to supply the man with whatever he needed, figuring it might somehow be therapy-related. He'd dug out both lined and blank paper, plus pencils and a portable sharpener for him to use. Donald thanked him, then nodded to the two children and their watcher before heading back to the Center.

'*You got nothing from him at all?*' Rose silently asked her again while paying scant attention to the animated animal hiding from the incompetent hunter on the monitor.

*'Nothing that makes any sense. He's lost in his memories ... somewhere. I see an alcove, but I don't recall seeing it anywhere on Kantor'*

Jaiying's attention suddenly focused on the gray creature that had stepped over a hole in the ground but hadn't suffered the effects of gravity until *after* it had time to taunt the poor hunter. It swished belowground, leaving vertical graphical representations behind before the hunter could even determine its location. Behind them, they could hear quiet chuckles coming from their current keeper.

*'After this is done, how about we watch another musical?'* Rose suggested.

*'Works for me. This guy seems to like them'* Jaiying sent while slightly tilting her head in the direction of their duty guardsman. She caught the absorbed smile on his face from the corner of her eye, as he'd apparently immersed himself in this Earthling form of juvenile entertainment.

### ***The Center, Donald's Room***

Donald sat at the small desk in his assigned space, looking down at his fourth effort lying on the desktop, but something was still not right with it. He was about to crumple it to join the others when he paused and started doodling off to the side. It seemed to be the outline of an emblem of some sort, and he pulled out another sheet of paper and started over on the emblem, or ... or *whatever* it was. It kept nagging at him while he continued. He knew it was important somehow and needed to be part of the final drawing.

### ***In Déjà's Room***

Spring Blossom was feeling stress coming from Donald, but she and Maya were busy helping with the babies. He didn't seem to be *too* stressed, but she decided to call someone over to see if he needed something in particular. Hopefully, it would be nothing more than assurances he was in the right place for his Healing.

*'Would it be possible for someone to visit with Donald and see if he needs any assistance with something? We appear to have our hands full'* she sent loudly, and felt an affirming response from the young Healer, Mary, as she made ready to leave the house.

### ***At the Residence***

"You guys know where the snacks and drinks are. I'm stepping over to the Center for a few minutes to help out," Mary told them, then glanced at the guardsman, who waved his hand dismissively without diverting his attention from the cartoon.

***The Center, In Déjà's Room***

"Spring Blossom, I can put the baby down and see to Donald," Maya told her, but she merely shook her head.

"Déjà will be out of the shower soon if she can escape from Kiki. That will be soon enough, and Mary can always use the practice," she said while continuing to rock little Ronnie on her stationary seat and wondering again when the rocking chairs Wilber had ordered would arrive.

"But ... but he might..."

"He will do nothing of the kind, Maya. Please stay with me and enjoy the presence of new life once again," she said while looking down at the little boy in her arms. They'd kept his eyes covered, but he'd made no attempt to open them during those few times they'd darkened the room to see if he would try.

Maya let out a silent sigh but settled into her seat while still holding the newborn girl. She was trying not to think about Ronnie – *Donald* – but the baby in her arms decided to drive that worry away with a hungry whimper of need.

She smiled down at her, and opened her cotton shirt to feed her lover's child. After the baby latched on and began nursing, she leaned back with a sigh and wondered what Donald was doing right now. Her concern was almost enough for her to ignore the inconsistent feeling of *bloating* she'd been experiencing for the last few days.

***At Donald's Room***

Mary arrived and quietly knocked on Donald's door. She waited a beat, then knocked again, but still got no answer. Hoping he was just sleeping, she turned the knob and found it unlocked, so she opened it to see him hunched over his desk and scribbling on a piece of paper.

"Donald?" She gave it a three-count before trying again, a little louder.

"*Donald?*"

He wouldn't be the first patient she'd had to deal with who'd become so focused on something that it'd drawn his complete attention. Just the same, she left the door opened wide as she hesitantly stepped over, leaned in, and saw what he was drawing – which didn't seem to make much sense.

Off to one side, she could see a fairly descriptive drawing of a window of some sort. Drapes had been drawn along each side that were pulled back into a decorative curve from a central location overhead. This allowed the vase situated on the windowsill to be

displayed. She'd seen something like this before, but then it came to her – an alcove. And it wasn't a vase, but an urn.

She stood up straight and cast a wary look at him, but he didn't seem possessed by an evil entity – *damn* that horror movie they'd all watched last night!

She edged to the side, getting herself into his line of sight and catching the briefest of glances from him when he recognized she was there, but was otherwise intent on ignoring her. She pulled the other chair over and sat down by the wall where she could watch him more directly and still maintain a line-of-flight to the door. His scribbling had a purpose, but she couldn't seem to make it out. The meaning of the circles and lines on the page continued to elude her – and *him*, if the wrinkles on his forehead were any indication.

He finally paused and sat up straight while looking down at the confusing pattern of circles, lines, and wiggly portions that kept their meaning hidden from him. She took that opportunity to reach out to him and rested her hand on his arm.

"Donald, perhaps you'd like to take a break? We have snacks in the house – juice, cookies? I can *cook* something for you, if you like? The children are there and watching cartoons. I thought I heard them mention watching a musical. Do *you* like musicals? Do you know what a musical is?"

He looked up at her blankly for a moment, before closing his eyes in thought.

"I ... I liked 'The Slave of Duty'," he finally said. "It was funny."

He opened his eyes and looked at her, and she reached over with her other hand and patted his arm reassuringly. He closed his eyes once again, then opened them, looking at her somewhat familiar face, then down at her hands. He froze as he looked at them, then took hold of her left hand and pulled it up to his face.

"Donald ... is everything all right?" she asked softly.

"This ... I *know* this!" he said, while tilting her hand from side to side and staring intently at her wedding ring. He looked down at his paper, then back to the ring again before letting go of her hand and grabbing another blank sheet to start over with.

In the span of a very few minutes, he'd sketched a reasonable representation of the crest imprinted on her wedding ring, then sat there looking at it and comparing it to the ring she wore.

"Your ring ... what is that symbol?" he asked while staring at her ring a moment longer before lifting his eyes to her face.

## Picking up the Pieces

“Ronnie said it’s the crest of his father’s family. He ... he adopted us when he came back here from... When he came back,” she said haltingly.

“Ronnie?”

“Ron Cal... His real name was Rondal Caldar. Those are his ashes in the dining room display case. He ... he died,” she said in a whisper.

He stared at her a few seconds longer before turning back to his drawing of an alcove. It needed a crest on it ... something subdued and tasteful to mount on the back wall of the alcove partway above the urn. He continued to ignore her while he started sketching in the crest of House Caldarous.

Mary watched him work for a few more minutes before getting up and leaving him to his art project. She needed to go find Ling, Lady Laisee, or Lady Sai as this was *way* out of her league.

### *In the Kitchen*

Ling and Sai had arrived at a tentative plan to locate the missing Fred and reported such to Laisee. The only question was how they could sneak away without getting into trouble and having it reported all the way back to the Elder.

Laisee had been *adamant* that allowing such a capricious action to take place under her tacit approval was *no* way for her to start a position of responsibility.

Sai had brushed off her earlier suggestion to involve the Senior Staff, but Laisee had been persistent – reminding her that *she* was in a better position to evaluate the suitability of their plans and how they might sour relations with the host country if things went poorly.

Laisee was frustrated at their lack of comity, while she was stuck playing a merely supporting role in Ling’s Earthly Empire to begin with – much to her *own* chagrin, it would appear. Instead of pressing a losing proposition, she’d stepped away to calm herself and was raiding the refrigerator in the Center when Mary found her...

“Donald is drawing something that’s important to him,” she said, not wasting any words. “He’s like, *totally* focused on it.”

Laisee raised one hand and closed her eyes before extending out to Donald and lurking about until she found a link to his visual cortex and could see what he was drawing.

“He’s remembering being on the *Sectorus*,” she murmured. “That’s from the traveling Throne Room where Emperor Rakel was enshrined after he–” She stopped, not knowing how much Mary knew of the intrigues surrounding the Imperial family.

“Was Donald ever even *on* the *Sectorus*?” Mary asked her, and watched as Laisee dropped her hand and returned to digging through the fridge.

She finally stood up with a can of soda in her hand and popped the tab on it, taking a sip immediately afterwards. Mary could almost *swear* Laisee purred after swallowing.

“We have *nothing* like this on Kantor,” she murmured with a sigh while savoring the ginger ale, whose label promised zero calories, along with five-percent of her daily allowance of sodium, before going on with, “Perhaps in another life he might have served on the *Sectorus*. He might have also spoken to Ronnie upon occasion. Spacers *do* speak with one another.”

“My Lady, this feels more like he’s remembering it from being there in *person*. He saw my wedding ring and that allowed him to find the missing puzzle piece,” Mary said, and held up the back of her left hand as proof.

Laisee reached out and held her hand to look at the ring in question. Then she pulled it a tiny bit closer and rolled it over to kiss the palm of her hand, which caused Mary to blush lightly.

“Ronnie was right. You *do* blush beautifully,” she said, then let go of her hand.

Laisee smiled at her sweetly, remembering how she looked when she’d “rescued” her from Kiki after having been lost in one of the Center’s many rooms for the better part of that fateful afternoon. She’d been nearly comatose, and Kiki had barely even gotten *started*. In fact, the little Kee had been returning from getting something *else* to eat when she’d followed her back to discover who’d she been playing with. Mary should have slept *well* that night.

“I – I just thought you should know, my Lady,” Mary murmured, then dipped her head in a polite bow before backing away and turning to leave.

“You are *beautiful* in your passion, Mary. Your wife and your husband are very fortunate that you share your life with them,” she called out lightly to her, causing her to stop and turn back to offer a more formal bow before finally leaving this time.

“The young are so ... *young*,” Laisee murmured, before having another sip of her ginger ale.

### ***In Donald’s Room***

Laisee had updated Sai and Maya about Donald’s situation but told them to leave him alone for the time being. Maya was finally able to

## Picking up the Pieces

break away about an hour afterwards and found him slumped over the table with his head resting on his folded arms.

To one side of his resting spot she saw a representative drawing of an alcove and a suggested location for it in the main room of the Center. She thought about that and considered perhaps the main room *would* be a better place for it, since being reminded of his *death* at every meal might not be as inspiring as Ling had originally envisioned.

Maya gathered his scattered papers and stacked them neatly on the table, with the alcove drawing right on top. She looked at the pencil sharpener, then took a moment to figure out how it opened, before dumping the shavings into the wastebasket and aligning the pencils next to the papers.

A quick look in the small facilities found that it needed fresh hand and face towels, so she gathered the dirty ones to exchange them in the linen stores. On the way back, she considered he could probably use a soothing shower, and she could take advantage of the situation to bathe with him and feed him afterwards. She smiled as she opened the door to his quarters.

### *Meanwhile, Somewhere REALLY Close By...*

*He stirred slightly, but was **still** having difficulty focusing. The **cramped** feeling was still surrounding him, and the loud voice was becoming an all too familiar annoying presence in his life – **wherever** his life was currently located. There it went again, **bitching** about the **darkness** and the inability to do anything **about** it – whatever darkness meant. He'd **much** rather sleep, but the voice was almost **relentless** with its complaints.*

*He wished things were **different** and there was someplace **else** more welcoming to him.*

### *Somewhere Else, Pretty Close By...*

*Yanmei had stuck around, still **fuming** after having had her **fill** of pleasurable drink that hadn't negated her anger in the **slightest**.*

*That the interloper had moved into a **currently** occupied suite, albeit only **partially** occupied, still irritated her womanly sensibilities.*

*She'd already decided it wouldn't be sporting to **unilaterally** alter reality once again, but she was sorely tempted to do **something** awful to that ungrateful miscreant for his **capricious** actions.*

*She was thinking of just what that might be, when she sensed the plaintive **wish** being expressed, which **immediately** offered her a suitable option.*

*Yanmei expressed a loud, if only, virtual, laugh and shouted, “**GRANTED!**” with virtual glee, before turning her attention back to the usurper.*

*“Oh, how the mighty have **fallen**... Aquintus will be **so** pleased,” she virtually murmured delightedly.*

*She contemplated with pleasure the **next** several hours of life for this tiny new citizen, but decided she’d had **enough** fun for a while. She carefully placed the cup onto the virtual lounge before **relinquishing** their shared existence.*

### ***Afternoon, At the Residence***

Rose and Jaiying were focused on the attempted seduction of Shirley Jones as Robert Preston performed a ritual-mating dance in a small town’s library. At the end of the scene, Jaiying’s attention was subtly drawn to the sound of strange laughter, but she brushed it off until suddenly feeling her Grandfather’s essence expressing a cry of anguish. She immediately extended out to his room but found him dozing on his desktop and in no apparent distress.

It had been a curious feeling, and one she thought she’d felt before, so she extended further and carefully searched while trying to trace it back to its source.

### ***The Center, In Donald’s Room***

Maya came back to the room and found Donald still dozing, so she put the towels in the bathroom and came out and shook him gently, saying, “Donald... Donald, wake up. Go relieve yourself, and then we will go and shower. I will help you.”

His semi-sleep was interrupted when her offer to shower with him wormed its way through his tired mind, causing him to wake and look up at her.

“You must shower, Donald. Then we will come back and you can relieve me of the last of my milk. But first, you should go pee,” she prompted him, which got him on his feet and staggering to the tiny facilities, while Maya bent to the task of pulling robes from the dresser for both of them.

### ***Still at the Residence***

Jaiying had played this game before and she was *more* than ready to do it again. She sent out the sense of a safe place to stay, then lured this *new* piece of her Grandfather over to join with the other piece she’d recovered. As she watched it meld with the *rest* of itself, she hoped that it really *took* this time.



***The Center, In Donald's Room***

He flushed the toilet, then ran the water for the sink while waiting for it to get a bit warmer. As he waited, he could hear Maya from outside the door.

"Come along, Donald. We will be taking a shower and you can wash there. I will wash your back for you and you can wash mine," she said. "Then you can wash my *front*."

He smiled at that, before looking at the stranger in the mirror once again. Whoever he was, at least he'd been assigned a Healer who was *more* than capable of taking care of his needs.

He turned off the water and was about to dry his hands, when a *massive* headache blossomed at the back of his skull, immediately followed by sharp pain that pierced through his brain and doubled him over. He fell to the floor – *hard* – but that was because he'd banged his head against the sink on the way down.

~~~

Maya smiled when she felt the impression of Donald as he looked forward to the remainder of the afternoon with her but then felt a painful spike in her head and heard his groan, then a loud thud, followed by a subsequent fall in the facilities. She opened the door to see him sprawled unconscious on the floor and bleeding from a gash in his head. She immediately pushed through him and called the energy for his Healing, placing her hand on his head in the process.

After turning that task over to his subconscious, she looked around and saw the blood smear on the sink, then looked at the bathroom rug suspiciously. She lifted up one corner of it and felt the backing, noting it seemed to be in good condition and didn't slip when pressed against the floor and pushed sideways. It puzzled her until she remembered the painful spike in her head just before he fell, and started fitting the pieces into a different pattern.

*'Sai, Laisee! Donald has fallen in the facilities in his room, and ... and I appear to share the Healer's Bond with him!'* she sent widely, then felt a handful of responders start heading her way.

"Come back to me, my Ronnie. I miss you. I – I *love* you," she whispered in the silence of the room.

***In Laisee's Suite***

Laisee was currently resting, but reached out and asked Shu to bring Wilber over to help with Donald if he was available. She slipped on her shoes and pulled a blouse over her shoulders before heading to Donald's room to help Maya with the newly injured body. On the way there, she thought about the *last* time something like this had

happened, but didn't think the source would be the same ... until Jaiying contacted her.

### ***In the Residence***

*'Mother ... I felt Grandfather again ... from the same location, too. I called him to Donald where he could join the rest of himself' Jaiying sent, only realizing just moments afterwards how insane that sounded.*

She could feel a virtual sigh wash over her as her mother resigned herself to the current situation.

*'Jaiying ... we will speak about this later, but for now I would like you to REFRAIN from playing with people's minds unless it is an EMERGENCY – and let someone know about it immediately BEFORE taking action'*

*'I AM letting you know, Mother, and it WAS an emergency. I felt him cry out, but it wasn't from Donald. It was from the ... the OTHER place. I just made sure we didn't lose this last piece of him' she sent quietly.*

Jaiying never sent it, but Laisee could feel her unvoiced hopes that this was the last piece of Ronnie they would ever have to deal with.

*'Very well, Jaiying. Let us hope Donald fares as well as he did the first time' she sent, then dropped the connection – leaving Jaiying to face Rose with a guilty look on her face.*

Shu had left in a hurry, dragging a confused Wilber along behind her. The guardsman barely noticed, this being somewhat of a common occurrence around the Center of late. He and the children remained in their seats while quietly enjoying a bit of American entertainment history.

Although her eyes were on the video screen, Rose wasn't paying any attention to the musical.

*'I think that perhaps you are becoming too intrusive into other people's minds, Jaiying' she shared privately.*

*'But I HAD to do it, Rose! I heard his voice and felt his distress. He might have been lost FOREVER if I didn't guide him to Donald! It was really HIM, Rose. I couldn't risk losing him all over again!'*

Rose reached out to hold her hand, finding her unresponsive for a few seconds until Jaiying opened her palm to accept her grip.

*'You and Grandfather shared a different reality, Jaiying. No one is saying that we don't believe you. What I'm saying is doing things without talking about it or asking questions first is not always a good thing to do'*

## Picking up the Pieces

*‘No! If it’s the difference between letting him die or getting him back, then I’ll do whatever I have to if it saves his life!’* She’d sent it forcefully, and jerked her hand away from Rose.

Rose turned and looked at her sadly while shaking her head slowly. It sounded like an intervention was in order, and she knew who to call.

*‘Walter ... Cathy ... Josie... Grandfather’s situation has been updated and you should hear about it from Jaiying ... again’* she sent softly, and waited for the rest of the Senior Staff to join the conversation.

### ***The Center, In Donald’s Room***

The sight that greeted Wilber would have been funny if it weren’t for the small puddle of blood soaking into the mat in front of the sink.

Maya was on the floor and cradling Donald’s head in her lap, while Laisee was glowing lightly as she’d extended into him and was taking inventory – or *whatever* the Ladies did when they did that glowy thing. Mary and Shu had stayed by the outer door and waited to be called, but Wilber wasn’t as patient.

“If nothing’s broken, can we at least move him to the bed?”

Maya looked up at him, the sight of recent tears obvious by the smeared, bloody tracks she’d made by wiping them away earlier. She looked down at Donald, then up at Laisee, while waiting for permission to act.

Laisee’s glow suddenly shut off and she turned to face Wilber.

“Might as well. Maya’s already fixed the bump on his head,” she said, then backed away to let him in.

Wilber stepped over Donald and worked himself behind Maya, letting her awkwardly slip out from under Donald while she let his head rest on a clean part of the mat.

Then she stood up and left the bathroom, but saw Mary and Shu, and waved them over – having them stand on either side of the door while she and Wilber got ready to lift the senseless body.

“Ready now, Ladies? On three – one ... two ... three,” Wilber said, then lifted Donald from under his armpits, while Maya raised him from his ankles.

As they shuffled out of the bathroom, Mary and Shu reached under Donald’s butt and locked hands together to help distribute the load while they shuffled him to the bed Laisee had pulled away from the wall. Wilber backed up far enough to get Donald’s head close to one

end, then Shu let go to dash around the bed to help Mary hold him safely over it. As one, they lowered him and got him settled.

Laisee brought a warm wet washcloth to wipe the little remaining blood from his face, while Maya busily started stripping down his upper body. Mary and Shu joined by undoing his pants and pulling them off, followed by his shorts. After Maya got his T-shirt off and tossed it aside, all four Ladies began an intensive scan of the injured body before backing away and letting out a combined sigh of relief.

"He seems to be sleeping, Maya," Laisee said, but failed to draw her attention away from Donald's face. "Maya? ... *Maya?*"

"What? Oh! I beg your pardon, Lady Laisee," she whispered, torn between watching Donald sleep and paying proper respect to the Emperor's daughter.

"Maya, you are obviously very upset at the moment. Would you like some time to compose yourself while Mary and Shu watch over Donald?"

"I-I would stay here with my ... my Donald," she said, and turned to look down at him again. "We were going to wash when he ... I felt his pain ... in my head..."

Laisee looked at her, and then *through* her, finding the situation had grown even *more* complicated now that they shared the Healer's Bond once again.

"The Gods *blessed* you, Maya, but remember you are not alone here," she said, then stepped closer and hugged her tightly. "Call out to us if you need us, Senior Tal," she whispered, then kissed her lightly on the cheek.

Laisee turned away, only to see Mary holding up a piece of paper for her inspection. She recognized it immediately. Personally, she didn't know Ronnie had that much artistic talent to draw upon, but she'd really only lived with him for little more than a decade or so. She sighed, then looked at the other image he'd drawn – a depiction of the Center's large room with a suitable location for the alcove. She appreciated Donald's attention to detail ... or was this from Ronnie? No matter... She took both sheets and rolled them together. It was about time to see if Ling was amenable to outside influences to some degree.

"Ladies," she said, then left the room without looking back. She paused halfway down the hallway before deciding to visit the large room and see how well Donald's vision suited the space.

~~~

## Picking up the Pieces

Wilber had distinctly heard the word “Ladies” and definitely didn’t consider himself one, so he stayed behind to help Maya reposition the bed once again, then watched as she worried over Donald – even placing towels under his butt and wrapping them around and over the top of him as a precaution.

“You don’t really think he’s gonna *pee* himself, do you?” he asked her, getting a started look from her in return.

He saw the distraught look on her face, so he opened his arms to her – vindicated when she rushed over and hugged him tighter than he’d expected.

“Oh, Wilber! I cannot lose him *again!*” she wailed, now clutching him tightly while her tears fell freely onto his shirt.

He let her cry it out while standing next to the bed. When she started letting up, he pulled her over to one of the chairs. After getting her down, he went to get her a cup of water, but came back with the cup for her, and the bathroom mat rolled into a bundle.

“I’m sure he’ll be all right, Maya. You’ve got all your skills, and the resources of the entire Center are at your disposal. You’ve even got your *Mom* to help you,” he said, although the idea of Ronnie needing help from the “Dragon Lady” sounded absurd, even in his *own* mind.

“What? What did you–”

“I’m going to take this bathmat and bring back a clean one,” he interrupted her. “Just keep an eye on the boy and I’m sure things will work out.” He watched her look over at Donald, then took the opportunity to kiss Shu on the cheek before scooting himself out of the room.

Walking down the hallway, he chided himself for forgetting how sensitive the Healers could be – especially *Seniors*.

He’d wondered where Donald had originally come from, as his skin tone was very much like what he’d seen often enough over the last thirty years or so. What had just clinched it for him was the tiny scar located on his torso just under his left elbow – *deliberately* left behind as an honor scar from Xiaoli back when they were sparring together. Then Maya had confirmed it for him when she’d all but shouted, “I cannot lose him *again!*”

*Whatever* the circumstances, the Boss was back – even if he didn’t currently understand all of it just yet.

~~~

Laisee and Sai visited in the early evening to find Maya lying beside her client and snuggled up next to him under the blanket. Shu had

reported Maya insisted on staying with Donald, and it looked like she'd decided to make sure he didn't fall out of the small bed.

"Maya, you should get something to eat," Laisee told her, and got an agreeable nod from her mother to back it up.

"My Lady, I am just not hungry right now," she murmured, then snuggled a little closer to her Donald.

Laisee was about to say something else when Sai placed a hand on her arm.

"Maya, should you need anything, call to me and I will bring it to you," she said, then drew Laisee towards the door while still smiling at her fretful daughter.

After they were alone in the hallway, Sai let go of her arm and slowly ambled along while thinking of their rather limited options.

"Has Jaiying found any *new* issues with Donald's mind?" she finally asked.

"I have forbidden her from interfering any longer – not without forewarning and supervision," Laisee said with a limited huff at her presumptuousness.

"Please take no offense, Lady Caldarous," Sai stated formally. "I meant no disrespect. I only advise that Jaiying is *most* skilled among us to work with the mind so intimately."

"Then perhaps my suggestion to use her to locate Fred would now find *fertile* soil in your garden? She reached the Vanir Prime from *across* the Vanir realm. Surely it would be *child's play* to locate Fred while she is on the same planet as he – *if* he still lives?"

Sai paused her step while taking a few seconds to chastise herself over her posture against blatantly using Jaiying to locate the missing Fred.

"I – I suddenly see things from a different perspective, my Lady," Sai admitted aloud. "Sad that circumstances have blinded me to this point. Truly, my only concern was exposing the child to danger during the journey ... *and*, of course, exposure of the entire Senior Staff. Perhaps we might find a way to quell Ling's curiosity while we pursue this alternate solution?"

Laisee smiled thinly as they continued to meander along, pleased at having easily achieved concord with this combat veteran.

She remembered what Shu had mentioned about her and her Wilber's first ever argument, and conceded a limited offer to Sai in that regard.

## Picking up the Pieces

"I understand Wilber has contacts that might prove valuable should we manage to pinpoint Fred's location. If they cannot prosecute a rescue attempt, then perhaps a *covert* insertion to recover Fred and his teammates would be warranted. After all, we have an entire *garrison* at our disposal."

After saying this, Laisee found herself warming up to this version of a possible reality and she reached over to take hold of Sai's hand while they both went to speak with Jaiying in person.

### *Meanwhile, REALLY Close By...*

*This feels **so** much better with that **parasite** finally gone from my presence!*

*He stretched out and felt the tentative connections of his bodily systems while they continued to sort themselves out and reveal their sensations.*

*He felt **warmth**. He felt **cold**. He felt pressure on ... on his ... his **lips**! His body automatically responded, and he enjoyed the warm nectar that began flowing from the firm nipple in his mouth.*

*He still felt out of sorts, but instinctively knew **this** would help him achieve **great** success in the near term; so he drew upon it even **more** forcefully than before, and was rewarded with a warm, sweet meal.*

### *In Déjà's Room*

At Déjà's sudden gasp, Spring Blossom looked up from her reading, but the new mother's smile belayed any trouble with the baby in her arms. With Déjà's attention solely on little Ronnie, she glanced over at the unnamed female in the crib and shook her head slightly. Déjà had remained reluctant to name the child for some reason.

As for now, she was focused instead on little Ronnie, as she struggled to reposition him slightly.

"Oh! He seems *very* hungry this evening," Déjà said while smiling down at his little face. His busy little lips were trying to drain her all in one sitting for a change.

"It's about time, Déjà," Spring Blossom said. "It was bound to happen with Maya and Sai helping to feed him, too, but *you*, most of all, is who he is going to rely on for helping him achieve his goals."

Déjà looked at Spring Blossom, the sight of her suddenly reminding her that Donald had suffered yet *another* attack of some kind. She tried to brush it off because she *knew* he would be coming back to her. It was just a matter of time, is all. Besides, he still had to name their daughter. She smiled at Spring Blossom, then looked down at the determined little face attached to her breast.

“As long as he grows up healthy, my Lady,” she murmured as she lay back and closed her eyes.

*Saturday, September 10, No Apparent Changes*

Maya woke up early that morning needing to pee in a *bad* way. She slipped out of bed and relieved herself before coming back to extend within Donald and check his status. Letting out a sigh, she went back to the facilities and grabbed the remaining towels before returning and pulling the blanket off him and rearranging the towels currently around him for more effective urine management. Once she was ready, she triggered his release and felt his body relax, while the draining of his bladder relieved the tension he was suffering from – although, morning wood could hardly be considered something one “suffered” from.

Once he was done, she pulled out the wetted towels and replaced them with a new set, then wiped him with a warm washcloth before covering him again. She wrapped the soaked towels in the remaining dry one and set them onto the table, after which she sat down next to him and extended within once again. She started searching through his mind for any positive activity, but found nothing of note – just the dreamless state of a mind at rest.

She looked over at the pile of used towels, then back down at Donald, before getting up to go wash her hands. The privacy of the facilities haunted her, and she let her feelings get the better of her, soon finding herself sitting on the toilet and beginning to weep at this *new* crisis she and her lover were dealing with.

*Somewhere Else, Pretty Close By...*

Aquintus opened his eyes and looked around, being careful to not make any **sudden** moves until he’d located his **Cup of Plenty**. The fact that it was set into the lounge’s **new** cup holder told him that his **wife** had visited during his short vacation, and he quickly reached out to see what had happened during his absence.

He found the miscreant in **sole** possession of the current real estate, so he looked around for the **previous** occupant, finding him in only moments, and somewhat gratified he’d **finally** found his way back home. Knowing the move had probably not been voluntary, he wondered what had **actually** triggered it – for just a few moments at best – then considered if **Yanmei** had allowed it, it **must** have met with her approval.

If it all worked out in the end, then perhaps he’d leave her another love note. The question **still** remained, however.

“Who in the hell let **HIM** out early?”



### *In Déjà's Room*

Déjà stretched and looked over at Mommy, who was feeding little... She looked away as she remembered she'd never named her daughter, instead leaving that task for the girl's father. Perhaps she could ask him for a suitable name for her when he finally woke up?

She got up to pee, stopping only to look down at the sleeping Ronnie, then kissed her daughter on the head while she nursed vigorously at her Grandmother's breast. She smiled and gently touched her Mother's face before going into the half-bath attached to her room. While sitting on the toilet, she considered that phrase – *half-bath*. Such strange names the Earthlings had given their facilities. She supposed one *could* take a bath in there, but it would be both awkward and messy without a drain in the floor. Besides, the toilet bowl was *terribly* small and the water was *always* cold.

She ran the water in the sink and let it get warm before wetting a cloth to wipe herself. Then she flushed the amber contents into the septic system and watched as the bowl partially refilled itself in preparation for the next deposit. A glance slightly upwards brought the thinly sliced roll of bleached tree to her attention, and she wondered if *all* Earthlings really used that pitifully thin fabric for anything other than blowing their noses.

She tossed the washcloth into the sink, then added a squirt of surfactant from the dispenser to wash both it, and her hands and face. Wringing it out and hanging it up, she grabbed the towel and dried herself before stepping out to hear the sounds of little Ronnie becoming fussy again. Already she could feel her nipples tingling, and sensed the letdown beginning in her breasts.

She picked up her baby boy and settled back on the bed to nurse him, stifling his incipient cry by plugging one of her stiffened nipples into his mouth. She let out a gasp when he began to nurse with a vengeance, then turned her head to share a labored smile with her Mother, as she'd *also* suffered one of little Ronnie's recent lactation-centered assaults.

### *Meanwhile, REALLY Close By...*

*He'd been going over his to-do list and had been on the **verge** of expressing his frustration. Then his bodily senses **reeled** from vertigo before he was placed against something warm and soft.*

*He opened his mouth to **comment** on it, but found it stuffed with a familiar warm appendage, which triggered **another** automatic response from his host.*

*He suddenly found himself being calmed by the sweet flowing nectar that was fulfilling a need he'd not even **recognized**.*

*He drifted along in a contented **daze**, thoughts of gaining control over his limbs and eyes pushed away for the moment. He'd been **chafing** at the delays in front of him, knowing the whole **world** was his to claim once he got control of his host. The more his host drank, the closer he got to a sense of **completeness**. He lay there in his contented daze, still contemplating the darkness and considering that **light** would be a welcome development.*

### ***Somewhere Else, Pretty Close By...***

*Aquintus **smiled** to himself, thinking devilishly, 'What **were** the odds...'*

*It wasn't on the order of a **real** wish, but still... Perhaps on just this **one** occasion?*

*"**Granted!**" he said, then felt a great surge of satisfaction as he kicked back in his lounge chair and took a **huge** gulp of his pleasurable draught.*

*All he had to do now was wait for the **inevitable**, which would occur when that recalcitrant soul achieved his **current** desire.*

### ***Mid-Morning, At the Center***

It had been a very busy and productive morning for Laisee. She'd contacted Lili with her proposal regarding Fred, and had gotten positive feedback from her. She'd also gotten permission to inform Lady Wen of Jaiying's *particular* set of talents, but nothing about the rest of the Senior Staff. She was to couch it as a single anomaly of the 'Gift' combined with her existing pregnancy. Use of the *Kraken's Child* in theater was currently prohibited, but subject to revision should Wilber's contacts be unable to acquire their target.

After feeding her granddaughter, Sai had joined with Laisee and Ling, just as Laisee had been promoting Jaiying as the best resource for the task. Laisee and Jaiying left after the child had demonstrated her talents to the dismissive Senior, which had subsequently *devastated* her concepts regarding Seniors in general, and her *own* talents in particular.

Sai was still doing damage control with Ling, while Jaiying waited patiently in their quarters as her mother was making more arrangements with Donald's mother.

*'Thank you, Lady Spring Blossom. I appreciate your support'* Laisee sent warmly.

*'Nonsense, my dear. There is still a chance she'll become my daughter-in-law, along with Déjà'* she sent back, the warmth of her being reflecting the joy she still felt at the possibilities.

## Picking up the Pieces

*'We will meet you at his door'* she sent, then dropped the conversation.

"Was it *really* wise to tell Lady Wen about me?" Jaiying asked her mother once again, before standing to follow her out the door.

"She will say nothing to anyone still unaware," Laisee muttered while closing the door behind them before heading to Donald's corridor. "Besides, you've *already* prevented that from happening, this is true?"

Jaiying looked up at her mother, not realizing until just now how much she'd *actually* learned at Aunt Lili's feet.

"Yes, Mother. Ling will not speak of me – or write it down, or try to tell anyone about me who does not already know of me," she confirmed for her.

At least she hadn't put in other safeguards like she'd done with Henry – although causing Ling to *vomit* at the tiniest effort to divulge her secret would probably not be appreciated by *anyone* in the Healer community.

They arrived at Donald's door and listened while Spring Blossom spoke to Maya and prompted her to get up and go eat.

She was still reluctant to leave him, and Jaiying was tempted to push an overwhelming hunger at her, but Laisee knocked on the door first and opened it.

"Maya, it is time for you to refresh yourself! You cannot remain strong and supportive of Donald if you become weak and lazy! Go and eat, then go and *shower*! Jaiying and I will watch over Donald in your absence. Lady Spring Blossom, may I ask that you watch over Maya and see that she complies?"

Her mother had come off as rather harsh in Jaiying's eyes, but results were what mattered, and her speech had been of both a supportive and reassuring nature.

"Come along, Maya," Spring Blossom told her. "We'll get a snack together, and then I'll shower with you." Her words were intended to comfort her, but only reminded Maya of what she'd planned with her Donald the previous evening, and her face began to fall.

Jaiying took the lead and reached out to Maya with a hug, but then started pulling her out of bed.

Once she was vertical, she got behind her and pushed, while Spring Blossom was leading her out the door. Once the door closed, she turned back to her Mother and let out an exasperated sigh.

"I *know*, Mother. This is *my* fault," she said, while shaking her head in frustration. "But I *couldn't* give up on Grandfather – not like the *Elder's* did."

Rather than say anything, Laisee pulled over two chairs and placed them next to the bed, where they both sat down before she gestured towards Donald. While her Mother rested a hand on her arm to take the journey with her, Jaiying extended into Donald and started poking around randomly, but didn't find anything terribly out of sorts. That meant she'd have to do a *complete* survey to detect any changes. She let out a sigh, then settled in for the duration. Hopefully it wouldn't take more than an hour or so.

### ***In the Dining Room***

Spring Blossom led a teary-eyed Maya in through the dining room and into the kitchen. She opened the refrigerator and found ingredients for preparing a meal, then Maya surprised her "*was-to-have-been-mother-in-law*" by the skill she displayed at making some sort of protein-based sandwiches for both of them. Once that was done, Maya opened the refrigerator door again and pointed to the selection of soft drinks available, asking, "Do you have a preference?"

"Laisee mentioned a ginger drink of some sort?" Spring Blossom suggested, and Maya pulled out two cans and handed one to her.

Instead of heading to the dining room, they stood near one of the counters while they popped the tops of their cans before taking a first bite out of their sandwiches.

"This is very *good*, Maya. How did you learn to fix Earth food so well?"

Maya almost laughed and had to take a drink to clear her throat.

"Ronnie and I were together here for over fifteen years," she said, and smiled at her. "He taught me many things in that time, but he never offered me the 'Gift' until we argued on his little ship."

Her voice had turned down at that, and she took a smaller bite of her sandwich before putting it down on a cutting block. She looked around and spotted a wide roll of sliced tree near the refrigerator, so she walked over to pull a couple of pieces from the roll before coming back and putting her sandwich on one and giving Spring Blossom the other. After doing so, she looked around at the expanse of the kitchen and shook her head slightly.

"I do not understand why the kitchen must be so large. The garrison eats most of their meals with their families, and they do not often gather here at all," she wondered aloud.

## Picking up the Pieces

“Ling says this supports their *guests*. We are here during a lull, as requested by Lady Lili. In another few weeks, the Center will resume limited operations as they continue to train Healers from the local tribe and two others. It was one of TSTLSQSQSÉ BIYIGÉ’s plans.”

Spring Blossom took another bite of her sandwich and watched when the expression on Maya’s face changed to one of amazement.

“He *did* it? He actually got Lady Lili to *approve* this?”

His mother leaned back against the counter and sipped her ginger ale before answering.

“TSTLSQSQSÉ BIYIGÉ had plans for *many* things, Maya. He had plans for *you* most of all. Don’t give up on him. As long as you love him, then everything will work out as it should. I can almost feel it,” she said confidently, then closed her eyes while silently reaching out to Laisee.

### *In Donald’s Room*

It was fast approaching noon before Jaiying finally let out a sigh and tried to relax her stiffened body. Her mother brought her hand to the back of her neck and flooded her with a flow of Healing fuzziness that nearly caused her to sag in her chair before turning it off.

“Well, my child. What did you find?” Laisee asked her, stretching a bit herself after sitting still for nearly two hours.

“Well, he’s *in* there, but ... I mean I *think* it’s him. It *feels* like him. Anyway, it’s like he’s doing *housekeeping* or something. I’m finding things moved around ... I mean *different* than where I’d left them.”

Laisee smiled down at her but didn’t say anything, knowing there was more to tell, and she was content to wait for her to verbalize it.

“It’s like... It’s like Grandfather once told me about Earthlings. He said they were usually very disorderly in their heads. ‘Scatter-brained’ he called it. I didn’t really know what he meant until we went shopping and I poked around a little. I discovered they *all* felt like Donald did – with everything tucked away in all *sorts* of places. Now he’s ... it’s like he’s *reorganizing* stuff on his own...”

She paused to glance at Donald before looking back at her Mother.

“And some of the memories from his backup nodules are finding their way up to his head and being put into place,” she added in a hush.

Laisee reached out and stroked her cheek, then looked at Donald laying there asleep, while apparently busily reconstructing his life. What was that he’d once said?

‘*One damn thing after another?*’ she thought to herself.

“How long do you think it might take?” she finally asked her daughter.

It was Jaiying’s turn to glance at Donald, but she just looked back at her Mother and shrugged her shoulders.

“Maybe tomorrow ... or the next day. He’s still weak,” she said, then almost reached out to transfer more life energy to him, but stopped herself. She didn’t need to have her Mother catching her in *that* little lie.

“Then we will let Maya continue to take care of him whenever she returns on her own. In the *meantime*...” Laisee muttered, then reached out to Ling.

*‘Lady Wen, Maya is currently indisposed. Would it be possible for Mistress Mary, or another Healer to attend to Donald until Maya returns?’*

*‘I... Certainly, my Lady Caldarous’* Ling sent back with utmost formality.

*‘Thank you, Ling. You are most gracious. Perhaps we may share an evening together while we are still here? Your bond-mate would be welcome, of course’* she sent, then waited curiously to hear what her response would be.

*‘That would be a welcome endeavor, my Lady. My Aineias has been well-trained and should provide an enjoyable evening for both of us’*

*‘I look forward to that time, Ling’* she sent back, before dropping the conversation.

She smiled at the side bands Ling had inadvertently shared regarding her anal proclivities, and looked forward to experiencing them herself once again.

That was something which neither Andy nor David were comfortable with. Taking *Larl* into her backside was, of course, *totally* out of the question, although Amy had reported it being a *spiritual* experience the first time they’d ever done it that way.

She folded her hands across her lap while waiting for someone to arrive, completely missing the *shocked* expression on her daughter’s face at this silent revelation.

A short while later, Laisee and Jaiying left Donald with Mary.

The young Healer stretched out on the bed next to him and teased him with her nipples, but unfortunately he was still out, so she gave up and sat in a chair before getting back into her pocketbook.

***While Headed to the Residence...***

On their way back to the house, Laisee and Jaiying met Wilber and Shu, who were coming to find Laisee to speak with her about his potential future.

Jaiying continued to the house with her watcher, while her mother invited Wilber and Shu to join her in the Center. They stopped by the kitchen to grab some drinks before she escorted them to her VIP suite; identical to the one Petrus had stayed in.

She invited them in and closed the door, but when she turned, saw them standing attentively for further instructions.

“Please... Wilber... Shu, please sit down and relax. Wilber, I understand you have concerns, and I would try to understand them,” she said, then gestured to any of the chairs in the room.

After they sat down, Wilber took a breath and tried to relax before speaking his peace.

“My Lady Caldarous, I find myself-” He stopped when she raised her hand.

“Wilber, both you and Shu are members of the Royal family,” she reminded them, then held up her left hand and pointed to her ring finger with her thumb to indicate their bonafides before continuing. “Lord Caldar made that invitation, and it is binding for as long as House Caldarous stands. Although you are not *blood*-related, we may interpret that you are *peer*-related to Lord Caldar – but without official title in Kantite society.”

She turned to look at his nervous wife and smiled at her.

“Lady Shu, you are related through clan ties to Elder Song. I could not *begin* to calculate how far away from Lili you sit, but you *do*, as Lord Caldar had determined, share a *peer*-level relationship with him that is separate from your husband’s. Lili has *also* determined this status will hold indefinitely. As such, I would be pleased if you simply called me by my given name, lest these discussions become overly burdensome.”

She smiled at Shu, then cranked up the intensity when she turned and shared her smile with Wilber once again while waiting for him to continue.

“Ahh... Yes. Anyway ... Laisee, I’ve been confronted with a situation that my government would like me to resolve in some fashion. With over three decades of service, I am approaching the legal age for them to request me to leave this position and begin my official retirement from government service. They would presumably desire to replace me with a younger man to fill the empty position.”

Laisee stared at him intently while trying to delicately pry into his thought processes; wanting to determine if this was something he'd been considering for a while, or if it was truly being forced upon him from without. She caught the fragment of memory regarding her father's long-view planning regarding him, then let her attention lapse as she sent a quick blip to Lili for understanding. A few seconds later, she focused on Wilber again while smiling demurely.

"That sounds like an incredibly *asinine* decision on the part of your government," she stated bluntly. "Wilber, if you do not wish to leave our service, then I do not understand why..." She paused when his mind danced over the *particular* conditions that triggered this mini-crisis, but determined it was trivial in practice.

"Wilber, if you have worries about your future with us here, I can assure you your position is secure and will *remain* so – even if nothing more than as a paid consultant to advise whomever your government deems suitable as your replacement. That *is*, of course, provided that he or she pass *our* acceptance criteria. As that decision would fall upon you, Ling, and *me*, I can guarantee it would be a long and *painful* process for our host to endure."

She watched his face while listening silently, sensing now the remaining issue with their host.

"Your government currently operates with an *age*-bias, Wilber. We *could* apply cosmetic enhancements that would emulate the appropriate age to appease their accountants. We could even modify your physical appearance *permanently*; much like ... like Lili has done to make her *nipples* more like Lady Diane's. Father finds Lady Diane's nipples to be *particularly* pleasant to suckle upon ... as do *I*."

Laisee turned away while smiling thinly at her near fumble, all the while listening silently as Wilber processed her comments and relaxed due to her diversional revelation of the Emperor's simple fetish.

In the process of his distraction, it also opened up his mind to the rest of his worries. She nodded once, then turned to face him again to issue her declaration.

"Wilber, we will support you no matter what your decision becomes. Should your government find fault with your physical age, then we may pursue Father's plan to acquire your pension package and remove it from our host's purview. Likewise, you may simply withdraw from your government position and work with us *directly*. Our retirement plan *is* non-existent, but living at the Royal Homestead on Kantor might be considered reward enough – or on nearly any other system that you might prefer ... even here on Earth. I trust Mister Sparks is well versed with the parameters of his position and may act



## Picking up the Pieces

in your stead for any issues that arise. It is *your* choice, Wilber,” she said quietly, then bowed her head slightly in his direction.

He sat there with the dumfounded expression on his face Shu had come to recognize as brain-freeze, so she stepped in to cover for him.

“My Lady ... Laisee, we thank you for your advice and will consider all of our options very carefully,” she said, then smiled at her superior before bowing her head until her chin almost touched her chest. She slipped her hand up the back of Wilber’s head and pushed it down as well, which triggered a delighted titter from Laisee in the process.

“Well ... good,” Laisee murmured, then watched as they both raised their heads slowly before continuing. “Wilber, I would now have *your* advice regarding a project that Ling and Sai are working on. It involves what we should do with any possible information we might obtain regarding the location of the husband of Nascha. His name is Fred...”

### *In Déjà’s Room*

It was the middle of the afternoon, and Déjà had her hands full again while feeding her daughter this time. Sai had told her this went on for *years* among the human-Standards, yet she only vaguely remembered being with her birth mother for a very short while until she was cast free and left to fend for herself. She looked down at her little girl’s face and at the tiny eyes that opened randomly and closed just as quickly. She needed to come up with a name for her pretty soon, but nothing came to mind. Perhaps Jaiying or Rose could suggest something? Better yet, perhaps *Donald* had a favorite girls’ name she could use? Her thoughts were broken by a bit of fussing in her son’s crib.

“Mother, would you please feed little Ronnie?” Déjà asked her hopefully.

Sai rolled her eyes, but moved her chair closer to the bed before picking up the wiggling little bundle of fuss and sitting down next to her daughter. She would have had Maya deal with him, but she was still dealing with the comatose *adult* version of him, so she gave out an exaggerated sigh and settled in for the duration. At least he’d take some of the pressure off her breasts while Petrus was still out with the *Kraken* and putting his new house in order.

She watched as he bounced his face off her breast before suddenly latching on, the pull of her nipple into his little mouth triggering an immediate let down from her. It was almost as if he was *determined* to make up for his low birth weight as quickly as possible. As much as she hated to admit it, his little features looked like they *could* be those of Rondal, and she wondered what color his eyes were, but he’d never opened them yet.

She sat on the edge of her stiff-backed chair and rocked her body slowly. The new rocking chairs were supposed to arrive on Monday, as promised by Wilber. He'd said they would be coming all the way from Tucson – wherever *that* was – but they'd be better than anything they could locate in town.

As the baby settled down, she thought back on all the adventures she'd had over her lifetime and tried to think of how *this* particular piece of her personal puzzle had come to be – following it right back to *Rondal*, naturally. It might have been fate. It might even have been *destiny*, but who could tell for sure? For some reason, their families had certainly maintained tenuous bonds over the centuries.

She'd given up a lot by working directly for Lady Song as opposed to settling down with someone – as if that were *really* an option for a Healer. She checked that thought when she remembered Lili had been steadily *changing* parameters in that regard.

*Petrus* would have been a good catch, though. He still *was*, actually. It had been a complete surprise to learn that, as Lili's little *brother*, he'd been part of the Royal family all this time, and yes – she was *still* married to him by Kantite law. That thought made her smile when she considered the many pathways they'd traveled to find themselves together once again.

They seemed to have worked out their remaining differences during their turbulent trials over Vanaheim. Their *future*, however, lay in continuing Rondal's work at the Emperor's direction, or rather, "suggestion" as there remained several issues to be worked out between the Commonwealth, the Hegemony, *and* the Vanir. No matter. They had Rondal's ship, the Emperor's backing and, *most* importantly, the Elder's *permission*. Hopefully, Rondal would remain out of the equation for the duration – if he ever returned at all.

There was a light knock on the door before it opened and Kiki peeked around the jam.

She was hoping to find someone to play with, but all she saw was Déjà busy nursing one new baby and Mommy nursing the other one.

Hmm...

"Mommy, I'm thirs—" She stopped in mid-whine as Sai opened the other half of her jumper, and suppressed a joyful squeal as she walked – *no running next to the babies* – over and settled in next to her new niece ... or was it nephew?

She nuzzled in, latched on, and was immediately rewarded with her Mommy's sweet nourishment. Then she looked over at the eager mouth work of her new ... *something* or other. Under the watchful eyes

## Picking up the Pieces

of Mommy, she reached out and petted his head gently, but he reacted by pulling back, and Sai flinched. His tiny sock cap, which had been pulled down over his eyes, was dislodged slightly.

"I'm sorry, Mommy," she said contritely, but the baby latched right back on, and she thought she could see his tiny eyes move under their lids.

"It's all right, my girl. He was just startled," she said softly. "I'm very *proud* of you, Kiki. You were very gentle." With that, she leaned over to kiss her second adopted daughter's hair.

Sai looked over at the smiling and nodding Déjà, who was watching how well her adopted little sister was behaving. She'd just have to remember that Kiki be fed regularly before she visited the babies...

"Mommy! Mommy, *look!*" Kiki said excitedly. "His little *eyes* are opening!"

Her voice seemed to distract him, and he unlatched and wiggled a bit. Sai brought him up and laid him across her shoulder to pat his back, shortly being rewarded with a throaty belch and a tiny sigh.

She pulled him back down and cradled him in front of her, so she could look into his face. His eyes were opening a bit, and she watched as they wandered all around, but then seemed to settle on her – their gray pupils finally zeroing in on her face.

~~~

*He'd been **content**. He'd been **warm**. Then the loud **noise** had disturbed him.*

*He'd been taken away from that nice, warm cushion and plopped over something not as soft. Then something had **pounded** on him somewhere.*

*He'd felt an immense **relief** somewhere in his being, and suddenly noticed it was not as **dark** as he'd become accustomed to.*

*His being became unbalanced for a moment, but steadied up once again ... and then the **not-so-dark** seemed to be forming **shapes** and ... **colors?***

*He seemed to see something ... in **front** of him?*

*He concentrated his attention on it, finally seeing something vaguely familiar ... something that was called ... called ... the **Dragon Lady?***

*"**\*Aww, CRAP!\***" was the **last** coherent thought passing through Rakel's conscious mind before it was **completely** wiped for the **next** go-round.*

*Somewhere ELSE, Pretty Close By...*

Destiny let out a loud virtual guffaw at the moment Raket's future suddenly **ripened**, but was **lost** in the same instant. He sipped his pleasurable drink and commended his wife's careful planning, for he could **clearly** see her fingerprints all over it.

Finished with observing the fixing of Raket's **next** assignment, he turned his focus back to Ronnie to see what he was up to. From all outward appearances, the boy seemed to be sleeping, but his **subconscious** was working **overtime**, reshuffling all the **crap** that little girl had been farting around with for the last few weeks. Too bad he'd never thought to include a **seating** chart, but then again, it was a **half-assed** idea to begin with. As he continued to watch, he considered it had actually been somewhat useful – **in the end** – then exploded in a sustained virtual belly laugh at those **terrible** puns, which caused him to spill his cup of never-ending pleasant refreshment until he got hold of himself.

With his laughter finally dying down, he settled back to see how things finished before packing up to leave for new horizons.

*Late Afternoon, In Donald's Room*

Jaiying had heard silent laughter earlier that morning, but could not determine the source of it. Now she heard it again, even *louder*, and reached out from the house, but *still* not found the source for it. Just the same, she left the house – her watcher dutifully trailing along behind her – and headed to the Center to check on Maya and see how Donald was doing.

Once in front of his door, she extended in and found Donald still asleep, and Maya sitting at the table, staring at him listlessly. She knocked lightly at the door and felt a stirring only seconds before Maya opened the door for her.

"Hello, Maya. I've come to check on Donald. Is he still asleep?"

Maya looked down at her, letting several moments pass until her words finally registered with her. She finally shook her head slightly before opening the door wider to let her in.

"Come in, Jaiying. Yes. He still sleeps," she murmured, then closed the door after her.

Jaiying walked over and laid her hand on Donald's head before extending within and trying to get a better feel of what he was doing, or perhaps *rearranging* – or if he was really doing anything at *all*. Maya stood there helplessly as she watched this tiny Senior examine her comatose lover. She was nervous but also hopeful, as Jaiying had been the one to bring her Ronnie back to life.

## Picking up the Pieces

Maya pushed a chair over for Jaiying, and the girl sat blindly while remaining focused on her client. She stayed focused for several minutes before pulling away, almost surprised to find herself seated instead of standing by his bedside.

“He seems to be getting better, Maya,” she finally said, then glanced up at the hopeful look on her face. “I don’t know if it will still be Donald who wakes up, or ... or Grandfather. *Whoever* it is, seems to be straightening out the mess I made in there,” she said while pointing to the side of his head.

She settled back in her chair and let out a disgusted sigh before turning back to Maya and pushing through her. She saw a few issues that needed a quick resolution before Maya lost anymore time worrying about Donald.

“You need to use the facilities, Maya. You need to void your bowels or you’ll become constipated. Then you’ll become uncomfortable if someone should need your services.” She raised her hand and pointed to the half-bath’s door.

“Turn on the fan,” she added after Maya meekly turned to follow her instructions.

Jaiying leaned back and closed her eyes. Just moments after the fan came on, she could *swear* she heard more laughter – this time much louder and more heartfelt, almost *joyous*. She scooted up closer to Donald and rested both hands on his head. Shaking her head slowly, she reluctantly dived back in to see if she’d missed anything...

~~~

*He could hear a muted rumbling nearby – almost like an air handler.*

*Air handler ... that air handler needed service. He needed to schedule service on the air handler ... and the septic system ... and the fuel system... In fact, he needed to get the entire SHIP serviced, if only to get his First Officer off his back.*

*Tomorrow... He’d do that tomorrow... As soon as Laisee finished up below, he’d call in a replacement ship to watch over her, then take his ship in for a well-deserved maintenance cycle. He’d need a few cases of ambrosia for Clax to share with his crew. Then... Then he needed a decent vacation, and a chance to make up with Maya again – if she’d still have him.*

*Tomorrow... Always something to do tomorrow...*

*He almost drifted off, but the rumbling sound was becoming noisome, and he wrinkled his brow but felt some sort of resistance on his head. Kiki? No. More likely it was Déjà.*

*Déjà was a good girl and turning into a lovely young woman. He was going to miss her when she left to go off venturing with Sai and the boys once again. At least she didn't snore like Maya did, but she did have a habit of flopping around in her sleep. He tried to ignore her, but she kept moving her fingers around and it was becoming annoying. Maybe he'd wake her up and let her have her way with him one more time before...*

"Ja ... *Jaiying?*" Ronnie whispered, triggering a quiet yip out of the young girl as she jerked her hands off his forehead and saw his eyes staring at her.

"Donald?" she whispered back.

He blinked at her before looking around the room. The room itself seemed almost familiar, but the fact that Jaiying was there indicated something had gone *horribly* wrong. He cast his memories back and considered each one critically, until coming to the moment he'd faced off against Trenka and let her take his head. He closed his eyes in grief, then opened them before turning a sad face to his Granddaughter.

He was fighting back the tears threatening to flood his eyes when he sadly murmured, "Oh Jaiying. You died, *too?*"

### ***In the Half-Bath...***

Maya was straining to void while remaining frustrated at her lack of dietary discipline. So far, she'd produced nothing to warrant the noisy fan's use, other than some noxious smells that seemed intent on merely taunting her. She knew Jaiying had been correct, as once it had been pointed out to her, a quick personal inspection had verified Jaiying's diagnosis and its proper resolution. She considered her limited options but remembered what one of her teachers had suggested. Opening her shirt, she pulled a breast out of its holder, brought the nipple to her lips, and began nursing from it.

### ***In the Outer Room...***

Jaiying was confused.

"Oh *no...* I didn't... Well yes, I guess *did* die that time, but they brought me back," Jaiying said, now torn between hugging him and crying with him.

"You don't get to come back after you *die*, Jaiying," he said with tortured authority, then glanced around the room again. "You get reborn into a *new* body, and then you forget *everything* about your old life so you can start over *fresh*. Only *then* can you work on your karmic balance." He looked around one more time before laying back and staring at the ceiling.

## Picking up the Pieces

“And here we are ... in *hell*...” he muttered dismally, before closing his eyes again.

### ***In the Half-Bath...***

Maya had never tried this particular solution on *herself* before, but it seemed to be having the expected results – and rather *quickly*, too. She dropped one breast and pulled up the other, not that she’d emptied the first one, but because the second one was already spraying milk into her clothes.

She quickly surrounded that nipple with her lips and nursed forcefully, getting half a swallow with only a few seconds of effort.

### ***In the Outer Room...***

“Donald, we are *not* in hell! We’re on *Earth*, and back at the Healer Cluster you set up. Ling is still in charge, and we’re here because ... because Déjà needed some time on planet for a while.”

He rolled his head in her direction and stared at her for a moment.

“Jaiying... Sweetheart... Who is Donald?”

### ***In the Half-Bath...***

When the release finally came, it was explosively violent – so much so, that Maya was embarrassed by both the amount and the accompanying sound effects, while the smell ran a very close third.

She spread her legs to check the bowl, then *immediately* flushed it – forgoing *any* attempt to clean herself. For that, she’d wait until the next cycle – or *two* – or perhaps lower herself to use some of the processed *flora* the Earthlings used when they ran out of water.

### ***In the Outer Room...***

“What was *that*?” Ronnie asked her, and he looked over at the door at the end of the room.

“That was ... somebody needed to use the toilet. And that’s *your* name – *Donald*. Your name is Donald *Cato* and you were a crewman on my Grandfather’s *ship*!”

### ***In the Half-Bath...***

Maya stood up shakily and looked at the huge pile of paper in the toilet bowl. Wilber had warned them of the dangers of using too much paper, but the toilet had no cleansing nozzle, and there was no shower in the room – *that* being the missing half of the half-bath she was currently standing in. There wasn’t even a large cup like the one she’d used when she was on Earth in the past.

She shook her head in resignation before reaching her fingertip into the bowl and proceeding to swirl the fibrous mass in slow circles in an attempt to break it up. After several rotations, she was gratified to see the mass start to separate into fragments, so she gave up a tiny prayer to whichever Gods were currently in charge of toilets, and flushed the load. After several scary seconds of a steadily rising water level, there was a sudden *whoosh*, and the entire contents rushed out, leaving only brown streaks on the inner side of the bowl to mark its passing.

She considered her options – then reconsidered them based on the brown streaks on the bowl and the coldness of the water. Turning to the sink, she let the water run warm, then stopped the sink, and added several squirts of the cleansing surfactant to it, along with a washcloth.

### ***In the Outer Room...***

“Jaiying, I’ve never even *heard* of this Donald ... *Gato?*” he persisted.

“*Cato*. Like ‘Sylvester the *Cat*’ ... only with an ‘o’ on the end of it.”

“That’s *ridiculous!* How can I be this *Donald* guy when I’m–” He stopped and stared at her intently.

“Why are we speaking *English?*” he asked her suspiciously.

### ***In the Half-Bath...***

After washing her bottom, Maya made a point of washing the washcloth *thoroughly* before washing her arms and face with it. She rinsed it and wrung it out before looking at herself in the mirror, where she finally noticed the wet spots still staining the front of her shirt. She thought of taking it off, but considered it would be easier to just wipe it with a wet washcloth, and that’s what she proceeded to do.

### ***In the Outer Room...***

“*NO!* My name is *NOT DONALD!* If I *ever* get... What am I saying? I’m *NEVER* getting out of hell,” he said with disgust, then flopped over on his back again.

Jaiying glared at him and narrowly avoided leaping on him for his stupidity. The only thing that prevented her was the sure knowledge that he was only a man and therefore *incapable* of rational thought. She had better things to do and decided to let the *adults* step in and deal with him.

‘*Mother... Grandmother Sai... Maya... Donald is awake and has become combative*’ she sent, before smiling grimly and waiting for results.



## Picking up the Pieces

### ***In the Half-Bath...***

Maya had finally turned the fan off – amazed that Earthlings couldn't come up with a *better* solution to the problem of unpleasant toilet smells – when she just caught that bit of information from Jaiying.

She stared at her disheveled appearance in the mirror for a moment, but decided it didn't matter. She turned to the door, opened it, then peeked around the jam at the scene before her.

"Donald?" Maya said very softly, causing him to open his eyes and glance in her direction.

As soon as he recognized her, he slowly sat up and swiveled his feet to the floor while keeping his eyes on her all the while.

She slowly stepped over and stopped in front of him, where he reached out to hold her hands and looked up at her with such sadness in his eyes that she almost felt it physically.

"Oh Maya. I'm so sorry you died," he said, with his voice on the verge of breaking. "At least they let us be here together ... in *hell*."

He looked down and sniffed a few times, before bending over their joined hands and turning them over to kiss her palms.

Jaiying figured her work here was done, so she slipped out the door unnoticed by them.

Passing her Mother and Grandmother in the hallway, she made no comment, other than pointing her thumb back over her shoulder while silently stalking back to the house to hang out with Rose again – with her dutiful guardsman trailing along behind her in the afternoon sun.

### ***Back in Donald's Room***

"Donald... What in the world are you *talking* about?" Maya asked him in confusion.

He looked at her sadly at first, but then started to get frustrated again.

"Maya – who is this *Donald* person everyone keeps talking about?"

### ***In the Hallway...***

Outside his room, Laisee was about to knock on the door, when Sai grabbed her arm.

"Let's wait and see how much he remembers," she whispered, and Laisee reluctantly nodded her head, before they both leaned closer to listen at the door.

### ***Back in Donald's Room***

After letting go of Maya's fingers, Ronnie sat there uncomfortably.

His level of frustration was draining him, but then he felt something *else* needed to be drained, so he got up and slipped between the bed and Maya to walk over to the facilities to pee. She finally stirred and followed him as far as the doorway, only to see him sit down on the toilet she'd just vacated.

"This is a *rotten* way to live," he muttered while letting go his bladder and gaining relief in the process. "You *die*, you go to *hell*, but you *still* have to pee!"

He got up awkwardly and flushed the toilet. Checking the bowl, he noticed the traces of brown streaks in it, so he reached under the sink and found a bowl brush behind the cabinet door. Opening the seat, he swirled the brush around in the still-running water, then tapped it on the rim several times before placing it back in its holder and closing the door.

"And I *still* have to do my own fucking *maintenance*," he growled, before turning on the water and washing his hands.

He reached out, grabbed the towel to dry his hands, and was about to hang it back up when the reflection in the mirror caught his eyes. He froze as he stared at it, then slowly waved his hands over his head – seeing the image in the mirror follow his every move.

He finally reached out and touched the mirror's surface, before pulling open the shallow medicine cabinet just to make sure it wasn't an elaborate hoax of some kind. He finally stepped back, pointed his finger at the mirror, then turned to Maya with an angry look on his face.

"Who the hell is *THIS* bozo, and what did you do with my *BODY*?"

### ***In the Hallway...***

The Ladies standing outside had heard everything, and Sai was hard pressed to stifle her laughter.

"I *think* that was our cue," Laisee murmured, and a smiling Sai nodded in agreement.

### ***In Donald's Room...***

He was staring daggers at Maya and still waiting for an answer, when someone knocked on the door, but stepped right in.

When he leaned around Maya to see who it was, he wasn't really surprised to see the stern face that greeted him.

## Picking up the Pieces

“Spacer – First – Class – Donald - *Cato*. It’s so good to see you up and *about* again,” Sai told him stiffly. She stood there and waited for a reaction from him – other than just silence – and then he gasped, but it was for the *second* person who entered behind her.

Laisee stepped around Sai and smiled at him warmly as she continued towards him. Once close enough, she stopped beside Maya and reached out to draw him from the facilities.

“It seems that you’ve recovered from your terrible *injuries*, Donald,” she said calmly while leading him towards the bed. “Lord Caldor did not fare as *well* as you. He *died* from his injuries over Vanaheim, while you somehow managed to *survive*. Perhaps you’re well enough now so that Lady Sai Tal may explain ... the ‘*Truth*’ to you?”

Ronnie got a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach that this *wasn’t* going to be a bedtime story – at least not one he would particularly enjoy. This might not be the literal hell that he’d *thought* it was, but Laisee’s wording suggested nothing but further misery to his imagination. He summed it up succinctly with a quietly muttered, “Aww, *crap*,” which got him a frustrated glare from Sai for his trouble.

Maya sat on the bed and tugged his arm to get him to sit with her. After joining her, he scrunched back with her until they were both leaning against the wall behind them, while Sai walked over to the door and locked it before returning to sit in one of the chairs Laisee had so thoughtfully placed in front of their captive audience.

“Let’s see ... where should we *begin*, Lady Sai?” Laisee asked her lightly, and turned to her in anticipation of what she might say.

“I think ... how about where that *MORON* decided to let *TRENKA* take his *HEAD*?” she suggested cheerfully, nearly chortling in the process.

### *At the Residence*

It was the early evening, and Jaiying had stopped listening to Grandmother Sai expound upon the stupidity of Grandfather Ronnie nearly an hour ago. The alert she’d sent out to the Senior Staff had mixed results from their members, but mostly about if they should tell their Mothers, or even let Aunt Lili know. Walter had finally suggested they let Mama Laisee make that determination, since she was actually on-site. After a little more comment, that is what they’d ended up agreeing to before the conversation ended.

At the moment, Jaiying and Rose were in the resident’s house and eating a simple evening meal prepared by Mary, but Jaiying was becoming fascinated by the *new* form of entertainment being watched by Mary’s husband. It was called – the *news*.

*The Center, The Dining Room*

Donald was sitting quietly with Maya in the Center's dining room after sharing a simple evening's repast with her ... *and* her mother, and Laisee, and Ling, and Shu, while Wilber had stepped out to grab more drinks from the kitchen...

His "official" debriefing had taken more than two hours and dragged him through the mud of his *own* self-centered pity in regards to his apparent *non*-existent future, and that was all *before* he'd been brought back to life. It had been explained to him that his *pre*-intact revival had occurred in stages, with his body being processed separately – for *Lili's* purposes, as explained by Laisee. Both she and Sai had expressed no remorse for those activities, while Maya had been appalled at the perverse reasoning behind Lili's orders.

Then they'd shared Woldron's efforts to decant and flush the toxic powder from his brain, which was only a temporary respite before it was popped back into stasis.

The final item dealt with the Elders Council's assertion that, even if he *were* brought back, his life expectancy would be measured in weeks or perhaps only *days* at most. Thus, they'd declared his death as occurring at the time of the "accident" and left instructions that Lili was *not* to attempt a recovery.

The *meaning* behind the message had been very clear and far worse than he'd expected – declared dead simply because the *Powers That Be* were looking out for their *own* self-interests. At least, that was what *he* got from it. The fact that the kids had disobeyed Lili by banding together to bring him back was a loose thread and subject to unraveling on a whim. Apparently, Lili had decided that – for the *moment* – Earth was far enough away to shelter him and his hazy future from prying eyes.

They'd finally ended with how he'd been up and learning this "Donald" persona for just a few days, but was expected to *maintain* that deception until told otherwise – possibly *forever*...

Throughout the meal, Ling had been pondering Donald's understanding of his current status, and finally voiced an opening comment on it.

"Donald, you look remarkably *refreshed* this evening. Lady Sai tells me you've had a breakthrough."

He turned and stared daggers at Sai, his mouth set in the hint of a thin line as he considered an appropriate response. On the whole, being alive and *mostly* functional was much better than being *kinda* dead and a *vegetable*. Besides, he could still have *fun* with it...

## Picking up the Pieces

He transitioned the half-frown on his face into a smile, and turned to Ling before beginning to spew a byzantine web of lies with his own *personal* touches.

“Lady Wen – I have to say this has been a day of *revelations* for me,” he said faux sincerely. “Everything has changed so much since the *last* time I contracted here.”

He’d looked around the room while saying this with his arms raised dramatically, and caught a satisfying look of panic in Laisee’s eyes before continuing.

“Ron Cal was kind enough to bring me here after I’d completed my training. I assisted him with the refugees back in...” he paused and turned to Maya. “When was it, Maya? ‘83? ‘84?”

She gave him a blank stare before nodding her head slowly, if uncomprehendingly.

“Somewhere in that time frame, then,” he continued. He looked up to see Wilber bringing over a tray of drinks, and pointed to him with a smile.

“I remember *Wilber*, of course, although he probably doesn’t remember *me* all that much.”

He leaned in confidently and said in a loud whisper, “Gods *grace* on Ron Cal, but the man was a *slave driver*. Kept me busy in the classrooms, and then out working in the fields – teaching our hapless souls how to earn a *decent* living from the soil.”

He leaned back and reached beside him to pat Maya’s hand familiarly, before turning back to his captive audience while wondering how far he could push them.

“*Poor devils*, the lot of them. Not as bad as *some* of the ones we’d pulled out of the Blight, though. *Some* of those we brought out, brought their *own* demons with them – haunted them day and night, they did. By the *Gods* grace, I wasn’t with Tank–” He stopped and looked around guiltily, before nodding his head.

“My apologies. It – it was his *working* name back in the day. Ron joined the training camps after a particularly *bad* experience out in the Blight ... something about losing a consignment of settlers. I caught up with him at the Fringe at Madame Caf ... well, you Ladies wouldn’t know of it. Anyway, I hit him up for a *new* contract – *mercenary*, you know – but he said he’d gone *straight*. Said he was working the *downside* now. Told me to find my soul and get *out* of the danger game. I *thought* about it. Then after I’d sobered up, I thought about it again, and decided to give it a try. I was tired of getting shot at anyway.”

He popped the top of whatever soda Wilber had placed in front of him and siphoned out a mouthful before swallowing it down.

“Worked here for a few years, then moved on. Next time I seen him, I was working for a science group that decided to ship out on a ‘secret’ mission and was asked to go along. *Gods!* If I’d known *where* Ronnie was headed, I *never* woulda shipped out with him.” He let out a sigh while shaking his head, before taking another sip of something bubbly.

“All that way, and with all them strange *creatures*... And *Drecks!*” He shuddered and took another drink, gulping it down with difficulty, which left his voice a bit gravelly. “And then he goes and gets in a *pissing* contest with one of them slimy *lizards* and fucks himself *up*. I felt *sorry* for the lad. I truly *did*.”

His audience had remained silently transfixed during his recitation, save for the quiet sound of grinding teeth coming from Sai. Ling finally found her voice and asked the question that no one had yet revealed the answer to.

“Donald ... how – how *did* you become injured? Was it ... during *combat*?”

He turned to her with a beaming smile, then took another sip of his soda while pointing to the air vent above their heads with his other hand.

“Mishap with an air handler,” he finally said, then rotated his arm horizontally and started twirling his finger in a loop. “Squeaky bearings were driving everyone *nuts*, so I took it upon myself to grab a can of lube and deliver due justice to it. Opened the cover, and saw the bearing cup at the end of the shaft – *Drecks’* design, stupid fucks. Figured it would only take a few seconds, and it did. I reached in without turning off the motor, and it caught my sleeve, and dragged the *rest* of me in there with it. Took off my *arm*, and I’m told it wacked the *shit* out of my head.”

He looked over at Sai and raised his can to her while patting Maya’s hand again.

“Gods grace that Senior *Tal* was aboard that day, or I wouldna be here to sing her *praises*.” He put down his can and stood to render her a formal bow. “I thank you for my *life*, Senior *Tal*.”

Sai stared at him stiffly, her lips pressed tightly together while tempering her anger. *His* version of the “Truth” was no worse than the *official* version of the “Truth.” It was centered on him *specifically*, while including enticingly ambiguous elements of history to back up his outlandish claims.

## Picking up the Pieces

In other words, typical Ronnie bullshit.

"I had nothing better to do, and your blood managed to stop the squeak," she muttered, getting astonished looks from everyone, and a gasp out of Maya. He stood up straight and smiled at her, before glancing down at his lover while still addressing Sai.

"Senior Tal, your daughter tells me I have an annoying snore. Perhaps if you find an uncluttered moment or two, you might take it as a *teaching* moment and convey to her the wisdom of your experiences for her benefit?"

Sai started to flush and barely managed to keep her anger in check, while Laisee found it necessary to cover her mouth and turn her head away and fake a cough to keep from laughing.

"I will take it under *advisement* Spacer First," Sai said stiffly, then slammed back the rest of her soda, which, *unfortunately*, was root beer, and just *waiting* for someone to break the carbon-dioxide/liquid bond in a sufficiently exciting manner.

The resultant explosion of gas bubbles expanded from her stomach and launched themselves upwards – finding one large, general-purpose egress, and two smaller ones. Whatever had not chosen the *preferred* exit corridors, found an alternate route that drove their hapless host into a fit of rough coughing.

Ling, Laisee, and Shu launched themselves from their chairs, while Donald grabbed the wiping towel from the tray Wilber had brought in and calmly walked around the table and handed it to Laisee. As he was walking back to his seat, Wilber reached out and touched his arm, which got him to pause. Wilber looked back at the Ladies in action, then looked up at Donald with a smile.

"Nice touch, Boss," he whispered, and noted that "Donald" simply winked at him instead of looking at him in confusion. For him, that was enough of a confirmation for now. He patted his arm and let him go back to Maya.

### *Somewhere Else, Not Quite as Close By...*

*The quiet chuckle that began, had eventually rolled over into a healthy belly laugh that could almost be heard by the **corporal** life forms in the immediate area.*

*It was tempting to stick around for a couple of dozen years to see the immediate results, but Destiny had **other** tasks in front of it – tasks that had been delayed long enough. Destiny lingered for a moment longer, and saw that everything was more or less in relatively **good** order once again, so it decided to visit the **next** quadrant – but adjusted its schedule to come by more frequently next time.*

*Leaving new instructions and saying its good-byes, Destiny, **part** of it formerly known as Aquintus Tiberious Rakel Caldarous, faded away to go to work at its **next** stop.*

### ***Earth, The Annex, Visiting the Babies***

After the fuss during supper, he and Maya had been moved to new accommodations in a wing he'd never seen before. The floor was carpeted and the layout roomier, with a bed that was *much* more suited for a couple instead of a single delusional client.

As a bonus, now that Déjà's situation was relatively stable – meaning the danger of having a carpet soaked in amniotic fluid was now over – he thought she and her brood of two could be relocated to the same wing.

While Maya busied herself with details of the transition, he took the opportunity to go back to the client wing and visit with Déjà, while potentially facing the adverse repercussions from Sai in the process. Fortunately, it was his mother who opened the door, and Maya's mother was nowhere to be seen.

"Ahh... Lady Spring Blossom," he said, now shocked by the change in her apparent age, and feeling ashamed it was probably his fault. She greeted him with a smile just the same and hugged him tightly.

"Donald! You look so much *better* today!" she said while beaming from ear to ear. "Look, Donald. Déjà had ... *babies!*"

He'd heard her pause, and even *without* his lost Senior senses, he knew she'd left out the word "your" to perpetuate the great deceit. He wasn't sure if Déjà was party to the deception or not, so he continued to play the part.

"Mistress Déjà, you look *lovely* this evening. I've not seen you at dinner or supper, but I do hope you'll be feeling up to joining us in a few days."

He smiled at her, before glancing over at the crib containing two wrapped bundles in them.

"May I?" he asked, while pointing to the crib, and got a pensive nod back from Déjà. He stepped over and looked down at the sleeping infants, reaching down to gently pull the covers away so he could see their faces.

He saw that one was smaller, and it had a tiny stocking cap over its head to keep it warm. From Sai and Laisee's earlier conversation that afternoon, this one would be his son – not withstanding that everything he wore was a tint of blue. He looked at the face intently, and watched as its tiny brows furrowed in a *very* familiar manner.



## Picking up the Pieces

'*Aww, crap!*' he thought to himself, now suddenly believing those crazy dreams he'd been slowly forgetting might have had a basis in reality. He reached down and gently rubbed the baby's brows while trying to erase the image of his birth father from his mind in the process.

"What's his name?" he asked, hoping it wasn't something stupid.

"I named him Ronnie ... after his father," Déjà whispered.

He smiled and turned to face the mother of his children.

"I'm sure Ron Cal would have appreciated that, Mistress Déjà," he said quietly, then turned to look down at his daughter.

Now *she*, on the other hand, was truly beautiful. She smiled, even in her sleep – not a furrow anywhere on her forehead to indicate future inclinations. He reached down to stroke her cheek, and she murmured very quietly and let out a contented sigh. He looked at her closely, then felt a sense of recognition.

He'd *seen* her before. Somewhere... Somewhere *else*.

"She is just *beautiful*, Déjà," he murmured, dropping to family familiar before turning to smile at her again. "What's her name?"

Déjà looked away for a moment before timidly turning back.

"I – I didn't name her yet. I don't know of a good name for her," she said, then took a chance. "Donald, can *you* think of a good name for her?"

He smiled and turned to look down at his daughter again.

He *remembered* her now, the terrified young being who had been so concerned about him during many of his trying times in the past. What was it he'd called her?

"Faith... I think it suits her," he said, then reached down to stroke her cheek again. "She's gonna need a lot of faith to deal with *that* one," he added, while tilting his head towards his son.

He turned back and leaned down to hug Déjà, then kissed her familiarly and felt her respond in kind. When they separated, he could see the confusion on her face subside, replaced by a big smile.

"Déjà, I've become somewhat attached to your big sister – Maya. I've only known her for a short while, but I feel she might be amenable to a longer-term commitment ... just in case I have a relapse or something," he said, then patted her hand. "If that comes to pass, I would like you to consider *joining* with us ... as a *family*, I mean."

He saw a thread of worry on her face, so he went all in.

"I would consider it an *honor* to help raise Ron Cal's children, even if Maya decided otherwise," he added, and saw her face brighten.

"Well, I've been moved to bigger quarters in the next corridor and have some shuffling to do. I hope I'll see you later, Déjà," he said, then hugged her once again, before turning to his mother.

"Lady Spring Blossom, it is so *very* good to finally meet with you – now that I know who I *really* am."

He smiled at her and initiated their hug this time, before turning and leaving the room. After closing the door, he paused and considered if he could actually succeed in reestablishing his relationship with Maya again, but was concerned there was a *sword* dangling over his head – yet *again*.

"Well, like the singer said, 'Things are more like they are today, than they've ever been before,'" he muttered obtusely while ambling back to his new quarters and thinking of asking if Déjà could make a similar move.

### ***With Déjà and Sai...***

"Mommy ... do you think he really *meant* it?" Déjà asked her mother.

Sai had come running after Spring Blossom's silent summons. The story that Donald had visited her daughter and his children, then made her the offer of providing a *family environment*, disturbed her at the maternal level.

"I'm sure he means well, my girl, and I'll still be here to see that he *keeps* his promises. Besides, Kantite Royals usually need more than *one* wife to manage them, and you *already* know how he is about children."

"And small animals," Déjà added automatically.

Sai snorted while thinking seriously about this new situation. Considering that Maya was still infatuated with the fool was beside the point. He'd essentially offered Déjà the principles of home and hearth, food and time, and *she* was quite capable of insuring that he *kept* that implied promise – especially now that he was virtually *helpless* against her.

Of course, there was still the matter of where they could safely *live*, and how he could *afford*...

"He named her, Mommy," Déjà said, distracting her further thoughts. "He named her *Faith*. I-I think she *reminded* him of someone ... someone who *helped* him."

## Picking up the Pieces

Sai looked at her daughter, dwelling on the concept that this Healer of hers was rapidly maturing towards becoming a *Senior* at some point, and saw the smile Déjà offered her when that thought crossed her mind.

“You *read* that from him?”

“I... I think I *felt* it, Mommy. I think it was a *memory* that Ronnie–” she stopped at the frown from her Mother and blushed a tiny bit. “I think *Donnie* knew someone who helped him, and he met her once ... maybe,” she corrected herself, and watched her Mother’s head slowly nod.

“Perhaps, my girl. And perhaps *Donnie* gave you much more than just two *children*,” she said testily, then glanced over at little Ronnie, who was beginning to fuss at all the conversation going on while he was trying to sleep.

She sighed, then reached into the crib and gently rubbed his back, hoping it would be enough to calm him. The puttering sound of baby flatulence, quickly followed by a juicy *squishing* sound, ended that hope, so she reached for the package of baby wipes and a clean, disposable diaper – oh, these *lazy* Earthlings! She prepared to perform routine maintenance while having *no* doubts he would need topping off afterwards.

### *In Donald’s New Digs*

It was close to midnight, and Donald was still wide-awake ... even after Maya’s persistent attempts to extend his life by at least a few more weeks. To his *personal* embarrassment, his change in physical status had resulted in a less-than-satisfying capacity for debauchery but he’d tried very hard to make up for it by utilizing his fingers, thumbs, and his very talented tongue.

Maya seemed satisfied by the results anyway, and had climaxed with just his lips around her nipples before they even got down to *serious* business.

He looked down at her, still wrapped comfortably around his torso. It was almost as if she were making *sure* he wouldn’t be leaving her, even in the middle of the night. At least the bed was bigger; he being moved to larger quarters in the “guest” wing after everyone determined he was no longer a “client” but back to himself ... his *new* self. Maya’s presence was soothing, but he still couldn’t sleep. His mind was stuck going over the earlier part of the afternoon...

Sai and Laisee had explained the missing five months to him – Sai almost *gleefully* at times – and he was able to fit most of the missing pieces into his still incomplete puzzle. He’d finally admitted it was his *own* despondency over his failing health which had prompted that

whole fiasco with Trenka, but was gladdened to learn that she'd stepped up, albeit reluctantly, as the new Ambassador to the Vanir.

The status of negotiations was absent from their knowledge, but the fact that Samuel and Sally were now at the Kantite Court was reassuring. Also reassuring was news that Torga and Manya had assumed similar roles as well, and achieved a reasonable degree of welcoming at the hands of the citizenry – but not as easily as the Vanir for some reason.

Laisee had postulated it was because the Drecks were their *traditional* enemies, while the Vanir were a novelty – with no one really knowing of their *millennia* of efforts to destroy both the Commonwealth *and* the Hegemony. He'd suggested such knowledge would be better delayed as long as possible, but never *denied*, as being *caught* in a lie was never as bad as lying about it afterwards.

He'd been flattered to learn Déjà had really become pregnant by him – not something he ever really intended, he'd *sworn* – but as she'd transitioned from Kee to a more genetically *human*-Standard, he'd withheld his knowledge of having listened to her whispered desires, many of them lamenting her inability to conceive a child. It hadn't been a *conscious* effort on his part but perhaps spawned by the same subconscious impulses that had changed a gangling 13-year-old Andrew, into the 16-year-old, Relative, young man who'd returned to Kantor with the rest of the family. It sounded reasonable to *him*, anyway...

He shook his head at the absurdity of it all, then remembered what else Laisee had told him...

Aside from still being alive, he did not appear to have any of the special abilities he'd enjoyed in the past. He'd also discovered that he was completely silent now, both in sending and receiving silent communications, and Laisee had tested it by shouting at him silently, but he hadn't heard a thing. He was hopeful he could at least still Fire a sword, but would have to try that test later.

They'd left shortly afterwards, leaving him and Maya alone for a while, but not before reminding him that, just like Wilber, he would need to seek contentment as often as prudently possible since his genetic makeup had changed significantly after the Vanir attempt on his life.

Maya had been suggesting just such an effort when Jaiying had returned to tell him of seeing him after they'd both died. He'd told her he'd thought it was all just a dream, but admitted his perception was skewed, and the memories he'd retained felt more like a dream than a real experience.

## Picking up the Pieces

The rest of it promised to remain a waking nightmare, with Lili having been summoned by her masters back on Cletus – something he'd *always* suspected to be the case – and called to task about him. The fact that she'd stood up for him when it would have been far easier for her to simply let dead Lords *remain* dead was a burden he didn't know how to repay.

Nor was the revelation that it was actually *Jaiying* who'd finally brought him back to life while destroying the family's garden in the process. He'd shook his head at that, having never considered the possibility before. If only he hadn't lost his genetic *birthright*...

He stopped and questioned that, before reconsidering it more thoughtfully. It *was* just a matter of genetics, wasn't it? Certainly something the *Vanir* were very skilled at. He let that thought linger for a bit before tabling it for later consideration ... *much* later, if the current situation was as fluid as he suspected.

Right now, he was harmless ... *relatively*. He could still fly a tank and probably still wield a sword ... *powered* now, of course. He'd just have to get back in shape.

He tried to roll to his side, but Maya still had him locked in place. He looked down at her, then tickled her nose a tiny bit, finally getting her to take a swipe at him before rolling away in her sleep.

With this sudden freedom to move, he slipped out of bed and silently drifted over to the bathroom – this one *including* a shower this time. Once inside, he took a few moments to pee, then stripped off the remainder of his undergarments and checked himself in the mirror.

His face was different – the face of a *dead* man now – but the rest of him was relatively intact. He looked about fifty, or perhaps fifty-five, *Earth* Relative. The marks on his arms had healed nicely, along with the ones on his torso. He could still see the older scar Xiaoli had given him. That was the one he'd told Dorcas to leave alone. The thought of it made him chuckle, if only for the reason he'd been so lax that day...

At Lili's insistence, he'd finally started Xiaoli's training before turning her over to Wilber for seasoning. A few weeks later, Wilber had teased him into facing her in the Center – the *old* Center – and watched from the sidelines while she seemed to keep up with him as long as he expended no *real* effort against her. Then Wilber had said something that made him laugh, while Xiaoli lunged at that very moment. It had resulted in the "honor" scar he'd kept as her reward for her improvement in skills...

He spared a thought at wondering how Xiaoli was doing, before flexing the muscles in his arms, and then his abdomen, only to find they were far less toned than suitable for an Imperial warrior of even

his Relative age. He frowned at the task before him, but at least there was an entire garrison of warriors to spar with, not including Wilber. He chuckled at that, but stifled the sound, not wanting to disturb Maya.

In his current condition, perhaps it *would* be better to work with Wilber rather than embarrass himself with one of the garrison's men?

A light knock sounded at the bathroom door before Maya poked her sleepy head inside to see him posing naked in front of the mirror. She ignored him while shuffling around to sit on the toilet to pee.

He dropped his arms and ran the water until it became warm, before making a show of washing his face and hands, then running the washcloth over his chest. When he was done, he rinsed it and was about to hang it up when she reached out her hand for it.

He interpreted her intention and ran it under the warm water again, but instead of wiping herself, she grabbed him by his hips and pulled him over in front of her.

She brought the warm cloth up and wiped his penis, scrotum, and the rest of the general area to remove the remnants of their earlier play before pulling him closer and engulfing him with her mouth.

He let out a grateful moan and let her play for a few minutes while running his fingers through her hair but once he realized nothing was happening, he gently pushed her away before squatting down to her level and drawing her to his lips to kiss her deeply before hugging her tightly.

"I am still hungry," she sleepily murmured into his neck, which caused him to chuckle.

He took the cloth and ran hot water over it again before standing her up and bending her over the sink. She spread her legs for him and let him wash her vulva and bottom before drying her off.

Then she stood up while he rinsed and wrung out the washcloth before they shuffled back to bed together, and she resumed her position by his side, but with her head down near his groin.

"I think you wore me out, my love," he murmured.

"It is all right," she mumbled sleepily. "I just want something to suckle upon."

So saying, she reattached herself to him and started to nurse herself back to sleep as he just lay there and appreciated being with his lover once again. He hoped she would consider an official bonding with him in the future ... or perhaps even marriage.

*At the Residence*

Wilber still lay staring up at the ceiling while Shu had curled away from him after their play. A glance at the alarm clock showed it was approaching midnight, but the thoughts swirling around in his head suggested sleep would be a long time coming to him...

He'd had a short conversation with Laisee earlier that evening where he'd explained it wasn't about the money, but rather the *need* to stay at the Center and make sure it survived. He'd invested nearly half his life to the task and felt it shouldn't be reasonable to expect him to quit when things were still at these early, tentative stages. After all, he had responsibilities to the Ambassador, to the Commonwealth, and to his *own* country.

Laisee had again assured him his situation was secure for as long as he felt like doing it. Even if his government became difficult about it, some relatively simple pressures could be applied that should mollify their concerns – not the least of which would be arranging for a dual-nationality status for him. She'd told him Ronnie had the same responsibilities and did *whatever* was needed to secure the safety of his refugees, and later, the Center and its staff.

She'd also reminded him that a dedication to work for the positive advancement of Commonwealth objectives was a goal that was expected from *all* Commonwealth citizens, and *especially* from Royalty like him and Shu.

Then she'd brought up the issue of Fred again, and he told her he'd reached out to his contacts for any further updates. If a hard location for Fred could be determined, then presumably these same contacts would pursue his recovery through official channels.

She'd thanked him, then reminded him he had plenty of time to make up his mind. Then she'd turned away and left for other tasks on her very busy plate...

Wilber tried closing his eyes again, but that only reminded him of what they'd all experienced at dinner that evening. Donald had pointed at *him* when he'd returned from the kitchen, but spouted nonsense about being at the Annex back in the '80's. Wilber knew *exactly* who was at the Annex, and when they'd arrived and departed – all right from the *beginning* – and Donald had *never* been on-planet that he could remember.

He'd listened to the line of bullshit coming from him in confusion, but it was when he'd closed his eyes while wiping one of them that it finally struck him.

Donald may not have *looked* like Ronnie, but he certainly *sounded* like Ronnie.

As Donald continued to tell his outlandish tales, he'd closed his eyes again and seen *Ronnie* speaking in his mind. He was so sure of it that when Sai had gone into her coughing fit, he'd stopped Donald and complimented him on causing her grief. 'Donald' had merely winked at him, then gone back to sit with Maya.

The Boss was *back*. He was *sure* of it now, and it only convinced him that his earlier assumption about that suspicious scar was true, but something was up and it was probably serious – as in the “someone could *die*” type of serious if the truth ever came out.

That suddenly explained a *lot* of things to him – like the funeral services the other day. Of all the people attending, *no one* who'd arrived from off-planet had shown any bit of loss – not even his *mother*. Among the Earthlings, however, nearly *all* of them had shed a tear or two, even himself.

The informal wake afterwards was just a simple gathering of friends and acquaintances sharing a brunch. Lili and her band of renegades had even broken ranks by forcing a modification of the operational guidelines regarding health services towards non-tribal members – the first of whom was Deloris. As for what Shu had later told him about the *hospital* visit...

He sighed quietly when he realized the future of the Center seemed to be in flux – but then again, it nearly always was.

He glanced at Shu, then quietly slipped out of bed to visit the toilet. While he was there, he took the opportunity to wash himself before going back to bed – a habit he'd picked up from all the lessons that he, Shu, Mary, and Kayla had been participating in over the last few years.

Coming back to bed, he closed his eyes to try and force himself to sleep, but was startled when he felt Shu's warm hand reach down and grasp him firmly, then begin slowly tugging on him.

“Shu ... it's late,” he whispered.

“Shhhhh, my Wilber. Let me help you to sleep,” she murmured, then pulled the covers down to get her head into position.

After she drew him between her lips and began licking his glans, she applied the gentle suction that proved his undoing. The pleasure she was giving him blanked his mind of concerns, and he simply lay there while she slowly eased his tensions away.

A few minutes later, she managed to trigger an endorphin rush within him that left him completely relaxed so he could sleep the rest of the night without stirring.



## Picking up the Pieces

*'He sleeps now, my Lady'* Shu sent drowsily, while swallowing his essence and licking her lips before stretching out and pulling the thin blanket over both of them.

She got a warm, loving flow from Laisee for her trouble, and snuggled next to her sleeping husband.

She had a transient thought for the following day, it being a day of mourning for her husband's nation but that was something only he would mark, along with many of the other Earthlings in their social group.

### *Sunday, September 11, The Game's Afoot*

Lean Bear sat in the front seat with his wife, Butterfly, while Gray Feather's wife, Snow Woman, sat in the back between Cocheta and Nascha. No one had said a word while they'd traveled the first five miles to the Healing Center this mid-morning until Butterfly's frustration finally came to a peak.

"WHY DID HE NOT COME, AVONACO?" his wife finally turned and asked him. Her Apache was textured by the sweetness of her voice, and it always made him smile.

"HE DOES NOT WANT TO CONFRONT THE ELDER DAUGHTER OF THE TRIBE," he replied, thinking Snow Woman would *surely* have told her of her husband's decision by now.

"HE THINKS SECRETS ARE BEING KEPT, APONI, BUT IT HAS NOTHING TO DO WITH THIS MORNING," Snow Woman said from the back seat. She stole a glance to either side of her, noting her traveling companions avoided each other by looking out opposite windows during the drive...

The Star Lady had instructed that Cocheta would attend counseling at the Center, and Nascha be allowed to remain there if she and her mother could not reconcile.

Snow Woman and her husband had kept Nascha with them since she'd been discharged from the white man's hospital, but they'd both known the family of TSĪSQSÉ BIYIGÉ would welcome Nascha with the same open arms as they'd had for most others.

Both Butterfly and Lean Bear had started on Cocheta yesterday afternoon, finally getting an agreement from her to drive out to the Annex with them to see where her daughter would be staying instead of with her.

They'd not mentioned the counseling part, yet, considering "baby steps" leading up to it would be more productive.

Besides, Cocheta had a very thick head, and it would probably take more than simply talking to her to get any results.

### *At the Center*

*'They're on the way, Mother'* Jaiying pushed to her. She was anticipating this new task that had fallen her way simply because she considered it should be relatively easy for her to find this missing Fred person. After all, she and her cousins had reached out and felt the Vanir Prime from *much* further away. As long as Nascha had *positive* memories of him, it should be easy. She *should* have. She was married to him and was now carrying his *child*...

Laisee had spoken with Ling the day before, and they'd decided that approaching Cocheta in Apache would be much more comfortable for her than forcing her to endure the white man's English. Kayla had already given them a major clue, as Cocheta's hatred of white men in general, and Fred in *particular*, seemed to be key to her current issues. Finding the root cause of her hatred would be of great benefit and should be revealed through traditional Healer techniques by simply asking casual questions that elicited emotional responses.

Meanwhile, Nascha would be spending time with Jaiying and Mary. Mary would walk her around the Center and show her the available rooms, while Jaiying would walk along with them and pick up elements related to Fred that Mary would hopefully trigger. That was in lieu of simply digging directly into Nascha's memories and randomly stumbling across useful information.

After that, it should be a simple matter to extend to the opposite side of the world and search for a matching memory pattern somewhere on the eastern edge of Afghanistan – provided, of course, that Fred was still alive, and still located somewhere in the vicinity of the Korengal Valley. That's what Wilber's contacts had suggested, anyway.

### *In Déjà's Room*

The knock on her door had come very softly, and the smile on Déjà's face seemed to brighten the room after he'd been called to enter.

"Good morning, everyone," Donald said very quietly while looking at the maternal scene in front of him. "How are all *three* of my girls, this morning?"

Maya looked up at him, sharing a demure smile that masked the rather dubious pleasure of nursing her lover's apparently *starving* son, while Déjà felt like leaping out of the bed if she wasn't burdened by the weight of the infant girl attached to her breast.

"We are *all* doing very well, Donnie," Maya said, then glanced at her smiling prospective co-wife. "The children are feeding well. *This* one seems determined to catch up with his older sister."

## Picking up the Pieces

He'd last kissed Maya when she'd left their quarters that morning, so he went to Déjà's side and kissed her first. It was a reserved kiss, not totally passionate but suitable for a currently nursing mother with an armful of infant, then shared a duplicate of it with Maya only a minute later. Afterwards, he pulled up a chair and sat opposite the both of them so they could catch him up with his children's progress.

### *At the Residence*

Wilber was startled awake by the sound of a truck from somewhere outside the house, but a quick dash to the front-facing office found a furniture delivery van just backing up to the front of the Center. He caught sight of Shu talking with the driver, while a couple of guardsmen trotted over from the motor pool to help with the unloading of ... whatever it was. Because it was Sunday, he was stumped, but the furniture store sign on the side of the truck told him they'd gotten an early delivery.

The *rocking* chairs are finally here!

Sure enough, two vertical boxes were lowered with the lift bed and Shu held off signing for them until she verified the contents of each, even going so far as to sit in each one and making sure they would rock.

Shu signed the paperwork, and the driver took his clipboard and quickly headed back to the front of his truck. He must have considered himself lucky that he didn't have to carry them inside, since he hopped back into the cab and drove off while throwing out a lazy wave with his left hand to Shu and her helpers.

Wilber gave out a sigh of relief, knowing Sai had been adamant that *proper* "baby-calming-devices" be acquired and installed as soon as possible. He was still looking out the window as one guardsman continued breaking down the boxes, while the other one lifted one of the rockers upside down over his head before Shu led him into the Center for his first delivery. He hoped they would be met with approval by the Grandmother of Ronnie's babies, but froze at that...

*Ronnie's* babies ... except they were really *Donnie's* babies, but probably no one would ever know about it. Check that. Somebody must *already* know about it, and odds were it was at least Sai and probably Laisee. Déjà ... *maybe*. Kiki ... not so much. She held a too-narrow focus on just a very few things. He dismissed Jaiying and Rose, as he had no basis to form an opinion yet.

With another sigh and shake of his head, he glanced down and noticed his nakedness, so he returned to the bedroom to get ready for the day. The only remaining thought that burdened him was why didn't Shu wake him this morning?

*At the Center*

Laisee, Mary, and Jaiying were waiting on the Center's porch when Lean Bear's car passed the departing truck and arrived with his group. After they parked and walked over towards them, Mary came down the steps to greet them.

"Hello, everyone! Welcome to the Center! Nascha, you're looking *wonderful* today!" she said, her infectious cheerfulness sounding perky to everyone, save for the dour-faced Cocheta. "How was the drive over, Lean Bear?"

"It was a nice, smooth ride. The new pavement to the Reservation is a vast improvement, and your *driveway* seems to be holding up for a change," he said, knowing *intimately* how dangerous the old gravel-packed road used to be.

He turned to Cocheta and muttered something to her in Apache that included Mary's name, but she seemed to ignore him. It didn't faze Mary, though, and she kept to the script.

"Welcome to the Center, Cocheta. We understand Nascha might need a place to stay for a while, and we thought – what better place than out *here*? We have room for her, experienced midwives on staff, and the Center itself is a place for rest and contemplation. Let's go up and meet one of our other visitor's. Do you remember her, Lean Bear? Laisee Caldarous?"

She led them, including the reluctant Cocheta, by latching on to Nascha's arm and guiding her up the stairs to the porch before stepping to the side, such that it placed Cocheta squarely in front of Laisee.

"Cocheta, I would like to introduce Laisee Caldarous. She is the daughter of Ron Cal's older brother," she said with a smile, but Cocheta remained mute.

"COCHETA, PLEASE FORGIVE THE OVERLY CHEERFUL GIRL BEFORE YOU," Laisee told her in impeccable Apache. "SHE MEANS WELL, BUT FORGETS THAT NOT EVERYONE IS SO COMFORTABLE WITH THE WHITE MAN'S TONGUE."

Rather than acknowledge Cocheta's shocked expression, Laisee continued with the other ladies.

"WELCOME TO THE CENTER, APONI, AND YOU, TOO, YEPA," she said, then stayed focused on Gray Feather's wife. "I AM SORRY YOUR HUSBAND SAW FIT TO STAY BEHIND THIS MORNING, AS WE SPOKE ONLY BRIEFLY AT MY UNCLE'S FUNERAL."

"He was just in a sour mood this morning. Didn't want to be stuck in a car with four women for half the day ... so he *says*," Snow Woman said, then laughed.

## Picking up the Pieces

English didn't seem to have the same impact on her that it did on Cocheta, so Laisee smiled and turned to Lear Bear's wife next.

"Butterfly, you are *much* too young and charming to be stuck with *this* old man," she said while reaching out to pat Lean Bear's arm, getting her to laugh while he looked away awkwardly.

"Lean Bear, there is coffee in the dining room, or you're welcome to take the tour," she continued. "Ling tells me it hasn't changed much since the *last* remodel so it's your choice. Nascha ... Mary AND MY DAUGHTER WILL SHOW YOU OUR OFFERINGS, WHILE THE REST OF THE LADIES AND I WILL TRY TO FIND SOMETHING TO AMUSE OURSELVES," she finished, having smoothly switched back to Apache at the last.

On that statement, Mary promptly pulled Nascha towards the door and on through it, with Jaiying dutifully following along. They'd gotten partway down a curved hallway towards a double-door when Nascha stopped and slipped her hand out of Mary's with a curious look on her face, coupled with a bit of puzzlement. She spared a glance at the male staff member who'd followed them into the building and stopped several feet away before turning back to Mary.

"Mary, back there ... did that Chinese girl *really* speak Apache?"

Mary slowly nodded her head, then reached out to take her hand again, while Jaiying snickered quietly.

"She's Lili's step-daughter," she said in an obscure explanation, before turning and leading them towards the double-door again.

From the hard-surfaced floors they'd just left, they suddenly found themselves walking on neutrally colored carpets that deadened the sound significantly. For all intents and purposes, it looked like a hallway from almost any moderately rated hotel from anywhere. They walked a few feet down the quiet hall and up to the archway of a small room, its lights coming on as soon as they paused there.

Looking inside, they could see a soda machine and a snack machine, along with a couple of small tables and several chairs. A door was visible in the far wall with a small sign on it labeled "Laundry." The snack machine was empty, but Jaiying walked over and looked at the selections on the soda machine before pressing a button. Moments later, a can of ginger ale rolled out the bottom and she picked it up and brought it back to Nascha.

"This will help settle your stomach," she said while handing it to her and getting a surprised look from the young pregnant woman at having her unspoken discomfort addressed by the young girl.

"THAT IS WHAT MY Aunt Lili SAYS," Jaiying added helpfully in Apache, then turned away while ignoring the shocked look on Nascha's face.

The resultant pause seemed serious enough, so they directed Nascha over to the set of chairs where they all sat down while she recovered her composure. It took a while...

### ***In Déjà's Room***

"Oh sweetie, these are soooo much better," Sai told her younger daughter.

Though cramped, both rocking chairs were in the room now, which had required removal of the small table and one of the other chairs. Sai was rocking little Ronnie quite comfortably, now, while he slept peacefully in her arms.

With Faith back in her shared crib, Déjà got up and maneuvered herself around to sit down in the other rocker. She was finding it strange that it rocked easily at the slightest push of her feet, and yet swiveled smoothly as well. She hadn't sat on that many rockers in her life, but this one seemed *very* comfortable to her.

"This feels very nice, Mother," she finally decided. "Ronnie had a different rocker on his ship, but this moves much easier."

Déjà rocked comfortably for a minute, then looked at the room's clock. It was still morning and she could really use a shower. She would also like to get something to eat other than what had been brought to her. Basically, she really felt like getting out of the room for at least a *little* while.

"Mother, may I please go shower and then get something to eat?" she asked after having finally screwed up her courage to do so.

"Go ahead, my girl, but you should plan on being back inside of an hour," Sai told her. "I'll call out to you if I need you."

Déjà got up and hugged her, before grabbing her robe and towels to head to the group showers. Once she left, Sai relished the quiet in the room while wondering what else was going on at the Center this morning.

### ***At the Residence***

After having nuked a frozen breakfast sandwich and chomping it down, Wilber finished dressing and headed out the door.

Ling and Sai had told him he should make himself available once Cocheta arrived on site, but still couldn't imagine what use they might possibly make of him. It certainly couldn't be for any of the *training* he'd been involved with, but he'd taken a quick shower just in case. As soon as he got outside, he saw Lean Bear leaving the Center and heading in his direction. Instead of moving, he waited patiently for the

## Picking up the Pieces

tribe's Medicine Man while trying to remember if the hot pot was filled with enough water to make instant coffee for a guest.

### *In the Center*

Laisee took the women on a short tour of the client rooms where guests received examinations, treatment, and covert Healings as appropriate. These were the same type of rooms Donald had initially been sequestered in, and where Déjà had given birth and currently resided. All were single occupancy, with a twin-sized bed, a small dresser, and a table with two desk chairs. The accommodations were limited; all of them having only a half-bath for convenience, while access to the group showers was just down the hallway. Across the hall were duplicates of these rooms, but having five-by-seven-foot treatment platforms in lieu of actual beds.

Afterwards, she looped them through a meeting room, past a couple of offices, then stopped to offer a look into the large gathering room before directing them back through the kitchen and finally into the dining room, where she offered them drinks and cookies.

Butterfly and Snow Woman had already seen all of this, but Cocheta was unimpressed. She'd also passed on anything to eat or drink.

She seemed content to sit there sullenly while letting angry thoughts bounce around in her head, which was *exactly* was Laisee was hoping for.

"ARE YOU SURE THERE IS NOTHING I CAN OFFER YOU, COCHETA?" Laisee asked politely, but got back an almost furious look from her – strangely enough, related to her daughter.

"AND YOU WOULD HAVE NASCHA SLEEP IN A ROOM WITH COLD, BARE FLOORS?" she asked indignantly.

Laisee smiled at her warmly while accepting this marginal opening as a conversation starting point.

"WE ALREADY HAVE A YOUNG MOTHER WITH US WHO GAVE BIRTH TO A BOY AND A GIRL JUST LAST Monday," she said calmly, now catching interest from both Snow Woman and Butterfly as she continued. "NASCHA IS WELCOME TO STAY IN THE GUEST ROOMS UNTIL SHE BEGINS LABOR. THEN IT WILL BE BETTER FOR HER TO BE CLOSER TO THE STAFF IN THE TREATMENT CORRIDOR." She left it at that and waited to see how she would react.

The results were surprising, as she'd never considered something of what she'd caught as a particularly disastrous situation. She continued to remain silent while Cocheta's jumbled memories leaked her shame for only the most sensitive enough to hear it, which was a lead Laisee could try to exploit.

Floyde Leong

"I REMEMBER MY SADNESS BEFORE I BECAME PREGNANT WITH JAIYING," she continued fondly. "I WAS IN A VERY BAD POSITION WITH MY BIRTH MOTHER, AND THOUGHT I WOULD BE TRAPPED WITH HER FOR THE REST OF MY LIFE."

She deliberately left that teaser out there while casually sipping her juice. She knew it could be interpreted in many ways and was curious to see how Cocheta would receive it, but it was Snow Woman whose curiosity got the better of her first.

"YOU BECAME PREGNANT TO ESCAPE FROM YOUR MOTHER?" she asked, somewhat reproachfully, Laisee thought.

"ACTUALLY, RON CAL AND HIS FAMILY TOOK ME AWAY FROM MY MOTHER, AND GAVE ME SHELTER AND A CHANCE TO FIND A SAFE PLACE TO GROW. JAIYING IS THE RESULT OF A VERY CARING AFTERNOON SPENT WITH RON CAL'S ... GREAT-GRANDSON, I BELIEVE."

Laisee could feel the thoughts from all three of them skittering around and wondered just how much trouble she would get into if she explained the details of their family grouping. Surely, Snow Woman and Butterfly had a *basic* understanding of Kantite family structure.

She poked around and found that Snow Woman was aware – more so than Butterfly, anyway – and decided it was a tribal issue and thus covered, just as Ronnie had explained it once before, but with perhaps *less* detail this time.

"MAYA HEARD MY PLEA FOR HELP AND SHE APPROACHED RON CAL. HE THEN DISCUSSED IT WITH HIS FAMILY AND THEY ALL AGREED THEY WOULD SUPPORT ME. MY MOTHER WAS UPSET, BUT MY FATHER AND MY STEPMOTHER ACCEPTED MY DECISION AND STOOD BY ME WHEN I MOVED OUT. I WAS WITH ANDY AND HIS SISTER, AND ANDY'S ... girlfriend, YOU CALL HER? I WAS WITH THEM AND BEING CONSOLED BY THEM WHEN ANDY AND I CREATED MY JAIYING." She closed her eyes and smiled at the memory of that time when all four of them were in bed together and loving each other.

"LAISEE ... DID ANDY FINALLY MARRY YOU?" Butterfly asked her, but got back a dismissive titter.

"Gods, *no!* IT WOULD BE INCONVENIENT FOR ME AND HIM BOTH. HE HAS BONDED WITH HIS WOMAN, SHAY, AND I NEED MY FREEDOM TO PURSUE THE WORK MY FATHER ASSIGNS ME," she explained in Apache mixed with English.

"YOU WOULD LET THIS ANDY FORCE HIS CHILD UPON YOU AND THEN LEAVE YOU!" Cocheta angrily snapped at her while revealing even *more* information about her circumstances.

"ANDY DID NOT FORCE ME, COCHETA, AND HE DID NOT LEAVE ME. HE AND HIS FAMILY LIVE WITH MY FAMILY NOW, AND THEY WORK FOR MY FATHER. HIS SISTER WORKS FOR ANOTHER department in our government," she finished in English, not knowing a suitable translation that didn't sound really silly.

"SO YOUR DAUGHTER IS FATHERLESS!" Cocheta said viciously, and seemed satisfied with that assessment.



## Picking up the Pieces

“MY DAUGHTER HAS DAVID LANE, ANDY LANE, AND AMY’S HUSBAND, LARL, FOR A FATHER. SHE ALSO HAS MY FATHER, HER GRANDFATHER, AND RON...”

She paused for a moment, looking away while clearing her throat before turning back to Cocheta and dropping into English when she continued.

“Before his death, she had her great-grandfather, Ron Cal, whom she loved most of all,” she said softly, then let out a sigh. “She has my step-mothers, and she also had *my* mother – once she came to her senses. She died last year.”

Laisee closed her eyes, but not for the reason Cocheta and the other women thought. She was fitting the puzzle pieces together and assembling the image of Cocheta’s perceived shame – finally pinning down the back-story behind her issues. She blindly reached out to Cocheta and grasped her hands, but it was her gentle flow of energy that finally made Cocheta gasp. Laisee slowly ramped up the loving flow until it broke down her walls and finally brought her to tears.

### *In the Guest’s Corridor*

“What do you think, Nascha?” Mary asked her.

They were in a twelve-by-nineteen room, with a double bed, a warm carpeted floor, and a small bathroom. The accommodations were just short of lavish – with a four-by-four table, four chairs, and two dressers. There was a small nightstand on either side of the bed, and two bookshelves were against the wall next to the bathroom door with its private shower...

Mary had explained the house rules – no smoking, no drugs, keep the room clean, and do your own laundry – but the amenities *far* outweighed these simple restrictions. She’d have free access to the kitchen and laundry, eat whatever she’d bought and cooked for herself, or freely draw from the pantry for her meals.

Although unscheduled, transportation was available upon reasonable request from the motor pool, and a driver and vehicle would be provided for trips to town or other close-by destinations.

She’d been warned that entertainment might be a problem if she wanted to do something more besides read books, but was told she could sit in during classes when they resumed once again. The lack of a TV was noted, but she was welcomed to purchase a portable DVD player system, and either borrow movies from staff or rent them in town...

After a tentative agreement to accept the offered space, they walked back towards the exit doors, where Jaiying stopped at the snack room for another ginger ale for Nascha and one for herself. This time she

put them on the table and sat on a chair before popping the top of her drink and waiting for the grownups to join her.

Mary smiled at the situation, being forewarned by Laisee that an intervention with Cocheta had been expected during the tour. She got herself a drink and joined them at the table. After a refreshing sip of soda, she extended into Nascha and jumped right into it.

“So tell me all about Fred,” she said with a warm smile, while reaching out to hold one of her hands.

### *At the Residence*

Lean Bear was sitting on the sofa next to Rose and her guard, who were watching Walter Matthau trying to fend off Barbra Streisand while she was selecting food for his plate. He honestly didn’t know who was having a better time – the girl or the guard.

Wilber walked out from the hallway on the right, still shaking his head after whatever he’d been doing in his office, and headed to the kitchen.

Seeing his destination, Lean Bear nodded, then stood up and joined him in the kitchen area of the house, the open plan separating the kitchen from the living room by the dividing line where the carpet met the linoleum. He poured himself another cup of hot water and grabbed a tea bag this time. Hopefully, it would help keep his nerves calm when he drove the women back to the reservation later.

“How’s the work coming along on the community room expansion?” Wilber suddenly asked him, catching him by surprise.

“Ahh ... seems to be coming along just fine. They’re still arguing about what to use the extra space for,” he said, getting a knowing nod from Wilber before watching him turn and pour himself some hot water to make a cup of instant coffee this time.

“Typical. Probably had a *preferred* item on their wish list but never really expected release of those funds,” Wilber muttered in frustration. “Now that they got ‘em, they’d rather have spent it on something *else*.”

He stirred his coffee, then sampled it, frowning when it didn’t meet his expectations. He scooped another half-teaspoon in and stirred it again.

“Hey, we learned that trick from the *white man*,” Lean Bear teased him, and Wilber snorted before they both broke into quiet chuckles.

A few moments later, they both took a breath and sipped their hot drinks, with Wilber looking over the rim of his cup at him before setting it back down. His frown deepened, but not from the coffee.

## Picking up the Pieces

“How’s the housing situation?” Wilber asked him quietly. “Any more homes needing repairs? New roofs? Heaters, air conditioners, stoves, refrigerators?”

Lean Bear looked at him steadily for several seconds until Wilber let out a sigh and straightened up, waving for him to follow him to the office. Once behind the hallway and office doors, Wilber gestured to a chair, while he perched himself on the edge of his desk.

“Look... Here’s the deal. The ninety-nine year lease still has over sixty years to go, but that money is coming from the Embassy. The money for *direct* tribal support was coming from Ronnie’s funds,” Wilber quietly told him.

Lean Bear stared at him for a few seconds more but shrugged, so Wilber continued.

“The fact of the matter is ... before he left here back in 2000, he made me executor of his estate. Over the years, and we’re talking *decades* now, Ronnie would put a little bit of money away for a *very* long time. Some of the companies that hold his trusts are *well* over a hundred years old, not to mention the *liquid* assets on deposit.”

“Well ... is it a *lot*?”

“If distributed per his *last* instructions...” Wilber paused, not sure how to approach this, so he took another sip of his coffee. Rather than spill it all, he decided to let just a little bit of it trickle out to get a feel of how things went.

“It’s earmarked to support safe, clean, and durable housing for the existing tribal members, plus whatever normal growth occurs between marriages, babies, and whatnot. There’s also enough to support decent health care and supplemental food for *everyone*, as well as enough money every year to send every kid in the tribe to a college or trade school of their choice – provided they fully intend to actually *work* for a living afterwards,” Wilber told him. “You remember how he was.”

Lean Bear almost choked, thinking of the infighting that would occur if the tribal council ever found out.

“Wilber, you ... you can’t tell *anyone*. You shouldn’t have told *me*. They’d go *nuts* if they find out there might be a windfall headed their way.”

“Oh, you *think*? Just so you know, I plan to follow Ronnie’s instructions until the funds runs out. I figure we got at least another thirty or forty years left.”

From *petty cash*, anyway, but he kept that to himself while taking another sip from his cup. He also neglected to mention the current

market value of Ronnie's trusts approached the gross domestic product of *Dubai*, but that was a separate issue.

"Well ... I suppose we should be thankful that he thought of us at all," Lean Bear considered aloud, then shook his head while chewing at his lower lip.

That comment brought a quiet snort from Wilber, but he swallowed before muttering, "Well ... at one time, he did mention terra-forming a *planet*. Said he'd like to try and offer *all* the tribes a place of their own – just like it was before the white man came over and kicked everyone off their traditional lands."

Lean Bear looked at him in surprise, then wondered how many people in the tribe might actually *accept* going back to the old ways but didn't really think there would be that many at this stage in their lives. Just to prove the point, his cell phone chose that moment to ring, and he checked the caller ID before answering it.

"APONI? YOU GUYS READY TO GO?"

### ***In the Snack Room***

Neither she nor Mary had expected the waterworks to start so precipitously, but Jaiying reached out and held Nascha's other hand while Mary flooded her with a loving glow. Jaiying's touch was for an entirely different reason since she was using the physical connection to pry into Nascha's memories more easily. As Nascha's grief flooded through her, Jaiying found very strong emotions for her husband, and echoes of his reciprocal feelings for her. She closed her eyes and concentrated on them, locking them firmly into her consciousness.

She pulled away and contemplated a comparison with her mother's feelings about him. She could trigger a memory of him in Cocheta's mind, but a quick probe found her current emotional state pretty much ruled that out.

She poked around while she was in there and found the puzzle piece her Mother intended to adjust in order to help Cocheta get her life back on track, so she withdrew and focused on Nascha and Mary once again while seeing the glow from Mary start to die down as Nascha became calmer.

"It's almost lunch time," Mary murmured. "These snack machines are empty, so how about we go and find something good to eat?"

Nascha looked at her with puffy eyes and just nodded her head. They got her up and slowly headed back to the kitchen where they could browse through the available offerings.

~~~

## Picking up the Pieces

Butterfly had hung up before peeking through the window in the kitchen door to the dining room. Snow Woman, Ling, and Laisee were still dealing with the fretful Cocheta.

At least she was vertical once again and no longer splayed across the table. She pushed the door open and walked in, bringing another drink for Cocheta.

"Here you go, girl," she said gently, handing the soda to the red-eyed woman.

"T-Thank you, Butterfly," Cocheta said shakily, then chanced a glance at the incredibly intuitive Chinese girl sitting across from her.

"Cocheta, you know what you are to do?" Laisee asked her softly.

"Y-Yes... I'll go h-home a-and write e-everything d-down," she said, her voice stuttering awkwardly.

"Just start at the beginning. Write down your memories and how they made you feel. Once the painful feelings are written on paper, you can simply put them away so they will not bother you any longer. Do you understand?"

"Y-Yes, Laisee. I-I know... I-I under-s-s-stand..." she said with difficulty.

"What are you to do if you start to feel angry or frightened?" Laisee asked her softly.

"I-I ... I'm to come ... come back here and ask for h-help," she whimpered, then dropped her eyes.

Both Snow Woman and Butterfly reached out to her and placed their hands on her forearms.

"You may also come to either of us, Cocheta, and we will help you. We'll bring you here if you need to come and talk with Laisee or Ling," Snow Woman told her while glancing over at Ling and seeing her peaceful smile and accepting nod.

Laisee and Ling stood up, with Ling stepping over and hugging Cocheta, while Laisee made her way around the table to share a hug with her as well. While Laisee was hugging her, Cocheta raised the other issue once again.

"W-What about Nascha?" she asked, but Laisee just hugged her tighter and murmured into her hair when she spoke.

"Nascha will stay here, dear, while we work on *you* getting control over *your* life. You have suffered long enough, Cocheta, and you need to learn how to love *yourself*. Only when you love yourself will you be ready to share that feeling with someone deserving of it. We'll see you

tomorrow, Cocheta, and maybe you and Nascha can take a walk around the grounds together. Would you like that?"

She didn't say anything, but Laisee could feel her nod her head, so she tightened her hug one more time, then pushed her away slightly, pausing to kiss her on the cheek, then pulled her back for another hug before finally stepping away.

*'Rose, please send Lean Bear to us. Have him bring papers and writing instruments for Cocheta to express herself'* she sent, and got an immediate response from her.

### ***At the Residence***

Wilber and Lean Bear were just coming out of the office when they almost stumbled over Rose standing in the hallway.

"Uncle Wilber, Mama Laisee needs paper and stylus for Cocheta to write down her feelings. Lean Bear is supposed to bring them with him," she said, then turned on her heel and headed back to watch the end of the movie.

The men just looked at each other before Wilber went back in and got a fresh notebook from the filing cabinet and several pens. He handed them to Lean Bear, and they walked out together and headed for the Center.

### ***At the Center***

Nascha and company arrived at the kitchen pantry and rummaged around until they found something suitable to eat – in this case, some fresh fruit and cheese for the pregnant woman, along with a cold glass of what looked like skim milk that Mary poured for her from a vacuum container. She told her it was *very* fresh.

They carried their trays into the dining room, but seeing Lean Bear's car pulling away through the dining room windows drew their attention and caused Nascha to let out a quiet gasp.

In silent resignation, she sat down and aimlessly picked at her selections, taking small nibbles and chewing them slowly before finally sipping the milk.

Several seconds later, she let out a quiet sigh and started taking bigger nibbles before finally biting off a hunk of banana just as Laisee and Ling walked into the dining room.

"Oh Nascha! You just missed your mother," Ling told her. "She'll be coming back for counseling tomorrow, and promised to bring some of your things for you. Do you need anything special for tonight? We can provide some items of clothing for you if needed."

## Picking up the Pieces

"Yeah, Nascha," Mary said, her cheerful smile in place once again. "Do you need underwear or sweatpants for tonight? I'm sure we got some over in the house you can try on."

"If needed, you and Mary can go into town and purchase suitable clothing if you have none of your own," Ling added thoughtfully.

"But ... I don't have that much money saved up. I-I was--"

"You are *tribe*, Nascha, and *we* take care of our *own*," Mary told her distractedly while missing the look of utter astonishment directed at her as Mary was picking through the offerings on her own plate.

"We continue to honor Ron Cal's tribe, Nascha," Laisee told her. "As Lili did for you in the hospital, so we will do for you here."

After the chaos in the snack room, things had been stable up to this point, but the trembling lip of the young woman preceded the *second* breakdown of the day for her.

### *Afternoon at the Residence*

It was mid-afternoon, and Wilber was still helping Jaiying use the computer in his office...

The request had come unexpectedly, but had the backing of both Ling and Sai. For over an hour, he'd patiently sat with her and showed her how to access the new worldwide mapping web page.

He'd been surprised she knew both spoken and written English; but considering what the Emperor had put him through thirty years ago, he should have expected it.

What he *didn't* expect was her request for information on Fred's last known location. That had brought both Sai and Laisee to the house, where they'd advised him that Jaiying was a key element in the search for Fred. He'd felt like putting a stop to it, but remembered what Ronnie had once told him, "Always do what the ladies tell you, and be glad they let you play with them once in a while."

It may not have directly applied in this situation, but he surrendered to the inevitable; brought out a stack of paper, and spread it over the sofa. Seeing that he was in compliance, Sai and Laisee both kissed him on the cheek and took their leave, while Jaiying squatted down and started flipping through the paperwork until Wilber pointed to a different stack and sat down on the floor with her...

"Okay, the last known location for Fred was *here*, somewhere in the Korengal Valley," he said, while pointing to a paragraph on the sheet. "This is near the eastern border of Afghanistan – up close to the Pakistani border."

She looked at the spelling, got up and keyed it in, but the computer couldn't find it. She turned back to him with a frown, and he pushed two chairs together in front of the computer and set the paper down before joining her.

"According to this, you search for Asadabad first," he said, and saw her glance at the sheet, then key it in. He watched the map pop up on the screen, and she zoomed it out to show its general location on that side of the world before zooming back in.

"What's next?" she asked.

"There are two rivers going through Asadabad. Take the one going to the left. It should be named Pech. Follow it until it splits."

He watched as she carefully manipulated the display until the Pech split several miles north-west of Asadabad near Nangalam. He looked at the map scale and guesstimated it was pretty close to the description, then checked the sheet again.

"Go directly south – *down* – for five miles, and that should be the target valley," he muttered, then looked up in time to see her shift the display upwards an appropriate amount before selecting a satellite view.

Nothing much could be seen until she zoomed in and viewed what looked like small groupings of buildings scattered in clumps across the lower sides of the valley.

A single road meandered through the valley until it split a little further south. He looked at the map scale and quickly ran the numbers in his head.

"Jaiying, there's gotta be at least ten square miles of habitable terrain surrounding his immediate last known position, and they could have moved him *anywhere* by now."

His impression of the terrain found it *appalling* – a steep mountain ridge with a narrow valley at the bottom. Not much ground vegetation, unless you count the trees standing among the rocks.

What good vegetation there was remained local to the few villages in the valley, and that was in terraced vegetable plots. He didn't see a source of water anywhere, and wondered how they managed to maintain them.

She continued to stare at the satellite image, then slowly zoomed it back out, cementing its location to the surrounding area until she was able to place it relative to the coastlines of four bordering countries.

"Uncle Wilber, do you have a *spherical* map of the Earth?"



*At the Center, In the Dining Room*

Donald and Maya were in the dining room and sharing an early supper with Déjà. It wasn't much, just simple fare from the pantry, but it tasted good, and got Déjà out of bed and moving around for a change. As he sat with them, with Maya on one side and Déjà on the other, he was thinking of the future and how lucky he was to be *alive*, with his *loved* ones, and somewhere *safe* for a change.

With both of them as his wives, he could see them keeping him young, healthy, and busy. The children just about *guaranteed* it, and he smiled at that, finally having children he could hold and declare as his *own* ... provided he actually *adopted* them as Donald Cato. That was a small point, though, and not worthy of concern. He was wondering when Déjà might be feeling up to a session of gentle play between the three of them, when Laisee and Sai walked in with a tribeswoman in tow. They approached the table and stopped on the side opposite him. Laisee was smiling at him sedately, which was a *sure* sign of trouble.

"Hello, Donald," she said. "I see you've finished your meal. I trust you've been sufficiently refreshed. Your recollections of service with Ron Cal during his *formative* years would be of use to us. There is a question of logistics and tactics involved."

He vaguely understood what she was asking for, even after that bizarre tangent she threw at him. He had no idea why the *tribal* woman was standing there until she spoke.

"Please, Sir. They tell me you can help find my Fred," she said, then looked at him hopefully.

That raised his eyebrows, and his hands, which half-rose in an expression of helplessness that Laisee addressed.

"Donald, Lili performed a service to Nascha at the hospital in town. There is another issue where Nascha can use our help – *if* we are able. Her husband has been misplaced on the other side of the world, and she would very much like to have him returned home to her ... safely."

He slowly started to shake his head, but Sai took over.

"Check with Wilber," she said. "He's got the information you'll need. We just need your advice on how to handle this based on your *previous* experiences."

He nodded slowly, which caused the woman – the *girl*, he now saw – to smile hopefully before she was led away by Sai and Laisee.

As they were leaving the room, Wilber was coming in and carrying a folder. Jaiying followed along, and behind her was her guardsman carrying a globe of the Earth.

### *In Déjà's Room*

Déjà and Maya arrived back at her room and opened the door to see both Mary and Shu nursing the babies. Smiles were shared all around until they closed the door, and Mary asked, "Where's Donnie?"

Maya started at that but quickly recovered, while Déjà simply ignored it and told her.

"Lady Laisee and Lady Sai came to supper and asked Donald to help Wilber with something," she said, then came over to see her children in action at these new breasts.

She almost felt disappointed they didn't seem to care *who* fed them, but remembered they were being fed and *not* crying for the time being. It was a new experience for her, never having been around newborns before. While the substitute milkmaids rocked and fed her children, she stripped down to her underwear and sat on the bed to chat with them. This, *too*, was a new experience for her and something she could get used to.

While they were learning about each other's day, she glanced over at Maya and thought back to the last time she'd come to nurse the babies. Her milk hadn't helped with her pain during labor, but she thought it tasted even *sweeter* than it did the first time she'd tried it back on the platform.

### *At the Residence*

They'd left Jaiying at the Center, ostensibly to nap for several hours until she could reasonably expect Fred to be awake on the opposite side of the world. Donald had given her an estimated local sleep cycle between noon until about eight in the evening, Mountain Standard Time.

It made sense, because Afghanistan was eleven and a half hours ahead of them, so it would require Jaiying to start her search in the late local evening and continue until the local early morning. Right now, he and Wilber were in the house and had been going over computer maps and written descriptions of the terrain since before the bottom of the day – *none* of which helped the situation very much.

"Wilber, you got the general location of the area, but didn't they have any *decent* maps they could send you?"

"Ha-ha. Funny. They're not about to give out copies of secret maps to the general public – *or* unknown Embassies. What we got here is all we have available."

"Oh *please!* This stuff is *crap!* The NRO's got *way* better cameras in them birds than *this* shit!"

## Picking up the Pieces

Wilber had been standing behind him while Donald was manipulating the satellite map of the target area and trying to read more detail from it. It was very frustrating, in that what *may* have looked like haphazardly placed buildings, also looked a lot like rock falls in the blocky images. It was also difficult to pick out any contours for the terrain because of the flatness of the photographs. This last outburst caused him to take a step back, before Donald pushed out an extended sigh and slumped in the chair.

“Well, if the girl can’t find him from *here*, we’re just gonna have to go over there and get *closer*,” he finally mumbled. “*If* he’s still alive.”

Wilber had already convinced himself this was Ronnie in disguise, but working with him on this project had cemented it in his mind. He’d heard those words before – maybe not those *exact* words, but the feelings and intent were pure Ron Cal.

“Bad situation on the ground over there,” he said. “After they got booted out of the Tora Bora, the Taliban have been digging in. The Korengal Valley is the perfect spot.”

“*Perfect?* Maybe if you like rocks and trees,” Donald chided him. “Aside from keeping the civilians around to steal from just so they can keep eating, there’s nothing there to fight for or protect against. Just a bunch of petty warlords trying to stake out a piece of land while justifying it over religion or race or ... or *something*. Certainly nothing to do with making lives better for anyone but *themselves*.”

“Hmmm. A lot like Washington, D.C.,” Wilber suggested, and got a loud snort from Donald.

“It’ll be a *bitch* pulling anyone out,” Donald mused aloud while rubbing his cheek slowly. “Be even harder if his *team* is still with him.” He rolled his fingertips on the base of the keyboard for several seconds before starting to shake his head slowly.

“Too bad we don’t have a *Galaxy*-class on hand,” he muttered, and Wilber almost choked on his spit, but kept his mouth clamped tight...

The tank parked in the motor pool was definitely *not* supposed to be there – even *without* standard beamers installed.

Sai had told him it was just in case they had to go somewhere in a hurry, but never actually defined what that might entail. He was faced with several choices at this point, the *surest* of which was being fired and maybe losing the Healing Center on Earth for the next hundred years or so. Just the same, at this point, he was basically a glorified security officer, and that job was relatively easy – observe and report.

Upon further reflection, that was the *perfect* solution. He’d observed someone making a comment regarding a current situation, and would

report it to the proper authorities, who, as the highest-ranking individual currently on the planet, would be Lady Caldaraus.

Wilber smiled grimly, knowing this was, at its *basest*, simply passing the buck, but it followed both Kantite and American law *explicitly*. As he was considering what he would say to Laisee, he wondered if he could still get his breakfast sandwiches in prison.

### ***In the Center, Following a Different Tack***

“Please, Mother?” Jaiying asked her pityingly. “It really *is* the best way to help me find him, and it’s not like it will injure her in the process.”

Laisee looked at her daughter, then once more at the clock. It was half an hour before midnight, which made it just eleven a.m. in Northeastern Afghanistan, but Jaiying had been at it since ten p.m. that evening. She looked over at Rose, who was sound asleep in the bed she shared with Jaiying, and considered who could come stay with her.

Donald had already gone to bed with Maya, while Sai had stayed in her own guest room for a change. Laisee extended outwards, and, oddly enough, found someone still wide-awake in one of the other guest rooms.

“*\*Spring Blossom, may I ask a favor of you?\**” she sent softly, and got an immediate reply, whereupon she explained the situation. As soon as Spring Blossom arrived, she and Jaiying left for the wing Nascha was staying in and sat in the adjacent room to carry out their plan.

### ***September 12, In Donald’s Room***

Once he’d learned the *Kraken’s Child* was sitting over in the motor pool, he and Wilber had gone to Laisee with the suggestion of a simple scouting trip to locate Fred – provided Jaiying failed to find him after a reasonable amount of effort. They hadn’t argued so much as suggested additional techniques that might help the girl locate the missing husband and his men. Once found, the plan was still to give their verified location to government forces for their safe recovery.

After Laisee’s promise to “take it under advisement” he and Wilber had left and joined their respective partners for the evening before eventually settling down for the night. He and Maya had played quietly for a while, then shared touches and kisses before she’d fed him just enough to take the pressure off her breasts until morning, when she’d either feed her sister’s babies again, or pump more milk for the Center’s use. They’d also talked about her volunteering at the hospital again before they both drifted off to sleep around midnight.

## Picking up the Pieces

A few hours later, Donald woke up with a start and realized that he didn't know the current weapons load in the tank. It had no *beam* weapons installed, which was a *definite* no-no according to the existing treaty, but the one main gun could *more* than make up for it – especially if there were any “hot” loads aboard.

That thought made him sit upright in worry. If the deck officer took it upon himself to have the tank serviced, and he didn't know of *any* Imperial officer who wouldn't include a little tour during the process, this was a potential disaster just waiting to happen.

He quietly slipped out of bed and grabbed his clothes before dashing to the facilities to pee and get dressed. When he stepped out, he glanced down at his sleeping lover, bent over to leave a quick kiss on her cheek, then left the room, heading to the motor pool.

### *Getting a Fix on Fred*

Jaiying was admiring the skill with which her Mother was inducing a sense of arousal in Nascha. The young woman was experiencing erotic dreams of her husband from before he'd left for deployment, the memory of their play fueling her desires until she finally reached down and began playing with herself in her sleep.

Laisee was trying to keep Nascha's dreams focused on happier times, keeping them hedonistic rather than romantic. Passionate rather than sedate. She could feel Jaiying's presence while Nascha's mind was radiating waves of pleasure, both physical and remembered, which included the memories of echoes from Fred in return...

Jaiying had spent nearly two hours in concentration while focused intently on the approximate coordinates of Fred's last known position, but to no avail. She'd *felt* people, but none of the thoughts present were intelligible in the least. What was worse, as she'd shifted her focus around the area, the impressions she was getting seemed to take on a different flavor ... almost as if the individuals she was trying to understand spoke another language *entirely*. When it happened the *third* time, she'd gotten frustrated and asked her Mother for this favor – an *intensified* response from Nascha to help refine Fred's memory patterns for her...

“I'm going to do it now, Jaiying,” Laisee murmured, and her daughter reached out blindly and patted her arm before dropping her hand back into her lap.

Jaiying extended further into Nascha's psyche while Laisee was reaching into the woman's pleasure centers. Once Laisee found the right nodes, she activated a suitably stimulating pattern that emulated the same physical reaction as the *Gift*, but without the necessity of touch. It wasn't as strong, nor was it as debilitating, but it did the job,

and Nascha was pushed over the edge while both Laisee and Jaiying read her wildly radiating emotions when she began repetitive climaxes for several seconds.

As these were overlaid with memories of Fred, the impressions Jaiying was getting were *very* strong, and she locked those into her memory, then withdrew, while her Mother discontinued the stimulation and let Nascha settle to the point where she finally drifted off with the pleasant memories of a very passionate dream.

Mother and daughter were getting ready to head back, when Ling reached out to Laisee about a security issue.

*“Laisee, Donald has gotten loose, and they’re holding him in the motor pool!”*

### ***In the Motor Pool***

It was three a.m. when Laisee got to the motor pool where Donald was sitting in the maintenance office, telling stories of his adventures while serving with the Madman back in his mercenary days.

Much laughter could be heard from the small audience on duty that early morning, which slowly died out the closer she got to the office door. As he was facing away from the door, Donald missed her approach, but *didn’t* miss the expressions on the faces of the three men in front of him.

“Ling is *right* behind me, isn’t she—”

“*Ling* asks why you’ve decided to visit the motor pool so early in the *morning*, Donald,” Laisee said pointedly, while standing there with her hands on her hips and frowning at the back of his head.

From the look on her face, the audience decided the show was over, so they nodded politely as they passed by on their way to get out of range. Meanwhile, Donald straightened himself and stood before turning around to face her while smiling widely.

“By the *Gods!* Lady Caldarous, you *still* look absolutely beautiful – even *without* getting enough sleep while serving our masters in this *desolate* wasteland,” he said loudly, which elicited the slightest of guffaws from at least one of his previous attendees.

“Donald... What are you *doing* out here?” she asked in exasperation.

“That’s a Galaxy-class,” he said, while nodding at the painfully black amorphous mass nestled over by the wall and surrounded by orange cones. “Not supposed to be on planet... Not *armed*, anyway, and *certainly* not with certain ‘hot’ loads.”

## Picking up the Pieces

"Petrus left it for Sai ... just in case," she said, while glancing back at it herself.

"I need to go inside and see what's in his armory. Any 'hot' loads gotta be taken off planet and stored on the backside of the moon."

He stared at her while waiting for a response, which was long in coming and not positive.

"Sai can check it later. She's the one it's keyed to, and—"

"And she doesn't know *half* the shit I've had done to that tank! She should have brought the *Orca* down and had the beamers locked out. *That* thing was kept ready to fight at moment's notice," he said, pointing this time to the strangely malevolent darkness across the motor pool floor. "I need to get inside and disable it."

"It's keyed to *Sai*," she repeated, but he held up his hand.

"It's *my* ship and it's keyed—"

"*Was* keyed to Rondal *Caldar*! Petrus flushed it and rekeyed it – *per protocol*," she said stiffly while facing him down.

He dropped his head and shook it a few times before meeting her eyes again.

"Look, just let me go in and secure the armory and loader. At least let me turn on a *background* from the cloaking system before someone walks into it and *hurts* themselves ... or drives a *van* into it."

"Donald, it's locked. Sai can—"

"Look, if I can't get in, then I can wait for Sai, but right now I'm having trouble falling asleep over this. *Please* ... just let me try."

He watched as she frowned, then glanced back at the tank again before turning to him and nodding her head.

"Fine. But if you can't get in, you'll have to wait until later. Let's go." At that, she turned and stalked over to the tank, with the mid-watch crew staying out of her way while she crossed to the other side of the motor pool.

He caught up to her when she stopped and stood there while trying to figure out where the door was. He withheld his chuckle when he walked around her and stepped to the side of it, then felt around for a few seconds before pressing his hand against the hull.

"\**Caldar* – zero – zero – one,\*" he said in Standard, and waited for the door to open – which it did not. He looked at his palm closely, and then pressed the panel, once again, trying the same combination with the same results.

He tapped his fingers on the panel for a few seconds, then nodded slowly before pressing the panel again.

“*\*Override\** ... ONE – SEVEN – EIGHT – FOUR,” he counted quietly in Apache, then stepped back beside her and folded his arms.

“Donald, I told you that–”

The tank suddenly gave out a sound somewhere between a loud fart and an obscene belch. Then it shrieked like a *banshee* for about three seconds, while all of its exterior lights flashed brilliantly before going out.

A slight hiss was heard. Then the airlock panel slid open, allowing the stairway to extend in front of them. He held a smug look on his face but didn’t flaunt it at her.

“Told ya’,” he muttered, then walked over and stepped up into the *Kraken’s Child*.

### ***In the Center***

Spring Blossom stirred, then looked over at Jaiying, who was snuggled next to a sleeping Rose but giggling very quietly. She reached out to touch her, silently letting her know she should be quiet now.

*‘I’m sorry, Grandmother. Donald just proved to Mother that he still has access to his tank’* she sent, then curled slightly away from Rose to face Donald’s mother. She smiled thinly in the dim light of the room, already sensing the next question she was about to ask.

*‘I did not feel Fred anywhere. He may not be in that area at all’*

*‘Or he might be dead’* Spring Blossom’s words seemed blunt, but they were likely the truth. *‘Were you able to read anyone else while you searched?’*

*‘None that I could understand, Grandmother, and many did not seem to use the same language as others – yet they walked among each other. It was very strange’*

Spring Blossom could understand that. Over two hundred years ago, none of the Native American tribes spoke the same or even *similar* languages. Among Lili’s periodic umbrages against the Earthlings was her complaint about the lack of one *common* language...

In the Commonwealth, which had one common written and spoken language for *everyone*, there were just a few holdouts from the older member clusters that retained their own languages for local use.

Cletus, Tyler, Grimer, and Nance had established a single, cluster-wide vocabulary before joining the Commonwealth, while most of the



## Picking up the Pieces

colony worlds spoke almost nothing but Commonwealth Standard. Balese was an anomaly, in that the transplanted natives of that world still spoke pure Balese at home, but used Standard for everyday business purposes – a task at which they were *extremely* competent.

All of the others, both clusters and individual worlds all the way out to the Fringe, spoke a smattering of additional dialects usually based on Standard, but *nothing* like the miserable hodgepodge that existed on Earth.

During Radatel's brief years as Ambassador to Earth, one of Lili's *constant* frustrations was the insanity of the Earthlings trying to co-exist with each other while dealing with over six-thousand separate voices and their accompanying dialects...

*'Jaiying, perhaps Wilber might better advise you about the native languages in the morning? Your mother, too, was taught by Lili. She may offer assistance'* Spring Blossom suggested, then felt Jaiying considering the situation when she reached out to touch her arm before turning back to snuggle with Rose again.

### ***At the Residence, A Seven A.M. Intrusion***

Wilber had awoken refreshed that morning, right up until Laisee and Jaiying came over from the Center. They'd caught him at breakfast while he'd been reading the overnight reports, and he'd hastily gobbled down his breakfast sandwich while going to answer the door.

After a brief greeting, they'd hustled him past Shu and into his office before asking more detailed questions about the target area – most notably, why the people over there did not even speak the same language to *each other*.

That had him confused, but then Donald knocked on the office door a few seconds later and crowded in with the rest of them, only to direct a question at Jaiying.

"Spring Blossom said there were some mixed results from last night. What did you find out, Jaiying?"

"That Earthlings are *insane*? They do not all speak the *same* language, even as they *live* together?"

He let out a chuckle before sitting down on the hide-a-bed and telling her the bad news.

"Sweetheart, these aren't *Vanir* you're dealing with. These are *Earthlings*. To begin with, *most* of us can only think in one language at a time, but over *there*..." He suddenly turned and asked, "Wilber, how many languages do the Afghans speak?"

Wilber gave him a shrug before taking his computer out of standby. Twenty seconds later, he was keying in a question, and five seconds after that, scrolling down a page of text and vocalizing as he went.

"Says here, two official languages, Dari and Pashto, with two more secondary's and about thirty others representing small ethnic groups," he said, then read a little further. "The target area also has about five *additional* dialects." He turned to look at them and added, "Those could be variations of *any* of the above."

"Then how is Jaiying supposed to learn the location of Fred from the people in the area if she has to learn—" Laisee stopped and stared at Wilber for a moment before a blush rose up her neck towards her cheeks.

Donald had missed it as he'd been considering another option, but took advantage of the quiet to voice a request for Wilber.

"Wilber, can you get hold of your contacts and ask what the interpreters were speaking when they were at that location? Once Jaiying gets that down, she can go in and make suggestions that they think of what happened to the Americans. That should give us a clue if they were killed on the spot or taken elsewhere."

Wilber looked at him and started nodding his head, before letting out a rueful snort and turning back to his keyboard.

"I donno, Boss. You always get involved with the *weirdest* shit," he muttered while opening his email program and banging out a specific request.

"Boss..." Laisee whispered, then turned from Wilber to confront Donald. "You *told* him?"

"He's seen me naked," he mumbled, then shrugged his shoulders slightly.

"That's true," Wilber muttered. "I *have* seen him naked ... although he's *much* prettier now."

"How... When did you—"

"That day we humped him back on his bed? He still has the *honor* scar Xiaoli gave him back when I got him laughing during sword practice," Wilber explained absently, before finishing his request and sending it off with a flourished pinky-plop on the "Enter" key.

"Who else knows?" Laisee asked him flatly.

"You tell *me*. I only know because I knew him before. I suspect Gray Feather thinks something is wrong, but that's only based on his reaction to Spring Blossom. *Ling* ... probably not, but after him

## Picking up the Pieces

breaking into the *Kraken's Child* this morning, it's *anyone's* guess. At least it isn't that god-awful dead *black* anymore."

Laisee glared down at Donald and was about to make another accusation when he raised his hand.

"Wilber is the official liaison with the Embassy. Anything that might even *remotely* affect the security of the Center is reported to him immediately so he can make a determination of whether the Ambassador needs to be notified or kept in the dark. Miltie and I have done this dance for nearly thirty years now."

"And it keeps getting *more* complicated every damn time you show up," Wilber chastised him gently. "You planning a smash and grab? If the boy's still alive, I can ask Aineias to grab some volunteers and—"

"No! We locate Fred and turn it over to our *hosts!*" Laisee said firmly, which prompted a quick rebuttal by Wilber.

"Lady Caldarous, you've never actually *seen* our government in action, have you?" he asked dismissively, but his computer chimed behind him and he turned and read the response while nodding his head at the semi-positive information.

"Okay... As one might expect, that district supports the *Korengal* dialect of Pashayi, along with a smattering of Pashto, and they're all pretty much independent tribes without any real connection to authority. They don't like *anyone* who comes in and messes with their lives; be it Russians, Americans, *other* Afghans, or the Taliban. They basically don't give a crap about *anything* outside their valley. Even when the Taliban ruled Afghanistan, the valley remained independent."

"How did they manage *that?*" Donald asked.

"*You* saw the terrain. It's basically fly in and fly out. Choppers go in and get shot at. The first cycle in, we lost one, and a bunch of guys got killed in the process. Fighting on that type of terrain is *not* what Americans are geared for, and quite frankly..." he paused for a reluctant shrug, "I'd be surprised if Fred was still alive."

"Wilber, we would still like the opportunity to find out," Laisee said quietly. "Is there a way to meet with a speaker of this 'Korengal' dialect?"

He looked up at her while thinking it over. The *last* time he'd been out with force recon was almost forty years ago, but they didn't play in the same sandbox, anyway. Dwayne didn't have any similar experiences on the teams, but he did have *friends* in similar places that might be able to help them out. Besides, he was the one assigned to Washington, D.C., and in the right place to ask for a few favors.

"I'll have Dwayne look into it on his end. Will you need classroom instruction in the language or what?" he finally asked her.

It was her turn to look at Wilber and consider her position – for just a few seconds. He already knew the truth about Donald, and was also quite knowledgeable about Lili, having worked under her for years.

"I would like to sit down and speak with such a person, and ... 'pick their brains' is, I believe, the proper expression?"

"That is correct, my Lady. I'll see what can be arranged."

He turned back to his computer, while Laisee turned away and spoke quietly with Donald for a few moments before leaving the room. Wilber's ears didn't *quite* burn at what little he'd overheard, but on the *positive* side, a rather long Kantite vacation for both him and Shu was probably not the most *terrible* outcome should things go totally tits up over this. He finished his request to Dwayne and lightly tapped send, saving his more *elegant* flourishes for a less serious occasion.

### ***Saturday, September 17, Limited Progress***

They'd all had a busy few days since Monday. Ling had focused on Cocheta's emotional issues, and was backed by Laisee. The woman's main issue wasn't so much Nascha or her husband, but issues Laisee had traced back to the way her *own* mother had treated her.

Cocheta's mother had been impregnated by a casual white boyfriend, but then dumped by him, leaving her to raise his bastard daughter. She'd taken out her anger and bitterness on Cocheta until she suddenly died when her daughter was at the age of 14.

As would be expected, those many years of mistreatment affected Cocheta negatively, and living with indifferent relatives hadn't helped any. That's probably why she'd been drawn to a friendly white boy she'd met at high school who'd eventually taken her virginity, but then left her – treating it as another notch on his counting stick.

After that, she'd let herself be bedded by a number of tribal boys and finally gotten pregnant by one of them. She'd continued running through a succession of casual sex partners until getting too big to go unnoticed, which was when *no one* would touch her.

Her bitterness had left her angry, and, like her own mother, she'd taken it out on Nascha, her *own* bastard daughter.

From her extended history, it was easy to deduce Cocheta blamed *white* men for her original trouble, and blamed Fred for getting Nascha pregnant. In her mind, she didn't believe he was lost overseas, and instead, thought he'd simply left her – just as *she'd* been left by her own first boyfriend, and her mother had been left by hers.

## Picking up the Pieces

At least Cocheta was on speaking terms with Nascha once again, if only in a rather limited fashion. They avoided speaking about Fred – or her pregnancy – and focused instead on what the tribe was doing. During their walks over the last few days, they'd started thinking of suggestions to improve the Healing Center's lack of a garden. Flowers and vegetable gardens were the one overlapping thing they'd shared over the years and the only thing they'd never really argued about. It was a start, anyway.

Wilber had been in contact with Dwayne Sparks at the Embassy in Washington, D.C., to see if he could pry any better geographical maps and images of the target area from his government resources for Donald. Both his and Dwayne's contacts covered the same organizations involved, but being located at the formal Embassy might be a deciding factor in getting the data released. As a bonus, Dwayne contacted Wilber earlier in the week with news of locating a translator/interpreter who'd assisted American forces in the target area. They were scheduled to arrive either Friday or Saturday.

### *In the Hanger...*

This fine Saturday mid-morning found Donald with Sai and going over the finer points of the *Kraken's Child's* last upgrade, the one Donnel Ardan had installed. She was attentive during this, even though privately wondering why Ronnie had allowed Ardan to mess with his tank so cavalierly on his own. She'd been surprised the new tracer sensor had been installed, but he mentioned only discovering it when he and Sue were over that Vanir research station at Site A.

The *final* upgrades had included detailed ground and subsurface mapping capabilities over and above that of most other ships, let alone tanks. Ronnie had mentioned his inability to find the hidden bunkers over Site A, and Ardan apparently spent a little time finding a solution to it after his return. Unfortunately, although Donnel had left remarkably *clear* instructions this time, Ronnie never had the chance to really check it out before his little "accident" in the gym with Lady Trenka.

"You know, we *could* take the ship out and hover over the Center and scan it," he suggested. "There are tunnels under us, and we'd be able to see how well it works."

"Not in daylight," she countered, although she was feeling the same desire to find out how well it might actually work.

"No, not in daylight. I'm not *completely* stupid," he said stiffly.

"You're quite right, Donnie, there are many parts of you that are *still* missing," she chided him, then looked back towards the airlock, where she thought she'd heard a sound.

“Are you accepting visitors?” Wilber’s voice called from the open airlock before he cautiously stuck his head inside the compartment.

“Come on in, Wilber,” Donald told him. “You got any *good* news?”

Wilber stepped inside, followed by Aineias and another guardsman. Wilber plopped down in one of the rear seats that had been rotated and reconfigured as a half-sofa, while Aineias and his man went back to the weapons locker to confirm the ammo loads were still locked down.

“Good is a *relative* term,” Wilber muttered. “Dwayne should be showing up sometime today with a guy for Laisee to learn the Korengal dialect from. That should cover most of the people in that *particular* valley.”

“Is that the *only* language he speaks?” Sai asked him.

“Not really sure. Can Laisee *really* pick it up that quickly?”

Donald was about to say something, but Sai put her hand up in front of him and looked at him sternly.

“Sai – Wilber is *family*. Just like you and Maya,” he said, then stared her down until she finally sighed and dropped her hand.

“On your head...” she muttered sourly, and turned away from him.

“Wilber, Laisee was taught by Lili, and you *know* how fast Lili can learn a language,” he said. “What *really* needs to happen is Jaiying getting a chance to dig in there and pull it out. She and the rest of my Staff are the ones who helped me learn Vanir last year – in one night.”

He heard a second sigh coming from Sai, and saw the shake of her head in his peripheral vision, but kept his focus on Wilber.

“Then we invite him to dinner and maybe offer a room for the night?” Wilber suggested, just before the garrison staff walked into the forward compartment. Donald looked up and smiled at Captain Anastasius.

“Is everything satisfactory, Captain?” he asked him.

“Spacer Cato, everything is *very* satisfactory. Thank you for pointing out the lockout settings for the primary weapon and installing the breach blocker as our weapons specialist recommended,” Aineias said. “I would still like to have your ‘*special*’ loads relocated somewhere else, but I know of no more secure space than right here – other than on the backside of the local moon.”

“I quite agree, Captain, but I was voted down by Lady Caldarous,” he said, then glanced at Sai before turning back again. “With any luck,

## Picking up the Pieces

the ship will remain grounded until the *Kraken's* return – although we've been considering an observation run at some point to familiarize Lady Sai with his full capabilities. Her *own* tank was left aboard the *Kraken*."

"With beamers?" At Donald's nod, Aineias continued. "A good thing, then. This is a *lesser* treaty violation, rather than a full one. And I thank you for finding a less *dangerous* background for this ship. I'm afraid I was the first person to walk up to it too quickly."

"*Pink* polka dots," Wilber muttered, then snorted after looking up and seeing Donald glaring at him.

"Well, I do have an *assortment* of images..."

Donald turned and pulled up a menu before scrolling down and smiling at one of his favorites. He keyed it in, but a few seconds later came the sound of several gasps, followed by a womanly shriek. He hunched his shoulders and quickly selected another motif.

When he keyed it in, they heard several relaxed sighs as the outside image of a jungle clearing with plants, trees, and the occasional animal and flier traversing through it had replaced a voracious snatching and eating humanoid bodies. Then they heard footsteps getting louder before breaching the airlock and stopping just inside. They all turned to see who it was and saw Shu looking around the jam at them.

"Welcome, Lady Shu," Donald said. "I have your Wilber right there," he added, and gestured to the side of the ship next to her.

"Thank you, Donald. That ... that *creature*..." she shuddered, and Donald got up to get her a drink of water.

"That is a kraken – a native creature of Earth," he explained, while handing her the water. "You should see it when the *Kraken* displays it – it's close to a hundred and fifty meters long. Absolutely *terrifies* the Vanir. I'm told it's some sort of an unpleasant racial memory for them."

She sipped the water gratefully, then remembered why she'd come to the motor pool. "Wilber, Dwayne has called from the house in town. He has arrived with two visitors for your ... project," she said, after glancing around at Aineias shyly.

"Thank you, my love." Wilber got up and hugged her, before turning back to give Sai a half-bow with his head. "By your leave, gentlemen ... and Lady," he added, then stepped outside with his wife.

"We'll leave as well, but Justus will be by periodically as long as the ship is occupied – merely protocol," Aineias told them, then gathered his man and left the ship. Once they were gone, Donald turned back to Sai.

“You know, I don’t recall this much hassle the *last* time I was here,” he muttered sourly.

“Perhaps Lord *Caldar* couldn’t be ordered around,” Sai chided him, “but Spacer First Cato is an unknown and *not* to be trusted – even if he *was* able to break into this ship on his own.”

“Well, I suppose anonymity still has its uses,” he muttered, before turning back to the console to continue with her instructions.

### ***A Walk in the Afternoon***

It was the middle of the afternoon, but Jaiying had declined meeting the interpreters who’d been summoned to the Annex. There were two of them, a man and a woman, but the impression she got from them was guarded for some reason, so she decided to leave it to her mother to make the initial assessment of them. Instead of helping with that, she and Rose had taken a walk outside the Center and continued past the newer buildings.

They were currently wandering through the collection of small adobe domiciles where members of the garrison were supposed to live, although they’d never really seen very many individuals outside. As usual, two guardsmen were following along behind them to provide physical protection, and offer additional support as needed, as was becoming apparent by the sheen on the children’s brows.

“Your pardon, Mistresses, but you should drink some water,” one of the guardsmen said, then held out a water bottle meaningfully. They both stopped and looked up at Vibianus; their expressions giving every indication that serious consideration was being given to his suggestion.

With a slight bow of her head, Rose smiled, and said, “Thank you, Sir.”

She accepted the bottle from him and shared it with Jaiying, who let out a sigh of despondency before taking a swallow from it. They both noted that neither Vibianus nor Aelius drank any of it, instead sipping from their own bottles. For some reason, that piqued Jaiying’s interest, and she tried fitting it into the situation they found themselves in...

Here on Earth, they were still treated as Royalty from members of the Imperial garrison – as would be expected. Anywhere *outside* the premises, they could be subject to many unpleasant realities; including capture by elements of the host country for any *number* of unsavory experiences. As for the dangers among the *local* citizenry ... well, it was a good thing they were of the right shade of skin compared to the members of their Grandfather’s native tribe.



## Picking up the Pieces

As for the rest of the world, the amount of vitriol and discord she'd read and watched while studying the Earth from the safety of Mister Milton's office computer led her to wonder why the Emperor had even bothered to treat with the Earthlings at all.

They had *no* common goals, nor any appearance of common *sense*, either. *She'd* certainly never learned of any particular bias against anyone from somewhere like Balese, nor anywhere *else* in the civilized portions of the Commonwealth. Well, perhaps the *Bornat*, but they'd never really engaged with anyone, and they'd already left, anyway.

The comment Nascha had made regarding her mother – the “Chinese” girl – had left her *totally* confused until she'd looked it up and discovered vague resemblances to an entire social construct located on the other side of the Earth – *several* of them, actually – and each of them with *different* governments and languages!

That had prompted a general study of Earth's inhabitants, which had kept her and her guardsman in the house for many hours while she compared images between Earth's various factions with those of the many clusters within the Commonwealth.

She'd found that citizens of Wilder, such as Mama Shay, closely resembled certain subgroups within the lower portion of Asia in a place called India, while the ladies of Cletus generally resembled those of the somewhat *Eastern* Asian countries.

In contrast, the men and women of Kantor reflected the general features and coloration of Earth's European countries – *some* of them. Of course, the influx of seedings between the Commonwealth and Earth created interesting variations, along with the much *rarer* situations, such as Uncle Petrus being born of a “reverse” seeding...

None of this really explained the biggest problem in her mind, though. As Aelius was the one they'd spent the most time with – albeit in front of a video display – she decided to ask him a question.

“Aelius ... do you *like* being here?” That brought his eyebrows up in surprise before he smiled widely.

“Mistress Jaiying, this is so much better than being *shot* at all the time!” he said jovially, and both he and Vibianus chuckled at the child's serious expression.

“Truly, Aelius – how do you tolerate the Earthlings?” she persisted. “Are they truly as mad as they seem?” Rose reached out to her, but Jaiying pushed her hand away and kept her questioning gaze on Aelius.

Vibianus stifled a resigned sigh as he remembered his orders: “Do *not* withhold information from the Imperial visitors, and *especially* not

from the Royal Princesses.” Not even *opinions*, which in this case was what the young lady was apparently asking.

He looked around and nodded once before sharing a rapid finger-flip with his partner, then reached down for Rose’s hand, while Aelius reached down for Jaiying’s. They headed deeper into the garrison housing area until they reached a sheltered trellis containing garden chairs and lounging swings of Earth manufacture. They situated the girls on one of the swings, and Aelius brought over two resin chairs for the men to sit on before passing over the girls’ water bottle again while they each took a solid drink from their own. That done, Aelius took the lead and opened up.

“Mistress Jaiying ... *personally*, I find the Earthlings to be childish in general and burdened with an *incredible* naïveté that is beyond comprehension,” he said, then sipped a little more of his water before continuing. “We were briefed before volunteering for this duty, and, for *me*, the reality of the situation is *far* beyond my worst expectations.”

While they were digesting that, Vibianus raised his hand and got Jaiying’s nodded permission to speak, which he did with utmost care.

“Mistress Jaiying, it’s not so much that they’re ... *insane* is a rather harsh description of them. Rather, they are like *children* by most definitions,” he said, then glanced at Aelius before he continued. “They do not have a *world* government – something the rest of the Commonwealth enjoys – but even among themselves, there are *very* few individual governments that are truly concerned about their *citizens*, rather than their ... ahh...”

“Pecking order?” Aelius suggested, hoping the Earthling euphemism was known, and got accepting nods from the girls.

“Yes. The *pecking* order seems to be a major problem with this branch of humanity,” Vibianus said while nodding agreeably. “Some governments keep to themselves and administer to their citizens’ needs, while others are more concerned about *illusionary* outside influences from other countries that really don’t care *what* they do as long as they only do it to *themselves*.”

Jaiying nodded thoughtfully, before focusing on their current situation.

“What about ... *this* country?” she asked them, and they both glanced away for a moment before turning back. Vibianus nodded once, and pronounced his own observations.

“Not that *this* particular government is any better or worse than most others, but there *are* inconsistencies in areas of management that Imperial administrators would be quick to condemn and rectify.

## Picking up the Pieces

Their justice system is partially corrupt, their business environment is principally profit-driven but *unstable*, and the government itself is ... *indecisive* is probably the best description I could give it."

"I believe that is due to a general lack of *cohesiveness* among the citizens," Aelius offered. "There are *far* too many dissenting opinions on how to manage *anything*, and rather than work together to *resolve* differences, those chosen to administer those policies persist in contesting among themselves to the detriment of the overall stability and safety of the society as a *whole*. It is appalling."

"Not that this isn't a relatively *safe* place to be," Vibianus quickly pointed out. "Overall, we've not seen any of the problems Lord Caldor had experienced in his *early* days here."

Jaiying smiled thinly, remembering what she'd learned over the years about Grandfather's history on Earth.

"No. I imagine they'd not risk losing what little we allow them to learn from us," she muttered, then shared a look with Rose. "I suppose simply announcing ourselves *publicly* and establishing control over them is out of the question." She'd neglected to make that a proper question and turned back to see the carefully neutral expressions on their keeper's faces.

"I believe that would cause an unfortunate amount of lost Earthling lives, Mistress," Vibianus said softly.

"Yes. That's what my Grandfather's little brother told him," Jaiying muttered futilely, then leaned back and closed her eyes. The sigh she let out was heartfelt.

'*Perhaps Donald can still do that*' Rose suggested silently, and Jaiying opened her eyes and looked over at her before nodding her head slightly.

'*If he doesn't make a NUISANCE of himself over the next few hundred years*' she sent with a grimace, before turning and leaning back again.

Both guardsmen had seen this behavior between females before – the telltales of silent communication *Seniors* within the Healer community enjoyed.

They both remained absolutely still while resisting the impulse to share a finger-flip of their *own* silent comments between themselves.

The girls noticed their keepers' impressions and sat up to face them. As they moved to stand, both Aelius and Vibianus jumped out of their chairs to steady the swing so they could get down from it safely. Afterwards, they stood before them in a formal pose of respect and awaited their orders.

“Aelius, Vibianus – I thank you for your honesty and loyalty to members of the Royal Household,” Jaiying told them, before bowing her head the precise amount to comply with protocol. “I believe we should return to the Center and attend my Mother.” She reached out to hold Aelius’ hand, and Rose reached out to take Vibianus’ hand.

While they were walking back to the Center, Jaiying considered the direction the current situation seemed to be headed, then smiled to herself before looking up at Aelius.

“You know ... Lord Caldar taught Donald Cato many things over the years. We were saddened to learn of Donald’s injuries, but perhaps, and only if it comes up, mind you ... perhaps he could use a little sparring practice to help get his body back into shape? I believe he used to spar with Mister Milton in the past,” she suggested, and saw a corresponding smile from Aelius at the prospect of having someone *new* to face off against.

“We welcome the chance to keep in practice, my Lady,” he said, while trying to keep his smile under control.

She looked straight ahead and considered what she’d just done. If nothing else, it might show her Grandfather that retirement might actually be *preferable* at this point in his life. It would certainly be better than raising any flags exposing his premature *cremation*.

### ***Doing a Little Eavesdropping...***

It was a little later in the early evening and Jaiying was lying down. She’d extended a delicate link to their overnight guests and was listening as they communicated casually with each other. Laisee had shared her lessons earlier, and she was still assimilating the language extracted from them and comparing it to what she was reading from them at this particular moment.

What a difference a *positive* reference point makes! If the Earthlings were capable of learning each other’s languages *this* way, then perhaps chaos would not drive them into self-destructive *behaviors*!

There were still the infantile mythologies to overcome, not to mention the *insane* desire for one particular group of individuals to have all *other* groups behave and believe as they did or face the pain of *death* because they did not. She could now understand her Grandfather’s early desire to create a terraformed planet for the exclusive use of all of his Native Earth tribes – *provided*, of course, they could all agree to live together peacefully. She let out a sigh and refocused on her targets.

The man and the woman were enjoying the privacy of one of the guest rooms in the same corridor Déjà and her babies had been

## Picking up the Pieces

relocated to. Currently, they were showering together. It was a novelty for them, as their native environs didn't offer such luxuries. Their conversation picked up as they turned off the water and started drying themselves.

### ***With Asad and Nurani...***

"<Asad, you do not think we will have to return, do you?>" the woman asked him in the target language.

"<They promised us we could stay, Nurani! If we go back, we would be killed! Your father would CERTAINLY kill me,>" he told her.

"<I would be dead as well, Asad. They would not let an impure daughter continue to live. But remember what the man said. If they need us, we must do as they say.>"

"<Smith said a LOT of things, but he promised we would be safe here and NEVER have to go back again,>" he insisted.

"<He is an AMERICAN, Asad. You KNOW they cannot be trusted!>" she insisted, then reached out and clutched him tightly.

Having seen and felt it all before, Jaiying disengaged to the point where she was merely tapping into various memories as they cropped up. She still listened to the feelings and sense of the private words they were sharing, but also delved into the question of their relationship with the host country.

If it was as transient as the woman had emoted, then there might be an issue of concern, not only for their project, but for the safety of the interpreters as well. She flagged that as an issue to bring up with Uncle Wilber in the morning, before beginning a subtle search for this *Smith* person in their memories to see if there were any overtones she could exploit.

### ***In Donald's New Room***

"Donnie, what if Jaiying is able to locate the husband of Nascha, but our host declines an attempt for his recovery?" Maya quietly asked him when he came out of the bathroom.

He stopped in mid-wipe with the towel canted at an angle across his back as he considered a reasonable answer for her. Déjà giggled a bit as she watched his penis swaying in front of him.

"Well... I suppose that depends on what Laisee decides to *do* about it," he muttered, then continued drying his back before sliding the towel down and wrapping it around his hips.

He stepped over to the crib and looked down at his kids – smiling at seeing them sleeping so peacefully. They *should* be sleeping peacefully.

Maya had dosed both of them with a full load just half an hour ago, and they ought to sleep for at least another two or three hours. He checked the changing shelf above the dresser next to the crib and saw it was fully stocked with spare diapers and wipes.

At least he'd been spared the sympathetic morning sickness both Walter *and* David had suffered from.

That memory almost made him chuckle aloud. He had no idea why Walter had been so afflicted, but it was pretty easy to believe David's relationship with him, coupled with Diane's relationship with Petrus probably had something to do with David's suffering. He supposed that if they looked back far enough, Bessie might have *also* shared a relationship with someone in the Commonwealth. Come to think of it, for the duration of Déjà's morning sickness, he'd been mostly *dead* all that time, hadn't he?

"Donnie, you would not do something *foolish*, would you?" Maya persisted, asking this to his back. He turned around and approached the new bed, pausing only to drape his towel over the end of the crib.

"And why would I risk the pleasure of *both* of your company, my Ladies?" he asked them while crawling into bed between the two of them...

After "waking up," Donald had been relocated to one of the new guest rooms. As nice as it was, he'd anticipated an additional need, and Wilber had acquired a queen-size Captain's Bed with under bed drawers, similar to what he had aboard the *Odontoceti*. The room had been rearranged slightly, so that each side of the bed still had enough space to step around it by putting the small table at the outside corridor corner and losing two chairs. The crib was fitted right next to the bathroom door by removing both bookshelves and putting one of the dressers along the inside wall. The two rockers were now opposite the bigger bed, but he'd lost the second dresser because of them. It was snug, but Déjà had been anxious to join her prospective husband and co-wife for a few days now...

Déjà's earlier conversation with Maya had assured her they could *both* enjoy the shared attentions of their man, and tonight she was looking forward to finding out how well it would work out. Even if she wasn't up to having intercourse yet, she still wanted to be included in their relationship. Aside from all that, her move came with an in-room *shower!*

"Maya," he said, and turned his head to kiss her.

"Déjà," he said, and turned his head to kiss her in turn, before he lay flat on his back. "I cannot think of anything more pleasant than being with the both of you, and seeing my children grow up," he

## Picking up the Pieces

murmured, then reached over his head and adjusted the room light to a dim glow.

“Ladies ... ask of me what you will. I may have lost the Gift of the First Wife, but I still remember all the *lessons* I’ve learned over the years.”

They both giggled quietly while snuggling up to him ... having already decided which of them would take which *end* of him first.

### *At the Residence*

While the Embassy data tab Dwayne had brought with him would only work in the ship, Wilber was still up at nine p.m. and going through the USB drive Dwayne had given him after turning over the interpreters that afternoon.

It contained extremely detailed survey maps taken over half a century ago that had been converted to a format his computer could read and display.

He’d been surprised to learn the separate larger dongle – when plugged into an Earth computer’s USB port – contained built in software that would allow data conversion from the Commonwealth graphic format to a common Earth graphic format, but felt like kicking himself for completely forgetting the technical resources available to him at the Embassy.

While he was still back in Washington, Dwayne had thought about asking one of the communications staff to tap into an NRO spy satellite, but an easier alternative had been suggested. Viewing the results on his computer screen was a complete surprise.

They were *beautiful* ... just *beautiful* – but they still needed Jaiying to pull off a miracle.

### *Sunday, September 18, A Fruitless Search*

It was almost two in the morning, but although she could actually interpret the thoughts of the Korengal Valley occupants more or less accurately, now, Jaiying was still no closer to finding out where the Americans were located.

Even her attempts to trigger a response in them seemed futile, and she pondered what was going wrong. After several more minutes lost in introspection, she finally reached out to the entire Senior Staff and posed the question.

‘Hello, Everyone. I have a problem’ she sent out.

‘You’re stuck on Earth, and Grandfather is going to do something stupid?’ Josie shot back flippantly.

*'No! Well, yes, and ... perhaps' she reluctantly replied. 'I've learned a new language, but I'm unable to trigger a subconscious response to a suggestion. I'm looking for a person who is missing in another location on this planet, but the individuals I'm trying to influence do not seem receptive to my suggestions'*

There was silence for all of three seconds before Walter asked a question.

*'These are Earthlings?'*

*'Yes. Of course they are. Over six and a half BILLION of them. The missing person is a warrior husband to one of Grandfather's tribeswomen. He is stuck on the opposite side of the planet. They only presume that he still lives, but the natives in that area do not accept my suggestions to think about him' she explained in more detail.*

*'They are Earthlings and their minds are not as ordered as ours. You remember the trouble we had with the Drecks. Are you making suggestions during their waking hours?'* he asked.

*'Yes, but they do not respond as expected'*

*'Do it at night, Jaiying' Cathy sent confidently. 'Their dreams may be more willing to accept your suggestions, especially if they are in an area of conflict, as is implied by his designation'*

*'Ah! They resist consciously thinking of things that are unpleasant, yet their dreams might be more pliant. Thank you, my cousins!'*

*'Jaiying, how is Rose?'* Walter asked her. She could feel the warmth flowing from him, but brought him down gently.

*'She is sleeping now, Walter. It is dark here, but I will tell her to reach out to you later' she sent, then followed it with a quick blip of what they'd been going through since they'd arrived on Earth.*

*'Jaiying, remind Grandfather to be circumspect with his behavior. Elder Xue was explicit with the conditions of his existence' Walter warned her.*

*'I will do so, Walter. Thank you all. Good night' Jaiying sent back, and included the hint of a yawn in the process.*

She lay there, staring at the ceiling for several moments while considering when her next attempt should be, then finally decided to speak with Ling to have her determine the best time to hit an Earthling at the weakest point in their sleep-cycle.

That settled, she rolled over and snuggled up to Rose – not even wondering how her Mother's sleepover with Ling and Aineias was working out.



### ***A Morning Wake Up Call***

Just after dawn had cast its first rays on the grounds, Albinus assumed the duty in the guest wing. Unlike the guardsmen assigned to the new nursing mother and her big sister, he was stationed at the head of the hallway.

During the change over, he'd been apprised of the two new guests from the night before and given their wake-up time.

Checking the digital timer strapped to his wrist, something Lady Wen had insisted upon for the *entire* garrison now, he saw it was within an Earth minute of seven a.m., then walked quietly down the hallway while making an effort to ensure the peace for the Imperial residents in this wing.

### ***In Asad's and Nurani's Room***

The quiet knock on the door alerted them, and Asad stepped over and warily unlocked it to find himself peeking up at their morning visitor; *another* one of the huge guards who'd escorted them to their quarters last night, but at least this one was smiling this morning.

"Good morning," Albinus said, then performed a slight bow to him. "There is a kitchen and dining area in the main building. When you are ready, I will take you to get something to eat." He bowed slightly once again, then backed away before turning to return to the head of the hallway, while other guards standing a few doors away ignored the exchange entirely.

Asad closed the door, then looked back to find Nurani *missing!* His heart skipped a few beats until he caught sight of her looking out from the shelter of the bathroom door.

"<They call us to the morning meal,>" he told her quietly, then sat down and started putting on his socks as she came out of the bathroom half-dressed and started making the bed.

He jumped up to help her, both startling her and making her smile at his devotion to her, then wondered how long his concern for her would last once the Americans had no further use for them and finally discarded them.

Asad caught her smile, but watched it fade as they finished making the bed. He thought he knew what she was thinking, something they'd discussed late last evening, but decided to leave it unspoken of for the time being. No need to bring up unpleasant thoughts until they joined the present.

Once they were ready, he knocked on the door to give fair warning, before opening it slowly so as not to startle the Americans into doing something unpleasant.

### ***In Garrison Housing***

Laisee had gotten up relatively early to be ready for her appointment this morning. She was already dressed and getting ready to leave her bed partners of the night. Having sensed Jaiying and Rose getting up earlier, she now felt them coming out of the shower and drying each other off, so she reached out to them for assistance.

*‘Girls, Asad and Nurani are being brought to the dining room. Jaiying, perhaps they would feel more comfortable if someone was there who could speak with them? Asad can speak English, but Nurani knows almost nothing of it’*

*‘Have fun at the hospital, Mother’ Jaiying called out to her. ‘Be careful with Howard. Ling said Aunt Lili really messed him up’*

Laisee turned back to see Ling standing by the bedroom door and smiling at her, and could just see Aineias struggling on his way towards the facilities door behind her.

### ***Heading to Breakfast***

The girls caught Laisee’s silent titter, and shared a giggle while they finished drying themselves. A few minutes later, they’d gotten dressed and straightened the bed before heading to the kitchen to raid the pantry ... as always, followed along by one of their dutiful guardsmen.

Tianus had morning duty today, but he enjoyed the company of the young Princesses. They weren’t *nearly* as troublesome as some of his adult assignments back on Kantor.

### ***In the Pantry***

Albinus had led his charges through the hallways and into the dining room proper, before taking them into the kitchen and showing them the pantry. They were in the process of looking at the wide selection of fresh and canned fruits, some fresh vegetables and dried goods, when the two youngest Princesses arrived.

Their Imperial shadow stayed by the doorway and shared a quick finger-flip with him. Aware of specific security restrictions regarding their latest guests, Albinus fell back on protocol.

*“Good morning, my Ladies,”* he greeted the girls formally. *“This is Asad and Nurani, who are guests of Lady Laisee.”*

*“Good morning, Albinus,”* Jaiying said. *“My mother told me of them and was concerned that they be made welcome. You may withdraw.”* She caught his quick glance at Asad, and let out a giggle. *“We are quite safe,”* she added. *“There are three of us, but only two of them.”*

## Picking up the Pieces

He gave another glance at the visitors, then spared a glance at Tianus, before turning back and saying, *"By your leave, my Ladies."*

He bowed very slightly and turned to leave, but was halfway out the door when he paused and turned back, saying, *"I will be right outside the door should you need me,"* just before the door closed behind him.

The girls giggled, then turned to their guests. Jaiying strode up and held out her hand to Asad, just as her Grandfather had taught her.

"Hello ... I am Jaiying," she said in precise English, then listened as his mind translated that into Pashto ... more or less.

He accepted her hand and shook it solemnly one time as he fumbled to greet her.

"I – Asad ... am I," he said, but she felt his face radiate a flush. She couldn't really tell if it was from his bugged diction, or his surprise at her forthrightness.

Rose repeated the greeting with Asad, while Jaiying presented her hand to a very shy Nurani. Once Rose had greeted Nurani, they all stood there and just stared at each other for several seconds until Rose asked them, "What would you like to eat?"

That caught them off guard, and Rose went to the open pantry and started down the shelves.

"There are packaged fruits and some fresh fruit. I don't know of these vegetables, but there are some dry cereals. There are also different meats in the cans. Milk is in the chiller over there," she said, while pointing to the refrigerator. "There are more fresh fruit and vegetables in the cooler."

"What ... eat ... to morning?" Asad asked awkwardly, with Jaiying snapping off a silent translation to Rose *'What's for breakfast?'*

*'We can't cook, so how about cereal?'* she sent back. *'Go ahead and talk to them if you want. I can listen to you'* she added, and Jaiying nodded.

*"<Since no one is here to cook for us, I would suggest cereal and milk ... and a fruit of some kind,>"* Jaiying offered in a Korengal dialect of Pashto that triggered a gasp from them both.

Rose dug out a bag of bran flakes with raisins, a bag of corn flakes, and another bag with round oat rings in it. After putting them down on a counter, she dragged over a step stool to reach up to the cupboards, but Nurani was quicker and opened the doors until Rose pointed to a stack of several plastic bowls. Nurani pulled down four bowls while Rose put away the stool. Then Jaiying opened drawers until she found spoons and handed them out at the counter.

*"<These are made from ground wheat, and those wrinkled bits are dried grapes,>"* she explained, while touching one of the bags. *"<Those are made from ground corn, and the last one is made from ground oats. Please take your pick.>"*

At their apparent reluctance, Rose unclipped and poured a tiny bit from each bag into a bowl and offered it to them for sampling.

Asad chose the raisin bran, while Nurani stuck with the rounded oats, although she muttered, *"<It is very dry.>"*

*"<Milk,>"* Jaiying said, and Rose opened the refrigerator to look at the selections.

Aside from the commercial brand, there was also some Healer milk available from Ling, Maya, and Shu.

*"<I don't do well with cow milk,>"* Asad said. *"<Is there any goat milk?>"*

*"<Ahh ... we have some that is not cow milk. Some of us cannot drink cow milk,>"* Jaiying said, then glanced at Rose.

Rose reached in and hefted each vacuum container, finding that both Ling and Maya were full, while Shu was down about half. She pulled out the Maya so they could all share it.

"I think there is enough Maya to go around," she said, then set it on the counter. After closing the refrigerator door, she turned and poured a little into the oat cereal for Nurani. Once she sampled it, Rose saw the immediate smile on the young woman's face.

*"<Asad, this is so delicious!>"* Nurani told him, then poured more cereal into her bowl and added more milk to it. He followed suit with the raisin bran, while Jaiying and Rose made their own selections before putting everything away.

Before they left the kitchen, Rose opened the cooler and checked the fresh fruit offerings. She selected bananas for both Jaiying and herself, and gestured to the cooler for their guests to make a selection. One apple and one nectarine later, they were headed to the dining room for a pleasant breakfast and some quiet conversation, enhanced with a little bit of silent observation.

### ***Visiting the Hospital***

*"Dr. Wells, you have visitors,"* his secretary announced from the box on his desk.

Howard looked up from the report he was reading and took off his glasses in confusion. He didn't recall any scheduled meetings this morning, certainly not on a *Sunday* morning.

## Picking up the Pieces

Later on, though, he was having lunch with the two women in his life after he and his secretary finished resolving this pile of paperwork – hopefully *before* lunch. Perhaps Betty brought Denise with her early for some reason?

“Send them in, please, Mary,” he said with anticipation, and switched off his box for the duration.

He stood up and smiled to greet his wife and daughter, but the smile became frozen when a familiar young Indian woman, and a slender Asian woman entered his office.

### *Catching Up on the World*

Donald was over in Wilber’s office this early afternoon and surfing the network for more details on what was going on around the world. That *was*, of course, after Wilber disconnected his data drives and arrays from his system.

Donald had already heard from Sai that Jaiying failed to make a connection that produced results. On *top* of that, she was becoming more despondent over the general situation on the planet as a whole.

It was somewhat refreshing that she still experienced life as a set of rather solid guidelines engineered for societal stability. Unfortunately, this was her first *real* exposure to the very many shades of gray enveloping the chaos that existed on Earth.

It was a lot to accept given her very short existence in this life. He’d had centuries to cultivate the psychological separation between reality and his comfort zone – that bubble individuals developed to insulate themselves from situations they had little or no personal control over.

Most individuals very seldom ever even *pricked* their bubbles, let alone shattered them in any significant manner. In *his* personal existence, he’d breached that bubble *hundreds* of times; usually when immediate lost of life – his or someone else’s – was balanced on the razor’s very edge.

Considering all the terrible things going on in the world, it was a wonder that yet another world war wasn’t in the offing. Apparently Earth was content to remain at the “bubbling over a low flame” stage for the time being. This nonsense happening in the Middle East might still be a trigger item, though.

“Shit!” Donald muttered, and Wilber looked over at him in surprise. “You guys lost a *shuttle* a few years ago.”

“Bound to happen, Don ... or do you prefer ‘Donnie?’” he asked him, then went on. “The Russians used to lose occupied capsules all the time.”

“For *you*, Don is fine,” Donald said. “I suppose the *overall* accident rate is still pretty low?”

“Yeah. We save up all our *big* accidents for *special* occasions,” he muttered. “That way we have *maximum* exposure on national television. You know, anytime you guys wanna step in and show us the way–”

“The world would fall apart, Wilber,” Donald interrupted him disgustedly, before leaning back and letting out a despondent sigh. “*You* know these morons. Even *without* all the conspiracy theorists out there, *no one* would believe we have their best interests at heart.”

“Oh, it gets *better*,” Wilber said, then laughed. “Something *new* started up earlier this year, and the security channels are already hopping. Something called ‘You Tube’. People are starting to post homemade videos to the network, and there is absolutely *no one* monitoring it – except for pornographic content.”

“You mean...”

“Yup! You fly that ship of yours *anywhere* someone can take a picture of it, and it’ll be *instantly* shared around the world – as anything from a super secret government experimental aircraft, to aliens flying a UFO!” Wilber’s chuckles seemed to make light of the situation, but they were heartfelt, just the same.

Donald turned his head and frowned at Wilber’s mirth because he understood the risks involved. They’d been the same throughout the millennia, but just recently the recording methods had improved *significantly*. Thousand-year-old, hand-written, eyewitness accounts were *one* thing, but – like that Air Force pilot who’d given him chase over restricted air space – real, *hard-to-dismiss*, photographs would be difficult to counter.

Unless they were *fakes*...

“Got a *new* project in mind, Wilber,” he murmured, then began chuckling at the probable response from the Embassy tech support staff.

### ***Back from the Hospital***

“How do you think Howard will do, Kayla?” Laisee asked her once they left the van and walked outside the motor pool into the hot Arizona summer sun.

“He seems much calmer now, my Lady.”

She immediately flushed, already having been chastised by Laisee for unnecessary honorifics in private. She toughed it out and

## Picking up the Pieces

continued. "He really is much better now – specially compared to the state the *Elder* left him in."

"Yes... I remember Ling telling me such," Laisee murmured, then let out a frighteningly familiar titter to the young woman beside her. "But then again, he is only a man."

"He's found a *new* source of strength in his life – Betty and Denise," Kayla shared. "If nothing else, he now finds solace in his *home* life, if not at the hospital."

Laisee smiled at that reminder, having seen Howard's eyes light up when Betty and her daughter finally joined them for lunch. For the sickness Betty was reported to have had, she seemed quite stable now, and her child seemed bright and cheerful, along with being polite.

"I do not think we will be as much trouble for Howard that he surmises. As Maya did for him before, you may do for him now," Laisee permitted her. "Perhaps Maya would choose to volunteer there once again – should she and Donald find a future for themselves here."

"Thank you, Laisee. I will be very circumspect."

"With Ling watching your every move, I would expect nothing less," she assured her just as they reached the steps to the house's porch.

### *In the Residence*

Laisee found Donald and Wilber chuckling in the front office and giving every indication of hatching a nefarious plan of some sort.

It sounded eerily similar to what her two older brothers had sounded like when planning something nasty against Rondal, but she quelled that hateful memory and focused on the men's good humor.

"Why *hello*, Laisee!" Donald exclaimed upon seeing her. "Is Howard gonna survive, or does he win the all-expenses-paid-vacation to Kantor?"

It took about three seconds before Wilber let out a choked laugh, then turned away from the expression on her face; having seen Laisee's lips tighten in a frown and her nostrils begin to flare.

"Dr. Wells should be just *fine*. After his *initial* bit of trepidation, I was able to explain that Lili was, after all, *used* to getting her own way, but she *always* had people's best interests at heart," she said firmly, then glanced away before adding, "*He* seemed to believe it, anyway."

"Well ... good," Donald murmured, then shared a smile with Wilber while they both barely managed to keep from breaking into laughter.

“What are you two giggling about, anyway?” she prodded them.

In answer, Wilber pointed to the screen of his computer, and clicked a button on his mouse. On the screen, a dark image of a cat playing with a rope of some kind showed for about half a minute. He clicked another image, and a young man stood in front of a large animal enclosure and spoke for about half of the previous video’s time. In all, they made her stand there and watch a dozen short videos of humans and animals doing ... well, primarily *stupid* things.

“Laisee, this is gonna be our *salvation*,” Donald intoned. “The Earthlings have finally created the ultimate tool to both entertain *and* deceive themselves – *You Tube*.”

### ***Back in the Center***

Jaiying sat up in the subdued light of the room; a glance at the clock on the wall showing her it was late afternoon...

After their light lunch, Rose had left her alone while she’d been attempting to trigger dream sequences in individuals on the other side of the world. It was painstaking work, but she’d finally located two men who’d allowed their dream states to ignore their general uneasiness at remembering the most recent invaders of their valley.

As she’d learned from the dreams of a man named Ghazan, incidents had *always* been occurring in the Korengal Valley. From the time of the Soviet-backed efforts of Afghan consolidation, to the Soviet invasion troops, to the Taliban, and now the Americans – for *whatever* reasons, the outside world seemed intent on gaining control over the valley, and all the small tribes located within – and this was in spite of the *impossible* amount of effort that would entail for so little benefit to the victors.

Once he’d reached those segments of REM that left his mind free to drift over the past, she’d thrown triggering words at Ghazan and kept trying to insert additional triggers that should have elicited a positive response. Unfortunately, he was the son of a goatherd, and tended to mind his flock. She did learn of an acquaintance of his by the name of Khialay, and spent some time throwing that name at his subconscious in an effort to elicit some bit of his essence and a reasonable guess at his current location.

Her efforts finally allowed her to find this Khialay sleeping in a village further north, and she waited through his uneasy sleep cycle for him to hit a REM stage. Once he reached it, she’d learned Khialay had a *reason* for uneasy sleep.

When the Americans were trying to establish a safe location for themselves, he’d been pressed to spy upon the Americans by some of



## Picking up the Pieces

the insurgent Taliban in the area and report back to them. Unfortunately, in the process of doing so, he'd been spotted by a group of four Americans who'd chased him back towards his village – not knowing the Taliban had set up an ambush on his back trail.

Once the Americans were in sight, the attack began, and two Americans were killed, while two others were wounded.

Khialay had watched as the wounded Americans were dragged away. Then he'd been ordered to dump the bodies of the other two after the remaining fighters had scavenged their weapons and supplies. He'd done as ordered because he knew that to disobey would bring harm to his family and village, but he had kept the tags from around the American's necks and hidden them away. He didn't know *why* he'd done so, but he had. In his mind's eye, he could still see them, the blood from the bodies filling in the names stamped on them.

He just hoped the local Taliban leader, Faridun, didn't think to come looking for them.

Jaiying had tried very hard, but as the letters were obscured, she couldn't make out the names on the tags in his mind. The name, Faridun, was another element, however, and she'd thrown it at him until his dreams reflected meetings with this Faridun individual in several places. She'd teased a silent query of a location for these meetings and learned they'd occurred mostly in the woods and under cover of the trees, but *never* in that one forbidden place.

She'd then focused on that forbidden place and finally managed to push his dreams into nightmares when she suggested that he'd be taken to that forbidden place if the tags were ever found. She'd gotten a pretty good location for Faridun's hidden base of operations – it was near a cave somewhere in the valley – just before Khialay had awoken in a sweat-covered panic...

The fullness in her bladder told her to get up and use the facilities, while the emptiness in her stomach reminded her that she'd eaten very little during lunch. Anyway, it was time to get up and report her findings to Donald, then go get something to eat.

### *At the Residence*

It was the early evening, and the men were sitting in Wilber's office after the update by Jaiying.

"Caves... Why did it have to be *caves*?" Donald muttered in despair, then lightly banged his forehead on the desktop several times before resting it there.

"Hey, at least Dwayne brought the *pretty* maps back with him," Wilber reminded him.

That had been a surprise for them both. Dwayne had been having lunch with the Embassy staff, and mentioned the lack of decent maps covering that area of the Earth, so one of the communications staff had casually suggested using the last set of survey maps from nearly sixty years ago. They could get updated maps if they waited another few weeks, but he'd happily provided Dwayne with what he'd had in stock, both on a standard data tab, and on an Earth-type USB drive after they'd been translated from Commonwealth format to a format viewable on almost any Earth computer. Unfortunately, they didn't show any network of caves in the target area.

"Maybe Jaiying will find that last guy and give us a bead on Fred?" Wilber suggested.

"Or maybe she'll find *Fred*," Donald muttered, before sitting up and shaking his head slightly. "Maybe once she has an idea of where *Faridun* is hiding out."

"You *really* gonna let those military wizards in Washington try to pull any survivors out?" Wilber asked him again, knowing what Ronnie felt about pointless campaigns with no end in sight.

"*That*, my friend, is what Laisee has been ordered to do," he said thinly. "You and I *both* know that going up against an insurgent force of a hundred or more fighters just to rescue two casualties is *bad planning* ... not that I haven't done it before," he muttered.

Actually, he'd done it on *more* than one occasion, but it had to be carefully planned and *totally* worth it. He shook his head slowly while considering again the usual assessment of a situation regarding one or two injured warriors on the ground, and their relative non-worth to the entire campaign. His *personal* actions in this regard were one of the things garnering loyalty to the Madman, but it usually ended with a rather lopsided casualty rate for any force that opposed him.

That would be rather difficult in this particular situation because loss of life – *any* loss of life – would not be tolerated.

Of course, what they *really* needed was better intelligence.

"Wilber ... do you think your friends might loosen up a bit if you offered them information on any cave complexes in that general area?"

Wilber turned to stare at him for several seconds before checking the calendar hanging on the wall, finding they were right in the middle of a full moon.

"Don, the full moon just started. The next new moon is two weeks away at the beginning of October. What do you have in mind?"

Donald glanced at the calendar, then turned back to Wilber.

## Picking up the Pieces

“One of my engineers installed a sensor enhancement, but I never got a chance to test it. It does subterranean surveys ... within *reason*. We can take the tank out, hover over someplace with a cave, and check it out.”

“Uhh... *Full moon*, Don...”

“And the cloak is even *better* than it was before. Supposedly, I can do decent surveys up to a hundred-fifty kilometer altitude,” Donald continued, his eyes now lighting up at the possibilities. “If we can offer your contacts *decent* tunnel maps, then it should make it easier for them to recover Fred – provided Jaiying can find him.”

Wilber closed his eyes and let out a disgusted sigh, giving his head a tiny shake to go with it. This could go sour in any *number* of ways.

If the government *liked* them, they’d probably ask for *more* of them. Even if they *didn’t*, they’d probably be pissed at not having them to begin with, but wonder how they’d been acquired.

Only seconds later, he nodded his head and got up.

He headed to the living room to see if Jaiying was still there so he could ask her to contact her mother. Meanwhile, Donald went back to surfing the network.

### *An Hour Later...*

Instead of dragging them over to the Center, Laisee had made the arduous early evening journey to the residence in person. Apparently, she’d been in the middle of doing something that required the sun to descend just a tiny bit more before she’d brave the summer heat for them.

As it was, she’d been only slightly less than testy at the inconvenience – not that it really showed.

“Donald, if I were to allow this ‘test’ of yours, it would be under the supervision of Lady Tal – Lady *Sai* Tal,” Laisee told him sternly, then raised her hand to cut off his objection. “*You* will go along merely as the *pilot*, while Lady Tal will be *in charge* of this test. I’m told there are caves in the neighboring provinces ... *states*? They should provide an adequate sample to test the hardware. As always, you will *avoid* contact with the Earthlings! Is that understood?”

She’d included Wilber in her proclamation, and to his credit, he never flinched ... unlike Donald.

“Yes, my Lady Caldarous. I will follow Lady Sai’s instructions,” Donald promised. This was, after all, only a test.

‘*Sai, would you like to go on a little journey?*’ she sent out softly.

***Cletus, The Council of Elders***

"Tell me you are not *serious* about this, Xue!" Elder Ju confronted her rudely.

Xue merely looked at her and smiled – feeling both confusion and anger just under the surface of Ju's verbal outburst.

"There is nothing to concern yourselves with, my Ladies. I will have ample security available all the way there and back. Besides, it has been *far* too long since I've left the planet."

"So soon you forget we just visited aboard the *Kraken* to deal with the *dead man*?" Elder Rong asked her. "And that you went *alone* to view the new Drecks and Vanir Ambassadors on Kantor?"

"That was just a short trip. I would *personally* visit this Earth we've heard so much about, yet seen nothing of," she said quietly. "Lili mentioned it may have played a key part in the distant past *despite* its current state of confusion."

"Confusion? Xue, the Earthlings are *killing* each other!" Rong pressed strongly. "This is *not* a place that is *safe* for us!"

"*Me*, Rong. I am going. There is an Imperial garrison there that will provide adequate security, I'm sure. I wish to evaluate the Earth's situation in person to gain a feel of when they might be formally offered membership in the Commonwealth. I'll tell you all about it upon my return."

With that, she grabbed her data pad and left the chambers before heading to her quarters to get ready for travel. She intended to enjoy this little vacation *despite* the wishes of her companions.

In addition, while she was there, she'd be able to evaluate Donald Cato's situation. Lili's last report had been guarded but leaning towards the positive side.

As long as it *stayed* that way, then Donald had probably found a safe haven for the time being.

If not, then Lili would be spared the onerous task of his disposal.

***Monday, September 19, Earth, The Annex, Very Early Morning***

Donald looked at the clock in the dining room and noted it was almost four in the morning, easily explaining why he was yawning so much. He went to the kitchen and raided the pantry, where he found a box of hot chocolate packets. Pulling one out, he searched for and found a mug, then used the hot pot to fill it. He pulled a spoon out of a drawer to stir it with and leaned against the counter while taking stock of the evening...

## Picking up the Pieces

After Laisee had gotten Sai involved, mission planning went rather quickly. They'd gotten the ship ready to go in only minutes, it having already been serviced before Petrus left in the transport. At midnight, he'd cloaked and raised it above roof level, where they'd begun a full overhead survey to find the current locations of satellites, manned orbital stations, and other space junk in the general vicinity. Once it was clear, he'd launched them straight up for nearly a hundred miles before leveling off stationary over the Center.

After that, the ground survey had been a rather simple task. Energize the sensors, take a reading, and make a recording of it. After several minutes of testing over the Annex, he'd started drifting over towards Tucson on the way to hover over Carlsbad Caverns, New Mexico.

Becoming stationary over the much larger cave complex gave him a chance to play with the settings, and he was able to fine tune the sensors and compare the readings to the downloaded pamphlets Wilber had transferred to a laptop computer for comparison. It had been easy to see the extent of the caverns far exceeded the areas the public was allowed into, and it even showed nearby cave and tunnel structures that ran close by but didn't intersect with the main cavern complex at all.

He and Sai dutifully recorded it all and took several data snapshots as reference points before shutting it down and returning to the Annex *well* before sunrise, which had surprised Laisee, who'd stayed in contact with Sai while they were on mission – presumably to make sure *he* didn't go off on some asinine mission of his *own*...

He took another sip of hot chocolate, but snorted. Lord *Caldar* might have been tempted to do something like that, but Spacer First Cato was under orders. Besides, he didn't officially *own* the *Kraken's Child* any longer. He let out a sigh, then drained his cup before rinsing it and setting it into the empty dishwasher. The spoon got similar treatment before he dried his hands, but then he stopped and stared at the hot pot.

Shaking his head, he opened the lid and pulled the flexible faucet over to top it off before tidying things up and heading back to the guest hallway. Along the way, he thought of the next logical step in the mission. Should Jaiying manage to locate the potential survivors, he needed to convince Laisee that a similar survey needed to be conducted, but over *Afghanistan* this time.

He reached the room he shared with his prospective co-wives and children. Unable to simply extend inside, their assigned guardsman opened the door very quietly and allowed him to enter. With the door closed behind him, Donald stood there listening to the quiet snoring of both Déjà and Maya in the background. Instead of possibly disturbing

them by coming to bed, he decided to sit himself down in one of the rockers and just rest his eyes for a while...

***At the Bottom of the Morning...***

Déjà's head was facing upwards when the faint glow of predawn through the translucent skylight was just beginning to bring the room out of complete darkness. She shifted herself and rolled towards Maya, who was lying on her back, but with her eyes still closed, even though a smile was on her face. Déjà couldn't remember what had woken her until she felt the slight movement in the bed. Then she realized Maya was already awake and dealing with a persistent itch – something she reached over and began helping her with.

Maya let out a very tiny gasp and turned her head to smile at her little sister. Déjà leaned in and shared a chaste kiss with her, which seemed just enough to help her over the edge to a satisfying conclusion.

Afterwards, they snuggled together, with Déjà noticing Maya's breasts were *very* full this morning. She was contemplating helping her big sister in that regard, when she glanced over and saw the figure sitting in one of the rockers near the foot of the bed.

*'Look, Maya. Our Donnie has returned, but decided not to sleep with us!'* Déjà's silent comment was tinged with both excitement and a touch of bitterness.

Maya rolled over and looked at the recumbent figure slouched down in the rocking chair over by the wall, a relaxed smile gracing her face.

*'Donald has always been very respectful of other's needs, little sister. We should let him rest until he wakes'* she shared, but heard a bit of fussing from the crib against the wall.

She slipped out of bed and extended through the babies, even while quietly preparing for her morning duties. The clock on the wall showed just after six a.m. and the skylight provided a dim glow that allowed her to move around the room safely. She eventually reached into the crib and grabbed the more urgent occupant for immediate triage.

In his case, a wet and messy diaper change, followed by an immediate topping-off.

Déjà reluctantly found herself standing next to her big sister, as she soon had a bundle of hungry daughter to deal with.

Maya had taken advantage of the bed, so Déjà thankfully settled into the remaining rocker and proceeded to top off little Faith. Meanwhile, Maya found herself facing down a bundle of wet and fussy baby, who she cleaned and swathed with one of Earth's finest

## Picking up the Pieces

disposable baby products in a most professional manner. Then it was just a matter of lying in bed while she let the voracious little human leech have his fill of her.

The girls looked at each other and smiled at their shared burden – well, not so much a burden, but a rather welcome duty to feed the children given into their care by the Emperor’s little brother. It was a *solemn* duty, and in Maya’s case, a *welcome* one. Almost as if on cue, they both glanced at their sleeping male companion before sharing a quiet giggle.

### *At the Residence*

Wilber sat in his office this morning while reading the overnight report from the security group. It contained nothing of note, other than the *Kraken’s Child* had slipped out during the night, only to return prior to four a.m. with the same load of weapons it had left with. He spared a glance at his monitor and saw that it registered seven-thirty.

He noted only a little over three hours had elapsed, so figured Donald would still be bunking in this morning, along with Sai and probably Lady Laisee. Nothing in the report indicated success or failure, so Donald would probably be around sometime in the afternoon and tell him all about it. In the *meantime*...

He reached out to his keyboard and keyed in an alarm to remind him to wake Shu by eight a.m. this morning. Monday was sick call day at the Reservation, and he liked to let her sleep in on days she was scheduled to actually “work” for a living. In truth, Healers worked *everyday*, but it wasn’t something anyone ever really gave any thought about.

### *At the Center, In the Dining Room*

“How does one manage to carry a child for *years*, Maya?” Déjà asked her plaintively.

Maya looked across the table at her in confusion.

Déjà had Faith cuddled in one arm, while her other hand held the spoon she was eating breakfast with. Little Ronnie was bundled in a thin blanket and held in her own left arm, while she was taking bites from a piece of fruit held in her right hand. It suddenly dawned on her that Déjà didn’t mean carry as in “*inside*” of her, but carry as in “haul around conveniently.”

Maya thought that perhaps a trip into town was in order so they could pick up some suitable baby accessories, unless Ling had already acquired such for any of the garrison wives or girlfriends ... *if*, that is, any of them had produced children while on Earth?

"We will need to get a few things for the babies. Slings, carry packs, and such. Perhaps even a stroller. That is something you put the baby in so you may move it around easily," she explained.

The dining room door opened, and they watched Kiki make a beeline to the kitchen door before stopping and turning to them with a big smile on her face.

"*Déjà! Maya! You brought babies for breakfast!*" she exclaimed in English, but clapped her hands over her mouth after finally recognizing the still bundles in their arms as *sleeping* babies before slowly – for *her* – approaching and stopping at arm's length from Déjà and Faith.

As someone who had gone out of her way to make the rounds of the garrison staff – even considering the short amount of time they'd actually been on Earth – Maya thought for *sure*, Kiki would have certainly noticed by now.

"Good morning, Kiki. Have you seen any other babies here? Among the garrison staff and their women, I mean?" Maya asked her quietly, but Kiki shook her head slowly.

"Not to see here. Just Déjà's babies. I see some at Reservation ... and some in town," she offered, much to Maya's confusion.

Maya's look finally turned to surprise. Kiki had been to *town* already? And to the *Reservation*? The look on her face was obvious – even to Kiki.

"Motor puu ... motor puhh... *\*Motor pool take me shopping! Let me help pick and carry food! But no play until we come back to Annex!\**" she said in a muted, cheerful voice, having shifted back to Standard to get it all out easily.

At just that moment, the dining room door opened and a voice called out, "*Kiki, you going with us? It's time to–*" but it stopped when Aelius caught sight of the Ladies having a leisurely breakfast with snuggly-wrapped bundles in their arms.

"*\*Your pardon, my Ladies,\**" he said quietly, then bowed and began to withdraw, but Maya softly called out to him.

"*\*You are ... Aelius?\**" At his embarrassed second bow, she asked him, "*\*We are curious. Are there no babies among the garrison women?\**"

"*\*No, my Lady. The women are... They are reluctant to bring life onto this particular world,\**" he said with political neutrality, *despite* the obvious sense of distaste she could sense from him. She could certainly understand it. After all, this *was* Earth.



## Picking up the Pieces

*"I understand, Aelius,"* she said, then offered a friendly smile, for which he replied with one of his own. *"Still, we find ourselves in need of certain supplies; mother's slings, carriers, and perhaps a stroller or two?"*

He nodded his head in understanding.

*"My Lady, I will inquire of Lady Mary for a suitable source for such things. I seem to recall instruction in certain regulations pertaining to infants in this society but that was a while ago. Lady Mary will surely have the most current information available."*

*"Thank you, Aelius. Ahh... Kiki is going ... shopping ... with you?"* she haltingly asked him.

*"Oh yes, my Lady! She has the most remarkable talent for choosing the best cuts of meat at the market! Is she not permitted to leave the Center? Lady Ling had allowed it."* His voice had risen only slightly, but his concern seemed very real.

*"That is fine, Aelius. Just... You want to make sure that--"*

*"She eats before she leaves,"* Déjà interrupted her, and all four of them shared a chuckle until Kiki finally remembered why she was there.

"Oh! Eat!" she said, then turned and darted for the kitchen door while the others watched her go with slowly shaking heads.

After Kiki and Aelius had left, Déjà and Maya took the opportunity to dawdle over their breakfast while talking about their potential future, either here on Earth or somewhere else – probably in the Demon's Realm were Déjà's thoughts on the matter.

They finally cleared their settings – somewhat awkwardly, with the babies in arm – and took them in to wash, only coming back to the dining room to make sure nothing was left behind.

A glance out the window showed a van loading up for a trip into town – two guardsmen, Aelius included, plus two women from the garrison – and Kiki, of course.

It was amusing to watch, as both the men and the women seemed enchanted by Kiki's natural perkiness, or perhaps it was a fond memory of a few lost hours under her talented hands and lips?

They finally finished boarding before Aelius drove away as the designated driver for this trip.

Another van was being readied, and they could see Mary, Ling, and Shu leave the house together and head in their direction, the three of them seeming to be deep in conversation. Upon getting closer, Ling

and Shu broke off and continued to the van, while Mary headed to the center.

*In Laisee's Suite, Jaiying and Rose*

Jaiying and Rose had slept in this morning, but the skylight was bright and their stomachs were empty. After washing and dressing, they quietly slipped out of the suite so as not to disturb Mama Laisee or Grandmother Sai in the other room. Once outside the door, they greeted their guardsman on this fine morning.

"Have our other guests had breakfast yet, Cyprian?" Jaiying asked him.

The man in question erred on the safe side, and said, "Mistress Jaiying, I have not heard of anyone else in the hallways this morning."

Knowing her mother was still asleep with Grandmother Sai, Jaiying provided the slighted of nods in approval, then took Rose's hand before heading to the guest hallway to wake up their visitors.

The closer she got, the clearer she could sense the couple balancing their need for food against their fear of the Americans.

Cyprian followed behind, exchanging a finger-flip with the corridor guardsman in passing that confirmed the translator's residency but since the Princesses already seemed to know, he stayed just close enough to be seen when their door opened.

*At the Dining Room...*

Mary met up with Maya and Déjà just as they were leaving the dining room. She was startled to see two guardsmen following along a short distance behind them, then supposed those rules would be slackened at some point in the future, but in the here and now, it made it obvious that Maya and Déjà – and Laisee and the kids, for that matter – were not ordinary visitors to the Center. She chalked it up to Imperial protocol and left it at that.

"Good morning, Ladies," Mary greeted them quietly, noting the two sleeping bundles being cradled in their arms. "Wilber tells me you need some extra baby supplies – slings, front pouches, strollers, and car seats. Do you want a supply of baby bottles, too?"

The moment she said it, she cringed and blushed. With the many nursing Healers present, running out of milk and switching to bottles was the *least* of their worries.

Of course, having one or two around might be useful if they pressed Donald into babysitting duty – as long as any expressed milk was heated in a water bath and not the microwave.

## Picking up the Pieces

“Bottles?” Déjà asked.

“Not all Earthlings can feed their young as we do,” Maya explained. “They sometimes need milk from others, which can then be fed to their babies from a bottle. That is something even *Donald* can do.”

“Ohh... Do you think he might do that?”

“It is a reasonable suggestion,” she considered. “Our campers sometimes used my milk in bottles to feed their babies. I used to pump for our campers, and for the hospital in town. I am sure Donald could manage.”

They’d been walking as they talked, and eventually met with Rose and Jaiying, who were escorting their new guests to breakfast.

On approach, all four guardsmen straggled apart from their two groups so they presented a less imposing presence for the foreigners.

“Good morning, Maya. Good morning, Déjà,” Rose greeted them. “We’re off to breakfast. Is there any milk left in the refrigerator?”

Maya extended through the babies before making a quick scan of Déjà.

“There might be some Ling and Shu. If these two leave me any later, I will pump more for the Center’s use,” Maya promised her, but immediately felt a chill of alarm from one of their guests.

She took a peek into Asad, then *immediately* considered a suitable substitute for breakfast cereal, before focusing on Mary for a moment.

*‘Mary, it would seem that one of our guests has just determined where the fresh milk is coming from and it disturbs him. Would you have the time to show them how to cook for themselves from the supplies in the pantry?’*

*‘Certainly, Maya. We have many good things to eat in there, and I will explain how to use the stove and microwave’*

Jaiying almost shook her head in disgust, but instead decided to play the game, and asked, “Mary, can we get something *warm* this morning? Uncle Wilber gave me part of his breakfast sandwich yesterday and it was very good.”

“That’s an *excellent* idea, Jaiying, and I’m sure Asad and Nurani would like to prepare their own meals instead of waiting for staff to make it for them,” Mary agreed. “Maya, when you and Déjà are ready – and when you find a babysitter – we’ll make a trip into town and go shopping for your needs.”

She paused, and then turned to Asad and Nurani. “Asad ... Nurani... I don’t know how long you’ll be with us, but if you need

anything – different foods, clothing ... supplies of *any* kind ... please let one of us know and we'll take you shopping to find it."

"Goat's milk," Rose suggested, which got a tiny gasp from Asad for the fact that she'd even remembered it.

"That too," Mary said. "I'm sure there's *somewhere* we can find some goat's milk – maybe from the Reservation, if I remember correctly."

"I ... we thank you, Mary," Asad offered, and gave his partner a quick translation of Mary's offer.

After Nurani smiled and nodded at him, he turned back to Mary and performed an approximation of the bow he'd seen the guardsmen display to their masters.

In just a little while, Mary had prepared hot meals for all four visitors, then stayed behind to show Asad and Nurani the features of the kitchen, and the many foodstuffs – frozen, fresh, and chilled – that were routinely stocked. The gas stove was a somewhat familiar appliance, but the microwave, although restricted to non-metallic containers, was a revelation to them both. The demonstration of an over-nuked bagel in less than a minute was an impressive warning of the careful planning necessary to use this modern marvel but Mary assured them they would soon "get the hang" of it.

### *In Laisee's Suite...*

Sai opened her eyes and looked at the clock on the wall. It was just after ten a.m., and her companion of the night was *still* snuggled up against her with a hand palmed across her left breast.

She felt that if Laisee moved her fingers even the slightest amount, she would begin dripping through the sheet, so she extended out and searched for her daughters to see if the babies were in any need.

'*Maya, you and Déjà are not in the Center? Where are you?*' she cast out silently, then sensed the presence of both of them with the babies, and surrounded by other women.

'*We are fine, Mother. We are taking a walk with the babies and they are content for the moment*'

She could sense that now, and felt that Faith and little Ronnie were currently awake and attached to Maya and Déjà – *both* of them getting another topping off.

'*Take care in the sunlight so that you do not burn*' she told her, then heard Déjà's giggle in her mind just before she sent back '*We will be careful, Mommy*'

## Picking up the Pieces

Sai relaxed, knowing that life would only get even more complicated as time went on – as it suddenly did, when Laisee teasingly drew her fingertip across her left nipple before delicately circling it.

“Good morning, Sai. I trust you slept well,” she murmured, then softly pinched her nipple to prevent any leakage onto the bedclothes. “Would you consider donating Healer’s milk to the Center? You never know when someone might need a nourishing supplement in the middle of the night. Or perhaps ... the *morning*?”

The lazy smile on Laisee’s lips telegraphed her intent, just as her fingertips had done, and Sai felt *very* full...

“Laisee, I find myself *terribly* full and I don’t think I can dare move without making a mess. Perhaps you might help take the *pressure* off my breasts this morning?”

“Ummm... I was *hoping* you’d ask,” she murmured, then slipped her hand under the sheet to fold it away so she could roll Sai over towards her and latch on for a liquid breakfast.

As Laisee settled in to nurse, Sai chuckled quietly and wrapped her hand around the back of her head to hold her in place. Then she closed her eyes while enjoying the sensation of her tightened breast becoming relaxed, one mouthful of milk at a time.

‘*Perhaps not so complicated at the moment,*’ she thought to herself while smiling serenely.

### *At the Residence*

After breakfast, Rose and Jaiying had set out for the house to take advantage of the entertainment system there with their new guard, Caius, who’d switched out with Cyprian during the lull over breakfast. He was currently ensconced next to Rose, while he and the children paid attention to the stage play that had just started on the monitor screen. It was some colorful song and dance performance whose principal character was a “second trombone” – whatever *that* was.

They were about ten minutes into it when Donald finally made his appearance and waved to the girls before heading into the hallway to Wilber’s office. Not finding him there, he came back, raided the fridge for a juice carton, then sat at the kitchen table while enjoying one of Gilbert and Sullivan’s most famous operettas – the one written as a response to the near dissolution of their partnership.

### *At the Garrison Housing Area*

Maya and Déjà had been wandering the grounds, the babies suspended in makeshift slings created by Mary from sheets she’d sacrificed back at the Center. They’d just turned down a different

pathway when they were found by three of the garrison's wives. The unexpected discovery of them had spread like wildfire, and they soon found themselves surrounded by garrison wives and girlfriends who were absolutely *enthralled* with the new lives their Imperial guests had brought among them.

They'd guided them to a sheltered trellis deeper within the housing area that contained a glider that easily seated three adults. There were very few young adults among them, and only one of them still at the early stage of adolescence. The remaining half dozen were between the middle and late stages, but they all seemed interested in the babies.

With nearly twenty women surrounding them, Maya and Déjà were bombarded with questions about the babies and how they were doing. Maya was able to explain the babies were twins of a sort, but both were healthy and related to the Royal family.

She asked about babies among the wives, but as she'd suspected, the fact they were currently with their husbands or bond-mates on *Earth* was a negative deciding factor.

The children among them had only been brought along because they, *themselves*, had insisted upon staying with their parents.

When asked questions about things going on back on Kantor, Maya was able to relate that the Dreds had sent official envoys and an Ambassador to Kantor, indicating a cessation of hostilities was in the making – or at least, the early ground work was being plowed.

Of more exciting news was the revelation of a *new* species in space – the Vanir – who had *also* exchanged Ambassadors with Kantor and the Dreds home world.

Maya was not sure if she could properly mention Ronnie's efforts on the Commonwealth's behalf, so she vaguely explained both situations as being "influenced by efforts of the Emperor's special staff."

When questioned about more common issues back home, Déjà was only able to relate her almost continuous deployment aboard ship until these latest little crewmates became a reality, but it was when Maya admitted her position as a resident Senior at the Emperor's Homestead that everyone became still.

"Senior Maya *Tal*? You are the daughter of Senior *Sai Tal*?" one of the wives asked.

At Maya's cautious nod, the wives looked at each other, with the whispered words, "She's the one," bouncing back and forth among them.

## Picking up the Pieces

As a group, they all turned to Maya and bowed their heads before one of the wives stepped forward and reached out her hands.

“Please ... come with us. We have something to show you.”

Maya stood, followed by Déjà, and they were led to one of the simple huts provided to the garrison staff for family housing. Not much to look at; they were less than twenty feet on a side and composed of rough adobe covered in whitewashed sealer, this particular one looking a little worse for wear and a little bit bigger. Their guide opened the door for them and ushered them into a dimly lighted vestibule.

“It was through the generosity of your previous companion, Lord Rondal Caldar, that we live in such luxurious accommodations on his birth world,” she murmured, then closed the outer door when the entire group was with them.

Once the outer door was closed, a door opened in front of them, showing a wide, curved, gently sloping ramp leading downwards for about twenty feet before leveling off. At the bottom, a high-ceilinged junction led to other corridors.

“From here, we can reach anywhere within the compound. It is similar to regulation garrison housing in a hostile environment but *much* more pleasant,” she said, then started them walking down one of the corridors.

### *At the Residence*

Mary finally made it back to the house before eleven a.m., and sought out Wilber to bring him up to date on their visiting interpreters.

She passed through the living room and saw Donald, the children, and their guardsman, all engrossed with the stage play on the screen before tracking down Wilber, who was puttering around straightening his and Shu’s bedroom. Mary gave him the short update, then left and headed to her own room to rest for a while before lunch. Ling and Shu would be back and probably hungry by then.

Out in the living room, Jaiying and Rose were giggling at the performance, while Caius was trying to maintain a professional detachment with his hand over his mouth.

That was the scene greeting Sai and Laisee nearly an hour later when they entered the resident’s quarters, along with seeing a smiling Donald as he watched with anticipation from his seat at the kitchen table. As Sai walked behind the girls, she heard a portion of the dialog, “Can you wait till *then?*” which triggered a memory in her, and she snapped her head around to look at the monitor screen in confusion.

As the play continued, she looked back at Donald and saw him shaking with mirth until her eyes narrowed and he seemed to feel her animosity towards him.

He looked up at her, then turned his head aside, his lips moving silently in a familiar expression of disgust. She didn't hear it, but could almost read it from his mind – something she'd been having difficulty doing since his return from the dead. Laisee, too, had mentioned it, although Jaiying seemed able to periodically dally about in there with no trouble.

Donald looked up at her and sighed in resignation before standing and heading towards Wilber's office like a chastened schoolchild, with Sai and Laisee on his heels.

Once the door closed, Sai turned on him and let her anger loose.

"A *PLAY*? You quoted words from a *PLAY* just to *TORMENT ME*?" she said loudly.

"Aww, *crap*, Sai! You *still* gonna hold that–"

"AND STOP SAYING *THAT*! YOU SOUND JUST LIKE YOUR *FATHER*!" she shouted on the verge of hysteria.

Donald was at a loss. He knew what she referred to, it being one of the previous Emperor's favorite expressions of dismay. He'd adopted it as a matter of course, hoping to achieve a greater level of acceptance among his peers by emulating the greatness of the sitting Emperor. He couldn't imagine why it affected *Sai* so much, though.

"Sai... I'm sorry. Truthfully, I don't understand why that upsets you so–"

"He said it to *me*! He said it *ABOUT* me!" she said in frustration. "It was *Lili*. She–" she stopped and glanced at Laisee before turning away to take a breath, letting it out slowly before stepping over and sitting down in Wilber's chair.

"It was after Bao Fang left your father ... after Lili married Radatel. She... Bao, I mean... She took the opportunity to leave the Emperor while his anger was focused on the Elder with her decision to place Lili with Radatel. Lili later arranged for me to join his staff of Healers, but every time he saw me, it was the same. He *knew* I didn't like him and preferred Healers who could *pretend* to accept his attitude about ... about things ... about women..."

"I ... I understand Rakel was ... difficult," Donald said quietly.

"*RAKEL WAS AN ASSHOLE!*" she shouted, lurching back up while shaking in frustration.



## Picking up the Pieces

"It's *true*, you know," Laisee said reasonably, and they both turned to look at her in surprise. "Sai, it's a wonder Elder Kita didn't use *you* to terminate his reign of terror. Perhaps it was because his replacement needed *seasoning*? Rakel became ... *obtuse* at the very last. Full of fears and indecision. I understand now that Commander Woldron was working on a *medical* diagnosis for the Emperor's condition, but ... that became quite moot."

They all stared at each other for several seconds while contemplating the fatal solution Elder Kita had finally applied to the situation. During the silence, a quiet knock on the door reminded them they were not alone in the house.

### ***A Welcome Break for Lunch...***

Noontime found Donald and Wilber sitting at the kitchen table and having sandwiches assembled by Mary for their lunch...

After a calming down period where he and Sai finally resolved their differences and actually kissed and made up – *again* – she and Donald gave Wilber a quick briefing on the effectiveness of the sensor operation, with a promise that viewing the results in the *Kraken's Child* would be eye-opening in the extreme.

Wilber begged off until after he'd had lunch, and Donald gladly joined him.

Sai waited while Mary graciously made sandwiches for the men, before going along to help Sai locate her missing daughters. As Laisee had nothing pressing to do, she joined the search party – all the while curious as to the jovial emotions radiating from Mary.

### ***At the Garrison Housing Area***

"That one there – the *crappy* one," Mary said.

She was pointing to a dilapidated adobe hut whose whitewash was not as pristine as many of the others, and whose walls were not as regular.

"The other huts are actually quite livable, but Ling was simply *appalled* at the living conditions the garrison staff was expected to live in – *especially* the women. She spoke to Wilber, and he asked her what she wanted. Once she and Aineias told him, he just shrugged and said, 'Not a problem.' Six months later... Well, just follow me."

She led them through the door and down the wide, curving ramp. Gathering at the bottom, she pointed to the location map on one of the junction walls, then closed her eyes while concentrating for a moment.

"Priscilla says they're with her," she said, then headed them down one of the corridors.

They shortly came to a door along the corridor, where Mary stopped and *almost* pressed a panel, but the door opened moments before she touched it.

“Mary! Your guests are here and they have *babies* with them!” the young woman who greeted them exclaimed. “Please come in, my Ladies. Welcome to our little home!”

Mary and her companions were led through a short, carpeted hallway, into a large circular room. They could see a dining alcove to one side, with an adjacent food preparation and storage area. Next to it was a familiar laundry fixture of Commonwealth manufacture, a single box serving as both washer and dryer. Other doors led to other areas, some doors being open and showing individual berthing compartments. In all, it looked like several individuals could comfortably make their home in this one setting.

Laisee was surprised it was so roomy. The quarters she’d slept in with Ling and Aineias the other night were not *nearly* as big. She thought this must be a general garrison accommodation for multiple staff, while the one assigned to Aineias was just for his immediate companions and guests. Still, it appeared just as opulent as Aineias enjoyed.

The muffled sound of voices could be heard, then became louder when another door opened to show a room seating perhaps a dozen or more women whose guests of honor seemed to be Maya and Déjà. Priscilla led them into the room so they could join the party already in progress, and as they walked in, they could see Kiki seated between two of the women and beaming from ear to ear.

### ***At the Motor Pool***

After returning from shopping, Aelius was off watch that afternoon, and after having washed the van in the parking area outside, he dropped off the keys for it in the motor pool office. He was contemplating returning to his quarters to eat and then rest, or perhaps catch Drusilla in a *good* mood for a change. If anything, at least she enjoyed it when Kiki had spent a few precious hours with the both of them that one night before switching over to the couple in the compartment next to them.

On the way in, he’d noted the tank over by the wall had gone from dead black, back to the peaceful jungle scene, which was *much* more relaxing to the eyes.

Heading back out, he spotted Justus as he was coming out of the small security office, and walked over to greet him. While they were talking, the Earthling, Milton, and the Spacer named Cato came into the motor pool and casually strolled over to the tank where they

stopped and looked in their direction before pointing to the tank and entering it.

“You ever been in a tank?” Justus asked him quietly while nodding his head towards the jungle scene.

“Years ago – but not like *that* one,” Aelius murmured, then followed along after Justus invited him with a flick of his eyes.

### *In the Kraken’s Child*

“Well, what do you think?” Donald asked him. He could see the surprise in Wilber’s eyes from what was being presented on the screen in front of him. Instead of a flat projection of an underground cavern, the display was a three-dimensional representation of Carlsbad Caverns that could be rotated and viewed from almost any perspective.

“That is ... *impressive*,” Wilber finally admitted, then watched as Donald rotated it to a side view, and then zoomed in to the underground lunch counter located over seven-hundred feet below the surface.

“You know, I’ve always wanted to visit there but I never got around to it,” Donald said with a shake of his head. “Maybe now I’ll have the time.”

“You should *go*, Spacer Cato,” Aelius called out to him from the vicinity of the small sink.

He and Justus had come forward after insuring compliance with the lockout restrictions currently in place, and both Wilber and Donald turned to look at them.

“Have you been there before?” Donald asked him. He was truly curious as to the entertainment value of a huge hole in the ground for a citizen of one of the Royal houses.

“My bond-mate and I went there last year – a small group of us. We don’t get out much, but sometimes Captain Anastasius and Lady Wen will authorize supervised tours. It was quite magnificent. The Earthlings seem to go out of their way to protect and cherish their natural resources, even as they continue to squabble amongst themselves. Your pardon, Mister Milton,” he added with a slight flush and a tiny nod in his direction.

Wilber held up his hand and shook his head, his smile quite genuine.

“No offense taken,” he said. “One of the beauties of *this* particular country is the relative freedom to speak your mind ... within *reason*.”

“Yes,” Donald added sourly. “The Earthlings have a curious mix of both national pride and an insatiable desire to control *everyone*, both within and *without* their borders. And I’m sure that if *coal* was found at the bottom of those caverns, they’d remove its national landmark status so they could reap its resources in the quickest and most *destructive* manner possible!”

All three of them were surprised at his outburst, but Wilber was the only one who really understood the raw *hatred* behind it. As he’d learned while surfing the network yesterday afternoon, one of the Arizona State Senators was the new Chairman of the Indian Affairs Committee. He reached out and patted Donald’s shoulder comfortingly.

“Sorry,” Donald murmured, then looked up apologetically. “Now that my memory’s back, I’m finding it hard to develop a planet-side routine. I should probably exercise more, as well.”

Remembering the young Princess’s words from yesterday, Aelius took a chance.

“If you like, you’re welcome to join me in sparring? We really don’t see any action here, and we’re not allowed to live fire our pellet throwers *anywhere*. We keep in shape with our swords.”

Donald looked up at him, then felt Wilber’s gentle nudge on his shoulder from behind.

“I’m sure Spacer Cato would *enjoy* the exercise, Aelius,” Wilber said confidently. “I haven’t seen him with a sword in his hands for *years* now.”

Donald glanced back at him, then faced Aelius again.

“I – I’ll have to check with my Healer ... and Lady Caldarous. They warned me against–”

“Doing *stupid* things, yes,” Wilber interrupted loudly before chuckling. “But I’m sure they’d be *delighted* to see you getting back in shape. *Last* time you were here, you didn’t look *nearly* as chubby.”

Donald turned and frowned at him, but then looked down at his stomach.

All right. It *was* a little bit thicker. He turned back to Aelius and nodded.

“Very well, Aelius. Where do you practice?” He saw the smile on the guardsman’s face and it seemed friendly enough.

“We try to get in some practice two or three times a week. If the motor pool is available, we’ll play matches here. If not, Lady Wen

## Picking up the Pieces

sometimes lets us use the Great Room in the Center – if the Center is *completely* unoccupied.”

“You don’t practice outside?” he asked. Public practice didn’t used to be an issue.

“Ling decided the clash of swords in the beautiful outside air was at odds with the stated purpose of the Healing Center,” Wilber said quietly.

He wasn’t quite sure what Donald had mumbled, but it sounded like “fucking busybody” to him, followed by a disgusted sigh.

“All right. When’s the next practice?” Donald finally asked, then stood up and stretched. Aelius shared a glance at Justus and got a confirming flinger-flip from him.

“Wednesday morning. *\*Half-way to dinner,\**” he said, switching back to Standard now that his offer had been formally accepted.

*\*“I thank you for your kind offer. It’s been a while for me and I hope I do not disappoint,”* Donald said, then bowed slightly to the Imperial troopers, who both responded in kind before turning to leave the tank.

Wilber waited until they’d both left before he stood and stretched as well. He watched when Donald turned and started transferring the data feed from the recording to a data tab so he could later convert it into something Earthlings could easily look at on a regular computer. Not that they’d *need* more detailed maps of Carlsbad Caverns, but just to make sure the process would produce usable results. Once completed, Donald handed the data tab to Wilber and shut down the console.

“Well. I’d better go see if my backup sword is still under the mattress,” he muttered, then went back to the bunkroom.

He returned with a battered Imperial blade of Royal manufacture, something he’d kept aboard the tank, because... you never know. Battered was really a misnomer, since only the handles ever really took a beating. He’d kept the wrapping on this one in excellent condition over the years, and replaced it upon his return from the Vanir research facility. He stood in the middle of the tank, hefting it and wondering if he could still Fire it. Facing away from Wilber, he stretched out his sword arm and concentrated, but nothing happened.

“Well ... *damn*,” he mumbled, then tried again without result.

“Dead batteries?” Wilber asked him.

“No... This one’s a *Royal* sword. Doesn’t have batteries,” he muttered glumly. “I didn’t used to *need* batteries. I’m afraid the Vanir really fucked me up.”

“Hey, you’re alive and you can still swing a sword – batteries or not. Besides, *live* sword practice is forbidden at the Center.”

“Yeah... Guess I’ll have to get used to it.” Donald sheathed his useless sword and carried it to the airlock, with Wilber following along.

“At least you’re less likely to accidentally kill Aelius,” Wilber muttered just before they left the tank. “Drusilla wouldn’t like that at *all*.”

“Drusilla?”

“His bond-mate. You think *Sai* has a nasty temper...”

### ***At the Residence***

It was mid-afternoon, and Jaiying was comparing the image on the screen, to the compiled image Wilber had printed and taped together earlier that day. He’d taken the graphic from the USB drive Dwayne had brought him and printed the area she’d identified as a possible location for both the hidden caves, and a third party in this search – the Taliban leader named Faridun...

Earlier that afternoon, she’d insinuated herself into Khialay’s mind and successfully triggered memories of the route to where the caves were supposed to be. The only downside was Khialay’s memories were of the *now* but the most accurate maps she had were six decades old and missing many of the landmarks – such as roads and groups of domiciles that didn’t exist sixty-years ago. Still, the sharpness of the physical images was much better than the existing satellite maps, and she was finding enough matching detail to indicate she now had a probable location, or at least somewhere worth looking into...

“Uncle Wilber, Donald ... I think this is the right area,” she said, and turned back to where they were sitting behind her and quietly taking notes.

“Have you reached out that far and felt anyone around?” Donald asked her, then watched as she closed her eyes and slumped in her seat to focus intently on that task.

While she performed her silent search, he and Wilber waited patiently and watched as her facial expressions shifted subtly. This continued for several minutes until she suddenly gasped and opened her eyes in shock.

Her mouth curled into a frown, while her face darkened in anger before her whole *body* began to glow. Donald slowly reached over and gently touched the side of her face.

“*\*Jaiying ... sweetheart ... let it go. Please,\**” he said softly, hoping she’d keep control of herself.

## Picking up the Pieces

Her eyes shifted to him, but her glow slowly died down before it went out completely. She began shaking, then reached out to him, letting him gather her into his arms.

*“It ... it’s a good thing Josie isn’t here,”* she mumbled as he stroked her hair while her shaking continued.

Wilber remained silent, not knowing what had happened, but what he knew beyond a *doubt* now was that Jaiying – Senior Jaiying – had been on the verge of doing something unpleasant to someone on the *other* side of the world, and it looked like it promised to be *permanent*.

Jaiying looked up from Donald’s shoulder and stared straight at him – giving him the tiniest of nods, before tucking herself back into her Grandfather’s neck. She managed to calm down after a few more minutes, then became very still; staying within the comfort of her Grandfather’s arms while reaching out once again.

Her words were muffled and soft when she finally spoke.

*“S-She lived. H-He didn’t have to do that to her ... to ANY of them. Grandfather, you HAVE to do something about it. Mister Milton, p-please let us bring those girls home.”* She looked at Wilber again and felt his empathy, but also his helplessness, so she slid out of Donald’s arms and looked at *him*, instead.

*“Grandfather, this was a refugee camp once before. You can STILL use it for that purpose. The Demon’s Realm has PLENTY of room where no one will hurt those girls anymore.”*

“Why don’t we talk to your mother and see what we can do, sweetie?” he told her softly, then reached out to stroke her arms before pulling her in for another hug.

### ***Kantor, The Elder’s Office***

*“This is what Jaiying has told me, Lili”* Laisee sent to her stepmother, trying to keep her emotions neutral and not reflect the angst she’d felt when Jaiying had shared the experience with her.

*“That is also what the Senior Staff have reported. The Earthlings do not seem to be any closer to civilization, I fear”* Lili shared with her, but the pause was slight before she continued.

*“The children speak everyday and share their findings. These findings are often not well received, but my instructions were CLEAR – do NOT interfere with actions Earth GOVERNMENTS take against ONE ANOTHER. Likewise, loss of life among REPRESENTATIVE government personal is UNACCEPTABLE. Do I make myself CLEAR, Laisee?”* she sent, before opening herself to give Laisee a chance to feel her *internal* impressions.

“*I ... I believe I do, Lili\**” Laisee sent several moments later, after having felt uncontrollable shivers pass throughout her body.

“*\*Good. See that Donald behaves. Tell him that ... that he is NOT to make any messes that cannot be cleaned up with a SPONGE and MOP. It would be preferable if only a light DUSTING be required. Say this EXACTLY\**” she sent cryptically.

“*I ... I hear and obey, my Elder\**” Laisee sent timidly, then waited several moments, but Lili had already left the conversation.

Lili opened her eyes, looked straight in front of her, and saw her staff staring at her.

When she’d opened herself to Laisee, it had included *everyone* in the room with her locally. She let loose a silent snort, then gave a tiny shake of her head – knowing this *new* disaster she’d just set into motion would likely cause repercussions all the way back to *Cletus*.

She took a sip of water before settling back in her chair, the weariness she was feeling at odds with the bright, sunny morning this had started out to be...

Slavery was *anathema*, and *sexual* slavery was an even *greater* abomination! That it was perpetrated upon *children* was the reason the Senior Staff had reached out to her earlier, as Jaiying had *almost* taken vengeance against such a perpetrator. Not that vengeance wasn’t fully *warranted*; but it was best done in person *after* the victims had been safely spirited from harm’s way. She wasn’t quite certain if Laisee had interpreted her instructions completely, but the words she was to repeat to Donald were succinct. If the opportunity arose, Donald would know *exactly* what was expected of him.

### ***Earth, The Annex, Late Afternoon in the Center***

Wilber laid out the paper collage on the dining room table in the Center, while Laisee contacted Sai and asked her to attend their impromptu meeting. Donald came in from the kitchen with a tray of bottled water and sodas, and set it off to the side.

“Pretty good images, aren’t they?” he suggested, while pointing out the details on the color printouts, along with Wilber’s hand edits.

“Yeah. Only sixty years out of date,” Wilber muttered. “These roads are new, along with what we think is a village ... or a rock fall.” He pointed to a hand-drawn line indicating a road, and a bunch of boxes representing ... something.

“So, what did Lili say?” Donald asked Laisee, but saw the hesitation in her eyes. “Laisee, what did Lili tell you? Can we do an overflight or not?”



## Picking up the Pieces

"I – I'd rather wait until Sai gets h-here," she stammered, something she wasn't noted for.

"It's all right, Laisee," he murmured, then reached over to pat her hand, which she tolerated for just a moment before jerking away.

Donald stepped slightly back, then turned to the tray and selected a soda. He popped the top and took a long swallow from it before setting it down and heading back to the kitchen.

"Laisee, is everything all right?" Wilber asked her, but she looked at him sadly and slowly shook her head.

They waited silently together for a few more minutes until Sai arrived and joined them at the table. She stayed standing while looking down at the map collage.

"Is that the target area?" she muttered, and got a slight gasp out of Laisee. "Laisee, you okay?" she asked, just as Donald walked back in with some chopped vegetables in a bowl.

"Hey, Sai! Welcome to the party! I got some *root* beer over there if you're thirsty?" he said, while trying hard not to snicker.

After observing the satisfying roll of Sai's eyes, he set down the bowl and grabbed a length of celery – the subsequent crunching of it sounding loud in the surrounding silence. He took a seat across the table from Laisee and a little further away from her, while Sai sat down next to her and Wilber sat directly across from her. They all remained mute until Sai got fed up.

"All right. You've got me here. What's going on?"

As Laisee remained silent, Donald jumped in.

"Wilber printed out these *beautiful* maps, which are *seriously* out of date, and Jaiying was able to determine the *probable* location of our missing Fred. At least she *thinks* she felt someone thinking in English. I asked Laisee to contact Lili for an update on our operational parameters," he finished, then turned to Laisee with an expectant smile on his face.

"Lili ... Lili said that we are not to interfere with the actions of the Earth governments, and ... and that loss of life is unacceptable," she murmured.

They waited for further details, but nothing was forthcoming.

"Okay, we don't go in and *kill* anyone. How about the overflight?" Donald pressed.

"She ... her emotions ... she didn't..." she suddenly broke off and turned away, causing all three of them to frown at her.

Donald got Sai's attention, then tapped his forehead several times before pointing at Laisee. She frowned at him until her eyebrows suddenly rose, then turned to Laisee.

"\*Laisee, what did Lili tell you?\*" she asked silently, and was suddenly awash in the feelings of anguish that spilled out of her. It was frightening, but also familiar, and she sat back in her chair and chuckled lightly.

"Lili may be the *Elder*, but she is also *human*. What you felt was what she would *like* to have happen, but not what she can *allow* to have happen. Do you recognize the difference?"

"But ... but she would think of doing that to ... to other *humans*?" Laisee asked her, giving Donald a clue to the situation and triggering his own input.

"Lemme guess. Lili told you *one* thing, when what she wants *most* of all is for the problem to go away – painfully and *permanently*? She's said much the same to me over the years, and probably in the same manner."

"But ... but she–"

"Laisee, Lili is a *practical* girl," he interrupted her. "*Very* pragmatic. Drove her *nuts* when she found out I was trying to *save* the Drecks instead of eliminating them entirely. Same with the Vanir. She can't help what she feels. The good Lady keeps the *ultimate* goal in mind. If she'd been in charge at the time, I'd be surprised if she didn't just *terraform* the Earth a millennia ago."

That brought gasps from all three of them, while Donald just nodded his head. "What *else* did she tell you?"

Laisee looked at him, glanced at Sai, then over at Wilber, before facing Donald once again.

"She said to tell you that ... that..." she closed her eyes, "... 'He is not to make any messes that cannot be cleaned up with a sponge and mop.'"

Donald let out a breath, not realizing he'd been holding it, while Wilber let out a chuckle, remembering the *last* time that situation had come up.

"So all we gotta do is hide the bodies? Not a problem. We don't even have to send the *ashes* anywhere afterwards," Wilber muttered, then pointed to a ginger ale, and Donald handed it to him.

"Wait! What are you *thinking of*?" Laisee asked him, but it was Sai who answered this time.

## Picking up the Pieces

“Lili is the Elder and represents the Commonwealth. Her word has been given that we will not interfere with the actions of the Earth’s *governments*. At some point, government stops, and *individuals* can be held accountable for the immorality of their actions.”

That stopped Wilber in mid-sip, and he turned to look at Donald, who, in turn, looked at Laisee.

“Laisee, did Lili say anything *else* about me?”

She started out with her eyes closed while bringing it back from memory, not even feeling it when Sai tapped in to read it directly.

“She said ... ‘it would be preferable if only a light dusting be required.’ Does that mean *anything* to you?”

Donald let out a sigh, then sipped his own soda before reaching out for another piece of celery. He sat there and munched on it while thinking through his options.

No death and destruction, certainly nothing *major* anyway, which automatically made it more *difficult*. On the *plus* side, their targets were in a fixed location – *nominally*. For some reason, a thought passed through him concerning Jaiying’s feelings about the other prisoners, so he added that to the mix.

Sai sat there and watched as Donald contemplated a *revised* mission. Not a survey mission, but a *recovery* mission ... a *major* recovery mission, she felt. She carefully extended into him, seeming to feel his mind finally opening to her, before she went all in and tapped her fingers on Laisee’s wrist.

‘*Laisee, listen with me. Donald is working out the new mission*’ she shared silently.

They both followed along while Donald ran through his options and alternatives.

Laisee observed with a feeling of trepidation. She knew what Donald was capable of, and what he was now contemplating could very well eliminate the reprieve granted to him by Elder Xue. If he stepped too far over the line, then Earth wouldn’t be a safe haven for him. Perhaps not even the *Demon’s Realm*.

Sai had no idea why he was suddenly so open to her, or how quickly he could switch through the many variables given but she should have had a clue from working with him back at the Fringe, or even while serving with him on the *Kraken*. Even the *unknowns* were being considered. At the end of ten minutes, he’d finished his fourth piece of celery, and was sitting there with a thin smile on his face.

“So... Who wants to go on a *survey*?” he quietly asked them.

*In Laisee's Suite*

It was the early evening, and Jaiying had finally settled down, but doubted she'd *ever* become as callused as everyone around her in ignoring the evils of Earth. She just couldn't understand how *anyone* could treat another human being so cruelly.

The only previous example she'd been exposed to had been Mama Shay's experience back on Wilder. Her *Kantite* Grandfather, "Uncle" Emperor, had put a *stop* to that nonsense after a reasonably short length of due process.

She steeled herself, bolstered by the support of the rest of the Senior Staff, and continued the search for the Taliban leader this early "tomorrow" morning in Afghanistan. Avoiding the location where she'd felt the rape of the child, she widened her search for the essences of him ... feeling tiny tendrils of his influence among some of the men she danced over, but not him directly. At least it was much easier, as no one there was afraid of *anything* ... aside from the captured girls and some of the younger women.

An hour later, she felt a strong impression of him, but the person she touched was not him. It felt strange to her, before she realized he was reacting to just *speaking* with Faridun. She quickly expanded her search and ended up following a trail of stronger and stronger impressions until finally stumbling over him as he was walking through a tunnel of some sort.

The missing Americans were only a trivial side issue to him, so she tentatively prodded his thoughts to consider them and learned they were being kept as bargaining chips in case of need. If necessary, they could be traded during a prisoner exchange – although he didn't consider anyone but *himself* to be of high enough value for such. She pushed concerns about their health at him, and he idly considered how much longer they could survive given the limited amount of precious medications needed to keep them alive.

Of his own volition, he took his mind off the prisoners and considered which one of the girls he would take at the end of the day. Female infidel slaves had at least *one* proper use under Islam.

As much as she wanted to obstruct various arteries in his brain right then and there, she followed Donald's recommendation and locked her feelings out of the equation for now. His time would come as it came to *all* men. At the moment, whether it was by her hand or the hand of another was not an issue.

She knew her Grandfather had neglected to mention Faridun just might die of old age, but was hopeful circumstances might soon catch up to him in a very painful and public fashion.

## Picking up the Pieces

Instead of murder and mayhem, she focused on other trivia he had lying around in his head, then made an effort to memorize the various contacts he'd accumulated over the years, and what their functions were. She found several within the Taliban movement, along with several attempted converts. Khialay was among them, but had not committed to the movement, having been more concerned with his family and home than anything else. She was surprised to learn how close he'd come to being killed for his reluctance. She also found a few foreign contacts and memorized those names and faces, as well.

She tapped into an unusually *twisted* portion of his mind and thought it strange that *anyone* could espouse belief in such foolish ideals, but then, *all* Earthlings seemed to believe in one mythology or another, with all believing that *their* God was the one *true* God while not recognizing the total *absurdity* of that concept.

### *In the Motor Pool*

Dwayne had driven in from town after being offered the chance of a *lifetime*. It was the middle of the evening, and Donald was in the motor pool with him and giving a tour of the *Kraken's Child*. Dwayne couldn't *believe* his good fortune at this opportunity. It wasn't exactly like Wilber's trip to the Sun and back, but still, being in low orbit for a survey mission on a *real* space ship was something that you just *couldn't* pass up!

Donald was just finishing the safety procedures with him when Sai came in to let them know of Jaiying's latest findings. She'd confirmed the Americans were alive and prisoners of Faridun, the local Taliban leader. Once the survey was complete, they could then pinpoint everyone's location.

She handed Donald a spare Embassy data tab from Wilber that he took and plugged into the ship's console. Meanwhile, she went back and put a container of fresh Healer's milk in the small refrigerator, just in case, while Dwayne took that moment to step outside.

### *In Laisee's Suite*

Jaiying had had enough and was trying to get some rest, but her thoughts were still troubled by what she'd felt earlier. Her inner demons finally spilled over and she fought hard to keep her tears from falling, something Rose immediately felt.

She rolled over, wrapped her in her arms, and hugged her tightly.

*"\*It's all right ... it's all right,\*"* Rose whispered. *"\*I'll protect you. We'll all protect you.\*"*

They stayed locked together until Jaiying's tremors finally subsided. Once she calmed down, Rose relaxed her hug and they

separated enough for her to lean over and kiss her cousin on the cheek before hugging her again. Jaiying hugged her back, but began giggling.

*“How are you going to protect me?”* she asked, then leaned away from her to look at her face, so Rose let go and sat upright to show her.

*“Like this,”* she said, then held her hand out in front of her, palm up.

A ball of bluish light formed in the palm of her hand, and she rolled her palm over and threw it at the wall, where it impacted silently and dissipated without a trace. Before Jaiying could say anything...

*“Now, imagine that fueled by the anger Josie felt when the Drecks attacked our home,”* she added, then slowly nodded her head knowingly.

*“Where did you learn that?”*

*“On the entertainment system. Some program about dragons and wizards.”*

*“But ... that isn't real!”*

*“No ... not unless we MAKE it real”* Rose shared silently, then hugged her cousin once again.

They separated after another minute and cuddled together so they could *both* get some rest. Sleep still seemed remote, but at least Jaiying was feeling better now. As she still wasn't tired, she reached out to their visitors and tapped their minds lightly, sensing depression tinged with the despair they both exuded.

### ***In Laisee's Room...***

Laisee had been a silent observer to both of them ever since she'd felt Jaiying's despair, but now had *another* worry to concern her.

Manifestations of talent like that were *forbidden*, certainly for Kantite *males*, and carried a rather high penalty. She had no idea what Lili might be required to do if the *girls* displayed that particular talent in an unfortunate fashion. As she had other issues at hand, she decided to let the girls rest. She needed to rest a bit herself before the survey mission began. After *that*... well, perhaps Lili didn't need to know right away.

### ***Outside the Motor Pool***

Dwayne had found that, not only did he have to leave the ship, but also the motor pool, so that his cell phone would work. Once he was

## Picking up the Pieces

outside, he was able to reach his intelligence connection with the good news that Fred's location was being narrowed down. As a bonus, it even included the location of Faridun, the local Taliban leader in the Korengal Valley.

While he was on the call, he repeated the assertion that the people he was working with functioned *independently* from the Federal government, but were a trusted, secret group with strong ties to the administration. Once again, he told the man he couldn't divulge their identities or headquarters, but assured him he would verify any information they produced and pass it on for resolution at the appropriate level.

He was thanked for the call and promised to keep him advised.

"Anxious bugger," he mumbled, then headed to the Center so he could update the interpreter with a change in plans.

### *In the Guest Wing of the Center*

It was later in the evening, and instead of preparing for bed, Nurani was working over their small pile of belongings while Asad was sitting and staring listlessly at the wall...

Agent Sparks had come and told them Agent Smith expected them back in a day or two, and he would escort them to Washington, D.C. for further debriefing – whatever that *really* meant. Nurani looked over at Asad and finally stopped fussing with their stuff, then stepped over and knelt down before looking into his eyes.

"<Asad... Asad, you've told them everything you know. What more do they WANT from you?>" she whispered desperately.

He looked down at her and considered how lucky he'd been in keeping her from capture by the Taliban. They considered themselves to be *good* Muslims, but the rigid Islamic beliefs of the Taliban declared them both to be *heretics*. They'd both barely gotten out alive.

If captured, he would have been killed, but her beauty would have had her put to use as a sex slave for the insurgents' baser whims ... all under the same religious beliefs of Islam. These Americans had *no* concept of the madmen they faced or how futile their actions were.

"<Asad, something terrible will come to pass. I can feel it in my heart,>" she said, then laid her head across his lap, where he gently ran his fingers through her hair.

"<We will just have to wait and see, my love,>" he said, then added a caress to her cheek with his other hand. "<Come. Let us bathe and wash each other once again. We should take advantage of their hospitality while they still offer it.>"

She looked up and gave him a half-smile, knowing *exactly* what that would lead to. It did not bother her in the least, however, as it was the *only* solace they could expect before their usefulness to the Americans was depleted. Better to enjoy what little life they had left while they still could, so she got up with his help and shed her clothes on the way to the shower.

### *In Laisee's Suite*

Jaiying never made it to sleep. She'd not lapsed into the same level of despair as earlier, but certainly understood more clearly the threat both Asad and Nurani faced from people in their homeland...

Rose had silently joined with her and helped maintain her spirits while they listened to the Afghans' "pillow talk" after their post-shower coital encounter. It started with endearments, but eventually spiraled into fear and bewilderment.

Rose explained it sounded much like what she'd read from the Hegemony refugees from Grandfather's recovery missions. She'd overheard many silent concerns of a similar nature while traveling with her parents on the Demon's recovery projects. Jaiying then considered offering them an escape to a *safer* environment might be welcome. Nurani still spoke very little English, but learning Commonwealth Standard would certainly be more useful in the *long* term.

They'd both giggled at that, then reached out to see what was going on in the motor pool. There was still an hour to go until the midnight launch window, and they observed silently as Grandmother Sai was resting in the middle bunk in the tank, while Agent Sparks was up front with Grandfather and watching an operetta on the big display screen.

It felt very comfortable to Jaiying. As Rose drifted off to sleep, Jaiying's thoughts continued to focus on Donald. Aside from his lack of Healer skills, he still had the fine combat edge of an Imperial Officer, if not the physical tone of body.

She'd learned earlier that he'd lost the ability to Fire a sword naturally, but there shouldn't be any swordwork involved anyway. Besides, Earthlings eschewed swordwork and relied almost exclusively on pellet throwers.

She considered what she'd pulled from his mind and how his recovery mission plans might change based on the results of the survey, for that was what he was ultimately planning to do under the latest authorization from Aunt Lili. She knew what 'sponge and mop' referred to, but was curious how a 'light dusting' might be interpreted



## Picking up the Pieces

for this event. Doubtless, it would be something clever but probably *very* foolhardy. After all, this was *Grandfather*.

She eventually calmed her thoughts, and stretched her jaw into a wide yawn before finally giving in to her drowsiness. Curling up to Rose while snuggling with her comfortably, and wrapping one arm around her torso, finally let her drift off to sleep.

### ***September 20, Midnight, The Motor Pool, Another Successful Launch***

The survey mission cleared the motor pool at the beginning of their launch window and quickly found safe passage to the projected orbital altitude of the target area. From there, it was a relatively simple, if not exactly pleasant, exercise to transit over areas not known to have optical observatories, where even the minimal occlusion granted by their cloaking system might be detected. Donald considered how frustrated Andy would have been by not being able to make micro-jumps that would cover the distance in just minutes. Their current estimated time on target was nearly two hours away.

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

*'Laisee, a moment if you please'* Lili politely sent to her stepdaughter in English this time.

*'How may I be of service, Lili?'* she immediately sent back.

*'How is everyone getting along? Have there been any problems I should be aware of?'*

Laisee stared at the wall, now wondering if Lili had already been alerted about Rose's indiscretion, or if her choice of language was an effort to speak of it without the risk of *local* eavesdroppers. She went with feigning stupidity and hoped it played out. Sanctioning a child was almost unheard of – *almost*.

*'Everyone seems to be very amiable so far, Lili. Once he came to his senses, Donald accepted the role he must play – although he still manages to tease Sai about it. Maya is aware, of course, as is Déjà. He has reached out to both of them with his desire to become a family with them'* The pause afterwards was very slight...

*'Otherwise he shows no signs of latent ability? No Healing? No silent communication?'*

*'No, Lili. I'm told by Wilber that he cannot even Fire his sword – a Royal sword – although he was invited to attend practice by one of the guardsmen'*

*'Well... That's good. He could stand to lose a few pounds and improve his muscle tone'* Lili sent back, while quickly considering just how dangerous a *hampered* Donald could be. She let go of that

concern, as Donald was without the *Kraken* now and relatively harmless – more or less. Of course, there was still the *other* matter...

*‘There was mention of a survey over a remote area of Earth. Has that taken place?’*

*‘They are en route in the Kraken’s Child at this time, Lili. Donald, Sai, and Agent Dwayne Sparks – he is Wilber’s replacement at the Embassy and was authorized by Donald when he ... in a past life’ she ended lamely. ‘Sai is in charge, and Spacer First Cato is piloting’ she hastily added.*

*‘This is a survey and NOT a recovery, this is true?’ Lili pressed.*

*‘Those are their instructions. If the survey confirms the location of Fred, then they will present detailed location data for the host to conduct a rescue operation’*

*‘Very well, Laisee. Your original instructions remain in place. I trust that Donald will remain in compliance?’*

*‘He has been informed exactly as you instructed me, Lili. He understood your meaning and promised compliance’*

Lili paused to reflect on the situation Jaiying had reported. It had infuriated her after learning of it, and she’d reacted poorly by issuing those instructions to Laisee regarding Donald, not to mention revealing yet *another* dark side of her personality to her staff. Still, Donald was not without talent and would be *determined* to assist if he could – *especially* if it involved children ... or small animals.

That constant of his personality made her smile, and she hoped he would follow through adequately, before reaching out to Laisee once again.

*‘Loosely within the boundaries of compliance, no doubt, but loss of life is a key issue. His existence may depend upon his compliance’*

*‘I hear and obey, my Elder’*

There was another slight pause while Lili was choosing between a casual mention of the next topic or simply ripping the bandage off and causing a panic. She tried to go for the middle ground.

*‘Laisee ... it’s become known to me that Senior Xue of Cletus has left home and is in transit to Earth. Her mission is to investigate Earth’s progress towards suitability as a full Commonwealth member – much like was done with Wilder. You might remember what a disaster THAT was’*

Disaster was an *understatement*. Wilder had been a semi-technological planet orbiting a star located within a very nice cluster of

## Picking up the Pieces

stellar companions. One *accident*, one *minor* navigational error on a Commonwealth cargo carrier had exposed them to a Galactic civilization and initiated a worldwide panic of *epic* proportions.

*'She's not seriously thinking of...'*

*'Truly, I believe it is a cover to stop by and check on Donald. You might want to speak to him about his manners, Laisee. Teasing Sai is one thing. Teasing those to whom I report is quite another'* Lili pressed her gently.

*'I will do so ... after they return. It should be in just a few hours'* she told her.

*'Very well. Our love to you and to the family. Even to that scamp, Donald. He MUST obey, Laisee, else Jaiying will have labored for nothing'* she sent lightly before leaving the conversation.

Lili leaned back and closed her eyes against the dryness she felt in them. Inviting *Earth* to join the Commonwealth?

At least *Wilder* had the sense to maintain control over their more *dangerous* weapons until the Commonwealth managed to take them safely out of their hands. It was now a more agrarian society than before, still with some technological advantages, but more laid back and content to enjoy the largess of Commonwealth membership without the worry of blowing themselves up.

In other words, petty tyrants had popped up left and right, and – as long as they didn't violate any *Commonwealth* restrictions – were left alone to treat their populace anyway they saw fit. Shay was a product of that environment, and it was her good fortune to be rescued from her position, only to come back with charges that changed the way things worked on *Wilder* from then on. It was still a work in progress, but promised better results than simply letting the *children* play at managing themselves.

As for *Earth*...

She could not imagine the *chaos* that would ensue if the public learned what a tiny speck they were compared to the *rest* of known Galactic society.

She rolled her neck while listening to it crackle, her joints fighting with the stress held within her muscles. She was looking forward to joining Amy and Larl in her Capitol quarters in a little while. She loved her husband dearly, but the addition of both Dreck and Vanir to the Kantite political scene found them spending more time than ever in the Capitol, rather than back at their Homestead.

As a matter of principle, she maintained quarters at the Elder's complex, while he spent his nights in the Imperial suites formally

inhabited by his father. She reflected on that, then considered it might be why the Elder and the Emperor had separated so many millennia ago. Working together all day, and then living together at night would certainly take its toll. She remembered those times when she and Radatel had argued about policy, each of them coming from a different viewpoint and not quite willing to give consideration to the other. It had been difficult.

She glanced at the timer on the wall and saw it was still creeping along slowly. Closing her eyes, she thought back through the conversation with Laisee just minutes ago and reviewed it carefully. Wasn't there something *more* in the background regarding her hesitation earlier? She gave it a few more minutes of thought but dropped it as pointless, then considered she should bring Lady Wen further into the conspiracy at some point, and probably soon, before things got out of hand.

### *Earth Orbit, The Kraken's Child*

Dwayne glanced at his watch and saw it was close to two in the morning...

They'd traveled twelve time zones in a little under two hours, and he couldn't be more pleased. This was a *first* – and probably a *last* for him – and he was determined to make the most of it.

The seat they'd given him, right behind the pilot's seat and next to the aisle, gave him a perfect view of the forward display, which currently held an *incredible* view looking straight down at the Korengal Valley below them. The detail was *fantastic*, equally on par with the best mapping cameras American spy satellites could mount. They were getting simply beautiful images from nearly a hundred miles above the ground...

"That looks like the area, Sai," Donald muttered while comparing the forward view, to the decades-old images he'd uploaded from the Embassy survey Dwayne had brought them.

He could see the changes; yes, those were squat buildings and not rock falls, and the road through the area was quite well defined, so he set about taking reference images to add to their data.

"Where did Jaiying say to scan?" Sai asked him, and Donald brought up a graticule on screen and started adjusting the edges of it. He zoomed out a bit, then fired up the scanner, letting it focus on the surface before triggering the ground-penetrating emanations that should give them results.

They had to wait while a calibration pass was completed, so Sai got up to get a drink from the refrigerator.

## Picking up the Pieces

“Dwayne, you want some milk?” she asked him, and he got up and joined her.

“Thanks. You know, I never thought to experience *anything* like this in my lifetime. I can’t thank you both enough,” he said, then accepted the cup of Healer’s milk from her. “Mmmm... Man, if you could only *bottle* this stuff, it would *fly* off the shelves.”

She looked at him and tried to put that into perspective, but was beaten by Donald, who started chuckling as he stood up and walked back to join them.

“Store shelves would require it to be *pasteurized*, Dwayne. Ruins the whole purpose of Healer’s milk,” he said, then accepted the small cup she offered him.

“Donald ... ahh, how likely is it you’ll be able to locate Fred?” Dwayne asked him, while completely missing the disgusted look on Sai’s face at having bypassed her and targeted the other *man* for his question.

“That pretty much depends on if our intelligence is good,” Donald said. “The equipment is sensitive enough to go through several thousand feet of rock, so if there’s anything to see, we should be able to see it. If Fred is truly down there, then it’s just a matter of planning the easiest way to recover him with the minimum of interference.”

As a matter of habit, Dwayne pulled out his cell phone and checked it, still seeing zero bars.

Donald caught him at it and teased him about it.

“No cell towers up this high, even if I enabled the pass-through. And I doubt Afghanistan carries that network,” he said, then chuckled.

“Pass-through? Does the hanger have pass-through capability, too? I had to step outside ‘cause I couldn’t get out when I called to check in back at the hanger.”

Donald froze for just a moment, then focused on him intently.

“Dwayne ... *whom* did you call back at the Annex?”

“My guy that liaises me with the military group that’s gonna recover Fred – if he’s down there. He’s the same guy that wants Asad and Nurani back in a couple of days. I called to let him know you were narrowing it down real good.”

It took a few seconds for Donald to process that, before he asked, “You told him that I – *ME* – was working on a location for *Fred*?” Donald set his cup down before getting frustrated enough to throw it.

“Ahhh ... I told him the *group* working to locate Fred was narrowing it down and I’d probably have updates for him later,” he clarified. “He doesn’t know anything about the Annex, the Center, *nothing* about the Embassy, or anything, other than DHS sometimes has access to a few special operators who can get information when no one else can. Did I just fuck up?”

Donald looked down at the floor while lacing his fingers together behind his head and squeezing his elbows together. Then he unlaced his fingers and ran them back and forth across his head a few times before looking up at Dwayne again while reaching out blindly and picking up his cup – taking a sip from it before putting it back down. Sai made a point of stepping around them and heading out of range.

Donald leaned against a seatback and folded his arms across his chest while letting his fingers scratch at the sides of his abdomen as he contemplated a way to put this into perspective. He pursed his lips and remembered a vivid example.

“Dwayne... Wilber tells me you joined the party fairly recently. Do you recall the day of your interview ... at the Annex?”

It was Dwayne’s turn to stare when those memories suddenly washed over him – the blood, the bodies, and the resultant manhunt that brought down an internal terror network comprised of rogue American military agents. Then the aftermath weeks later that had caused the destruction of the Center, and the death of a Senior. He couldn’t bring himself to speak, and Donald recognized that.

“Wilber says he traced that event to a few leaks, both external and internal, which ended up targeting the Annex *specifically*. I understand the result of that was having the offender returned to the Embassy in a body bag about ... yea big,” he said, while making a horizontal circle with his arms.

“Yeah, I remember... I... Fuck... ‘No communications regarding operations at the Annex that don’t originate at the Embassy in Washington, D.C.’,” he reiterated his original instructions. “And absolutely *no* details *whatsoever* without proper vetting.”

Donald’s torso spasmed in a silent snort.

“I’d say fall on your sword with Wilber and have him review the problems he’s had to deal with over the years,” he muttered. “I understand the First Lord caused *most* of them but ... you never know.”

He straightened up and tossed back the rest of his milk before rinsing out his cup and putting it away. Then he turned to head up front, but paused and glanced at Dwayne.

## Picking up the Pieces

"It's probably gonna be completely benign, lad, but *hey*, if everything goes sour, the Imperial Marines could *always* use another good man!" he said cheerfully, then patted him on the shoulder before heading forward to see how the survey was going.

As he continued forward, Dwayne followed him with his eyes, while thinking about him a little more critically.

### ***Afghanistan, Korengal Valley, Taliban Encampment***

"<You look terrible,>" the guard leader said, but briskly stepped out of the way. Sometimes it wasn't wise to comment on the commander's appearance.

Faridun glared at him, but had to admit he was right. He'd slept terrible last night, and it seemed like his mind had continually wandered all day long. There shouldn't be any reason for it, but he was worried about what the Americans were planning next – either pulling out entirely or coming back in force. That last sounded foolish, as they seemed to have *no* concept of mountain fighting.

He continued towards the hillside and eventually found himself nearing the entrance to the caves. The shade was cooler here and he knew it would be even cooler inside, something he was looking forward to. As he walked along, he wondered how the American prisoners were holding out. In hindsight, they should have just killed them like the others, but it was his idea to keep them around for barter. They'd managed to keep them both alive, but it had been difficult. At least the *other* prisoners were uninjured – not any more than usual for virgins.

### ***In Stationary Orbit Above the Korengal Valley***

It was a quarter after two a.m., Arizona time, and the last several minutes had kept Donald busy...

After the brief break taken while the scanner had run its calibration pass, he'd returned to the console but was still distracted by his conversation with Dwayne. When he sat down, he immediately noted several flashing indicators on the console before porting them to the main screen – only to have two of them turn red and trigger an audible alarm requiring him to abruptly shift ship to avoid unexpected traffic.

Once relocated to an *alternate* altitude, he triggered another orbital scan to locate and track obstacles that were likely to become a problem in the next thirty minutes or so. That done, he turned avoidance decisions over to his navigation system after letting *it* decide on a relatively benign altitude to allow their survey to begin in a somewhat more stable position with a new calibration pass.

After that, he continued scanning up, down, and all around them, while the ground-penetrating survey was taking place. It was his *own*

fault, really. They'd already established a track on all the big orbiting junk out there before they'd even left the motor pool. Unfortunately, he'd neglected to figure in all the *other* crap floating around above Earth that nobody really bothered to track. Normally, it wouldn't have been that much of an issue since most such debris fell and burned up in the atmosphere. However, the nature of the survey process required a thinning of the shields ... something that was risky in Earth orbit for, *oh*, so many reasons...

A soft 'ping' from the console told him it was time to reposition the ship, and he moved the controls delicately, glad now for having practiced this several times over New Mexico. The enhancement to the generated map would be worth it, and he locked them into a *new* geostationary orbit before turning the scanner loose again. The system matched up reference points, then continued building the database.

Sai came forward and plopped into the navigator's seat next to him. She'd been lying in the bunkroom while focusing her attentions on the people below them, but from the look on her face, it was apparent she'd not had any luck.

"I don't know, Donald. If Fred's down there, he doesn't seem to be talking to anyone, or even *thinking* of anything," she muttered in frustration.

"He might be asleep. If he's injured, he might be in bad enough shape that he simply can't think straight," he suggested, then glanced back at Dwayne, who was standing at the sink and washing a bowl. "Did Jaiying give you anything to help locate him?"

She rolled her head and gave him a blank stare before smirking slightly and saying, "Not enough, apparently. Jaiying ... she's really so much... She *intimidates* me, Donnie," she admitted quietly, but he just smiled at her.

"Hey, at least she didn't have to bring *you* back to life," he murmured, but caught Dwayne's approach out of the corner of his eye and turned back to the display.

When Dwayne stopped behind Donald's seat, he checked his watch and quickly ran the numbers. Their time on station was starting to narrow.

"How we doin'?"

Donald checked the ship's timer, then looked at the progress line on the display. "We should be able to finish here and still make it back before sunrise."

Donald glanced back to see the expression on Dwayne's face, but tempered his laughter. "Shoulda brought a book. I'd suggest a *movie*,



## Picking up the Pieces

but we aren't gonna be around long enough to finish it." As Dwayne let out a sigh, he added, "Not the romantic voyage everyone imagines. It could be weeks ... *months*, sometimes, and then—"

"Thirty seconds of absolute *panic*," Sai contributed, then shared a chuckle with Donald over it before he added his own comment.

"And then thanking the Gods for *saving* your sorry ass, or ... or sweating it out on a dying ship while you try to get enough of it going to get back to civilization again," Donald muttered while shaking his head slowly.

The console pinged again, and Donald carefully reoriented the ship for another sensor pass.

Meanwhile, Sai settled back and closed her eyes.

### *Afghanistan, Korengal Valley, Inside the Caves*

Faridun enjoyed the coolness of the cave complex, but that was just a bonus from all the effort they'd put in widening the passages and constructing the rooms. They had a secure shelter to store supplies in, a hidden passageway to transfer materials and personal clear through to the other valley, and even safe places to retreat to during times of conflict on the outside.

Best of all, it required very few men to guard their most valuable commodity.

The Americans might be content to perform a limited invasion of Afghanistan, but what he sent back to America every season made it all worthwhile. Two men, randomly selected and rotated frequently, guarded that particular storeroom at all times. He made a point of inspecting that storeroom daily, if only to let it be known that eyes were *always* watching them. There had been only one unfortunate incident during his command, and those two bodies had been displayed for a month as a visible reminder of what happened to those who abused their position.

The Taliban leader checked his watch and saw that it was almost four p.m. Time to consider the afternoon meal and whom he would share the evening with. There was one last stop on the way, however.

"<How are they today?>" he asked the senior guard on duty, and got back a chuckle in reply.

"<They sit quietly, now that they know what it is to thirst,>" he said, then let out a louder chuckle.

Faridun looked in on them in the dim light of the hollowed out cave wall. They were chained in place, not that it would make any difference, since neither of them could walk. One of them had suffered

several broken bones during a fall, and the other one had lost one of his lower legs. After being shot, it had been infected with gangrene, and he'd just narrowly survived the battlefield surgery necessary to save his life. They could hear the raspy breathing from each of them, and smell the stink coming through the wooden barrier.

It was a shame to waste resources on them, but they could be useful bargaining chips should things turn poorly.

"You ... you know ... you could ... trade us ... for prisoners ... or something," one of the Americans said weakly. He'd had to reposition himself to see the familiar eyes in the gap in the barrier.

"You bloody Americans. You buggers always think so *highly* of yourselves," Faridun chided them. "I should stop wasting our food on you and dispose of your bodies. Besides, I have much more *valuable* products to trade than your swollen corpses."

Faridun's English was quite good, having learned it before entering Cambridge, where his wealthy father had sent him so many years ago. Now his father was dead, having died at the hands of the American-led international coalition in 2001. Faridun was now a field commander of the Taliban and determined to make them *pay*! Perhaps he should get their doctor back and have him amputate a few *more* limbs before dumping them on the doorstep of the Americans!

### ***In Orbit Above the Korengal Valley, Wrapping Things Up***

"That is just *beautiful*," Dwayne said in admiration while viewing the display before him. "Does that... Is that a *tunnel* that goes from one valley to the next?"

Donald looked up from the console and saw where he was pointing.

"Looks like it. One would think the lines are too straight to be natural." He rotated the display to a new angle. "Yep! Looks like someone spent some effort getting a penetration from one side to the other. No *wonder* it's so hard to catch up with any of these guys."

Sai had been quiet for the last half hour while focused on reading impressions from those below her. She'd felt the suffering from some female types, and anger from somewhere else a little while ago, but nothing *remotely* like any understandable thoughts coming through in English – until just *now*.

"I ... I think I *got* something," she said, then tightened her concentration.

Donald looked at her, then brought a downward-looking view of the survey to the display. After doing that, he did another quick scan for traffic before turning back to watch Sai.

## Picking up the Pieces

"I think it might be them. They're thinking about ... about water ... and food. I just felt some of their pain. I think they moved," she said, and he reached out to touch her hand, getting her to look at him.

"Can you tell me a general area?" he quietly asked her.

She looked at the display and placed her hand over an area on it. To his eyes, it looked suitably out of the way and appropriate for stashing people you wanted to keep close track of.

"How about the girls?"

She glanced at him, then looked at the map again and closed her eyes for a few more moments. When she opened them again, she planted her hand on a different location.

"Okay. That's probably where they keep the girls then," he murmured while considering the tactical situation involved in everyone's recovery.

"Time to go home, Donald," she said quietly, and he looked at her, then at the console timer.

"Right."

He sent the updated image to storage and cleared the display, before bringing up the navigational chart that held their convoluted course back to Arizona.

"Let's get back to civilization before the sun comes up," he muttered. "Everyone strap in."

Once they were ready, he turned the ship and started dodging his way back to the other side of the world. They had a little over an hour to get there.

### *The Annex, Winding Down*

The return had been uneventful, and they'd made ground fall just fifteen minutes shy of local sunrise. After putting the converter into standby, Donald greeted Wilber and Laisee at the airlock, then quickly brought them up to speed before handing over the Commonwealth data tab for Wilber to run the conversion software on.

He'd been adamant, however, on the data being transferred *only* by hand and not transmitted electronically.

In addition, he'd also suggested it be retained by the Embassy staff and *not* handed over to the Americans until they'd received assurances it would *only* be used to recover Fred.

Afterwards, Dwayne, being the responsible agent that he was, fell on his sword and walked away privately with Wilber while explaining

his procedural faux pas regarding the unauthorized communications from the Center to his contact.

As leader of the mission, Sai walked out with Laisee and conducted a walking debrief, while two guardsmen entered the tank and observed as Donald disabled the breach of the weapon and locked out the firing controls. He was about to set the console to standby, when he remembered, then turned back to them while they were still standing in the forward compartment.

“Pink polka dots? A seashore? I think I got a view of an ice planet?”

“That jungle theme was nice,” one of them said, and Donald smiled and nodded his head before triggering the optics and bringing up the peaceful jungle clearing once again.

After shutting down and locking the console, he walked out before closing and locking the door behind them. He spared a glance at the jungle display, where a big cat of some sort could be seen skulking behind a row of bushes as it traversed from the front of the tank to the rear. An appropriate audio file wasn’t available, but he was sure it would enhance the effect greatly. Letting out a sigh, he turned and headed back to the Center so he could shower and crash for a little while. He had sword practice the next morning, and needed to loosen up this afternoon or he’d likely tear something, which would probably be both painful *and* embarrassing.

### ***At the Residence***

Wilber looked at the clock in his office and frowned. It was nearly two hours since the survey party had returned, and his computer was *still* crunching the data from the data tab through the conversion dongle but didn’t seem to be making a whole lot of progress with it.

His disk drive was thrashing away, and the lights were flashing, but the image on the screen was building by only tiny fits and spurts. He really wanted to talk to Donald about what they’d captured but was letting him sleep. A glance at the sofa found Dwayne still sacked out and snoring quietly, as well...

Dwayne had indeed fallen on his sword and admitted the protocol violations as Donald suggested he should. Considering that Donald was only a Spacer First – at least in Dwayne’s eyes – Wilber was impressed Agent Sparks would do so. A review of the security protocols had ensued, and Wilber assured him that mistakes were merely opportunities for learning – provided the lessons weren’t too harsh. Hopefully, that would be the end of it...

A glance at the screen showed tantalizing bits of information being displayed, but it seemed to be taking *forever*.

## Picking up the Pieces

With a shake of his head, he turned the lights down and decided to go grab a bite to eat, but suddenly noticed a light flashing on the wall behind his computer. Peeking around his desk, he saw the network connection flickering non-stop, and popped out the cable without a thought.

“Aww, *shit!*” he muttered, then shut his computer down and turned up the lights.

He started digging through his desk drawer for the custom *Embassy*-coded recovery disk with the built-in special utilities, and prepared to do a quick security scan of his box. A few minutes later, he discovered his computer had been compromised, and it looked like the infection source was the dongle from the *Embassy* – requiring a quick call to ask, “*WTF?*”

At the end of forty minutes, his tech support call had finally come to a conclusion of sorts.

“*\*Not a chance? None at all?\**” he asked Balbinus, the resident Embassy geek.

“*\*Not unless Dwayne let it out of his sight for a few minutes. At least the Commonwealth side is completely unique from the computers you use on Earth,\**” he offered in conciliation. “*\*The only thing I can surmise is that either he plugged it into a non-certified system, or your system was compromised before you plugged it in. Go down the messages with me again, please, Wilber.\**”

At the end of another twenty minutes, Balbinus, working through Wilber’s verbal reports, determined that the attack – while clever – had been half-assed and not *completely* compromised the system. The built-in security functions had forced loops to occur surrounding suspicious activity, which seemed to explain both the excessive disk thrashing and the constant network activity.

The fact that Wilber routinely disabled the outbound connection when not actively engaged in searching the network had probably saved him from an embarrassing security violation.

As Wilber had mentioned that protocol, he’d immediately looked up at the local router and confirmed the power to the modem behind it had been turned off. The computer had been trying, but there was no way to get a signal out. That observation also took note of the fact that *both* arrays were still online and connected to his switch, which soured his mood at the thought of digging a virus out of all *that* data.

“*\*Not to worry, Wilber. Go to the recovery page and we’ll get started,\**” he told him.

“*\*I’m not going to lose everything, am I?\**”

*“You? I know you, Wilber. I thought I was paranoid until I met you,”* he teased him. *“Worst case – we can’t kill that infection. Since you’re using the recovery disk, it can’t try to spread anywhere else unless you enable your outside network connection while your drives are online. We’ll start by rebooting your box. Pull the dongle before you reboot and we’ll turn our disk loose on it when you plug it back in. Be sure to disconnect your arrays!”*

*“This sounds like it’s going to take a while,”* Wilber muttered, and heard a period of silence on the secure phone until Balbinus made a suggestion.

*“Maybe you should step out and make a sandwich ... or two,”* he suggested. *“I’ll wait.”*

### ***In the Center***

Donald got up around eleven a.m. after having slept through at least one feeding so far and awoken refreshed and ready to eat something himself. As both Maya and Déjà were currently feeding the babies again, he opted to head to the kitchen for a snack before starting exercise in the Great Room of the Center, provided Ling didn’t come by and complain about it.

Kissing his women goodbye, he grabbed his backup sword and left them to take care of the babies. As he walked down the hallway, he thought to himself that fatherhood just wasn’t as hard as everyone made it out to be. Sure, there would be times of stress when they got older, but babies just ate and slept a lot before they became troublesome, didn’t they?

He’d started remembering his earliest recollections of the other three children at the Homestead by the time he entered the pantry.

His snack was a bowl of corn flakes, with a banana sliced into many pieces on top, and a cup of Ling poured over the whole. It was delicious and resolved his emptiness nicely.

The Great Room seemed bigger than it used to be, not that he’d ever really paid that much attention to it before. He could see the beginnings of an alcove between the two entry doors, something he’d *definitely* never noticed before, and a drawing taped to the wall beside it.

It seemed familiar somehow, until suddenly remembering that *he’d* drawn it during his days of confusion. From the marks on the wall, it seemed like it was going to be implemented, and he paused to consider how little he felt about it now. At least no one would be facing the wall during most activities in the room, so it shouldn’t be that much of a distraction to anyone.

## Picking up the Pieces

He walked to the center of the room and began his slow exercises ... feeling every stiff joint and tight muscle acquired over the last several months complain at the *slightest* bit of extended movement.

It promised to be a *long* afternoon.

### *At the Residence*

Wilber's frustrated activity had finally awoken Dwayne, who sat up and watched as Wilber worked through the recovery of his system.

The USB drive had been clean. As most geeks would do, Dwayne kept the USB drive on his personal key ring until he'd turned it over to Wilber. The bigger conversion dongle had to have been contaminated somewhere between Washington, D.C., and the Annex. Wilber asked if the conversion dongle ever left his sight, and Dwayne retraced his steps from the Embassy while he had it with him...

He'd kept it in his briefcase and taken it with him when he'd met Agent Smith for lunch in Washington. Thinking back on it, he'd been about to take the briefcase to the restroom with him, but Smith had offered to keep an eye on it while he went.

When he came back, he'd subtly noted the locks were still secure, and the case was in the same position on the seat in the booth, with the napkin in the exact same place across the top of it.

Then he'd gone with Smith to pick up the interpreter and his wife ... or girlfriend. He wasn't quite sure. They came as a set, so he'd taken them both.

He'd left Smith in Washington, and he and his traveling companions got on a westbound flight. Once aboard the plane, he'd kept the briefcase under the seat in front of him where both Asad and Nurani were sitting.

He'd gone to the restroom on the plane, as well, but nothing had been disturbed – the tiny string he'd placed across the handle of the briefcase never having been moved.

The only place he'd actually left it alone again was at the house in town. He'd put it on the floor in the front office while calling the Annex to let Wilber know he was in town. Then he'd puttered around a bit and gotten his things put away before driving them out to deliver the translator and his companion, along with the USB drive, the data tab, and the conversion dongle. Thinking back on it, he remembered going out to pick a couple of not-ripe oranges from the tree in the back yard, then visiting with the rabbits for a few minutes...

So far, things weren't looking too good for their guests, but at least the security disk seemed to be rooting things out of Wilber's computer.

### ***In the Great Room***

"You move like *shit*, old man," Sai chided him gleefully while watching the grimace on his face as another unexpected twinge hit him.

"Yeah, well ... stick and stones," he muttered, then groaned when he stepped forward and tried to bend awkwardly at the knees.

"Guess you've been *sleeping* too much, huh?" she teased him again, and he speared a glare in her direction just before his knee collapsed on him, and he took a tumble to the hard floor. She walked over and stared down at him while shaking her head in exaggerated sadness at his pitiable condition.

"Come on, Donnie. Let me help you up," she said, then reached down for him. She got him on his feet and took away his sword before leading him towards the door.

"Hey, I need to exercise!"

"What you *need* is to let me work you over *proper*-like," she said, then tugged on his arm. "Let's go find us a platform where I can beat some sense into you. If you behave, maybe I'll let you *drink* from me."

At this point, the thought of having *any* fresh Healer's milk was welcome, and he knew Sai's was very good. He'd only barely survived half an hour of practice, and if she could put his body back into *proper* alignment, then the milk would just be a *bonus*.

He hobbled off with her and allowed himself to be steered into a treatment room with a wide flat platform. He stood unsteadily while she threw a couple of fresh sheets over the top of it before stripping him down and pointing to the platform.

"I see and obey, my Healer," he said flippantly, so she gave him a tiny shove that planted him face-first on the platform and knocked the wind out of him.

### ***At the Residence***

Dwayne watched guiltily as Wilber purged the infection from the rest of his computer before turning the security disk loose on the two arrays. This last step could take a while, but Wilber had disconnected the router entirely and let the computer and the arrays talk amongst themselves through the high-speed switch. The *conversion* dongle, however, was a lost cause.

"I don't know what was done to it, but Balbinus wants to take it apart as soon as it gets back to the Embassy," he told Dwayne, while still curious as to why the recovery disk couldn't purge the dongle.



## Picking up the Pieces

"I honestly don't have a clue, Wilber. I never thought those two were capable of a technical intrusion like this."

Wilber paused for a moment, then walked out of the room, coming back a minute later, saying, "I'm having someone look into it."

Dwayne stopped wrapping the dongle in bubble-wrap and looked up at him, but Wilber didn't say anything else.

### *In the Living Room...*

Despite the actions of the cartoon characters on the screen, Jaiying had just stifled a yawn from being up since before four a.m. that morning when Wilber came in and made his request. She excused herself from the living room so she could visit the bathroom to pee – along with doing a little bit of intrusive fact-finding. Once behind closed doors, she extended to the Center and sought out Asad and Nurani, insinuating herself into their minds and searching for impressions of the dongle device she'd seen in Wilber's office. After a few minutes of fruitless effort, she'd found no indications they'd ever even seen it themselves.

Pulling out from their guests, she next turned her thoughts to the courier, Dwayne Sparks, and delved into *his* rather clear memories of the device from the time he picked it up at the Embassy to the time he delivered everything to Wilber. Dwayne also seemed truthful in his assessment of his recollections, and the level of his tradecraft seemed to clear this "Agent Smith" he'd crossed paths with, or anyone else gaining access to it on the plane.

Could someone have infected the dongle at the house in town? But that meant someone would have to know of Dwayne's movements and be able to track him. Surely, the Afghans would have mentioned someone else being in the house, wouldn't they? She dipped back into Asad and Nurani, but found no recollection of anyone but them and Dwayne at the house during their short stay there.

It was a curious anomaly for sure, just like the anomaly she'd discovered while Faridun was tormenting his captives this morning...

He'd been speaking a butchered dialect of Korengal to the prisoners' guard, but switched to English when one of the prisoners reached out to him for a resolution. He'd chided them in English, but not *American* English. The words sounded more like they were from one of Grandfather's musicals...

Jaiying reached over and turned on the hot water to get it warm. After flushing, she ran the washcloth through the warm water and wiped herself, before rinsing and wringing it out. Pulling her pants back up, she walked out to search through the movie selections. She was *sure* she'd seen that movie in here somewhere.

### ***In the Center***

A solid hour of bodywork had been followed by a short period of free-play that left Donald limp as a rag and just as relaxed. He couldn't find any part of his body that ached *anywhere*, not that he'd spent any serious time looking. Sai looked just as relaxed as she lay beside him propped up on her side and resting her arm across his naked chest.

"Maya said you'd managed to keep up with them, but I didn't believe her. I'd say the Wives taught you *well*," she murmured.

That got him chuckling softly.

"I credit Lili for most of it," he said just as softly, his voice reflecting the exhaustion from their efforts. "She taught me to be generous with my devotions, as it was too easy for men to forget the needs of our life-bringers."

"Well ... the Gods gave us monthly bleedings and cramps – *and* babies to bear – so they made up for it with multiple orgasms." She giggled, then leaned in to kiss him again.

When Petrus came back for her, she knew she was going to miss Maya and Déjà, and the babies, too, but didn't expect to find herself already missing Donald. She finished dancing tongues with him and pulled away, only to lean back in to plant a chaste kiss on his forehead, which made him smile.

"Still thirsty?" she asked, triggering another round of chuckles from him as he slid lower to put her nipples into range.

He latched on and suckled gently, savoring the sweet nourishment that didn't need to ease any of his pains because she'd already driven them away through a *major* release of his endorphins. She held his head to her breast while she bunched a pillow under her head before settling in for the duration.

### ***In the Residence***

At the end of the last cartoon, Jaiying had asked Rose to put on the movie she'd found, and they'd been watching it for nearly an hour.

Dwayne and Wilber had joined them, and they'd popped popcorn in the microwave for everyone before sitting down on the floor to watch it with them.

Almost in the middle of it, Mary arrived with a visitor in tow.

Wilber stood up, while Dwayne turned the sound down a bit and stood up as well. As Mary went into her bedroom hallway, Dwayne came forward and greeted their visitor somewhat awkwardly.

## Picking up the Pieces

“Agent Smith. I ... didn’t expect to see you ... here,” he said, confused now as to why Smith was here and not waiting for him in Washington – or how he’d even known how to *find* him.

The ever-present guardsman stood up and stretched before casually going to the open kitchen and pulling a bottle of beer out of the fridge.

He stood facing the sink, but kept his eyes on the reflection in the kitchen window while twisting the cap off the bottle. He took a tiny sip of beer, but spat most of it back. Earth beer was *nasty*.

“Agent Sparks,” Smith said, and then pointedly looked at Wilber.

“Ahhh...”

“Welcome to the Healing Center, Agent Smith. My name is Will,” Wilber said, cutting Dwayne off abruptly. “How can I help you?”

“I’ve come to recover the ... my friends,” Smith said, while glancing at the man standing in the kitchen, the two men standing before him, and the two little girls sitting on the sofa and watching the movie with what looked like Spanish subtitles running underneath it.

Having heard a security key phrase, the guardsman turned and raised his beer bottle in their direction, asking, “*Is this a security issue, Sir?\**”

Wilber looked at Smith, and asked, “Would you like a beer?”

Smith looked surprised, but finally said, “No ... thank you.”

Wilber turned back, kept his voice level, and said, “*\*Hopefully no, but sadly most likely. Jaiying, please discover how this gentleman managed to find us.\**”

Instead of saying anything, both Jaiying and Rose stuck their fingers in their ears and remained focused on the television. As Jaiying started prying into Smith’s background, Rose contacted every Healer at the Center to alert them to the situation.

### *At the Center*

“Donnie... *Donnie!* There’s an *intruder* at the house!” Sai told him while shaking him roughly.

He opened his eyes, swallowed a last mouthful, then smoothly rolled off the platform, grabbed his clothes, but paused while looking at her.

“He’s that Agent Smith that *Dwayne* is associated with. He isn’t supposed to be here – shouldn’t even have known where we *were*,” she said, so he continued donning his clothes while starting to process it.

“Ling? Aineias? What’s the status of security?” he asked her, and could almost swear she snickered.

“Got it *handled*, Spacer Cato. Aineias has locked down the Center, with just a handful of us given free access. You’re included,” she added, not that he would be any good without a *real* weapon.

### ***In the Residence***

“What ... what’s that language you’re speaking?” Smith cautiously asked Wilber, seeming to be concerned about it for some reason.

“*That?* That’s something the women speak – the *Healers*, they call themselves. *Them*, their *husbands*, their *kids*,” Wilber said, gesturing down to the girls. “Some sort of holistic, woo-woo crap language they adopted from somewhere, but don’t seem to remember where. Works for *them*, I suppose.”

“Sounds like ... almost Asian and ... and...”

“Yeah,” Wilber interrupted him. “A mix of Asian and something like Esperanto, I think. And the verbs are all fouled up, too. Can I get you anything? Oh, the bathroom’s across from that door.”

He pointed to the office hallway door and smiled.

“Ahhh, yeah. Sure. Been a long drive,” Smith said, and they watched as he went through the door, then heard the bathroom door open and close.

“*\*Jaiying, is he armed?\**” Wilber asked lightly, keeping things artificially cheerful. Dwayne looked at him in shock, but started putting things together.

“*\*You’re not suggesting S-\**” He stopped when Wilber’s hand snapped up.

“*\*Let us not name names. And, yes – we do not know enough about our visitor yet.\**”

“*\*Uncle Wilber, he is armed and he is worried about something,\**” Jaiying whispered.

“*\*Do you know how to disable a pellet thrower? I’ll think about it and you tell me if he has one.\**” Wilber envisioned an automatic, and Jaiying looked at him and nodded her head.

“*\*You break this part here,\**” he said, then thought of the firing pin of a typical automatic.

“*\*I don’t think I can-\**” Jaiying stopped when her Mother boldly walked in through the front door.

## Picking up the Pieces

*“Where is he?”* Laisee asked her silently, but was answered when the toilet flushed, and they heard the sound of running water.

She turned to the hallway door and watched it as Jaiying brought her up to speed. Moments later, Smith came out, and found that a pretty young woman had joined the party. She smiled at him, then turned to Wilber.

*“Who is this?”* she asked cheerfully, still smiling, as they were all among friends here.

*“Ahh, this is\* Agent Smith. \*He’s come for his friends?”* Wilber suggested, then shrugged his shoulders. *“Can you pop a firing pin on a pellet thrower? Rondal told me he’d done it before.”*

Smith had watched this unintelligible conversation between the two of them, but his attention was drawn to the excited activity of the movie. Rex Harrison and Audrey Hepburn were watching the end of a race at Ascot and she’d just lost her composure. The memory of it made him smile, while *his* memories gave Jaiying the missing connection.

*‘Agent Smith went to the same school as Faridun – at the same time. He has another name’* Jaiying sent to her Mother and Grandmother Sai, then continued with details.

### *At the Center*

“Donald, this Smith person went to school with Faridun ... at Cambridge. That’s in *England*, right?” Sai told him, which caused his head to snap around.

They left the treatment room and found two guardsmen in the corridor. Then they hurried to the hallway where the girls and babies were located, and found two more. After checking in with the girls, they returned to the dining room and watched the house from the windows. They could see Wilber’s white jeep parked to one side of the house, and a light blue sedan parked next to it. Getting status updates relayed through Sai, Donald’s mind was spinning at being out of the loop; *fully* missing the Senior abilities he’d taken for granted.

“Ask them how Smith got here and who is in the house with them,” he finally said, while starting to work out contingency plans.

She looked at him and frowned, but reached out to Jaiying and got the timeline. She was surprised that Mary had let him in, then reached out to her, finding she’d been hiding in the bedroom after aborting her tub soak once the alert had gone out. Sai told this to Donald, and moments later, she saw his eyes light up.

“Let’s go *caving*,” he said, then dragged her towards the showers.

***In the Guest Quarters***

"<Asad, what is going on?>" Nurani asked him quietly.

"<I don't know, but they want us to stay in the room.>"

They'd left their room to go and get something to eat, but two guards were at the entrance to the hallway and asked them to return to their rooms until a problem had been resolved.

A while later, they'd heard voices of a man and a woman talking as they'd knocked on the door just across from them. He'd peeked outside the door to see them talking to someone in the room – the one with the crying babies in it – before they'd closed the door and turned their way. He'd pulled back into the room and shut the door, but they didn't receive any further attention from the guard standing outside.

***At the Residence***

Now that she'd been brought into the loop, Mary became much calmer and straightened herself before coming out to help create a plausible distraction.

"Dwayne, shall I set another place for lunch?" she asked him, while sparing a smile at Smith in the process.

"I don't think I have time to–"

"There's no rush," Wilber interrupted Smith. "Mary's an excellent cook, and we've got plenty in the pantry. Say, you got a place to stay yet? We've got *plenty* of room at the Center. We're going on line sometime next month so everything's ready for visitors. Warm beds, carpeted floors, hot showers. An all-you-can-eat self-serve pantry?"

"That – that's really tempting, but I've got to arrange a flight back to D.C. and get my friends back to Washington."

"\*He's lying. He's not taking them back there,\*" Jaiying muttered, while pointing to the television screen and nudging Rose, who was sitting beside her.

Laisee smiled down at her daughter. She was very proud of how well she played the game.

***In the Vault Room...***

"Can you do it *now*?" Donald asked her in frustration.

"No. I have to get much closer. And I'll have to ask for *permission*!" Sai snapped at him.

"Jaiying and Rose are *sitting* there while Wilber is dancing around with an *armed man*! What more permission do you *need*?"

## Picking up the Pieces

He'd kept his voice low, but she could hear his frustration. The Elder's First Sword had never danced along the dark edge by performing forbidden acts.

She'd never even *considered* doing something he'd taken for granted as an operational necessity.

In spite of the narrower space of the old tunnels, they'd managed to make it to the vault room below the house accompanied by a squad of four Imperial warriors. *Overkill*, he knew, but from what Sai had told him, this Smith guy might be a total nutso and have more on him than just a gun. Before they headed up the ladder, he asked her to check with Mary on a tiny detail.

"Ask her if the trap door in the closet is clear."

She threw him another frown, but reached out to Mary and got confirmation that protocol had been meticulously followed regarding the tunnel system. The trap door was clear.

"All right, Donnie. The trap door is clear. *You* go first ... and be quiet about it," she murmured, then nudged him towards the ladder.

"Just remember to scan him fully to see if he's carrying anything else," he whispered before starting up the ladder.

He stopped at the top and quietly unlatched the trapdoor before pushing it up and gently setting it against its stops.

Either Mary had thoughtfully left the closet door open or she'd forgotten to close it, but he could see into the bedroom and saw the bed in his view.

He leaned out further, and saw the door flush with the jam. With any luck at all, Mary would have shut the hallway door to the living room, thus affording them some extra noise insulation.

He climbed out and waited for Sai to join him. The guardsmen followed behind and looked completely innocuous until you noticed they all had a protrusion at the back of their necks that were the handles of Royal swords in combat harnesses strapped to their backs.

Their task would be to stage themselves in the laundry room by passing through the connection in the master bath. Meanwhile, Donald and Sai would come out of the bedroom hallway as if they'd been there all along and pretend they'd been having some private time together that, as it turned out, they'd actually managed earlier. It wasn't much of a plan, but would put a *lot* of combat-rated people in the room with a single armed unknown and a handful of non-combatants.

The odds were with them.

***In the Living Room...***

Smith was wondering when he'd lost control of the situation. Everyone was treating him nicely, and that Will guy had even offered him a room for the night. The menu for the late lunch appeared to be relatively simple fare, but it was beginning to smell delicious, and the American beer tasted somewhat watered down but was still palatable enough to quench his thirst.

Apparently, he could only speak to Dwayne, Will, and Mary, as everyone else spoke that other language. The little girls were still watching the movie with the weird subtitles, and he tried to match what he'd heard of their spoken language to what little he knew of Spanish – which was pretty much a tourist's guidebook version. He was beginning to accept his situation when he heard voices and a woman's giggle coming from the other hallway.

***In the Hallway...***

Donald had stopped them in the hallway and tickled Sai while pulling out her shirt before unbuttoning his own.

*"We've been playing and we're disheveled,"* he said, keeping his voice light and playful. *"Now we look it."*

She caught her cue and giggled even louder before turning back and opening the hallway door.

***In the Living Room...***

Smith turned and watched as a middle-aged couple stepped out of the other hallway, then stopped to stare at everyone in surprise before making motions to put their clothes back in order.

It looked like the woman was blushing, while the man's darker skin hid whatever embarrassment he might have felt. The movie suddenly paused, and the little girls got up, ran to the newcomers, and hugged their legs tightly, giggling all the while.

*"Hello, my darlings!"* Donald said cheerfully, then squatted down to hug both of them.

*"What should we do, Donald?"* Jaiying said happily, while looking up at him and continuing to giggle.

*"I want you to go and see Maya and Déjà, and tell them everything will be all right,"* he said, then stood up and made hand-washing motions, before pointing to the master bedroom hallway.

The girls pouted appropriately before trooping off to the bedroom – closing each door behind them along the way. They climbed down the ladder in the closet, just far enough to close the trap door, before



## Picking up the Pieces

heading over to the Center by way of the tunnels. Meanwhile, Donald was working through broken-English introductions with Agent Smith, while Sai joined Mary in the kitchen – each of them going through the motions of giggling gossip in Standard.

Donald wandered into the kitchen and pulled a fruit juice out of the fridge before coming back to the living room side and standing companionably by Wilber and Dwayne. While he'd done so, he'd been running his own survey on Smith and just didn't see a connection to Faridun, other than the faint English accent.

The fact that Jaiying had reported another name for Smith – Daanesh – only made it more confusing to him. He *did* notice the slight bulge under Smith's left arm indicating the location of his weapon, so he ignored it completely while working on clearing the room.

He was standing there smiling when he suddenly smacked his forehead with the palm of his hand and called out to Mary.

"Mary! Uhhh ... po-tae-toes ... *big* bag. I put in *pan-tre* today ... *morn-nink*," he said, and pointed to the door on the left side of the kitchen. He swiveled to Wilber and smiled cheerfully, saying, "*\*Have both of them leave out the back door. Guards are in the laundry room and ready to cover.\**"

As Mary stepped over to the laundry room door, Dwayne spilled a little of his drink, swore quietly, then wiped it with a napkin before going to the sink to wash his hands. From within the laundry room, Mary called out to Sai, and Dwayne could see them sliding by the four guards who'd already pulled their swords and held them ready. He smiled at them before returning to the area where Wilber, Smith, and Donald were standing.

Dwayne took up space on one side of Smith – seeing that Wilber had already positioned himself on Smith's other side.

Donald smiled and took another sip of his juice, before saying, "*\*Now, please.\**"

Wilber and Dwayne each grabbed one of Smith's arms and locked them tightly to their chests, before Donald calmly reached in, removed his weapon, and cleared it. Then he pulled his phone, wallet, and keys, and patted him down for anything else he hadn't seen.

Simultaneously, four Imperial warriors had trooped out of the laundry room and took up positions on either side of Donald and behind Smith – whose eyes had gotten very large at their presence.

"*\*Wilber, do you want to do the honors?\**" Donald asked him, but Wilber just shook his head.

“Very well,” Donald muttered wearily in English, and turned his attention back to Smith.

He disassembled Smith’s weapon – a Glock – into its component pieces and left them on the kitchen table. Then he took a look at the cell phone. Rather than farting around with it, he opened it up and removed the battery. Then he went through the keys and determined there seemed to be a set for a rental car, and another set for a common residential lock, with what looked like a post office box key or perhaps a safety deposit box key along with it.

The wallet revealed the expected collection of identification, credit cards, and whatnot, along with a laminated sheet of contact numbers, and some medications listed. He also found many one-hundred dollar bills, of which he counted over twenty, along with some fifties and twenties.

“Gotta watch out traveling with this much cash in Arizona,” he said casually. “Damn State Troopers will pull a bogus traffic stop on you and confiscate it as *drug* money if they find it. So much for *due process*...” he muttered while shaking his head slightly.

He picked up the badge holder and disassembled it completely, spending a little bit of time feeling the structure of the holder, then looking at the badge from both sides before focusing on the identification card. Something about it just didn’t seem right, so he set it aside and went through the contents of the wallet once again, and took a much closer look at things. He finally held up both the ID card and the driver’s license, then compared the photos to Smith.

“So ... I’m confused, Agent John Smith,” he muttered. “Are these supposed to be pictures of *you*, or pictures of *Daanesh*?”

Smith suddenly flinched, and all four swords surrounding him Fired *angrily*. He could see the two directly in front of him, which *immediately* changed his mind from whatever he’d intended to do.

He became very pale, but Donald wasn’t sure if it was because of the swords, or of him revealing his other name ... his *Taliban* name. At a word from Wilber, the swords powered down, and Smith relaxed, more or less. He also found his voice.

“You ... you can’t hold me here. I-I’m an agent for the Department of *Defense*. You have no *authority* over me.”

“Well... If you were on *American* soil, that argument might hold some water. As you’re currently standing on an *Indian Reservation*, that pretty much eliminates that argument,” Donald calmly explained.

“*\*Dwayne, does he know ANYTHING about the Embassy?\**” he asked, before turning to look at him.

## Picking up the Pieces

*“He’s not suppose to. But he wasn’t supposed to know how to find ME here, either.”*

Donald pulled a chair over and sat down, studying the floor while rubbing a hand across his forehead for a few seconds before looking up at Smith with a frown on his face and shaking his head slowly.

“Here’s the problem, Daanesh–”

“S-Stop *calling* me that! My name’s *Smith!*”

“Strange... That’s what *Faridun* calls you. Anyway, you weren’t supposed to *know* about us out here. Very few people in the *government* know about us to *begin* with, and yet ... here you are. That tells us we have a serious security breach *somewhere* that we’ll have to resolve to our host’s satisfaction or we might be asked to pull up stakes and move to another location. Myself, I kinda *like* it here. I was *born* here, and it’s nice to be back home ... so to speak.”

*“Wilber, does Aineias have any holding cells we can use?”*

*“He certainly does,”* Wilber said, adding a smile to go with it.

*“Good. I would recommend that we strip search him, then have one of the Seniors scan him from top to bottom for anything hidden inside his body. If Aineias can put him on ice while we complete his background clearances, then we’ll know who to turn him over to. That’s with YOUR approval, of course.”*

Wilber smiled and was about to agree, but was interrupted by Laisee.

*“HE will take your recommendations under ADVISEMENT, Donald!”* she said stiffly, but missed the smirk on Sai’s face by the laundry room door.

Laisee was miffed at being ignored during this whole interdiction, but reluctantly nodded to Wilber, who started issuing orders to the guards for additional backup for the relocation of their prisoner.

### ***Kantor, The Elder’s Suite***

Lili had just finished bathing and left her warm bath draining while thinking over the issues of the last few days...

‘Donald’ had suddenly become aware, but thought he was in hell. Even the presence of Jaiying and Maya hadn’t dissuaded him until Laisee and Sai arrived and explained the “Truth” to him in *agonizing* detail, or so Laisee had assured her.

That seemed to be the extent of things until her operators on site decided to seek Donald’s advice regarding Nascha’s problem with her missing Fred; subsequently, having that issue expand to include some

rather unpleasant discoveries by Jaiying that were reported to the Senior Staff and up to her. To her *own* chagrin, she'd allowed her anger at the situation to explode, and dragged Donald into the middle of things, once again, knowing that even hampered by his current limitations, he was *still* the best tool for the task...

Lili hung her towel and put on her robe, thinking once again how much she missed their canyon home while she wandered around her lonely Capitol bedroom. She looked at the empty bed and thought of Spring Blossom, so far away on Earth. At least she was still surrounded by family, while Lili was struck with the loneliness of the Elder's Suite. She sighed and sat down, pouring a small measure of ambrosia to help settle her unhappy feelings.

Things seemed steady so far, but she considered once again if she should include Lady Ling Wen in the conspiracy regarding Donald? Acting as her primary agent on Earth, Ling had centuries more experience than Laisee and a firmer grasp on the overall puzzle. If the pieces should fall, who would be better placed to help reassemble the picture into a suitable whole?

She glanced at the room's clock and considered Laisee was a bit late today. Still, she had earlier reported the initial survey had been conducted and all had returned safely. Perhaps they were still savoring some downtime after that successful survey mission?

*'My Elder, do you have a moment?'* Lady Wen pressed gently.

### ***In the Basement of the Motor Pool***

It was half past three p.m., and Smith was safely ensconced in a holding room – a cell being a misnomer in this case – which was nearly twenty feet on each side, and located two floors below the motor pool. He'd been relieved of all of his clothing and given a thin bathrobe to wear.

Aside from the relatively standard sleeping platform, there was a small sink next to a toilet located in a corner of the otherwise barren room. He'd been provided a towel, a washcloth, a travel bar of soap, a tiny tube of toothpaste, a toothbrush, and a pair of shower shoes. As this was a *Commonwealth*-style holding area, the quaint American custom of toilet paper was not included.

Behind the fifteen-foot-high, transparent ceiling barrier, allowing lighting to shine into the room, a quad cluster of tiny pinhole cameras provided coverage over every square inch of the area.

At the moment, Smith was sitting quietly on the sleeping platform while presumably still contemplating just how he'd fucked up so badly.

*In the Security Office*

It was reaching four p.m., and Donald and Wilber were lounging in the garrison's security center while going over what little they'd learned about their mysterious Mr. Smith, which was not very much at all. The figure sitting on the thin sleeping pad had remained still for at least the last half hour.

That was after a relative *frenzy* of activity earlier, wherein he'd calmly stood up and walked over to pee in the toilet, then washed his hands before sitting back down in the nearly identical location.

"Well, what do you think?" Donald muttered. "Spook? *Super* spook? Double Agent? Master Spy? He went to Cambridge. Does that mean he's really *English*?" Donald had rattled this out while staring at the screen in front of him.

Wilber's tiny muscle spasm produced the *slightest* of snorts at Don's many suggestions. In a suitably Midwestern drawl, he muttered, "I use to *work* with a guy that went to *Came-braage*. He was *bor-r-n* in *Tex-ass*."

He slouched in his chair for a bit, before returning to the question before him. "The NSA acknowledges Smith's existence – in a *general* way – but they aren't giving him *up* for some reason."

"CIA?" Donald suggested, but Wilber just gave him an unseen shrug.

"Dwayne's burning up the secure line and back-checking his resources – piecing together how he was put in touch with Smith in the first place. Maybe something will come to light."

Donald stared at the screen a while longer, then suggested, "Or maybe we let the girls peel him like an onion and see what's below a few layers?" Don's suggestion brought a slight intake of breath from Wilber, and he turned to glare at him.

"Oh *please!* It's not like it's never *happened* here before!"

Wilber looked away while running down the *official* restrictions in his mind regarding interference with government officials, programs, and operations in general. If Smith was another *rogue* element similar to the individual who'd perpetrated the mini-assault against the Healing Center, then there was plenty of leeway involved.

However, if this was a *sanctioned* incursion, then action against Smith might be construed quite differently – by representatives of their host government *and* the Commonwealth. And Don was right.

Smith might not actually *be* part of the American government at all, which opened up a whole *other* can of worms. At least they'd had the

good sense to escort him into custody with a bag over his head. Wilber finally let out a sigh, and asked Don for clarification about his intent.

"If by girls, you mean Sai and Laisee ... would they have the necessary understanding of the American political structures we're working within? I mean, if it were *Lili*, then there's no *question* she could make a value judgment."

"We're not setting him up for an *execution*, Wilber," Donald chided him. "Just finding out who this guy really is and who he works for should be an easy enough starting point, and ripping it out of his brain is the quickest way to achieve that. Maybe our hosts don't really know what he's up to. Likewise, maybe they *do* know and put him up to it. Hell, they might have even set him up just to track us down."

Wilber stared at him, letting those options filter their way through his thinking, but quickly pulled away from that dilemma when he started going around in circles. He was fumbling over too many "what ifs" at the moment, and Don was right. Pulling the information directly out of Smith's head would be easiest. Besides, it's not like it'd never happened here before.

"So, who do you want to do it?" he finally asked. "Sai? Laisee? Laisee's got that *other* language down pat – if he even thinks in it."

Donald smiled at him.

"So does *Jaiying* ... and she has *backup* resources."

Wilber looked at him, but shook his head slightly.

"Rose?"

"Rose ... and a few others."

Wilber thought of the two girls and how he'd often seen them together over the last several days. Then he remembered how they *behaved* ... much like Ling and Shu – being *physically* expressive while carrying on *silent* conversations.

He closed his eyes and reached up to rub his eyelids, muttering, "Always with the *weird* shit..."

### ***At the Center, Dwayne's New Room***

Dwayne was sitting in a guest room at the Center just two doors down from Donald's, but having a hard time this afternoon.

The request for interpreters had come from Wilber back on September twelfth, so he'd immediately reached out to one of his government contacts who'd routed him to another internal resource whom he'd worked with before. That resource had put him in touch

## Picking up the Pieces

with *Smith*, who'd supposedly been playing in that particular sandbox for a while now. Smith's credentials had been run past the Embassy, but now it was a question of who *they* ran them past, and *why* the NSA was being so tight-lipped about him.

He'd gone over *every* interaction he'd had with Smith – actually written each one down – but not come up with a reasonable scenario for how he'd been tracked to the Annex, let alone *Arizona*.

His intermediary contact list was short – only two hops – but he'd been working with each of those operators since he'd signed on with the Embassy. Besides, the security staff had vetted those individuals prior to his arrival at the party. That left just *him* as being the potential leak for this event, and it wasn't a comfortable position to be in.

He thought of another avenue to follow and pulled out his phone to make a call, but then stopped and stared at it. The longer he stared, the more worried he got. It couldn't be *that* simple, could it? He couldn't have been *that* stupid, could he?

He checked his written list of every interaction with Smith, then went back and highlighted every *physical* interaction. He paused over one of them. It was only four lines down, and had occurred on September fourteenth...

They'd met in person on the thirteenth, then met for the second time on the fourteenth. It was in a booth at a diner, and they'd finally come to an agreement on the interpreter – *two* of them, actually. A couple. He and Smith had just finished eating, then Smith had taken out his phone and tried to make a call but couldn't get service. Dwayne had generously handed over his *own* phone to let him use it...

He stared at it a few moments longer before pulling it apart to remove the battery. He needed to use the secure phone to call the Embassy geek squad, but would ask Wilber for permission first.

### *In the Motor Pool*

Another hour had passed and their prisoner hadn't appeared to move at all. Even when the door opened, Smith stayed where he was and only observed silently while four guardsmen entered and brought in a plastic liter water bottle and a meal wrapped in paper towels. Being the professionals that they were, they left the meal and bottle at the other end of the sleeping platform and backed out blindly before securing the door behind them.

"Well... I can't fault his *professionalism*," Donald muttered.

As Smith slowly turned and looked at what they'd brought him, Wilber turned to glance at Don and just shook his head.

“You want I should go in there and smack him around a little?”

The comment got a chuckle out of Donald, but the expression on his face was skeptical.

“Smith is a book without a cover, Wilber. That’s why there were seven of us but only one of him. Granted, in unarmed combat, I’d bet on our guys *every* time. But still, if Smith is as sneaky as his vague background would suggest, then it’s wise to be cautious.”

Don’s comment sounded reasonable – from *his* point of view.

*Personally*, Wilber had thought they were at least three guardsmen over the number needed, but then again – you never know. Then he remembered that Don *would* know.

“What’s the plan, Don?” The silence continued for several seconds until Donald took a breath and let it out slowly.

“Well ... it kinda depends on if he’s an independent contractor, or he’s gotta report to someone on a regular basis. If he’s all by *himself*, then we can take our time and just *sit* on him. If he’s gonna be *missed*... Well, *he* already found us. We’ll have to assume we’ve been compromised.”

Wilber groaned at the memory of that having already happened twice in seven years, and suggested, “Or he just showed up in our doorstep and decided to take a break for a while? *Fuck!* We gotta get the girls in there and do like you said – peel him like an onion.”

“Yeah...” Donald let out another sigh, then asked, “How’s Dwayne taking it?”

“Ha! He’s still stuck at Sweat-Condition, One-Alpha.” Wilber’s chuckle told him he wasn’t concerned about it – yet. “Doesn’t know how this happened. Told me you told him to fall on his sword with me, and I wouldn’t be surprised if he’s really thinking about doing it.”

“Nah... Dwayne’s a standup kinda guy. He knows the paperwork would be *atrocious*. Besides, the Imperial Marines can always use another good man.”

Wilber looked at him sharply, then reached out to touch his arm.

“He said you mentioned that to him. You told him that once *before*, you know. Gotta watch out, Boss. You’re getting *sloppy* in your old age.”

Donald looked at him, then closed his eyes and settled back in his chair. He *was* getting old – *again*. And he was going to get even *older*. He ran his hand over his face and let out another sigh before glancing back at the monitor.



## Picking up the Pieces

“What’s that he’s eating?”

“That’s a ... sunofa... They’re feeding him my *breakfast sandwiches!*” Wilber snapped. “*Two of them!*”

“Is that, like, *bad?*”

“Sausage, egg, and cheese on a flakey croissant! Three-hundred ninety calories ... *each!* And those are the *good* ones! Not them nasty *dry* ones!”

Donald watched Wilber’s anguish play out on his face, before glancing up at the clock. It was almost five, and lunch had been interrupted by the arrival of the unfortunate visitor currently locked in the room two levels below them.

“Well... I’m hungry and I’ve got sword practice in the morning. Wilber, please talk to the Ladies and see if something can be arranged to ease our minds regarding Smith. Probably feed him questions, and let them pick out the answers.”

Wilber nodded, having seen that happen before. It was quite effective. As for the *other* matter...

“I’ll check with Dwayne, too. We got him a room in the Center’s visitor area just down the hall from you and Asad. Oh... Jaiying’s pressing to put them both under protective custody. Would Laisee be inclined to let that happen?”

Donald stood up and presented a grim smile to his friend while nodding slowly.

“I have *new* instructions – proceed with a ‘*moderate*’ dusting. If the opportunity arises, I’m allowed to recover *all* the women captives at that location. If our hosts can’t be bothered to recover Fred, we can pick him up on the way out.”

Wilber sat there and watched as Donald opened the door and left. The duty guardsman was standing just outside and glanced at Wilber for further instructions.

Wilber stood up and gathered what few notes he’d taken before motioning in ... Marcus, he thought it was, and turned the security office back over to him.

‘A *moderate dusting...*’ He wondered exactly how Donald would interpret *those* instructions.

### ***Kantor, The Elder’s Office***

Lili looked longingly at the bed, but stayed in the comfortable chair across from it, her ambrosia slowly swirling in the crystal she held while events kept circling in her mind...

Ling's update earlier had been a surprising but hopefully fortunate occurrence, and she'd volunteered a particularly delicate Imperial secret in hopes Lady Wen would become a willing accomplice to their grand cover-up.

Instead of being shocked at this new conspiracy, Lady Wen had expressed surprise, but also gladness that Lord Caldar's demise had been prematurely announced; admitting that she'd felt the off-planet visitors seemed a little nonplussed during the Remembrance, certainly more so than expected during a ceremony for the recently deceased. In particular, it also explained the focus both Maya and Spring Blossom had maintained on 'Donald Cato' during his recovery.

Subsequent promises were made to keep her Elder advised, should 'Donald' become a problem in the near term, but she was otherwise requested to keep Laisee and the others unaware of her knowledge...

Lili took another sip and leaned back ... letting out a sigh at how easily things could collapse around her. If nothing else, Xue might become useful if Donald became 'less than trustworthy' regarding actions that might later be authorized. She closed her eyes and snorted – short and ladylike – before finishing the rest of her crystal and getting up to prepare for sleep – should she actually manage to find such this evening.

### *Wednesday, September 21, A Day of Questions*

Wilber met up with Dwayne as they were both headed to the security office in the motor pool at seven a.m. this morning. They had yet to learn exactly how Laisee wanted to handle their unwanted visitor – or how Dwayne might suffer for his *own* inadequacies regarding the current situation...

Dwayne had updated Wilber yesterday evening, then drove into town to ship his phone and the infected dongle back to the Embassy by overnight express. He'd also included Smith's phone, with instructions to see if there was any valid intelligence that could be pulled from it. Meanwhile, Smith's car – a rental – had been reasonably field stripped for unusual accessories, and they'd found an assortment of miscellaneous electronic equipment hidden behind a fender well in the trunk. The local tech guys were still scanning the car and looking through things, but so far, that seemed to be the extent of the curiosities...

Wilber glanced at the clock, seven oh five a.m., and settled into his chair. He picked up the overnight prisoner report and scanned through it, then went back and read it again – word by word – to make sure it was truly just as dull as it appeared before handing the top copy to Dwayne.

## Picking up the Pieces

Less than a minute later, Dwayne looked up and stared at the monitor for a few moments before letting out a disgusted breath.

“He actually *dragged* the platform over against the wall so he could sit up facing the door ... *all night long?*”

Wilber looked up from the second page to take a glance at the monitor. Smith had indeed dragged a three-hundred-pound sleeping platform across a solid floor so he could sit up facing the door from as far away as he could possibly get. Healthy sense of paranoia, that.

He shook his head, then looked down to continue reading, only to stop at a written comment. Rereading it, he got up and opened the door to speak to the current guardsman on duty outside the security office.

“Please have the prisoner fed, Appius. And please let the supervisor know the prisoner is to follow a regular meal schedule unless he’s otherwise engaged with questioning, or during the elimination of bodily wastes.”

“Yes Sir, Mister Milton.” With a bow of his head, Appius turned and pulled his communications link to update his immediate supervisor. Wilber listened just long enough to ensure compliance, then turned around and closed the door behind him.

Several minutes later, they watched the monitor as the door opened and the standard four-man security team entered – with one man designated as the water and paper towel-wrapped food dispenser. After leaving their items at the foot of the bed, they swung as a group towards the sink, picked up the discarded paper towel and water bottle, then backed out of the room.

Instead of simply leaving right away, four *more* men came in – this time with one man as the designated washcloth, towel, and bathrobe dispenser.

The washcloth and towel were exchanged, while the used bathrobe was still currently in use. After a short group shuffle, the clean bathrobe was left at the foot of the bed, and then they, *too*, backed out of the room as a group, with the door being secured afterwards.

“Man, are we really worried about him *that* much?” Dwayne muttered.

“It’s like Don said. Smith’s a book without a cover.” Wilber glanced at him but saw the confusion on his face. “We don’t know *anything* about him other than he’s a sneaky bugger, which implies he may have *other* hidden talents we gotta be wary of.”

He looked back at the screen and tried to read Smith’s body language, but it wasn’t really telling him much. Smith didn’t seem all

that impressed with the number of men sent to interact with him. Likewise, he hadn't made any efforts to interact with *them*, either.

Psychologically, he should either be intimidated by his situation, or making an effort to find a way out. As it stood right now, Smith seemed content to simply bide his time while his captors were searching for information about him – any information at *all*. They currently had *nothing*, but that would probably change once the formal interrogation began later today.

“So... How did you sleep last night?” Wilber asked him.

Dwayne's thoughts were a bit more scattered than usual this morning, and it took him a while to respond.

“Umm... All right... I guess... I just been worrying about Smith is all...” His voice trailed off as his mind was drawn to last night...

Aside from the discovery of yesterday's procedural faux pas, he'd received an unexpected guest at his door in the middle of the evening. The off-world visitor named Spring Blossom, had shown up carrying a bottle of ambrosia in one hand, and a couple of plastic cups in the other.

He couldn't really say that she'd *barged* in on him, but rather entered briskly, then poured a few ounces of the green liquor into each cup before handing one of them to him. He'd taken it and sipped it slowly, surprised at the delicate flavors he tasted as it went down, *oh*, so smoothly. She'd smiled at him, then poured him another small amount before pulling out one of his chairs and sitting down at the small table in his room.

She'd beckoned him to sit with her, saying that she didn't like to drink alone, and they'd sipped lightly at their drinks while talking about his time with the Embassy, and how he liked his job. They'd spoken of many inconsequentials during the next few hours, before he'd eventually found himself lying in bed with her and beginning to lose pieces of clothing – which seemed to keep pace with the number of garments she'd been discarding. Somewhere in there, he'd lost track of *anything* that wasn't soft, warm, and wrapped snugly around him.

The *next* thing he remembered was her getting up to wash and coming back to kiss him goodbye, before reminding him that he had an important appointment to keep this morning. After the door closed behind her, he'd looked at the clock and saw that he had about an hour to shower, dress, eat, and then meet Wilber at the motor pool.

The subsequent adrenaline rush ripped the cobwebs from his mind, and he'd jumped out of bed to start his day, only to find the memory of last night – triggered by Wilber's question – was now haunting him...

## Picking up the Pieces

Wilber had an inkling of what Dwayne was going through. He'd known *exactly* how well he'd slept last night, as Shu had updated him the moment Spring Blossom had gotten around to reporting it to her.

As the majority of the principal staff were all Healers, they were keenly aware of the emotional states of their male companions, and one of their tasks was to make sure *routine* maintenance was performed on their men. Otherwise, they would burn out too quickly.

Another task was to help their companions maintain a *stable* emotional state during a crisis, and the easiest way to accomplish that was through an excessive endorphin release ... which is exactly what Spring Blossom's assignment had been last night. Besides, after being back on Earth for the first time in *centuries*, she was probably feeling a little bit out of sorts herself.

He smiled to himself, wondering if Dwayne would get around to admitting he'd had a good time last night, but would wait for the man to tell him so, himself. No sense in making him feel any worse on top of this *Smith* fiasco.

### *In the Center*

A fussy baby woke Donald, and he slipped out of bed to see who it was. Little Ronnie was still lying quietly, so he checked Faith and found her diaper sufficiently heavy enough to warrant maintenance. He carefully lifted her out of the crib and cradled her in one arm, before gathering up supplies with his other hand and setting everything down at the foot of the bed. The blanket had been put on clean last night, so he carried Faith to the bathroom and grabbed one of the bath towels to change her on. When he got back, he expertly flipped it over the foot of the bed before laying Faith in the middle of it and starting to disassemble her, layer-by-layer.

Luckily, there were no semi-solid wastes this morning, so he made quick work of the task, and had her cleaned, wrapped, and rocking in his arms inside of five minutes. The *other* one – *Beelzebub* – gave them both another few minutes of peace before his internal alarm went off and triggered his *external* alert system, announcing that he needed service *RIGHT NOW!*

Maya automatically responded, and soon had him changed before she began feeding him in the other rocker. He couldn't help but ignore Faith for the moment while he turned his head to watch Maya as she nursed his son, the serene smile on her face making him think wistfully of what could have been all those decades ago.

They would have continued in silent bliss, but Faith finally woke up enough to determine that a warm body *without* the appropriate accessories was rocking her. She let out a whimper that soon became

anxious, and, like a zombie, Déjà rose from the bed before staggering to the facilities to relieve herself. He waited until the toilet flushed and the sink finished running before cautiously standing up and vacating the pre-warmed rocker for her.

The sleepy new mother grabbed a blanket from the crib and took Faith from his arms before sitting down. She automatically shuffled her around to a comfortable feeding position; placing the blanket – *just so* – and pulling up her sleep clothes – *just so* – such that Faith’s hunger could be properly assuaged. As he stood there in the soft illumination from the skylights, he considered it was just like he’d thought. Being a father just wasn’t that hard.

He stretched, rotated through the facilities to void and wash, then came out and got dressed. Then he gave each of his women a parting kiss, before heading out to start his day. He had sword practice this morning, followed by a prisoner interrogation, but *first*, he needed to eat...

~~~

It was a half hour later when Déjà ran her hands through her hair and stretched. Faith was *finally* full and had just been returned to their shared crib. Déjà bent over and smiled while looking down at her children...

It had been a *total* surprise to see their Donnie sitting up with Faith this morning. That prompted her memory of what Mary had suggested – baby bottles – and she knew Maya could *easily* provide the excess necessary to have on hand.

Maya had put little Ronnie down a few minutes before Faith. Her milk volume easily filled his belly, but he was more demanding in his need to be rocked.

Now she stood there and stretched as well, working out the kinks in her neck before pulling off her nightshirt altogether and hefting each breast, only to find little Ronnie’s stomach capacity couldn’t match the level of her production. She had two options, pump for the Center, or find another hungry stomach somewhere. Donald was her *usual* choice, but he was preparing for sword practice, so she turned a critical eye to Déjà.

“Déjà, would you like to shower first, or would you care for something to drink?” she asked, then hefted her breasts in her direction, causing her to smile when Déjà’s eyes sparkled at the offer.

“Don’t you want to save it for Donnie? He’s coming right back.”

Maya glanced at the sword propped up in the corner behind the table and grinned.

## Picking up the Pieces

“He is in the Center and warming up now. When he comes back, he will take his sword and go out to play. Besides, it does not take long for me to build up my supply.”

She reached out her hand and drew Déjà back to bed with her.

### *In the Dining Room*

Laisee and the girls had not slept in that morning, so it was around eight a.m. when they reached the dining room to have breakfast.

Asad and Nurani were politely greeted when they came across them in the outer hallway, but they both seemed reserved and only offered quiet morning greetings to them in passing. The Center was still on a higher state of alert than it had been yesterday morning – the presence of additional guardsmen making it obvious.

They entered the pantry and fixed themselves breakfast before carrying it to the dining room. When the Center went online – *if* it went online – Laisee supposed they would be restricted to the dining room during normal meal hours, and perhaps even have to deal with dedicated staff any time hunger breeched their consciousness.

As their light meal wound down, Laisee again broached the question she'd been concerned about since Wilber had made his inquiry.

“Jaiying, you've been inside Donald's head and know how he used to use his other skills to conduct an interview. With his current limitations, how may we best help him today?”

“With Smith? You felt him yesterday, Mother. He was fairly open when he let his guard down. Once he was in custody, he tightened up – almost like he knew what could be possible with us.” Jaiying closed her eyes and extended out to the motor pool for a moment. “Even now, he's awake but not thinking about *anything*.”

“*Nothing?*” Rose asked. “That's really hard to do. Every Earthling *I've* ever paid attention to is always got *something* rattling around in their head.”

Laisee and Jaiying both looked at her in surprise, while Rose just nodded her head.

“Well, then perhaps I should be in the room with Donald and simply tell him what I feel from this Smith person. *\*I doubt Smith understands Standard,\**” Laisee suggested, but Jaiying reached over and touched her mother's hand while shaking her head slowly.

“Mother, that would tell Smith there is something *special* about you and make him more resistant to you. Besides, it would be better if you could *press* that information directly into Grandfather's–” Jaiying

stopped and looked around, seeing just one guardsman on the far side of the room away from them before continuing more softly. “Donald seems more open – just as you told me yesterday. I can feel him in the Great Room now, and hear a little of his internal thoughts as he exercises.”

“Then... Mama Laisee, can you just push whatever you feel right into his head?” Rose asked her, but Jaiying raised another objection.

“She would have to touch him to really make it work, and I don’t think Mister Smith would understand why Mother is sitting in there and holding hands with Donald during his interview.”

That gave them pause while considering their options. Then Rose smiled and made a suggestion.

“All right. How about someone he would not suspect goes inside with Donald, while someone *else* stays at the security center to pass whatever is learned to Uncle Wilber?”

There was silence for a few seconds before both girls began to giggle – *instantly* raising concerns within Laisee.

### ***In the Motor Pool***

Donald had recovered his sword, kissed both of his girls goodbye, then proceeded to the motor pool for the scheduled exercise session at nine a.m. this morning.

There were nine men waiting for him, all bearing Royal swords, and Aelius smiled when he walked through the door and called out to him.

“Welcome, Donald! I see you’re ready!”

“I took the liberty of warming up in the Center. I didn’t want to pull a muscle.” He left out how poorly *yesterday’s* practice run had gone. When he’d picked up his sword, Maya had given him a drink before he’d left for the motor pool.

As he approached the group, he could see Ling and Aineias observing from the security office windows. Another movement in the background revealed Wilber – no doubt ready to tease him *mercilessly* when he failed miserably.

The stocky woman who just stepped around him was Sai, and probably there to pick up his pieces and drag him back for more maintenance right after this debacle.

For some reason, the thought suddenly struck him that this was all a setup, and he was there simply to *prove* that his days of farting around on the Emperor’s behalf were over. It was almost enough to make him change his mind, but he reconsidered and decided to tough



## Picking up the Pieces

it out. He might fail, but he could still have a *little* bit of fun while it lasted.

He joined the men during their warm-up stretches; standing in two lines of five men each while performing a standard warm-up routine, just like he used to teach on the platform. He felt a little off balance at times, but the ten-minute exercise was performed slowly and with precision, and he managed not to make a complete fool of himself during it.

Afterwards, Aelius felt pressed to compliment him on it.

"You did very well, Donald. Captain Aineias mentioned you're just recovering from a terrible accident – something about your head and your arm that kept you down for a few months. I promise we'll take it easy on you."

Aelius' words were friendly enough, and they rang with more truth than bravado. Still, he *really* wanted to make him work for his points – depending on what style they practiced. If it involved *combat* scoring ... *there*, he might have a problem.

He stood to the side while the men paired off in twos, eventually finding himself paired with Aelius at the end. Aelius gestured behind him and guided him to a resin chair.

He noted several chairs were there, and Aelius sat down in one and pointed to the one next to him, the other chairs slowly filling until only two pairs of men were left to face off against each other.

"That's Cassius and Felix. They're pretty well matched. The Captain often finds it hard to score them," Aelius informed him while pointing out the two. "Justus and Cyprian," he said, pointing to the second pair, then turned to the men sitting in chairs next to them. "Julius and Lucius, and on the far end, Marcus and Octavius."

When they heard their names, they turned in their seats and nodded in his direction, getting an acknowledgement back from him in return. Then they turned back and watched as Aineias approached the four men in the middle of the room.

"Good morning, gentlemen. Standard rules apply – meaning swords will *NOT* be Fired – so do your best not to have any unfortunate accidents. As always, we have Healers standing by to repair any mishaps." He turned and stepped away, being joined by another man.

"Septimus," Aelius whispered, then sat back to watch as Aineias turned back to the combatants.

Aineias moved to observe Cassius and Felix, while Septimus centered himself to watch Justus and Cyprian. At the sound of a beep, swords were drawn, and practice began.

*At the Residence*

Wilber had watched the warriors practice until it got close to his eleven a.m. appointment with Laisee. They had a planning session scheduled to go over the limited amount of information trickling in from the Embassy over the secure line. As he walked back to the house, he met Laisee on the way to their meeting.

“Good morning, Wilber. How ... ah, how was Donald this morning?”

Wilber smiled and shook his head.

“He was a *clumsy* oaf ... for about the first two rounds. Then he started getting back into the swing of things. They were just starting to switch partners around again when I left.”

His chuckle implied there was more to the tale, but she declined to pursue it for now. No doubt, she would hear of it later. She just hoped he didn't hurt himself.

They continued to the house together, and grabbed drinks from the refrigerator before closeting themselves in the front office.

“Where's Dwayne?” she asked.

“He's over in the security center monitoring Smith for a while. Smith ... he's a strange one. Very impassive. Stoic. It's like he's just waiting for us to make up our minds about what to do with him.”

She considered that before turning on her data pad and going over the notes she'd taken that morning with Rose and Jaiying.

Wilber pulled out the folder he'd started and began reviewing the questions he'd gone over with Dwayne after the takedown yesterday.

It was a long list of unknowns, and they were both hopeful Donald would be able to pry useful information from Smith ... at least enough information to know where to send the body.

~~~

It was half an hour later when Donald finally wandered in and caught them arguing over some issue, but they broke off when he entered.

“So... Will Aelius *live*?” Wilber asked him, and Laisee jerked her head up from her data pad.

“The kid's tough. Sai already patched the hole before the blood *really* started to spurt.”

“*Donald!* What – Did – You – Do!” Laisee asked him sharply.

## Picking up the Pieces

“Hey, it wasn’t *me!* Apparently I made him look so bad that he felt the need to prove himself against one of the *other* guys.”

“Kid got so frustrated that he lost sight of the goal,” Wilber explained to her. “Seems that word about Donald shipping out with the *Madman* never quite made it to his ears.”

“Yeah,” Donald agreed. “Most of those kids are in their early eighties or nineties. I think Aineias is in his mid-second hundred. I got the impression there’s one or two more like him on staff. Otherwise, I’ve been doing this twice as long as most of them have been *alive*.”

“I *thought* you looked a little rusty out there,” Wilber chided him.

“Well ... *yeah*. Then I figured out that I have to fight them like they’re *Drecks*.” At their confused looks, he explained, “I can’t *feel* them anymore.”

Wilber nodded, having had this conversation with Ronnie several years ago, while Laisee turned and looked sternly at him.

She was still frowning, but finally started to relax.

“I was given to understand this garrison was staffed by more *senior* warriors,” she said, addressing this to Wilber.

“It *was* – before mister *nosy* over there discovered the Vanir,” Wilber said, while tilting a thumb at Donald. “Priorities changed. Experienced men – *more* experienced men – were reassigned to more *critical* positions.”

“Typical,” they heard her mutter as she turned away to focus on her data pad again.

Donald ignored her and turned to Wilber.

“So ... what do you got for me?”

“We have preliminary DNA results from the Embassy geek squad. Smith’s DNA was non-conclusive, but we have a general split of about fifty-percent European and fifty-percent somewhere in the *middle* of the Middle East.”

“Wilber, that is very much *less* than non-conclusive,” Donald said, then turned and sat down on the sofa bed. “At best, you have mixed-parentage. One from somewhere in Europe, and one from the Middle-East ... and that’s *millions* of square miles.”

Wilber opened up his folder again and brought out his list.

“Which is why we agree that you use *Seniors* to open him up. What’s his *real* name? Who does he *work* for? Why does the NSA know of him, but why don’t they have any *details*. What’s his relationship

with *Faridun*. Is he *Taliban* with Faridun, or part of a separate cell? Where was he taking Asad and Nurani? Why--”

Wilber stopped when Donald brought his hand up, so he handed him the folder instead, then spent a few idle minutes waiting while Donald read items in the folder ... until he looked up at him when he read a certain passage and confronted him about it.

“*Jaiying*? You want me to take my *Granddaughter* in there during the interrogation?”

Before Wilber could say anything, Laisee reached out and touched Donald’s shirtsleeve to gain his attention.

“The girls and I spoke of it this morning. It was *Jaiying*’s idea. Actually it was *Rose* who pointed it out, but it makes perfect sense.”

Once she had his undivided attention, she began to lay it out for him – *silently*.

Donald looked at her and watched her facial expressions. He was puzzled for several seconds until feeling a slight buzzing in his head, that *immediately* cleared when she physically touched his hand, and he heard faint echoes of her words in his mind.

“\*...and we cannot let *Smith* suspect that we are special in anyway\*”

“I... *What*? You want to let *Jaiying* pick his brains, and then share it with *me*?”

“Donald, she is so much *better* at it than I, and you’ve worked with her before,” she said, then Wilber chimed in.

“You used to do that with *me*, Don. Remember? It was *weird*, but it worked. And he’d *never* suspect *Jaiying*.”

Donald frowned at the both of them before leaning back on the sofa bed while they continued to discuss the dog and pony show he was expected to put on for their guest.

### ***In the Basement of the Motor Pool***

Precisely at noon, the door opened to the holding room and four guards entered, the man in front being the designated deliverer of the noontime meal.

Smith calmly watched the lead guard deposit a fresh water bottle and a bundle wrapped in paper towels on the edge of the bed. Then he watched them do that bizarre shuffle thing so that every angle was covered while the same man reached the small sink and recovered the used paper towels and the mostly empty water bottle from this morning.

## Picking up the Pieces

After they'd backed out and secured the door, Smith tilted his head and looked down at his potential lunch. He slid over a bit to get within arms reach of it and picked up the bundle of warm paper. Peeling it open, he found a duplicate of the "dinner" he'd enjoyed yesterday and the "breakfast" he'd had this morning.

He didn't vocalize it, but the thought struck him that perhaps there'd been a *sale* somewhere that justified feeding him not-quite-fast-food for every meal. Still, it was warm enough. He remembered how the *second* one he'd eaten later this morning had tasted when he'd thought to save it for later. That was when he'd discovered warmth was an *absolute* necessity for palatability. He settled in to wash *these* two down with some of the fresh water they'd brought.

While he was munching on the first sandwich, he inspected the cap on the water bottle and determined that it was still sealed – not that it couldn't have been adulterated through nefarious means.

Certainly, *he* was no stranger to such activities, but he couldn't get a feel for these Americans – or *whatever* they really were.

After he finished both sandwiches, he crumpled the paper towel into a ball and looked back at the sink. Taking careful aim, he deliberately tossed it short so that it landed under the sink, but it hit the wall and rolled closer to the toilet.

"Bloody hell," he muttered.

He got up, decided to use the toilet first, then washed his hands afterwards. Since there was no towel rack – something he could actually *exploit* – he'd wrapped the small towel into a bundle and set it behind the faucets on the sink. Pulling it out now, he clumsily knocked his toothbrush to the floor, following with *another* muttered imprecation.

He bent down and grabbed the paper towel, then twisted and reached for the toothbrush, only to knock it further under the sink. Avoiding the lip of the sink, he carefully bent his head down and slowly stretched out his arm to pick it up.

He rinsed it off and set it in the sink before twisting the top of the tube of toothpaste, managing to squeeze some out before brushing his teeth *thoroughly*. If there was *one* thing his mother's homeland lacked, it was decent dental care for the masses.

After taking care of his teeth, he rinsed the toothbrush and carefully laid it behind the faucets before rolling up the towel and stuffing it on top; leaving the washcloth draped over the nozzle as before. He really wanted to check his mouth, but there was no mirror; his captors weren't that stupid. Holding in his frustration, he turned to that insanely heavy bed and slowly plodded back to it.

He'd finally figured the reason it was so bloody heavy was so it couldn't be used as a weapon. From what little he'd felt of the frame while feigning sleep last night, it appeared to be one solid piece of metal, capped with a thin mattress pad. Coincidentally, it helped explain why he'd slept so poorly on it. Sitting back down, he glumly contemplated this unexpected truncation of his somewhat successful career.

### *In the Security Office*

Wilber and Donald had been watching on the security monitor while this latest frenzy of activity finally gave them something to comment on.

"Good personal hygiene," Donald muttered.

"You said he went to Cambridge? Seems kinda clumsy for a college grad – or a spook," Wilber offered.

Donald tilted his head and gave it some thought, while the man sat on the bed pretty much where he'd been sitting for the last eighteen hours – give or take.

"Well ... he misses not having a mirror. He's used to having one right over the sink," he murmured. "Stared at the wall too long expecting to see something in return. And he's established that neither the toilet nor the sink have any features he can exploit."

Wilber looked at the monitor, then looked at Donald.

"The paper?"

"He probably intended to use the paper, but I think the toothbrush was just for insurance. The paper was in the ballpark, but the toothbrush needed to be closer to the sink. It also doubled the amount of time he could be squatting down and looking at stuff. That extra flick with the toothbrush was probably just to extend time on station."

Wilber stared at him for a few seconds, before asking, "How'd you figure all that out?"

Donald turned and looked at him.

"Because that's what *I* would do," he said, then looked up to see their accomplices arriving.

"Donald ... Wilber. Are you ready to begin?" Laisee asked them. Jaiying didn't say anything but walked around her mother and reached out her arms for Donald to pick her up.

"Laisee, I'm not comfortable with Jaiying going in there with me. She can read him just fine from out here."

## Picking up the Pieces

"That is not the point, Donald," Jaiying piped up. "I can read him, but it would give too much away if I talked to you..." She paused to touch his skin. *'Unless I do this. Do you want English or \*Standard\*'*

"I ... ahh ... English, please," he said, quite surprised at how loud she sounded in his head compared to Laisee. "He already speaks English, and I spent some time in England back in ... ahh, a while ago." He dropped the subject when Wilber looked at him expectantly.

"Jaiying will accompany you, as there is no one else to watch her at the moment," Laisee said, thus providing a reasonable, if *ridiculous*, premise for her being there.

"I really don't want her anywhere *around* Smith, Laisee. We know *nothing* about—"

"I do not want her in there, either, but I've already had to convince Wilber. Do not make this more difficult for—"

Jaiying raised her hand, directing her palm at her mother while looking at Donald.

"Donald, we will be fine. There are two of us but only one of him. I'm sure Uncle Wilber will have men standing by to protect Smith from us," she said in all seriousness, and kept looking at him until he finally smiled.

"Very well ... but I want you out of there at the *first* sign of trouble. Agreed?"

She let out a tiny sigh, but nodded her head in acquiescence, following it with a murmured, "Yes, Donald."

Now that the rules had been established, Laisee watched them walk out the door with mixed emotions. She didn't like seeing her daughter going into danger like this, and felt that Smith was dangerous. Then she remembered what Josie had done to protect the family, and knew that Jaiying was an order of magnitude *above* that...

### ***In the Holding Room***

Despite all of his training, Smith was getting bored again.

Sitting in the same spot was the *correct* thing to do. It implied a psychological breakdown into despair and resignation, and he kicked himself mentally for that singular outburst of frustration when the paper he'd tossed missed its mark. The toothbrush made up for it, letting him check the underside of the sink, only to find that it fit flush to the wall with absolutely *nothing* exposed underneath it.

That matched the uselessness of the toilet – it having only that one button on the side that flushed it, and no other external parts.

He closed his eyes in an extended blink, really wanting to simply flop down on the bed and stretch out for a change to see if he could maybe get some *real* rest. His trainers would have chided him for it, but they weren't here. For that matter, many of them were already dead, and their deaths reminded him that *nowhere* was it safe any longer.

He opened his eyes and stared at the floor, but only saw yesterday afternoon in his mind and the happy group of people who'd taken him so easily. The men. The women. They seemed so ... so *average*. So *normal*. Even the little *girls*... Then it suddenly struck him, the *reason* why he didn't struggle.

The little girls. *Both* of them with flowing hair. Different *shades*, certainly, but looking a lot like hers. He could have fought his way out, but it might have gotten dangerous for the children. He took a longer breath and an extended blink to help clear his mind...

Here he was, highly trained and experienced, but frustrated by his *own* lack of progress until he'd heard of a request for an interpreter who spoke a dialect in the area of interest. Not giving *any* thought to it, neither research nor vetting, he'd jumped in and made the introductions, hopeful that intelligence might be pried out of that couple or extracted from their contractors – *whoever* they were. It had *seemed* simple enough.

Bug a phone, follow the travelers across America, and finally track them down by some simple cell tower triangulation. The *remoteness* of the final destination had even made it easier. It should have also given him a *clue*, but *no* – he'd barged right in and gotten *taken*...

He let out another sigh, then looked down at the floor again. It had been a *mistake* coming here. After having told his handlers what he'd intended to do, they'd sent him off with their blessings, but told him he was on his *own*.

He could *not* rely on them to intervene on his behalf, and his own *government* had already put triggers in place to disavow his actions, backdated from the moment he'd walked out the door.

Ending up *here*...

Locked in a rather *bland* room...

Without *toilet paper*...

### ***Wandering Around the Basement***

Donald was feeling turned around, and finally stopped at a corridor junction to look at the map, a much more *extensive* map than he'd expected.



## Picking up the Pieces

“Ahh... Just when did all *this* get done?” He had a hand on the map and his fingers were circling the area they were headed to that wasn’t exactly underneath the motor pool they’d left just a few minutes ago.

“These are the new extensions Lady Ling and the Captain asked for.” The guardsman, Vibianus, he thought, shared an expression of “why does it matter?” and turned to move away.

“No, really. It didn’t used to be so ... *extensive*.”

Being fully aware of how it might be construed, Donald had restrained himself from reaching out and grabbing his arm. Jaiying felt his concern and jumped in to assist.

“Vibianus, I am curious as well. My Grandfather’s original Center was destroyed and then rebuilt. I do not remember Aunt Lili ordering improvements to this extent.”

Vibianus stopped in his tracks, knowing *intimately* whom he was answering to after having reviewed the takedown of John Smith, and Jaiying’s suspected part in it. He turned and bowed formally to her.

“My Lady, Senior Wen and Captain Anastasius have been here for some time now. While the garrison staff are used to less than ideal living conditions, Lady Wen was appalled at the quarters provided for the families of the staff. The good Lady discussed the situation with the Captain, and inquiries were made. My understanding is, and it is only by rumor mind you, that we received an upgrade to hostile environment status due to the discovery of that new species found somewhere below us.”

Donald gave out a snorting laugh and shook his head.

“The *Vanir*? They’ve got their hands full abandoning their *home* planet before it *poisons* all of them. I doubt they’ll be a problem for a few more decades, at least.”

Jaiying looked up at him and smiled, while thinking of a way to increase his status a bit.

“Your work on behalf of the Emperor was much appreciated, Donald. The information you provided to Lord Caldor was accurate in predicting their eventual decline if they failed to leave that unhealthy environment. Now they have *another* reason to seek alliance with us, if only to thank us for the lives you’ve saved.”

He smiled down at her and glided his hand over her hair.

“Well, there’s only about three-hundred thousand of them left. It was either leave, or die out as a species. I’m grateful Lord Caldor accepted that solution, but I *do* miss some of the Vanir crew he had aboard.”

He looked up at Vibianus and smiled. "You know, he actually rescued the daughter of the sitting *Prime* – that's like an *Elder* in their society. He was a great man, and I do miss him." He followed that with a sigh, then motioned for them to continue. As Vibianus turned to lead the way, Donald felt Jaiying reach up and squeeze his hand.

'*Well played, Grandfather*' he heard clearly, and gave her a tiny squeeze back.

It was only a few more turns to the guarded door Smith was locked behind. They could see him on the local monitor screen – still sitting in the same spot and apparently bored out of his *mind*.

### ***In the Holding Room***

Smith was still sitting in his customary spot when there was a knock on the door and it opened. He wasn't surprised to see the man – "Don" – enter the room. He'd expected his original interrogator to show up eventually, but *didn't* expect the little girl who followed him inside.

"Good afternoon, Agent Smith. I trust your lunch was acceptable. I understand *Wilber* was quite put out by it, though. He thought they were raiding *his* freezer, but apparently the staff stock them for themselves as well."

Other than a blink of his eyes, Smith gave nothing away, and watched as Don stepped to the side while two guards entered the room, one of them carrying a resin chair. It was set down several feet from the bed, before they backed up to the door and stood there.

Don walked over and sat down, then helped the little girl crawl onto his lap. Don looked down at her, then smiled up at Smith.

"Sorry for the inconvenience, but the Ladies are otherwise engaged so I got stuck with *baby*-sitting duty."

Smith said nothing, but could barely suppress the hint of a smile when the girl tilted her head back at an angle and gave Don a dirty look. Then she slouched against him and held on to one of his hands. He watched as Don looked to the guards and tilted his head to the door, signaling them to leave.

### ***In the Security Center***

Laisee looked back at the two guardsmen who were sharing the office with her and Wilber. In case anything happened, both of them had communicators in hand to alert the men in the corridor below to intervene – which they would not do unless they were *ordered* to do so, or it looked like things were getting out of hand from the local corridor display. Wilber reached out and adjusted the volume a bit higher. It seemed like a vain hope, but he knew that in a *previous* incarnation,

## Picking up the Pieces

Donald had the requisite skill set to enrage the most *peaceful* of individuals. He just needed to press the right *buttons*...

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

Lili was preparing to head home for the weekend in anticipation of spending it with her husband and their wives.

She still missed her little Spring Blossom, but had been delighted to learn she'd shared contentment with Agent Sparks during her visit.

She knew her lover truly preferred feminine companionship, but was gladdened she was able to satisfy her more hetero-urges on this occasion while not having her husband around to provide for her.

She sighed in lost opportunities – the burdens of the offices she and her husband held being most ... well, *burdensome*, to put it bluntly – but then remembered one other little issue that needed checking on.

*'Laisee, do you have a moment, dear?'*

She could feel confusion and semi-shock in response to her contact.

*'Yes. Yes, Lili. Of course. How may I help you, my Elder?'*

Lili smiled. After all this time, Laisee was still an enchanting creature who remained a delight to watch as she grew and matured.

*'I am curious about Donald's reaction, Laisee. How did he respond when you told him about Elder Xue's visit?'*

This time a wave of panic flowed back, but didn't appear to be from anything particularly urgent. She waited patiently until...

*'I... He... Ahh, I did not actually tell Donald about Xue ... yet. Things have become rather busy, and we are working on a more urgent issue at the moment. We have detained an unexpected guest. Donald is leading the investigation ... with Jaiying's help'*

*'Oh my... That sounds absolutely enticing. Please open to me so that I may observe'*

*'Of course, my Elder'*

At Laisee's invitation, she extended into and *through* to observe the surroundings through Laisee's senses, all the while getting an explanation from her stepdaughter about the current situation.

### ***Earth, The Annex, In a Holding Room***

"Are they treating you well, John? Are you lacking anything ... aside from your freedom ... and a roll of toilet paper?"

Donald had hoped to evoke *some* sort of reaction, but Smith remained silent, except for what Jaiying pulled out.

*'He is wary. He is also responding with a strange feeling'* she pressed, then shared the feeling.

Donald knew what it was: sarcasm. Either that, or cynicism.

"I admire your professionalism, John. I must admit I have been in *similar* situations in my past – *wary* too many, if you ask me. I'd always hoped to *retire* one day, but the buggers keep needing me to go out and *fix* things."

*'He knows you're trying to empathize with him to try and draw him out. He's resistant'*

Donald let out a heartfelt sigh of resignation, then visibly settled a bit.

"Well, this is gonna take a while, so I might as well get down to it. We're *both* professionals, John, and I know who *I* am, and who I work for. Our problem here is that you're an *unknown* to us, and you seem to be out of your area of operations."

*'He wonders where you're going with this'*

"I would *like* to tell you what's really going on, John, but I would need permission from my superiors. In turn, they would have to discuss the situation with the American government and see if *they* want to become involved. Quite frankly, I've *seen* those bozos in action and it isn't very promising. I'd much rather keep this between you and me so we can get you home safely with neither *one* of us compromised."

*'He is surprised that our situations sound similar. No. His people have already dismissed him. He cannot go back'*

"It kinda sucks being behind enemy lines, John, except we're *not* your enemies. At least, no one's told *me* that we are. *Cambridge*, right? Is *that* where you met Faridun?"

He didn't need Jaiying to tell him when he got a decent hit.

He'd seen the tiny flinch in the muscles around Smith's eyes, and how his irises had reacted.

*'His mind is tightening up. He is becoming harder to read. He doesn't know how you knew about Cambridge or Faridun'*

"You know, that Faridun guy is a real *dick*. Rapes young women and children, mistreats prisoners of war, and intimidates entire *villages* to do his bidding. It would be a real bonus if I could locate

## Picking up the Pieces

someone who can give me some *useful* information on him. I'm sure the *Americans* would really appreciate it."

*'He is becoming more confused. He doesn't understand why you keep talking about Americans as if they were separate... Oh. Now he is concerned he will be traded to the Americans for some favor, and he ... he feels left out?'*

Donald tried to fit that particular piece into the puzzle. Wasn't Smith a *friend* of Faridun? He decided to try a different tact.

"You know, Daanesh, I can't seem to wrap my head around why a relatively *nice* guy like you would be associated with an asshole like *Faridun*."

*'He ... he is very angry. He is NOT a friend of Faridun. He HATES the name Daanesh. Faridun gave it to him. He HATES Faridun. He ... he wants to ... what is Krav Maga?'*

Donald blinked. *He* knew what Krav Maga was. He'd studied it *years* ago and incorporated elements of it with all the other hand-to-hand techniques he'd learned over the last couple of centuries. He started reconsidering Smith's background in a new light, then thought of a *different* trigger phrase...

"You know, I've been around in ... well, all *sorts* of places, really, but I've *always* been amazed at how well Imi Lichtenfeld's training protocols have held up over the decades."

### ***In the Security Center***

Laisee gasped, and Wilber glanced at her before staring back at the monitor.

*'Well, I see that Donald and Jaiying seem to have everything under control. If necessary, you may offer Smith the NDA to sign. I leave it in your capable hands, Laisee. Do not forget to remind Donald about Elder Xue's arrival'*

Laisee was stunned, not only at Smith's reaction, but also by the departing message from Lili. She seemed to think everything would work out – possibly with the addition of the dreaded NDA.

Instead of breaking Wilber's concentration, she decided to keep it to herself and wait for things to develop a bit longer, while still not having a *clue* of what Donald was talking about.

### ***In the Holding Room***

Donald noted the change in Smith's pupils and breathing, along with the tiny twitch at the corner of his lips, so he continued to pursue it.

“John, you appear to be a fine physical specimen. One might wonder where you come from – *aside* from Washington, D.C. that is. I believe it’s unlikely you’re *really* employed by the Department of Defense – or any *other* American government agency for that matter. No ... more than likely you’re an *independent* contractor – with prior training provided somewhere else, on someone *else’s* dime.”

*‘He is not associated with the Americans. He was trained outside of America. He doesn’t understand about the dime?’*

“If I were to guess, I’d say your physical condition and your professional carriage seem to indicate prior military service, probably in a special unit. Perhaps Rangers ... or Seals? But you’re not American. SAS perhaps? Or maybe ... one of the *IDF* Special Forces Units?”

*‘That last... IDF. He reacted to that’*

Donald smiled thinly.

Israeli Defense Forces.

He tried to remember what units were associated with the IDF, while passing an obviously appraising look at Smith.

“I’m thinkin’ ... maybe Sayeret ... or possibly Mista’rvm... But you’re kinda *old* to be an active member of those groups. Of course, *other* services might still find you useful – such as Shin Bet.”

*‘He did come from Sayeret, but Mista’rvm and Shin Bet did not react. He relaxed at that’*

“Of course, Shin Bet is focused on *internal* operations, and what you’re doing is *well* outside the operational areas of Shabak. No... I’m thinking you’re *sneakier* than that. Probably ... Mossad. They’ve got their fingers into all *sorts* of stuff all over the world.”

### ***In the Security Office***

“Smith is tensing up. I can feel him from here,” Laisee murmured, her eyes remaining glued to the monitor and so focused she didn’t hear Wilber tell the guards to be ready to alert the standby team below.

### ***In the Holding Room***

Jaiying slid off Donald’s lap and calmly walked over to the toilet to pee.

“Sorry. She’s got a little bladder,” he said quietly, while holding up one hand with his thumb and forefinger held slightly apart. He kept his eyes on Smith while Jaiying finished and flushed the toilet.

## Picking up the Pieces

“What was that saying... ‘Where no counsel is, the people fall, but in a multitude of counselors there is safety.’ I *think* that was it. It’s been a while. Probably sounds better in Hebrew.”

He could see the tension continuing to build around Smith’s eyes as he struggled to maintain control.

Jaiying was washing her hands when she called out, “*\*His control is really very good, but you’re starting to worry him now.\**”

She wiped her hands on Smith’s towel, then bundled it up and replaced it before returning to sit on Donald’s lap and settling in.

“I wonder... *Collections?* Probably not. That field is too generalized for someone of your obvious skills. You’re more of a *hands-on* kinda guy. Perhaps part of ... ‘the tip of the *spear*’? ... But *no*. Back in the house, you could have left *everyone* dead, and we wouldn’t have seen it coming.”

Donald watched as the light seemed to die in Smith’s eyes. Was that *shame*?

*‘That really bothered him. He is really upset that you even considered him to be like that’*

“No... Not Kidon. You’re more *thoughtful* than those guys. Still hands-on, but creative in your *own* way. Maybe ... *Metsada?*”

Smith started getting twitchy, and it was becoming *real* obvious.

*‘He’s thinking of trying to escape the next time the door opens’*

Donald let out a sigh and shook his head slightly.

“John ... I know there’s *nothing* you’d like better than to get out of here. Unfortunately, there’s just too many guards in the way. And you’d have to get past me first. And my little friend, here.”

### ***In the Security Office***

“Wilber! I want her *out!* *Right now!*”

Wilber could see Laisee spooling up and beginning to glow – a lot like *Jaiying* had done in his office.

He gave the order, and heard the message go out.

*“Wilber!”*

“It’s being done, my Lady,” he murmured quietly, and watched as her glow steadied at a level somewhere below *Jaiying*’s had been, but still tried to defuse it a bit.

“It was about time anyway. Donald can do *stupid* all by himself.”

His flippant comment washed right over her, so he cautiously rested a hand on her arm, and she clutched at it nervously.

***In the Holding Room***

*'He is only holding back because I am here'*

Donald smiled, then gave out a short laugh.

"You know, I was born not too far from here. My mother named me TS'LSQSQSÉ BIYIGÉ. I didn't find out until years later what it *really* meant. We had to move in a hurry when I was about two years old. One of those 'out of wedlock' kinda deals where either you married the right person, or you got *stoned* to death. Kind of a silly concept when you think about it."

Smith glanced past him at the door, then focused on him again.

*'He is confused again'*

"I wonder, John. What did your mother name *you* when you were born?"

Donald watched as Smith's eyes unfocused for a few moments, but there was a knock at the door just before it opened to admit a guard, with his partner standing in the doorway behind him.

"Your pardon, gentlemen. The girl's mother has requested her return."

Jaiying let out a sigh, then slipped out of Donald's arms to stand on the floor.

She reached up and hugged him, saying, *"\*Don't do anything stupid,\*"* before kissing him on the cheek.

She turned to go, but stopped and looked at Smith, before stepping over to him and holding out her hand.

He looked at her for several seconds, then leaned forward and very gingerly grasped her hand – fully aware of all the eyes on him.

"Be. Good. John," she said flatly, then shook his hand just once, before slipping away and reaching up to hold the guardsman's hand.

They walked to the door, where she stopped just at the threshold and turned back.

She smiled at Smith, then smiled at Donald, cheerfully saying, *"\*Like an onion,\*"* before turning and stepping through it.

The door was closed and latched once again, leaving Donald and Smith alone.



***In the Motor Pool***

Dwayne checked his watch as he walked across the hanger floor. Two p.m. – meaning the interrogation had been going on for close to two hours now. He hoped the notes he was carrying would help fill in some of the blanks. As he walked up, the guard on duty opened the door for him and prepared to announce his arrival, but suddenly froze at the sight of the glowing Senior.

***In the Security Center***

Laisee sagged as soon as the cell door shut and let out a breath she hadn't known she'd been holding. The glow surrounding her started to fade, then blinked out completely when Jaiying silently reached out to her.

*\*Mother, I have learned much from John. You should probably take notes for Wilber\**

Wilber watched as Laisee scrambled to grab her data pad and began beating it half to death. He checked the monitor again, but Don and Smith were still just sitting there looking at each other. They seemed to be chilling for the moment.

"Wilber, got new information," Dwayne murmured. He'd bypassed the guards in the room and walked up to Wilber's other side – the one *away* from the walking light bulb – and handed Wilber his folder, who quickly opened and eagerly perused it.

Wilber found there were additional photos and fingerprint matches to several different names on just as many different passports, but *nothing* leading directly to Israel. He suppressed a snort. The likelihood of the Mossad leaving a paper trail behind was *much* lower than the breadth of public CIA scandals over the years. Wilber closed the folder, spared a glance at the static image on the monitor, then looked up at Dwayne, who took that as his cue.

"They took the rental car apart – *most* of it – and found some electronic devices hidden behind a wheel well panel in the trunk; several USB drives, and a double-headed USB-socket style cable thingy with a battery attachment. It looks like it would connect two USB drives together without a computer – unless there's one crammed into that little dongle in the middle. There was a separate USB drive that had markings on it. They're trying to get it translated. Or translated and decoded. The *markings*, I mean. *None* of them have been plugged into anything."

Wilber nodded slowly, then set the folder down before bringing his hands up to his face and rubbing it a few times. They didn't quite cover the yawn he was trying to suppress, and afterwards finally settled his hands across his stomach.

"It looks like our man Smith *might* be Israeli – maybe Mossad. No idea what he's up to yet. The girls have been picking him apart, but we don't have—" Wilber stopped when the door opened and Jaiying came in and walked over to her mother.

### ***In the Holding Room***

Donald finally let out a sigh before starting defusing techniques with Smith.

"I really miss my family sometimes," he said wistfully, then slowly stretched his arms straight out in front of him and yawned. He relaxed and broke eye contact with Smith before continuing.

"I was born here, but all my family is gone now. Married and moved away... Got old and died... My mother remarried to a man with two older sons – my 'evil' step-brothers." He shook his head and frowned.

"They never accepted me. I eventually went to war, but we ended up in the same service together – even got assigned to the same *ship*, but they couldn't get past the sibling rivalry crap that sometimes develops from such uneven mix-ups. I even did the good brother thing and *saved* their asses, but they *still* managed to go out and get themselves killed while I was recovering from that stupid act of loyalty."

He let out a short chuckle, along with a slow shake of his head.

"Then I found out later on that my *real* father had another son and *two* daughters, but that was after his wife had left him and took her daughters with her. My *real* older stepbrother is kinda nice, though. Bean counter type. Wanted me to follow in his footsteps, but..." he paused to look around the room with a shrug, "...we each do what we're best trained to do."

He shook his head again while looking down at the floor. "Never did meet my two older step-sisters."

He took a breath, shrugged again, then let it out while leaning back in his chair.

"You still got family back home, John?"

Smith stared at him for a few moments before turning away.

### ***In the Security Center***

Laisee finished summarizing Jaiying's account of her interceptions, and handed her data pad to Wilber, who then read it aloud for Dwayne's benefit.

"Raised on a kibbutz in Israel, and was fortunate enough to attend Cambridge in England. That's where he met Faridun. That was a *pre-*

## Picking up the Pieces

radical Faridun. Came back and found his little sister had left the kibbutz and joined the drug crowd. Got her into rehab.”

“Wait,” Dwayne said. “Drugs? In *Israel*? Isn’t that ... you know ... not something a Jew would get involved with?”

Wilber turned to him with a skeptical look on his face.

“Never read any of those DHS updates on the *worldwide* anti-drug enforcement actions, did you?” At Dwayne’s embarrassed expression, he turned back to Laisee’s report.

“Joined the IDF – duh. Most *all* Israeli serve at some point in their lives. Served in the IDF’s Sayeret group – that’s a special recon unit. Well, recon and some commando stuff. Meanwhile, little sister is in and out of rehab when he finally gets called home for her funeral. Drug overdose. Heroin. Went off the reservation for a few months while he went rogue – local dealers, suppliers... Left a *trail* of bodies behind him before he got stuck. Couldn’t find the next connection.”

“Man. That would *really* fuck me up,” Dwayne muttered. “Had drug dealers in my old neighborhood growin’ up. Took *forever*, but the police finally got them to move somewhere else.” After Dwayne’s sigh over a past misery, Wilber continued.

“Some higher-ups had taken note of his *extra* curricular activities, so after reporting back for duty, they decided to kick him out of the Sayeret and invited him to join Mossad. They wanted him to join *Kidon* – that’s a special assassinations unit, but it appears he didn’t like the idea of being told to go and kill on command, *regardless* of the target. Instead, they let him join Metsada – that’s Mossad’s sabotage unit. Huh. Go out and break stuff, and *still* get to kill on occasion. Maybe he thought he might get the chance to locate more links in the drug chain and take them out. I guess IADA wasn’t hands-on enough for him ... that’s the Israel Anti-Drugs Authority.”

He read down the list further.

“Doesn’t explain his relationship to *Faridun*, though. Or how he got his Taliban name.”

The office became silent after Wilber stopped speaking, but it was broken by the sound of movement and painful grunts coming from the monitor.

Wilber and Dwayne turned to look, only *then* noticing the glow from Jaiying that began fading away as Donald calmly sat down in the chair while Smith carefully picked himself off the floor to sit heavily on the bed.

They watched as Donald stood up and walked over to the sink, ignoring Smith while he washed his hands and wiped them on his

pants, then grabbed the water bottle and handed it to Smith before sitting down again.

“\*Gods,\*” one of the guardsmen murmured, then suddenly remembered who else was in the room with them. “\*Your pardon, my Ladies.\*” He bowed, then quickly made his way out of the room.

### ***In the Holding Room***

Smith sat very quietly while taking small sips from his water bottle.

The old man had been quicker than expected, but when pressed about his *Taliban* name again, he’d simply lost it. It’d been a bad decision. A decision for which he’ll have *bruises* to show for it in the morning. A tiny smirk twisted his lips as he considered the hubris of what he’d just tried to do.

He closed his eyes while thinking of what lies he could *possibly* come up with that would not sound as stupid as the *reality* that was his current existence. It wouldn’t matter. The Americans may be in a position of power, but their country suffered just as much as Israel did. Probably *more* so, considering the percentage of drug users per capita in the United States.

He looked at Don, then shook his head. He was tired. He was tired, and what he *really* wanted to was just ... just *fuck* it all and lie down and get some *sleep*, but the mere *thought* of giving up brought echoes of his training to the forefront...

‘Give up? That’s NOT what we’re training you for!’

At least the little girl had already left before he’d lost his composure. He closed his eyes again while reviewing what little remained of his life...

He’d gotten revenge for his little sister’s death, but it just wasn’t enough. The trail had gone cold, and there were no new leads until his *new* position opened up more intelligence resources, and he’d found a link to heroin supplies being brokered from a Taliban source headed by someone named *Faridun*.

The name had shocked him at first, and he’d doubted it could be the *same* man but intelligence had the right particulars – the same family name and the same family *location* ... and the *same* loss of Faridun’s father by an American-led, anti-terrorist coalition. He remembered Faridun being shattered at hearing the news about his father’s death. It had come the week before graduation, and he’d immediately left for home, never to be heard from again.

The reports indicated Faridun had gone a little nuts – *there* he could relate – and joined the Taliban for the *express* purpose of

## Picking up the Pieces

seeking revenge against the Americans. The analysts figured that, as a *business* major, Faridun had apparently calculated the net effect of suicide bombers against the “gift that keeps on giving” – in *this* case, a net increase in the number of non-productive, drug-addicted citizens who become a burden over a wider spectrum of American society. It was simple mathematics.

Smith had his *own* opinions. Why hijack a plane and crash it into a building? *Steal* the plane and do something *useful* with it. That way, your pilots live to steal *again*. Why spend a body to blow up a crowd? You lose a willing body, and you kill and maim one crowd’s worth of people. Better to hijack a *fuel* truck, or a *milk* truck, or something hauling *sugar*, or better yet, *molasses* – and then *jackknife* it in the middle of *commute traffic*! *LOTS* of people are annoyed, and commerce is *disrupted*.

The American power grid was *wide open*. Why go twatting about sneaking into places that people were *guarding*? Why not follow the power lines and find a few inconvenient and *isolated* places where replacing missing towers would be *difficult* – and then knock down three or *four of them*? Do it right, and a whole *area* could be blacked out for *weeks* – maybe even *months* – until they get them reconstructed.

However, the Taliban had to work with what it had, and Faridun’s name had come up as being active in the poppy trade located in a narrow valley somewhere in the Northeastern portion of Afghanistan. Those were the suppositions the analysts had been projecting, but he’d had no luck in narrowing it down until remembering the notebook he’d brought back from college and left at home...

Smith opened his eyes and subtly flexed his body. Maybe he should give the old man another try...

### ***In the Security Center***

Both Jaiying and her mother were focused on Smith, but it was enough for Laisee.

“*Enough* of this!” she growled angrily, then grabbed the folder from Wilber before storming out the door.

Dwayne and Wilber watched her go, seeing one of the guardsmen quickly following along in her wake.

“John is feeling very stressed right now,” Jaiying observed. “I don’t think he realizes Donald has been doing this for a lot longer than he has.”

She turned back and watched the monitor to see if Smith was capable of doing something even *more* stupid than Donald was.

*In the Holding Room*

Having already taken him down once, Donald had been hoping Smith would behave himself, but the telltales building from him said otherwise.

In hindsight, teasing him about how he'd gotten Daanesh for a terrorist name was probably in poor taste, particularly when he'd chided him for lacking the "wisdom" to apply his "knowledge" in a sensible manner. Then again, interpretation of names was usually sketchy at best, but could be self-fulfilling if you waited long enough. At the moment, it looked like Smith was tired of waiting.

While the pseudo-terrorist was tensing to explode, Donald frowned as he resigned himself to the inevitable – until a knock came at the door and it opened to reveal Laisee standing there with a furious look on her face. Both men turned to look at her, and Smith's level of tension seemed to evaporate. At Laisee's approach, Donald sighed and stood before stepping away from the chair and bowing formally to the Emperor's daughter.

Laisee stared daggers at him, then grabbed the chair and dragged it much closer to Smith – within *touching* distance – before sitting down and letting out a frustrated huff. She blindly held the folder out to Donald, who accepted it and stepped to the side; ignoring Smith while focusing on its contents and letting out a sequence of half-chuckle/snorts while his eyebrows started dancing as he read both the correct and *misread* impressions he'd taken from Smith.

Meanwhile, Laisee had begun a staring contest with Smith while just *barely* touching her knees to his. It wasn't flesh-to-flesh contact, but just enough to confirm what Jaiying had ripped from him when she'd shaken his hand.

"I am *very* disappointed in you! You have been very *rude* to Donald, and you *continue* to annoy *me*!"

Donald looked over at Smith and felt sorry for him. He could remember several instances where *he'd* been on the receiving end of a similar scolding. He took a half step forward and stopped to address Smith.

"Um... May I introduce Lady Laisee Caldarous ... and *you* are?"

Donald prompted him with a tilt towards Laisee's head, but she continued to glare at Smith until she was fed up.

"He is *Barak Pasternak*!" she barked sharply.

Smith looked at her, stunned, while Donald ran through the derivations in his head, then started muttering them aloud.

## Picking up the Pieces

“Something ... bright ... *loud* and bright ... light ... *Lighting?* Lighting... Lighting... Lighting ... *Parsnip?*”

Smith turned with a jerk to face him, before a defeated look came over his face.

### ***In the Security Center***

“What’s going on with Smith, Jaiying?” Wilber asked.

“He’s feeling lost. He’s been found out, and he’s ... *really* depressed right now.”

Dwayne had been watching the monitor and caught many of the same clues Donald had. “Is he still contemplating mayhem?”

Jaiying closed her eyes, but shook her head while pursing her lips in a thin frown.

“He’s wondering how he can commit suicide.” “*\*Mother – Smith wants to kill himself\**”

### ***In the Holding Room***

“Barak, you will *NOT* commit suicide on *MY WATCH!*”

Donald flinched almost as much as Smith had, then remembered the complications involved.

“By the *GODS*, man! The paperwork *ALONE* precludes it!”

### ***In the Security Center***

“That’s better,” Jaiying muttered. “Now he’s too *confused* to think about killing himself.”

### ***In the Holding Room***

Smith had been temporarily shocked out of his depression and was looking up at Donald in confusion.

Donald was shivering uncontrollably as his body tried to reduce its level of tension. After several seconds, it finally allowed his voice to come back at a somewhat conversational level.

“Besides, I’m curious to see if there’s a way we can help each other.” At Smith’s vacant stare, he added, “You know – *Afghanistan?* Home of the Ten Lost *Tribes?* Faridun and his *terrorist cell?*”

Smith blinked as his mind tried to catch up with all the tangents being thrown at it, before finally focusing on one of them.

“What... What do you know about Faridun?” he finally asked them, while taking turns looking between Donald and Laisee. He stopped

and watched when Donald dropped his hands and crossed them over his waist before he spoke.

“Well... We know he runs a cave complex in the Korengal mountains, and he’s got at least two American hostages. We also know he’s got a bunch of women and children in captivity – mostly sex slaves – and my brother’s wife has given me permission to recover them, provided I can do so without creating a treaty violation.”

“A ... a *treaty violation*? With *Afghanistan*?”

Laisee was finding it *much* easier to read him now, then considered the leeway Lili had given her. She reached out and touched his hand to draw his attention, then smiled sweetly at him when he did so.

“Barak, do you know what a Non-Disclosure Agreement is?”

### ***In the Security Center***

Wilber said, “Shit,” then despondently threw his pen down on the desktop. “Elizabeth ... we will be *three* for dinner,” he muttered to no one, then slouched back in his chair with a sigh.

He closed his eyes and tilted his head *completely* back – rolling it slightly from side to side to help ease the tension he’d been holding. Dwayne looked on in dawning understanding as Jaiying began to giggle.

“Don’t worry, Uncle Wilber. We can put him in the Center. We appear to have *plenty* of room.”

He opened his eyes, then rolled his head to look at her, getting another burst of giggles out of her for his trouble before she slipped off her chair and headed for the door.

“Jaiying! He’s not bunking with *me!*” Dwayne called out, finally getting a laugh out of Wilber when she cast them back a casual wave before the door closed behind her.

Wilber sat up with a groan before grabbing his clipboard and flipping through the pages dejectedly.

He pulled out three pages stapled together near the bottom of the stack and handed them to Dwayne.

“If you *would*, please, Grasshopper, see that Lady Laisee gets those for our new guest.” Wilber pushed back his chair and stood up to stretch, while Dwayne flipped through the pages and tried not to chuckle at Wilber’s teasing.

“Uhhh... These might not work for him. He’s not an American citizen.”



## Picking up the Pieces

Wilber took them back and looked at them for a few seconds.

"I'll see what I can do. Just have her tell him it's representative of what he can expect. I'm sure we can come up with *something* binding just for him."

Wilber looked down at the monitor, seeing that it displayed a calm conversation in progress between Laisee and Smith, with occasional finger admonishments from Laisee to emphasize some particular point she was making. Smith looked suitably cowed during this, but Wilber could see she was softening the lecture to the point where Smith was giving up a smile upon occasion.

Wilber smirked, wondering if he'd be so calm after signing the NDA. He looked up at the clock, then glanced at his watch to compare the two. All told, this was three and a half hours he'd *never* get back.

### *In the Center's Guest Wing*

Smith sat in one of the four chairs in his new quarters. It was actually quite nice, with a double bed, a small table with four chairs, two dressers, two bookcases, and a private bath. Well, actually just a shower. Overall, they were *much* better accommodations than where he'd spent last night...

After his interrogation, his captors, in the persons of Dwayne, Laisee, and Donald, had walked him out of the holding cell – *sans* hood this time – and escorted him up two ramps until they'd exited to a short hallway that opened into a huge space. The 'motor pool' they'd called it. There was a row of windowed offices along one wall, and several large passenger vans and a couple of cars parked inside. As they'd walked past the line of vehicles, he recognized the remains of the rental car he'd driven the day before in various stages of disassembly.

Body panels had been removed, and interior seating had been pulled and set aside – although there were indications the upholstery had been removed and replaced. It was obvious from the bare paint in the trunk that they'd have probably discovered the tools of his trade in the fender wells at some point. They'd even gone to the trouble of removing the *tires* from the rims. He'd thought of mentioning the few items he'd stashed behind the glove box, but caught sight of the entire dashboard sitting beneath a pile of body panels.

He'd closed his eyes and shook his head, then glanced upwards at the ceiling – noting the odd arrangement of tracks on opposite walls giving every indication that the center seam in the roof allowed it to split open. He'd considered what could *possibly* justify having such a huge roof opening, when he'd caught a flicker of movement out of the corner of his eye, and turned to watch as a big cat of some sort slinked

across the huge mural he'd assumed was painted on the far wall. Looking more carefully, he'd finally discerned that it *wasn't* actually a mural, and it wasn't actually a *wall* that it wasn't actually *painted* on.

They'd walked outside into the afternoon sunlight before he'd had a chance to raise a question about it.

Continuing to the large building, they'd routed him through a kitchen; offering him his choice of fruits from the chiller ... something to last him until supper, they'd said. He'd selected a few pieces, and they'd provided a plastic bowl for him to carry them in.

Donald had even pulled off a few sheets of paper towels to use as napkins, and added them to his selections.

Afterwards, he'd been escorted to a hallway that was manned by six guards: two in front of one door, two in front of another door, and two at the hallway entrance. As they'd proceeded to his room, one of the guards followed and remained outside the door with Dwayne, while Donald and Laisee showed him his room and the "facilities" as Laisee had called it. Afterwards, Donald had apologized in advance for any crying sounds coming from the babies located a few doors down from him, and then all three of them left him alone.

At least he was more comfortable now. They'd returned his clothes – cleaned, he'd noted – along with most of his personal belongings, sans ID, phone, and gun, but including his pocketknife.

He'd even been provided a supply of underwear and a couple of changes of outer clothes suitable for the environment; trousers and long-sleeved shirts in denim. The athletic shoes had been in three sizes – with instructions for him to try them on and let them know which ones fit the best. Overall, even after making nice with each other, it looked like they didn't intend for this to be a 'catch and release' situation. Not right away...

He glanced at the orange sitting in the bowl and decided it could be worse. Then he spared a glance at the thin stack of paper sitting next to it printed in legalese using an innocuously large font. Remembering what he'd read, he suddenly considered that worse was *relative*. He picked up the pen they'd given him and slipped it into his shirt pocket. Then he pulled it out and took it to the dresser to stash it in the top drawer – no sense having temptation at his fingertips. He let out a sigh, looked at the clock, then looked at the orange again.

They'd mentioned supper was around six p.m. and he still had over an hour to go. It was a moment's decision, so he grabbed the orange and proceeded to disassemble it – all the while thinking about his rental car, and how he *really* should have gotten the extended insurance policy...

*In the Residence*

Dwayne was just hanging up the secure line in the office when Wilber returned.

“Got confirmation about my phone, Wilber. It was hijacked with software to respond to a ping from a cell tower that could easily be traced. I don’t know how Smith did it, though.” He got up and moved out of the way.

“With *his* resources, I wouldn’t be surprised if he simply called an answering machine somewhere that reprogrammed it remotely,” Wilber muttered.

Wilber sat in the chair Dwayne had just vacated and brought his computer out of standby. He looked up at the modem and the switch, confirming that both his arrays and the outside connection were still down, before opening his local “Smith” folder to update it.

“The geek squad also deciphered the language written on that one USB drive. It was in Hebrew. Translates to ‘Leak’ ... or something like that,” Dwayne added.

Wilber leaned back and turned to look at him with a frown on his face. It had taken him the rest of that evening and well into the next morning to flush every bit of suspect software from both his system and the backups, but he still felt uneasy about them.

Dwayne looked suitably chagrined, and pushed both hands away from himself, wrapped them around the hilt of an imaginary sword, then plunged it into the middle of his chest with a thud.

Wilber smiled and gave out a laugh.

“Mistakes are a *learning* opportunity, Grasshopper. Any idea when he infected our USB dongle?”

Dwayne raised his hands with a shrug and shook his head. “Musta been when I went to the bathroom. At the restaurant most likely. If he did, *I* couldn’t tell – left tattletales on my briefcase that weren’t disturbed. Of course, with *his* background he’s probably got *mad* skills.”

Wilber nodded and turned back to look at his screen before deciding to shut it down. He’d already ordered a replacement system from the Embassy crew, and it was being shipped express from Washington.

Hopefully, they would have included the *extra* toys he’d talked about to tighten up security so this couldn’t happen again.

“Well, I suppose we can ask him. At least find out *when* he did it so you can exercise better caution next time.”

“Na-ah. Not gonna *be* a next time. Gonna arrange for *special* items to be shipped separately. Don’t need to be exposing the project to outside intrusions like this.”

Wilber reached out and laid a hand on his arm.

“Don’t beat yourself up too much, son. Remember that I let *my* guard down and got *kidnapped*. It happens. Just don’t get stupid and try to take out the *first* old man who interviews you.”

Dwayne looked at him in confusion before remembering coming back to the security center later and seeing several guardsmen crowded around the security monitors...

The recording of the take down was being played over and over.

One moment, Smith had launched himself at Donald, and the next, he was on his back and looking up at the ceiling.

They’d had to slow it down to actually *see* what had happened. Then the guard captain, Aineias, had pointed out each motion Donald had made by name and how it’d been applied to the situation.

It’d taken him a moment to realize that Aineias was using Donald as a *teaching* tool for his men.

When he’d walked away afterwards, he began wondering what Donald’s background *really* was...

“Yeah. That old man was really quick,” he murmured, and Wilber started to chuckle.

“Yep! Trained by the very *best*.” Wilber shook his head, then looked at the clock. “Time to clean up for supper. You wanna eat with us, or are you gonna head back to the Center and see if Smith will cooperate over food?”

“I think... Probably yeah. See how he’s doing, and if he’d care to give up any secrets. Any *more* secrets the good Lady hasn’t already pried out of him, anyway.” That was something else he’d heard about but never really seen in action.

That, and the Lady *glowing* like that, and her *daughter*, too.

Wilber stood up, and they went their separate ways, Wilber to his bedroom, and Dwayne back to the Center.

### *In Laisee’s Suite*

“John seems to be content for the moment,” Jaiying said while looking up at her mother, “but I get feelings of failure from him and a sense of embarrassment because of it.”

## Picking up the Pieces

“He is only a man,” Rose pointed out, and all three of them shared a giggle about it.

“We should invite ourselves to supper and see how he behaves with Dwayne,” Jaiying suggested.

“That sounds like a good idea, my girl. It will help keep him off balance, and we may learn more while he and Dwayne work on patching their relationship.”

“Their *relationship*?” Rose asked, but then said, “Oh. Their *working* relationship. That sounds like a learning experience. Do they know about us?”

“I used baby English with John earlier. You were listening. I felt you,” Jaiying stated.

“You weren’t with me, and I was getting bored with the cartoons.”

“We will listen to John and Dwayne as they work out their problems,” Laisee told them. “You girls will be just learning English, but you may speak freely in *\*Standard.\**” “*\*Or speak silently as you please\**” she added silently.

“Has he signed the NDA yet?” Rose asked, and Jaiying closed her eyes for a moment, but shook her head blindly.

“Not yet, but he’s thinking about it,” she said, then paused. “He put the pen away so he wouldn’t do something rash. One of the clauses bothers him.”

“That would be the *transportation* clause,” Laisee muttered, knowing full well the *current* NDA would probably not be enforceable unless Israel was formally introduced to the Ambassador and included in the current level of technology transfers.

“Wilber said he would be working on a revision of the document that would apply only to individuals, but we still need to contact Lili and Radatel to make sure they will stand by it,” she added.

“There really isn’t that much to change, Mother, and even if it wouldn’t be enforceable by Earth’s laws, I can ensure John won’t reveal us to anyone besides those who already know about us.”

“Yes, my girl. I am aware of your special talents in that regard.”

Laisee reached over and hugged her daughter.

Rose joined in so she wouldn’t feel left out, and Laisee included her as part of their extended family – which seemed poised to grow by one, or three more, or perhaps even *more*, depending on how John might be able to advise them about Faridun’s operations and how best to intervene.

### ***In the Guest Hallway***

Dwayne spoke to one of the three guards outside of Donald's room and was told Donald and three Ladies were in residence, so he decided to leave things be and headed down the hall to Smith's door.

### ***In the Babies' Room***

Maya opened her eyes and quietly said, "Dwayne was going to remind you of supper, but he has continued to the room of John Smith."

Donald looked up from his sleeping daughter and smiled at her with the pride of a proud father.

"She's finally asleep," he whispered, then watched as Spring Blossom got up, took Faith from him, and put her back in the crib. She stayed there for a minute to watch the babies sleep, then turned back to them with a smile.

"So... Who wants to eat first?"

Déjà, already sitting on the bed with Maya, looked at her and nodded her head. Maya glanced at Donald and looked back before tilting her head in his direction. Déjà looked at the clock and grinned, knowing that forty-five minutes was not enough to wear out *either* of her lovers.

She kissed Maya, then came over and hugged and kissed Donald, before taking hold of Spring Blossom's hand and leading her out the door.

Before the door closed, they could hear Déjà tell the guards that Lady Maya was not to be disturbed, and saw two guards break off and follow them away, while Maya's guard remained behind.

Maya and Donald looked at each other, then at the clock. Forty-four minutes was not that long, but quality and not *quantity* was what counted. She reached down and pulled the covers away, while Donald stood and left a short pile of clothes behind him on the way to join her.

### ***At John's Room***

The knock on the door was unexpected, but John was surprised to find Dwayne standing there awkwardly when he opened it.

"Good afternoon, Agent Sparks."

"Agent Smith..." The silence lingered until Dwayne's brain finally kicked back in. "The staff will be preparing a light supper at six p.m., and you're invited. You may also access the pantry by yourself at any time day or night. Your guard will assist you as necessary."

## Picking up the Pieces

John looked at the guard – *up* at the guard – while considering the implications of his situation. He was not *officially* under house arrest, but it was obvious he'd be supervised everywhere he went until they cut him loose. He was grateful that he had a *private* toilet now, then considered a show of faith on his part would probably be appropriate at this point.

"Agent..." John paused, then decided to drop the pretenses. "Dwayne, I think I would enjoy having dinner in your company. I'm sure we would have at least one or two topics of interest to pursue," he offered, then held out his hand.

Dwayne hesitated only a moment before accepting this symbol of truce, if only temporarily.

"We'll see you at six, then. Wilber will be dining at the house with his wife, but Don should be there." He let go of John's hand and stepped back from the door. "I'm right down the hall this trip, John. Wilber decided to keep me *in* house for the time being."

"I'm sorry, Dwayne. I'm sure that's *my* fault. Didn't mean to bugger things up so badly for you."

Dwayne smiled while chuckling softly.

"Just another day on the Reservation," he said, then raised his hand in parting before turning to head back to his room, hearing the door close behind him within two steps.

### ***In Asad and Nurani's Room***

Asad had heard voices in the hallway, and cracked the door open to see what was going on. Agent Sparks was speaking to someone down the hall, and the tone of the response had identified itself as Agent Smith. He closed the door and leaned against it while Nurani saw his distress and came to him.

*"<What is it, Asad?>"*

*"<It is Smith! Smith is out there! Across the hall! Agent Sparks is speaking to him!>"*

*"<Oh, Asad! What can we do? I don't want to go with Smith! I am afraid of him!>"*

*"<I... Maybe I can speak with Agent Sparks? Maybe he will let us stay here?>"*

*"<Asad, ask him. Please, I don't want to go with Smith!>"*

Asad hugged her, then turned and cracked open the door just enough to see Sparks reach out his hand to Smith. It was *worse* than he thought! He had to tell Sparks how deceptive Agent Smith was,

always pressuring him to answer questions whose answers he had *no knowledge of! There!* Sparks was turning. He was walking this way! He had to act *now!*

Asad waited until Smith's door was closed before opening his door wide and waving frantically at Dwayne. The American paused and waved back, then approached when Asad anxiously waved him over.

"Please, Agent Sparks, we must speak about Agent *Smith*. Nurani... Nurani cannot be taken *back* with him! He ... he isn't what he *seems!* He is *not...*"

Dwayne held up his hand and Asad stopped. Dwayne looked around him before tilting his head towards the door he'd stepped out of, then finally gestured towards it with his hand.

Asad glanced behind him to make sure he would miss both guards as he backed up to the door.

Dwayne stopped at the doorway and Asad waved him in, before closing it behind him. He looked around the room and caught sight of Nurani peeking around the door jam of the bathroom in fear.

### *In Laisee's Suite*

Jaiying had been keeping loose tabs on Smith, but followed Dwayne when she'd felt the stress coming from the interpreter couple.

"Mother, Asad and Nurani are very worried. Asad watched Dwayne and John meeting in the hallway. Asad has reached out to him with their fears."

Laisee had just returned from the facilities with Rose, and now they both extended out to see what the problem was.

"We should go and help them," Rose said, and looked up at Laisee imploringly.

"Yes," Laisee agreed. "Asad and Nurani do not understand what is going on, and will need assurances to ease their minds."

"And we should offer them *asylum!*" Jaiying insisted. "They cannot go home *now*. Her family would *kill her!* And maybe *him!*"

Laisee looked at her, then down at Rose when she tugged on her hand. "She *can't* go back, Mama Laisee. Not *now...*"

Laisee extended out, and then *within* ... finally letting out a quiet sigh, followed by a faint titter.

"And this happened *when?*"

"Yesterday... Perhaps last night," Jaiying suggested.



## Picking up the Pieces

"They felt *very* alone," Rose added helpfully.

"It actually might have been a few days before, but I really felt their despair last night," Jaiying added. "Anyway, we'll need them to help deal with the refugees that Gra- Donald will be bringing back from Afghanistan... Maybe."

Laisee looked down at their smiling faces while wondering if they'd planned to spring this on her later, or were just waiting for a choice opportunity.

"Well, we'd best go and check on them, then," Laisee muttered. "It wouldn't do for Nurani to become *too* stressful."

"No, Mama Laisee," Rose agreed. "Not *now*..."

### *In Asad and Nurani's Room*

Dwayne brought his hands up waist high, and with palms down, waved them slowly up and down a few inches until Nurani timidly came out of the bathroom and stood in front of him. Asad hurried around him and stood next to her, finally hugging her, one-armed as they both faced him.

"Asad... Nurani... We have found a problem with John Smith..." He paused while Asad translated that for Nurani.

"John Smith does not work for the American government," he continued, again, waiting for Asad's translation.

"John Smith is an Israeli, ahh ... *investigator*, and is part of a government anti-terrorist group based in Israel. He has information for us about a terrorist in Afghanistan who is holding American and Afghan prisoners – some of them women and children."

The couple looked at each other, somewhat relieved, but also knew the Israelis didn't care for Afghans any more than the Americans did.

Dwayne had no way of knowing what they were saying to each other, but the stress in their body language was telling him the news wasn't exactly overjoying. He was about to continue when there was a knock at the door, and one of the guards opened it to reveal Lady Laisee standing there, with Jaiying and Rose beside her.

"Dwayne! The girls and I were out for a walk and we decided to visit our guests for a few minutes," Laisee announced cheerfully, then entered the room without waiting for an invitation, while letting the guard close the door behind them.

Laisee looked at Dwayne, pointed to one of the chairs, then motioned for him to sit. Once he sat down, she took Asad and Nurani by their hands and drew them over to their bed, where she gestured

for them to sit as well. Rose walked over to Dwayne and held out her arms, finally getting him to lift her up into his lap. Laisee pulled out another chair and drew it closer to the couple before sitting down and letting Jaiying climb into her lap.

Laisee addressed Dwayne, while still looking at the couple sitting on the bed in front of her.

“Dwayne, I believe you were updating our guests as to the *current* change in circumstances?” she murmured softly.

“Uhhh... Yes. Yes, my Lady Laisee. I was just telling them Smith was not who we thought he was, but we intend to use information he has to help us find–”

“Thank you, Dwayne,” she said quietly, cutting him off before smiling at Asad and Nurani.

“Asad... Nurani... I am so *very* sorry you have had such a terrible experience in coming to help us. I understand your fears, and I assure you it was *never* our intention to involve you with John Smith – who is no longer involved with *anything* that will affect your lives.”

She waited as they spoke between themselves. When Nurani reminded him that Americans could not be trusted, she took that as an invitation.

*“<Nurani, it is true that Americans sometimes use deception to fulfill their needs – just as Israelis do – but I must confess that there are no Americans in this room, other than Dwayne. And Dwayne works for ME.>”*

Dwayne heard his name, but didn’t know in what context. He wisely decided to remain mute for the time being and simply held Rose in his lap. He did note the sudden shock from both Asad and Nurani, though.

*“\*Mother ... asylum?\**”

*“<My daughter reminds me that circumstances in your homeland are somewhat volatile for you. She fears for your lives should you seek to return to your families. I am authorized to offer you safe refuge here on an indefinite basis until you decide where you would like to live. I cannot promise the Americans will grant you citizenship, but we will make every effort to find you safe shelter within their society if that is what you choose. The Americans ... we have an arrangement they find of benefit to them. Because of that, they grant us certain ... concessions. Upon occasion,>”* she added with a tilt to her head.

Her speech had been long, and she sat back and folded her hands around Jaiying while they stared at her for a few more seconds.

## Picking up the Pieces

Then they began whispering to each other, but shortly Asad turned to Laisee.

"Would you please excuse us?" he asked, then without waiting, he took hold of Nurani and almost dragged her to the bathroom. They could hear muffled voices from behind the bathroom door as they continued their conversation ... now verging on an argument.

Laisee sighed, then turned her head to Dwayne.

"They still have concerns about John Smith, but he is no longer an issue for them. There is *another* issue regarding them returning to their home. The girl would likely be killed by her parents or siblings ... something about family honor?"

"All over the Middle-East," he said with a frown. "Girl looks *cross-eyed* at a boy, and they'll *stone* her ... or *worse*."

"That's true, Mother," Jaiying said. "I learned that on Uncle Wilber's computer. Earth is *not* ready to join the Commonwealth. Even *Wilder* wasn't as bad as this."

"Wilder was an *accident*," Laisee reminded her. "At least they had one *common* society ... *nothing* like these Earthlings."

Dwayne listened while they talked like he wasn't there, suddenly realizing how poor his planet measured up to even a *mediocre* civilization. That was something Jaiying noticed before she spoke to her mother again.

"They have Uncle Wilber and Uncle Dwayne to help them *grow*, Mother," she said, and sensed his feelings begin to perk up at that comment. "All they need is a couple of dozen big countries to grow up like *they* have. Then they might be able to bring order out of this chaos so that—" she stopped when the bathroom door opened, and the couple came out.

"Miss... Lady Laisee," Asad began, then pulled Nurani closer. "We... We would very much like to accept your kind offer to let us stay here until ... until you tire of having us around?"

Laisee smiled, and Jaiying slid off her lap to go over and hug Nurani around her legs, while Rose left Dwayne to go and hug Asad. Laisee stood and smiled at them both, with Dwayne standing only seconds later.

"I am sure you will find safety here with us. You might also find suitable employment for your skills, or perhaps choose to learn *new* skills of your own desire," Laisee said, then turned to Dwayne. "Dwayne, dinner is at six ... *o'clock*, is the correct expression?"

"Yes, my Lady," he said, then struggled to control his smile.

“Asad, you and your companion are welcome to attend. The girls and I will be there, with Donald, Dwayne, and ... and John Smith...”

Laisee left it hanging and watched when Nurani gripped Asad’s arm tightly, but she already knew what he was going to say.

“Please forgive us, but ... we would prefer to eat a little later. I’m afraid Nurani is not quite ready yet.”

Laisee smiled and nodded her understanding, then walked to the door and addressed one of the five guardsmen standing outside.

“Agent John Smith is *not* allowed to interfere with Asad and Nurani in *any* way. He may only speak with them by *their* permission. Otherwise, he will come no closer than necessary to pass in the hallways.”

“Yes, my Lady,” he responded. Then she heard him update the watch supervisor on his communicator.

Laisee turned back to see Asad whispering to Nurani, and watched as her face brightened.

“Dwayne, you should go freshen up for dinner. The girls and I would like to stay and visit with our guests for a little while longer,” she said, then settled into the chair again while Rose and Jaiying drew Asad and Nurani back to the bed and sat next to them.

Just as Dwayne left their room, it suddenly struck him that Asad had accepted Laisee’s offer to stay for as long as they wanted?

### ***In John Smith’s Room***

Smith sat in his room while repeatedly stealing glances at the clock. He was showered, shaved – with an electric razor provided by his hosts – and had brushed his teeth once again with the brush he’d carried with him from his cell...

After his shower, he’d looked at himself in the bathroom mirror and found that he had the beginnings of a nice set of bruises already forming in several locations on his body. He didn’t remember being hit *that* many times, but the numbers added up, and he’d been nailed quite well – and quite *easily*.

His instructor would have been embarrassed for him...

He spared another look around the rather sterile room and thought maybe a few plants would brighten things up a bit. Looking up, he considered they should still thrive in the diffuse daylight provided by the skylight. It was a shame there were no books, though.

He looked back at the clock – ten minutes to six...

## Picking up the Pieces

He'd received his first *official* demands from his hosts twenty minutes ago. One of the big American guards had knocked on his door, then calmly and very politely informed him he was to have no contact with the interpreters located a few doors down from him, and that, if passing in the hallways, he was to remain mute and away from them at all times. Then he'd been thanked for his cooperation, and the door was closed for him. On the whole, it wasn't much of a demand. The Afghans didn't seem willing to give him the answers he needed, and the woman was *terrified* of him for some reason...

He looked up again – nine minutes to six...

The guard had called him "Agent Smith" even though the woman, *Lady Laisee Caldarous*, had somehow revealed his *true* name after that foolish attempt on Don. As a matter of convenience, they'd allowed that he would *continue* to be addressed as Agent Smith ... or *John* Smith, or simply John, so that it wouldn't upset his handlers back home.

For some reason, he'd laughed and admitted that he was off the clock on this one – having been captured, had effectively rendered his identity *non-existent* to the Israeli department he'd worked for. He'd lamented the loss of his pay and pension, but the Americans reminded him they'd still provide him room and board – for his cooperation – then discussed the NDA in somewhat vague terms. They'd given him time to read through it, and he'd noted it specifically mentioned references to the American government. Agent Sparks had said *Agent Milton* would be looking into a "personalized" version just for him...

He looked up again – eight minutes to six...

After dancing around the issue of the NDA, Don decided to address the elephant in the room, and asked him outright just *why* he was so intent on finding Faridun in the first place. That had nearly ended in a stalemate until Lady Laisee asked him if it was because of his little sister. He'd expected to become angry at her question, but the way she'd presented herself as a sympathetic listener and rested her hand on his arm had calmed him down. Instead of acting out, he'd looked away while gathering his thoughts.

They'd *known*. They'd certainly discovered a *lot* more than he'd ever expected them to in only twenty-four hours. That meant their resources were quite extensive, so he'd told them *exactly* why he wanted Faridun's location so badly. *That*, they could understand. His *Taliban* name, they couldn't.

He'd been tempted to let them figure it out for themselves, but decided to simply show his hand. He'd admitted he had suspicions the person he'd known in England might possibly be the *same* person who'd been suggested as a potential supplier for the Israeli drug trade.

The simple fact that he'd written down Faridun's contact information while in school and then called home to have that binder mailed to him in Tel Aviv made it somewhat easier. Over a period of weeks, he'd reached out and finally managed to get a response to his personal queries. They'd been cautious at first, but slowly became more friendly. Over the next several weeks, he'd seemed to be making inroads with Faridun – right up until his department had gotten intelligence back indicating there was a secret *mole* within the Mossad whose name was *Daanesh*.

Coincidentally, because of his generally “wise” counsel and “scholastic” achievements, “Daanesh” had been the Islamic name Faridun had nicknamed him with back in school. Not so wise now, as he'd never considered Faridun might have the resources to find out what *he'd* been up to after all these years, or why he'd been so persistent in reaching out to him. It had put him in a bad light with his handlers and made it difficult for them to maintain trust in him. This had forced cut offs from many of his resources until he could prove himself – if he ever could.

Learning someone needed interpreters for that *particular* set of Pashto dialects was one of the last threads he'd followed, which got him detained at an American Indian Reservation on the far side of America...

He was about to look up at the clock again when someone knocked on the door. He got up to open it, which revealed two guards standing there. It would appear that his escorts to the evening meal had arrived. He faced them with a thin smile on his face – wondering how this meal would compare to the happy family dinners he'd shared with his parents and sibling back on the kibbutz.

### ***In the Babies' Room***

Maya heard laughter coming from behind the hallway door, but it quieted down before the door opened. Déjà walked in, followed by Spring Blossom. A glance at the disheveled bedclothes brought smiles to their faces before they both glanced to the crib to see the babies were still asleep.

“Better get ready for dinner,” Spring Blossom quietly told them, prompting Donald to slip out of bed, followed by Maya.

Déjà took Maya's hand and pulled her down for a kiss before letting her go with Donald to wash up. Meanwhile, Spring Blossom began straightening up the room, all the while sparing glances at the crib to make sure she was being quiet enough for the sleeping infants.

After refreshing themselves and getting dressed, Donald and Maya hugged them both, then left for their dinner engagement.

*In the Dining Room*

Dinner was being served buffet-style, with a selection of meats, vegetables, and fruits, along with dinner rolls and an assortment of spreads. Earth-style salad not being a Kantite staple, it was prominently absent from the offerings.

A round table had been procured for this particular dinner that allowed everyone equal status during the meal.

After serving themselves, Laisee shared space with Sai on her right and Dwayne on her left. Across from her sat Smith, who had Donald seated on his right and Maya on his far right. The girls, Rose and Jaiying, were seated between Sai and Smith.

Conversation remained somewhat sedate from early on, and was usually restricted to the taste of various offerings. The only persons speaking outright were the staff – wives of the garrison – as they made periodic sweeps around the diners, making sure everything was satisfactory.

Finally, Donald couldn't hold it in any longer, and turned to ask Smith, "By any chance, are you related to *Boris Pasternak*?"

Everyone froze and looked at them; Donald seeming wide-eyed with curiosity; Smith looking at him oddly, and Dwayne smiling quietly ... with the rest of the non-Earthlings completely confused by the question. As the silence continued, Laisee delicately cleared her throat, and Donald looked at her.

"Donald ... who is Boris Pasternak?"

"Uhhh ... a famous Russian author. A *poet*, really. He wrote a book about a Russian Doctor – Doctor Zhivago – that spans from about 1905 to 1922. In Russia, I mean."

"It made a very *long* movie," Dwayne inserted helpfully, then looked invitingly at Smith, who glanced around the table before speaking.

"I ... my father once told me my grandfather was related ... somehow. Cousins, or something like that."

"That is remarkable, John," Donald told him. "What's the expression? Six degrees of separation? I'm more of a Melville fan myself, but I sat down and actually read through that book twice; once in the original Italian, and then I picked up a copy they'd finally printed in Russian."

"Wait. It came out in *Italian* first?" Dwayne asked him, getting Donald to turn and look at him.

"He had to get it smuggled it out of Russia," he explained. "The political structure back then wasn't as forgiving as it is now –

relatively. He sent it to a guy in Italy, where it got translated into Italian before it was published and distributed. They distributed that version pretty widely back in ... 1957, I believe. Then they did a Russian version and submitted it for review by the Nobel Committee. He won the Nobel Prize in Literature for it, which embarrassed the *hell* out of the Soviet Union back then. Sad thing is, the Soviets threatened to deport him to the West, so he declined the prize to stay in Mother Russia. I understand one of his sons finally accepted the award almost thirty years after his death.”

There was silence after that, until Sai said, “Donnie, you’re such a *font* of obscure trivia,” which got a few chuckles from around the table at his expense.

“Well ... long transits with nothing else to do,” he murmured.

After that, things seemed to loosen up a bit, and conversation finally picked up by the time dinner was starting to wind down.

### ***In the Residence***

Wilber leaned back in his chair while his printer squirted out his final version of the modified NDA. Once finished, he picked it out of the tray and read it over for completeness before reaching for the phone to call the security office. A glance at the clock showed it was almost six-thirty, which meant Ling should still be up and on the premises somewhere. Then he remembered the semi-formal dinner going on in the Center and figured she’d probably be in her quarters and waiting for Aineias to finish supervising the staff.

Still, that’s what security was for, so they connected him with her, and he arranged to meet her in her office at the Center in fifteen minutes. With Laisee busy, Ling would be his link to Lili for her approval of the new wording of the revised NDA.

### ***In the Dining Room***

Smith was feeling much more relaxed within this circle of individuals, even after staff had cleared all but their glasses and a few plates of finger-food. He’d finally pieced together the relationship between Laisee and the little brown-haired girl, her daughter Jaiying, who was almost a head shorter than the *younger* blonde-haired girl, Rose, who was the child of a couple who were “stuck at work.” Sai Tal turned out to be the *mother* of Maya Tal, thus explaining the similarities in their looks and buxom figures. Dwayne he’d met only recently, but seemed to be comfortable in this situation, as did Don, who didn’t seem to have a care in the world.

He could certainly understand why, as he’d watched Don’s interaction with Maya throughout the meal. Their behavior indicated a



## Picking up the Pieces

long and loving relationship that was still blessed by an underlying passion.

It suddenly struck him that business with Don and Sai had been a *setup*, and he settled back in his chair in concentration. If it *was* a setup, then when did Don and Sai have time to plan it with Dwayne and Wilber? And what role did *Mary* play in it? Was Don giving instructions to them all along in that funny language they all seemed to speak? And the guards – wielding *swords*? *Glowing* swords?

“*\*Mother, he’s getting confused and worried again,\**” Jaiying shared helpfully, and Laisee nodded to her before turning a dazzling smile to Smith.

“John, you must have so many questions about things that go on around here,” she said softly. “Please be assured that we mean you no harm. We mean no harm for *anyone* here. My stepmother allowed the Center to be established here as tribute to my stepbrother, Rondal. It was his desire to help his native tribe, and eventually expand that level of service and support to all the *rest* of the Native American tribes.”

While Smith was digesting that, Donald felt the need to vent.

“You know, you look at the maps – the *old* maps – of *all* the tribal territories taken over by the white man, and it’s *appalling* how our tribes were treated. *Forced* off their native lands, *cheated* by the white man, and nearly driven to *extinction*! The great buffalo hunters who killed vast *herds* of our staples, just to leave them behind to *rot*! *We* killed to *eat*!”

“Donald...” Laisee said softly, which immediately shut him up and drew his focus to her.

“I apologize, my Lady,” he said, then bowed his head to her in placation before continuing. “I understand Rondal Caldar was also born here, and it was his desire to change the way Americans treated each other, starting right here at home ... so to speak.”

It wasn’t the *exact* truth, but had been at the back of his mind for several decades until Lili had finally given it her approval – *without* telling him, of course.

As Smith was digesting that, Laisee considered another diversion and turned to Dwayne.

“Dwayne, I’m curious how *you* became involved with us. How did you happen to join us here?”

“Ahh... Wilber was assigned to the Embassy in Washington, D.C., but he was spending more and more time here. Back in ’99, he contacted some of his friends in the ICE office in Seattle, looking for a

volunteer. They didn't have any, but I was in the FBI, and they knew me from when I'd worked with them on a few cases. They recommended me, and Wilber flew out and we talked for a while. Then he offered me an interview with Ron Cal after the first of the year," he said, then paused to glance at Donald before continuing.

"I was getting ready to visit my folks for Thanksgiving when he called the FBI office in Seattle and told me I could get a jump on things if I could get to Arizona, ASAP," he said, then looked around a little sheepishly. "My interview with Ron Cal was rather ... awkward."

Dwayne wasn't sure, but he thought he heard a snicker from across the table.

"Well, I'm delighted you're part of the family now, Dwayne. Nathan Thomas was your predecessor, but unfortunately, he was ... reassigned," she said delicately, which finally triggered a guffaw from Donald, and brought giggles from the girls.

"Donald! Girls!"

"I'm sorry, Laisee. *Reassigned?* He got the girl *pregnant*, and they made him fess *up* to it!" Donald chortled, while wiping tears of laughter from his eyes, before turning to Smith. "Fell in love with an illegal alien – at first *sight*, mind you – and they couldn't keep their *hands* off each other. Put a bun in her oven, and ten months later, *out* pops a baby girl." He turned and gestured across the table. "Our beautiful little Rose, here ... and *all* because of Wilber."

"What? What'd I do *now?*" Wilber groused from the doorway.

### ***In the Kitchen***

Ling entered the kitchen and snuck up behind her man, who was standing by the door to the dining room and spying on their guests.

She reached around his waist and squeezed him through his pants before making a move on his zipper.

"Ling! Not *now!*" he whispered loudly, then spun around to steal a kiss from her laughing lips. He held her tightly and reveled in having found such a perfect bond-mate.

"But I *have* to be more attentive to you now that you've experienced Lady *Laisee's* charms," she protested, then tilted her head back and let him kiss her again.

They finally separated, having become the center of an observant group of wives and young adult daughters.

Aineias glanced out the window again when Donald burst into laughter and began talking to Agent Smith. He checked the kitchen

## Picking up the Pieces

clock – already hovering close to seven – and looked at the remaining staff before picking out the lead and addressing her.

“Sabina, they appear to be down to drinks and a few crackers. You may dismiss as many of your staff as you see fit.”

“*Thank you, my Captain,*” she said flirtingly, then turned to her crew to delegate the remaining tasks.

Ling noticed a stool by a counter and walked over to sit and wait it out. Things seemed to be going well, and Donald appeared to be behaving. Of course, it all might *change* in the next few weeks, but that was in the future and *completely* out of her hands. At least it *should* be. Lili had *promised* her.

She closed her eyes and extended outwards, feeling the ... six guardsmen waiting in the hallway outside the dining room, and the other five in the guest wing. She shook her head slowly and wondered if Lili would *ever* lift the heightened security for their Imperial guests, before remembering how the Royal Homestead had been assaulted by a *ground* force that had led to the death of one of the Royal family and her companion.

She opened her eyes and glanced at the off-duty guardsmen sharing quiet confidences on the far side of the pantry – along with leftovers – the sight of it making her smile.

*‘Imperials... Always thinking with their stomachs,’* she thought to herself.

She couldn’t remember where she’d heard that before, but it was reassuring to see her Captain’s men enjoying themselves while stationed at this new Healer Cluster – now rather ambiguously classified as having achieved “hostile” environment status.

Instead of dwelling on it, she turned her focus back to the diners. Lili had been insistent – Donald *must* remain in compliance, or the visit by Senior Xue would go poorly.

### ***In the Dining Room***

Donald waved Wilber over after he’d stopped giggling at the pained expression on his face.

“Telling tales out of class, Wilber. Told John here how you lost Nathan to that siren from foreign shores,” he said, getting a knowing nod back from him as he walked up to the table. “You still hungry? Probably got leftover’s in the back. Good food. Didn’t *have* staff the last time I was here. *My* cooking *sucks*.”

Wilber stood at the table between Laisee and Sai, before dropping a folder in front of himself.

“Don, as I recall, if it requires more than popping the top and *drinking* it, you don’t cook at *all*,” he said, which prompted a slight pause before quiet laughter worked its way out of several diners.

“Alas, I’ve had to cut back,” Donald said with a sigh, while resting his hand on Maya’s. “I’m a whole *new* man now, and I’ve got a *new* set of responsibilities.”

Laisee smiled when she watched Maya rest her opposite hand atop Donald’s...

She’d seen Maya’s ups and downs while Rondal was out playing the part of the Demon of the Commonwealth, but also seen how close she’d come to being sacrificed to Lili’s temper. Maya’s submission had been painful to watch but she’d come out of it a better person – still focused on Healer service, true, but now accepting the political realities *everyone* in the Royal family faced on a daily basis.

*Rondal*, of course, would never do as First Lord, but as her father’s First *Sword* – *that* was what he was best suited for. It remained to be seen how he could best apply himself with that troublesome little complication of him being officially *dead*...

Her attention was drawn to Wilber when he slid the folder over in front of her and stared into her eyes – her cue as to what he desired from her – so she reached down and brushed a finger against the hand still holding the folder.

‘Yes, *Wilber*. You may share to me’ she pushed to him.

‘*This is the new NDA. Ling got me in touch with Lili, and Lili has reviewed it, and approved it for use with Smith*’

‘*Thank you, Wilber*’

The room became quiet when she opened the folder and pulled out three pages stapled together from within. Reading it didn’t take very long, even with the specific restrictions and penalty clauses included. Large fonts also helped. She smiled and looked up at Smith.

“John, we find ourselves at a *turning* point in your life. We could simply let you *go* ... but we know you would have certain concerns regarding your ... *experiences* with us.”

Smith looked around at the faces at the table, before focusing back on her.

“You said... You said you didn’t mean me any harm,” he said quietly, and Wilber raised just his fingers to draw his attention.

“John... Laisee speaks the truth. We don’t mean *anyone* any harm here. This is a Healing Center, where the ladies provide counseling,

## Picking up the Pieces

and various illnesses are dealt with whenever possible. Now, it's true we're very low key, and there's a very good *reason* for it. That's why those we work for insist on the Non-Disclosure Agreement. It establishes a very *specific* set of guidelines to live by for those we consider to be insiders."

He turned his attention to Maya and stared directly at her. "Of course, sometimes someone slips through the *cracks*, but we eventually catch up with them."

Maya blushed appropriately for her indiscretions with Doctor Wells, but Smith was still looking at Wilber and didn't see it.

"Guidelines ... to – to *live* by?"

Donald turned to Smith and tried to explain it in common terms.

"It's a simple agreement that you won't say anything to anybody about what you've seen here, heard here, or experienced here. Not that you couldn't be prevented from *doing* so, but it's always much better to have *full* cooperation, rather than something like ... like..." He paused to look at Laisee. "What'd you guys do Henry if he tried to be a tattletale? Was it projectile vomiting, or talking in gibberish?"

Laisee closed her eyes and covered them with the one hand that wasn't folded across her waist. She finally pinched the bridge of her nose lightly, before pulling her hand down to address the question.

"I believe it was projectile vomiting. Henry was a non-believer, until Wilber and – well, it was still a concern at the time. He didn't suffer any other ... alterations."

"That's a polite way of saying posthypnotic *suggestion*," Donald whispered loudly, and saw Smith relax. He apparently thought himself resistant to hypnosis. Obviously, he hadn't considered the ramifications of the *transportation* clause yet.

"Laisee, may I please see the version that's being used now?" Donald asked, and she slid it across the table to him.

He turned it around and leaned closer to Smith while keeping the paper flat on the table between them.

"This here ... that's where you're not allowed to blab about us," he said, then continued down the page. "This part – speaking, writing, *any* form of mechanical reproduction or transmission – that means no pictures, movies, telephone conversations, audio recordings, etc... Oh *look!* It's *generic* now! You can be from *anywhere*, and it *still* binds you!"

Smith glanced at him as if he was nuts, before reading it down to the bottom by himself.

“John, you will note there is no termination clause,” Laisee said softly. “There is an expectation that our confidences will be kept in *perpetuity*.”

“Of course, if you were under *duress*, then we’d like to be informed of whom we should be contacting to *correct* the problem,” Wilber pointed out helpfully.

“John, you said that your *own* people already wrote you off,” Dwayne reminded him, and Smith looked at him in confusion.

“I watched the recordings,” he added, getting a frown back from Smith, before he looked down at the NDA once again.

“This transportation clause... It says that ... that *your* side gets to decide if I get to stay, or if I have to go. Why is that?” he asked.

Heads swiveled until the majority of them landed on Wilber.

“John, if things go sour, we can’t very well leave you hanging in the breeze,” he said. “Consider that to be your semi-permanent *vacation* clause. If someone gets the impression that your life is superfluous to existence, then we can arrange for you to effectively disappear from the face of the Earth.”

Wilber left out the word *literally*, but it looked like Smith was finally starting to waver anyway.

“You could consider it *company* travel, John,” Donald offered. “You outlive your welcome *here*, and we simply find somewhere *else* you can gain useful employment. It’s all about being *useful*, John. Doing something of benefit to society as a *whole*, or to a *group* ... or even just your immediate *family*. As long as you’re supporting stability, and you find *gratification* in that support, we consider it a win-win for *both* sides.”

“Both sides?”

“For both us *and* you ... and whomever or whatever you’re helping, John,” Wilber continued. “I’m here because I *want* to be here. The work I’m doing to support the Center will pay off dividends even *beyond* my lifetime. It’s also the place where I met my wife. Besides, retirement sounds boring, and I’m not ready to give all this up just *yet*.”

Smith looked at all of them, searching the eyes of every person at the table for some idea of what he was letting himself in for.

There was that one remaining question, though.

“You’ve gone to all this trouble, but ... what, *exactly*, do you expect from me in return?”

## Picking up the Pieces

He watched as they all looked at each other again, before Laisee nodded to Donald, who then turned in his seat to face him properly.

“John, *aside* from the issues addressed by the NDA, you have information we might be able to use to our advantage in recovering prisoners from Faridun. The *only* reason we got involved is that a young pregnant woman in the tribe has a husband missing over in Afghanistan. We *think* we tracked down his location to a set of caves in the Korengal Mountains. We also discovered a small group of women and children – sex slaves to the Taliban – in the same set of caves. We’d very much like to see them recovered safely.”

“You expect me to help you attack Faridun on his own *ground*?”

“Wasn’t that what *you* were planning?” Wilber asked him. “You weren’t just gonna talk someone into dropping *bombs* on him, were you?”

“Wilber, we *cannot* allow that! Lili was *very* specific! We cannot–” Laisee stopped when she realized what she was saying.

“Who is Lili?” Smith asked, and Donald had a moment of *déjà vu*.

“Sign the NDA and we can tell you,” he murmured in the sudden silence, getting Smith to turn back to him.

“You’ll tell me who Lili is if I sign the NDA?”

“John, you sign the NDA, and we’ll tell you *anything* you want to know – the *truth*, mind you – about *whatever* we’re allowed to tell you, and in as much *nauseating* detail as you can stand,” Donald quietly promised him, triggering yet *another* episode of *déjà vu*.

After several more seconds of silence, Donald slowly reached over and took a pen from Wilber before setting it in front of Smith.

“Right there on that bottom line,” he murmured, then tapped the paper in front of him.

“Please sign it Barak Pasternak so it reflects *reality* as we all know it,” he added, and Smith looked up at him, then back down at the paper.

He lifted each page and looked it over once again, before picking up the pen and pausing with it in his hand. He finally clicked it open, signed in the space indicated, and wrote in the date.

As an afterthought, he added “A.K.A. John Smith,” then closed and dropped the pen before sliding the paper back to Donald.

“Thank you, John,” he said softly, then pushed it across to Laisee, who merely glanced at the signature before adding her own as witness, then sliding it back into the folder and handing it to Wilber.

Everyone sat back and let out a sigh of relief, knowing that yet *another* potential leak had been stopped – *temporarily*, at least. The sound of a door opening drew several heads towards the kitchen, where a member of staff was bringing out a tray of small glasses. Ling followed them out with a juice box in each hand, accompanied by Aineias carrying a bottle of something green.

The staff member placed glasses in front of everyone, while Ling made a production of opening the juice boxes and pouring them into glasses for Rose and Jaiying. Donald was smiling widely when Aineias walked around the table and poured a small measure of ambrosia into everyone else's glass.

Laisee stood, as did everyone else, including the children. Smith was stuck at what to do, but Donald whispered, "Just stay seated, John. This is for *you*."

Laisee reached out her glass, clinked it with Wilber's, then reached across and touched Sai's glass before turning to touch Dwayne's. The group continued touching glasses around the table until everyone had touched each other's, including the girls, who'd had to stand on their chairs to reach everyone. Finally, one-by-one, they each reached over to touch John's glass.

Laisee took a breath to say something, but her head snapped at Jaiying, who was still standing on her chair. She presented a dazzling smile to her daughter, and raised her glass high, waiting for everyone to follow along. A moment later, she brought her glass down and sipped at it delicately, savoring the fine vintage Wilber had stashed for a special occasion.

Just as John was in the middle of sampling his glass, Jaiying softly called out, "באַגריסן צו די משפּחה, Uncle Barak," which caused him to *choke* on his ambrosia.

Her voice hadn't really startled him, but the fact that she'd welcomed him to her family in broken *Yiddish* had left him quite unbalanced for the moment – a moment that extended while Donald tried to help by pounding on his back.

### ***In the Kitchen***

Ling was caught by the surprise that rushed out of Smith, or *Pasternak*, as he was truly named. She easily read the confusion in his mind, and was reminded of her *own* confusion when Jaiying had demonstrated her talents in consideration of using her as the proper tool to locate Fred.

Her resulting smile was more of a smirk, and she wondered how Laisee managed to keep her daughter under *any* control at all,



## Picking up the Pieces

considering how much more powerful she was than *anyone* she'd ever met before – Lili and Xue included.

'Yet another issue for another time,' she considered privately, then turned to watch as her husband directed the final cleanup – if the guests ever left the dining room.

She could sense they were feeling *much* more relaxed now, even Smith – once he got his coughing under control. She could still read the lingering confusion in his mind and wondered why Laisee hadn't simply pulled what she needed from him and cast him aside with missing memory links to keep their secrets. Then she almost smacked herself for even *thinking* of doing that forbidden act – even on an unsuspecting *Earthling*. She knew Donald had done it to Maya in a *previous* life, but it was an act of *charity* at the time, and eventually corrected with proper help and supervision.

She watched when Aineias stepped through the door and looked back through the window again, seeing him nod and then turn to address Sabina.

"I think the party will be over once they finish that bottle," he told her. "Just clear the tables and remove temptation from the local vermin. You and your crew are released from duty once you're satisfied with the conditions of the dinning room and these spaces, Sabina."

"Thank you, my Captain," she said, then winked at him, apparently just to tease Ling with her attentiveness to her bond-mate.

Ling caught her eye and pursed her lips at her, getting a smile and an air-kiss back in return, before Sabina returned to her tasks.

Meanwhile, Aineias had found an empty stool and sat down in quiet contemplation – something Ling knew he wasn't prone to doing unless something was really bothering him. She delicately reached in and browsed his surface impressions, finding he was focused on the many unknowns about Donald Cato – Spacer First and *former* crewman of the Madman.

### *In the Dining Room*

Sai had already escorted the children to Laisee's quarters, leaving the rest of the adults behind.

Now that John was in control of himself again, he was able to sip another sample of ambrosia and actually enjoy the experience.

"This is really good stuff," he said in admiration. "I've never tasted anything quite like it. Where do you get it?"

Donald was about to tell him, but Laisee beat him to it.

“My father owns a vineyard back home. He produces it as part of the... Ahh ... a means to support the family and provide useful labor opportunities for those who need something to do.”

It sounded lame, and she knew it. Donald did, too, and added his own comments.

“Her father follows the convention of their society in making sure gainful employment is offered to everyone capable of working at it. And we’re not talking illegal alie – *immigrants!* No illegal immigrants have to sneak across borders in order to find work of any kind to support themselves and their families. These are all things her society works to eliminate.”

He thought he’d covered for her nicely until Smith started picking at it.

“So, how do you control population growth? You can’t just continue to bring people in and feed them without having them eventually crowd you out.”

Donald caught the glare from Laisee, but he continued gamely.

“Well ... like with the refugee camp I worked at here,” Donald said, spreading his arms widely. “All these buildings are new – like in the last few *years*, I mean. Before that, it was an abandoned Apache village that just needed to find a new water source. Once a new well was drilled, refugees were brought in, given health care, taught new skills, and then shipped out to stable locations that needed their skills and had plenty of room for them.” He hadn’t lied, but could see Smith was prepared to keep digging, so he continued.

“That’s what we plan to do with the women and children being held by Faridun and his men. Pull out the women and children, get them back here and healthy, then find safe places for them where they won’t be ostracized after being raped and impregnated by terrorists.” He looked up when Laisee gasped, but continued with his argument.

“You know what some of those Muslim countries are like, John. Girl falls in love with the wrong man, and she’s signing her *death* warrant. Look at *India*. People over there are *killing* wives because they don’t wanna be married to a man thirty or forty years *older* than they are. Or maybe the *dowry* wasn’t enough. Or maybe the daughter was caught smooching with her *boyfriend*, and it was deemed a grave blow to the ‘honor’ of the *family*.”

Smith saw the shocked expression on Laisee’s face, then glanced at Maya, noting Maya already seemed to understand this, but it looked like it was news to Laisee and it *shouldn’t* have been. He drew a breath to say something, but Wilber beat him to it.

## Picking up the Pieces

“John, we’d been requested to help locate the husband of a pregnant tribal member. In the course of that investigation, we discovered a whole lot of people in misery over their capture at the hands of the Taliban.”

Wilber stopped to look at Laisee, but she merely nodded her head for him to continue.

“Now – we can’t actively prosecute actions against *formal* governments or their representatives, but my current understanding is that the Taliban really *has* no formal government, nor is it recognized by *anyone* in the world who doesn’t already support terrorism. According to a *careful* reading of our treaty with the United States, that gives us some leeway to act on their behalf – as long as we don’t *kill* anyone in the process.”

“Not *too* many of ‘em,” Donald added cheerfully, earning a gasp from Maya for his frivolity.

Smith ignored Donald and focused on Wilber.

“You say you have a treaty with the United States? But aren’t you all Americans to *begin with*?”

Laisee looked at Donald, who looked at Wilber, who looked back at Laisee. Dwayne seemed content to sip his ambrosia and let the *big* kids deal with the issue.

Wilber finally sighed and decided to go for it.

“Of *all* us here... *I’m* an American. *Dwayne* over there is an American. *Donald*... Donald was *born* here ... pretty close by, anyway, during a time when America was still being finalized. Maya and Sai come from a place called *Cletus*. Laisee...” he paused, and then stood for the formal introduction.

“Barak Pasternak, may I present Lady Laisee Caldarous, Princess of the Imperial House on Kantor, and daughter of Emperor Radatel Caldarous, Sovereign Leader of the Commonwealth of Planets ... of which Earth is a *Protectorate*.”

Smith was at a total loss, but suddenly found himself pushing his chair back and standing up straight. He couldn’t understand *why* he did so, but then he bowed – *just so* – and Lady Laisee tilted her head – *just so* – and he found himself suddenly free to move again.

The first thing he moved was his lower jaw – which he opened wide to gasp. Then he reached down to his empty glass and paused while watching a smiling Don pour another measure of ambrosia for him.

“Sip it, don’t *slug it!*” Don whispered urgently. “Otherwise *bad things* happen!”

Smith glanced at him in shock, but slowly drew it to his lips and sipped at it carefully before looking back at Laisee. She nodded languidly, then gestured to his seat – bidding him to sit back down, which he gratefully did.

“We welcome you to our family, Barak,” she said. “But the hour is becoming late, and you have *many* questions that are better answered in the light of day. You should get some *rest* now, and find comfort in sleep. Tomorrow will be soon enough to explain our situation, and perhaps you might find it in your heart to help us with our *current* mission – the recovery of our missing *family*, and the slaves in *Afghanistan*?”

“I... Yes... Rest... Please,” he said haltingly, but bowed his head to hide the impending tears in his eyes. He wiped his face and looked away from her, only to catch the concern Donald and Maya seemed to be displaying towards him, before looking down at the table in confusion.

Laisee took the opportunity to extend into him again, this time gauging his level of need. She found the desire for company in him, and considered the options available. A smile finally graced her lips, and she reached out to Ling.

*‘Ling, do you have a moment?’*

*‘Yes, my Lady. I am in the kitchen, just behind the door. How may I be of assistance?’*

*‘Our new family member is somewhat distraught, and I would consider it wise to provide him with some relief so he can get a good night’s sleep. Do you perhaps know if anyone is available for a short while this evening?’*

*‘I can think of one who is PARTICULARLY popular, but I will see what her schedule is like, and let you know. Failing that, there are other options among the wives and girlfriends’* Ling smiled to herself, imagining finding no one other than *herself* to take care of Smith.

*‘Thank you, Ling. I leave it in your capable hands’*

“Dwayne, would you please see that John makes it back to his quarters safely?” Laisee continued smoothly. “Donald, I need you to meet with me and Sai in my quarters to discuss an upcoming situation you should be prepared for.”

“Yes, my Lady,” Dwayne and Donald said, almost in unison, and began chuckling about it.

Donald tossed back the rest of his one measure of ambrosia, then kissed Maya, before sending her off with Dwayne to help get John to

## Picking up the Pieces

his room. As it was, they walked on either side of John, with Maya's arm wrapped around his waist to support him while they followed the guardsmen down the hallway.

Donald gallantly held out his arm to Laisee, and she frowned at him, before letting out a sigh and looping her arm with his. They picked up her guardsman outside the door, who then led them to where the girls' guardsmen were standing outside her two-room suite.

### *On the Way to John's Room*

John was walking more easily now, with Maya on one side and Dwayne on the other. He noted the relaxed security from earlier this evening, but held his tongue as they passed the single guard standing watch outside Asad and Nurani's room.

Maya parted ways when she reached the door with the babies inside, and her guard immediately assumed his station just outside the door and alongside the other two men. He noticed they didn't speak, but made several hand gestures to each other. Silent laughter was shared among them – presumably at *his* expense.

Dwayne continued with him until he reached his own room, then stopped and turned to him.

"You gonna be all right on your own?"

Smith looked up at the guard standing next to him and turned back to Dwayne with a shrug and a shake of his head.

To his surprise, Dwayne leaned in and hugged him, murmuring, "Welcome to the family, John," before pulling away and entering his room, leaving John and the guard standing outside.

John sighed, then turned and plodded along to his room, not even noticing when his guard dropped behind him. He got to his door and opened it before turning around to see his guard standing a few feet away from him and smiling. He looked up the hallway and counted noses. There were three guards now at Maya's door; one at the interpreters; one at the end of the hallway ... and one standing in front of him. He didn't quite understand entirely, and thought it would be somewhat awkward to ask, but did so anyway.

"I notice there aren't that many guards on the floor this evening."

"There's enough, Sir," his overly cheerful watcher said. "There's *always* somebody at the main door, and each of the Royal Ladies are assigned a personal guardsman. Our guests are assigned only one now, and you and Agent Sparks are *family*."

John stared at him for several seconds, then nodded his head just a tiny bit before turning to his room. Just before he entered, his guard

reminded him, "If you need anything, Sir, just ask for it, and I'll be happy to help you find it until you get the feel of things. Once you learn your way around, well ... after that, you're pretty much on your *own*."

John turned back and looked up at the smiling face.

"Thank you ... uhhh..."

"Justus, Sir. Until midnight minus two. That's when my relief takes over."

"Mid... midnight minus *two*?"

Justus looked at his older analog watch and counted two marks back from the top, then made a quick finger flip and nodded his head.

"Ten a.m. No – ten *p.m.*," he said, then proudly showed him the watch on his wrist. "Sorry, Sir. I still get confused with only a twenty-four hour day."

John looked at him critically, but got the impression he wasn't messing with him at all.

"Well... I hope you get some rest then."

"I will, Sir, and don't worry about your safety. If someone gets past all of us here, there's still Agent Sparks just down the hall."

Now he was *sure* he was being messed with, so he decided to tease him back a little.

"And Don. He's with *Maya*, right?"

There was a moment of hesitation until the abbreviated name clicked with Justus.

"Yes, Sir. He keeps company with both Lady Maya and Lady Déjà. He seems quite fond of the *babies*, too."

"So, if anything happens to everyone else, Don will be around to protect us?"

Justus looked up the hallway, then turned back to him before leaning in confidentially and speaking just above a murmur.

"Sir, I've watched the recordings. We've *all* watched the recordings. Donald is rated as a Spacer First, but watching him in *action*, it ... it's *scary*. Gods, I'm not sure if there's any *one* of us could take him without a pellet thrower."

It took a few seconds, but John finally blinked while that information filed itself away for the time being.

## Picking up the Pieces

"Thank you, Justus. I'll try not to be a bother to you. To anyone. Good night."

"Sleep well, Sir."

John walked into his room, not even noticing when Justus closed the door behind him.

### *In Laisee's Suite*

Donald and Laisee had finished their trek to the VIP suites and joined Sai, who was already there and watching after the girls while they were preparing for bed.

"It's still a little bit early for bed, isn't it?" Donald asked Laisee, after seeing the clock on the wall indicated only a quarter to eight.

"It is morning in Afghanistan, and Jaiying is still watching over the prisoners. She'll spend most of the night at it," she said quietly, then glanced into the girls' room before drawing him and Sai over to her room and closing the door behind them.

She pulled out a chair from the small table in the bedroom and sat down, leaving Donald and Sai to find their own seating on the rather large bed. Laisee stalled while trying to imagine how much Donald knew about Cletus and their relationship with the Commonwealth – their *true* relationship. Donald, however, was ready to be with his girls, and pushed the issue.

"Okay, Laisee. Spit it out. Is the mission scrubbed? Am I being recalled, or what?"

Her gasp only confirmed his suspicions, but he was gratified to hear the intake of breath from Sai as well. That meant this was relatively *new* news.

"Donald, I meant to tell both of you yesterday, but other issues got in the way. Lili contacted me to let me know that a representative of the Elder's Council is on the way to Earth to evaluate it for membership in the Commonwealth."

Donald gave that a good ten seconds to filter through his brain before coming to a stunningly simple conclusion.

"Horseshit. The *Emperor* and his staff make that determination, and *then* ask for input from the Elder. Of *all* the Elder's we've had over the centuries, Lili probably has the *best* understanding of how screwed up Earth is. What's *really* going on, Laisee? Is the mission scrubbed?"

Sai looked to Donald, and then to Laisee, who shook her head slowly and shrugged.

*“Does he know about the Elder’s Council?”* Laisee asked her silently. *‘I mean the REAL background of the Elder’s Council?’*

Sai shrugged this time, while raising her hands up slightly.

“Okay, you guys *stop* that nonsense! You both look like you’re having a *seizure*.”

His comment got both of them to look at him, and he ducked his head and raised his hands up questioningly. Sai thought of how she’d gotten Petrus to figure it out, and started in that direction.

“Donald ... you know that the Elder lives and works on *Kantor* ... her whole *life*.”

“Uhh... *Yeah*. After she was born somewhere else and *selected* to become the Elder.”

“You also know she holds the title of *Queen of Cletus*.”

“Uhh... *Yeah*. Kinda comes with the *job*. Sai, just how long we gonna play twenty questions?”

“Donald, this is very important,” Laisee murmured. “Please pay attention.” She looked to Sai for her to continue.

“Donald, the *Queen* of Cletus is the *Elder* ... and yet the Elder *never* goes to *Cletus*.”

“*Nooo...* I hear Lili’s *already* made a couple of trips back home when–” Donald’s brain stalled when he replayed that line in his head, then started filling in the missing pieces of it.

They watched when he closed his eyes and started shuffling things around, much like he’d done when planning the mission.

It took very little time before he was able to verbalize his thinking.

“The *Queen* of Cletus lives on *Kantor* – *all the time*. Since she’s busy keeping all the *men* from going crazy, she must have minions on *Cletus* who do her bid–” He stalled again while *more* pieces dropped onto the table in front of him before he began shuffling them around until the puzzle became clearer.

“The Elder’s *Council*? Or perhaps ... the Council of *Elders*? Oh *crap*! Lili’s got a *boss*? She must really *hate* that!”

Sai decided to ignore his expletive, while Laisee sighed and slouched in her chair.

“*Several*,” Laisee said. “*Five*, in fact, and *one* of them is coming here – Xue. Lili doesn’t believe for a *second* she’s really coming here just to check on Earth, and the likelihood of her coming to inspect a new



## Picking up the Pieces

Healer Cluster without students is non-existent. Lili believes she's coming to evaluate *you*."

"Me? What the hell did *I* do?"

Sai let out a snort at his petulance.

"You forget *already*, Donald? You had the audacity of coming back to *life* when they'd already declared you *dead*!" She smirked when she'd said it, but turned to Laisee. "Elder Xue is the one who visited when Donald was still crazy, right?"

"Ahh ... yes. I believe it was Xue. *Elder* Xue," Laisee quickly corrected herself.

"Good. Amy said she was the *moderate* one," Sai said, then turned to Donald, adding, "You just have to be on your very *best* behavior and play your new role *perfectly*."

Donald had remained silent while he was busy catching up.

"Wait a minute! You said she visited when I was *crazy*? When was *that*?"

"You know... Well, no, I suppose you don't," she admitted. "Xue was the one who brought us the spare body I modified to look like you. *That* body provided us with eyewitnesses at the remembrance for you. Then it was cremated so that *no* one on Earth could possibly identify it as you, or anyone *else* from Kantor ... or in this case, Cletus."

"So that means I – I look like a *dead* guy?"

"Not a *whole* lot. The other guy was ... you know, *really* dead."

"Not making me feel any *better*, Sai!"

"Donald! *Focus*!" Laisee snapped at him. "A visitor is coming, and her most *likely* reasoning is to see that you're no longer a threat to the *Commonwealth*! You must make every effort to *act the part*!"

"Since when was I *ever* a threat to the Commonwealth? Didn't I fix the *Drecks* problem? Didn't I make nice with the neighbors down *below* us?" Donald fumed with their accusations against him.

"Hell, I even rooted out some *internal* problems they were suffering from so they'd become amenable to a *treaty* agreement between *humans and them*!"

"Donald, you don't *understand*. You're the *Kraken's Child*! You're the *Demon of the Commonwealth*! You're the most *dangerous person* ever to exist in our *time*!"

"That was my *FATHER* – *NOT ME*! And I got *rid* of that problem somewhere in the middle of an ocean on *Midgard*!"

He was standing by this time and feeling very frustrated, but also distracted enough not to notice when Jaiying stepped into the room and walked up behind him.

“Donald, that problem came back,” she said quietly, and he spun around to look down at her. “I felt you were with us, but I couldn’t figure out exactly *where* you were hiding. When the *second* part of you returned, you *almost* came back to your senses. The *last* part of you was still stuck in the wrong body, but Grandfather Rakel pushed it out when he moved in.”

Donald wobbled over to the bed and sat down heavily.

“So... So all those dreams were ... were *real*?”

“Metaphysically... *Maybe*... You were dead longer than I was, but Rakel moved in and eventually kicked you out. He was there for a short while until he suddenly just went missing. I don’t really understand what happened.”

She let out a sigh, then walked over and held her arms up to him, absently getting him to lift her into his lap while he applied his memories to the problem.

“Destiny said that if I chose to be reborn, I’d get a mind wipe,” he murmured.

There was silence for all of about five seconds until Sai asked, “Wait. If you *chose* to be reborn?”

“One of three options I was given. The other two didn’t sound as promising,” he muttered. “But I forgot all about the resourcefulness of my Senior Staff.”

He suddenly brightened, and hugged Jaiying gently. “*Gods*... We’ll have to keep an eye on little *Ronnie*.”

“I don’t sense him in there at all, now,” Jaiying muttered. “It’s like he was there one minute, and then just ... went away. I thought... I thought I felt panic ... or *anger* just before he left.”

“Maybe he got a good look at your *Grandmother*,” he whispered for her ears alone, and she giggled before sliding down to the floor. She got as far as the door before stopping and turning back.

“Be good to Elder Xue, Donald. She trusts us – and she let us plant a block inside her mind to prevent the *other* Elder’s from finding out about us from her,” she said. “Mind your manners with her, Donald. She’s on *our* side in this.”

With a tiny wave of her hand, she turned and left for the bed she shared with Rose, leaving Donald behind with Sai and Laisee.

## Picking up the Pieces

Donald looked at the clock and determined it was time to head back to his new family, so he bent down to kiss Laisee, then stepped over to kiss Sai.

"I'm off to bed, my Ladies. If you need anything from me, you know where I'll be," he said politely, then turned and headed out the door.

Laisee and Sai watched him go, but Laisee felt a twinge of loss from Sai at his leaving, so she decided to offer an alternative to a lonely evening.

"Sai, I find that I'm feeling somewhat *lonely* here on Earth. Would you care to share my bed this evening? There is plenty of room," she offered, and Sai stood up and stepped over to hug her before turning them both towards the attached facilities.

### *In John's Room*

John had stayed in the warm running water for *much* longer than he'd intended, and was now standing in front of a mirror and looking at himself to see if there were any *visible* signs of insanity. Unfortunately, although the spray had been quite warm, the level of confusion he still felt kept him from relaxing.

"Laisee is a *Princess*," he muttered to himself. "Each of the *Royal* ladies gets a *personal* guard... And Wilber and Dwayne are the *only* Americans here ... or just in the *room*?"

He looked down at the toothbrush and saw a new, double-bladed razor in a small box on the squarish sink top. A travel-sized can of shaving cream was next to it.

"Very thoughtful, these ... *non-Americans*," he muttered, just before the shakes began again in earnest.

With his towel still wrapped around his waist, he stumbled out of the bathroom and walked over to sit in one of the chairs pulled out from the small table. He gripped the edge of the table, thinking of how much he would enjoy a bottle or two of that green liquor they'd served when toasting him less than two hours ago. He could certainly use *something* to steady his nerves...

He'd thought it too much to take in all at once. It sounded crazy at first, but everyone at dinner seemed to be on the same page in their shared delusion. The neatly prepared narrative seemed too real to be rehearsed, what with Donald's sharing of random events seemingly drawn from memory rather than a paper script. Even believing that both Dwayne and Wilber were Agents – of *whom* he wasn't even sure of any longer – now seemed like a bit of a stretch ... and then Wilber had stood and led him through a formal introduction to the young woman seated across from him.

Even *that* had seemed contrived ... until he'd inexplicitly found himself standing and performing what appeared to be the expected *social* forms for the situation. That had *truly* shaken him to his core, and he'd no reasonable explanation for it.

They'd told him to go and get some sleep. *She'd* told him to go and get some sleep. How could they *possibly* expect him to sleep after dropping this in his...

The knock on the door startled him, and he immediately glanced at it, expecting it to open. When it didn't, he looked around and caught sight of the robe lying on the bed where he'd left it, so he stood and slipped it on before stepping over to the door and opening it.

Instead of finding Justus standing there, he found a short young woman with a dazzling smile, whose eyes seemed to glitter in the light from his room. The guard – someone *new*, he noticed – was standing behind her and smiling as if at some hidden joke.

"Hello John. I am *Kiki*," she said, then stepped towards him slowly. "I told you need to *relax*? Do you want to *play* with me?" She continued forward while John slowly backed away from her, catching the widening smile on the guard's face before he closed the door behind her.

"I – I don't understand," John said while continuing to back away until his legs hit the edge of his bed.

"I see to your *needs*, John. Would you like *massage*? It *relax* you," she suggested softly.

He looked down at her and suddenly found himself becoming *very* interested in knowing this young woman a little better.

"I ... I just got out of the shower," he murmured, then allowed his knees to fold so that he sat on the edge of the bed.

Kiki stepped closer until he subconsciously spread his legs wider to let her get just as *close* as she wanted.

"Hmmm ... nice ... hot ... *shower*... That sound *wonderful*," she murmured, then slowly reached her hands up to his shoulders. "You smell *good*, John. I bet you taste *better*..."

The moment he opened his mouth to comment, she launched her tongue into it, and he lost all sense of being...

### ***In the Babies' Room***

Donald was laying on his back and simply enjoying being alive. The babies were asleep, Maya was snuggled by his side, and Déjà was sitting on his penis and slowly rocking herself backwards and

## Picking up the Pieces

forwards on it at her own relaxed pace. A glance at the clock showed it was only a few minutes past ten, and the women had already taken ample pleasure from him this evening. By some arrangement of their own, now it was Déjà's turn to complete their play ... when she got around to it.

Maya suddenly "Mmmm'd" into his ear, then giggled lightly before reaching closer to nibble on his neck. Before he could ask, she explained to him that, "Kiki has started to play with John."

She'd murmured this and then nibbled on his neck again.

"Do you think he'll be okay? She's already *eaten*, right?" he asked in concern, which got a chuckle out of both of his Ladies.

"I can ask Laisee or Jaiying to block his receptors ... but only if he *behaves* himself," Maya said, then they both looked up as Déjà began to ramp up her efforts to bring herself to a climax.

Donald reached up to fondle her breasts, while Maya planted her lips over his and danced a tango with his tongue for a few minutes. When Déjà began panting in earnest, they separated and watched their lover as she began jerking uncontrollably before freezing atop him when her climax overcame her.

Almost as soon as her muscles relaxed, she slipped off his hardness and gulped him down, working rapidly to finish him off in her mouth. Maya helped by grabbing his face and raping his mouth with her tongue while he playfully struggled between the two of them ... finally giving it up to Déjà while she milked him until he was empty. Maya sucked very firmly on his tongue before pulling away and dragging Déjà over to her lips to share the taste of their man's essence. Donald collapsed in exhaustion while the women casually nudged him aside so they could continue with their suddenly renewed desires.

### *In Garrison Quarters*

Ling was sleeping peacefully, having been properly ravished by her bond-mate to her ultimate satisfaction. Aineias, on the other hand, had become restless after their play due to his continuing discomfort regarding Donald's true nature...

Donald said he'd served with the Madman, but he fought *much* too well for a mere mercenary. In his experience, the awkwardness at his first meeting with Aelius wasn't because of a lack of training – it was more in the line of a lack of practice. He was supposed to have been out of action for five months, and yet it had taken no more than a few rounds to find his stride and become an even match with Aelius until he'd suddenly nodded to himself and become even *more* proficient before disarming him repeatedly.

That was something he knew Aelius hadn't thought possible, which explained why Felix had found a rather *aggressive* Aelius on his hands, who'd suddenly seemed to forget *everything* he'd learned about swordwork before fumbling so miserably. Fortunately, Lady Tal had been there to patch him up.

That's when he'd taken it upon himself to face the Spacer First, and they'd shared a more or less even set of exchanges until Donald had begged off from exhaustion. After Donald bowed his thanks and left, he'd watched him walk out while considering what he'd been feeling during the match.

He could feel Donald, much like *any* Kantite warrior could feel any other warrior – except for the *Drecks*, of course – but with Donald, all he felt was complete *randomness*. *Nothing* Donald did was exploitable, and *that* was something to think about.

Trying to take his mind off the issue, he ran through the latest updates for the garrison. This included the revised status of John Smith, the reported Agent of an Earth security function belonging to someone *other* than their hosts. He wasn't in a position to question that decision, but was *still* responsible for the safety of the staff and Royals. He would have to request an audience with the good Lady Laisee in the morning to receive her personal instructions regarding John Smith – if she chose to share them.

Just before he finally dozed off, he remembered the training recordings they'd received from Commander Zickgraf, covering all the years he'd been in service with the Commonwealth. They reportedly contained *actual* footage of Lord Rondal Caldar among them, and if they couldn't rate a master swordsman on staff, at least they could learn by observing one in action – much like he'd used that recording of Donald earlier.

### ***In John's Room***

John opened his eyes and found himself staring at the ceiling. He let a satisfied smile grace his lips before blinking slowly and stretching out his hand in search of his very energetic bed partner ... who seemed to be missing. He sat up and looked around, before disentangling himself from the sheets and planting his feet on the floor.

In the dim light of the room, he could see the clock on the nightstand was just inching towards midnight – indicating he'd lost something over two hours of time. He stretched out and realized that, yes, he was *thoroughly* relaxed at the moment, but still wondered where Kiki had gone. Seeing the bundle of clothing piled on the table, he knew she couldn't have gotten far.

## Picking up the Pieces

His concerns evaporated when she walked out of the bathroom wrapped in a towel. She had another one piled atop her head that she was vigorously drying her hair with. She smiled at him and puckered her lips in an air kiss, but kept working her hair until she tossed the towel away and unwrapped herself to continue drying her body.

He wrapped his arms around himself while watching the sensual show in front of him as she dried herself from top to bottom. He was at a loss when she stepped up to him and held out the towel, waiting for him to take it from her. It was only when he'd taken it, and she turned around, then hunched her back towards him that he understood. Then he leaned forward and dried her back as if he was shining a pair of shoes ... getting a grateful purr of pleasure from her in return.

When she was dry, she turned back to him and pulled his face to hers for a kiss – a *regular* one this time.

“You *delicious*, John. I like to stay but have *appointment*. It time for you to *sleep* now.”

“Sleep? How can I sleep when you’ve given me–”

She shut him up by the simple expedient of thrusting her tongue down his throat and washing him with another dose of her enzymes, but *this* time with the intent of getting him to sleep. Once he was out, she withdrew and let him flop back on the bed, then glanced down and smiled at the look of bliss on his face before walking over to the door and quietly knocking on it until it opened.

“Augustus! I think John sleep *good* now!” she said in an excited whisper, then reached out and squeezed his pants in an *all* too familiar way.

Instead of falling for that trick *again*, Augustus stepped around her and got John straightened out and under the covers – making *sure* he was still breathing in the process. He turned to wave goodbye to Kiki, who'd stayed long enough to dress and make sure he was happy with her results, before she hurried off to her *next* assignment.

Augustus picked up the towels and checked the bathroom for blood, knowing Kiki sometimes got *adventurous* with her clients. In this case, with only two towels in disarray, it looked like she'd let the man sleep instead of dragging him into the shower for another round of a *vertical* nature.

He tossed the towels into the small hamper and made sure there were clean ones available, before wandering out and glancing down at John one more time.

“Thank the Gods she's the *only* one like her on Earth,” he muttered, before leaving the room and closing the door behind him.

***Thursday, September 22, 7 A.M., At the Residence***

Wilber stretched in place and listened to the sound of life beginning to stir around him. He turned to tickle Shu, but found she was already up and missing. ‘*Probably in the bathroom,*’ he thought. He was thinking of closing his eyes again but caught the movement of his digital clock as the numbers changed to seven a.m. – which triggered a mini-panic when he realized the alarm hadn’t been set the night before.

He was still struggling to get out of bed when Shu calmly walked in with a cup of fresh coffee for him – the special blend they’d found that didn’t affect the way he tasted, either during or *after* oral sex, or so she’d said. She had a big smile on her face when she handed it to him.

“My Wilber, you are almost out of coffee again. You really should *limit* your coffee intake, my love. Now that your retirement is upon you, perhaps you will be able to relax more, and even sleep in more often?”

They each gave that a three-count before bursting into laughter. Wilber gratefully sipped at his perfect cup of coffee, then stood and kissed his wife lightly before heading to the bathroom to start his day.

***In Dwayne’s Room***

Spring Blossom came out of the bathroom and smiled as she looked down at a peacefully sleeping Dwayne. She’d really enjoyed the last few times with him and wondered how her life would have been different if Lili hadn’t seduced her over two centuries ago. Then the thought of her co-wife sent tingles up from her groin, and she knew that life couldn’t *be* any better than it was right now – unless she was back in Lili’s arms on a more *regular* basis again. Her sigh was heartfelt, but had the additional affect of wakening Dwayne.

“Good *morning*, young lover,” she said, then giggled at the look on his face. “It is the morning hour, and my grandchildren have need of my attention.” She turned to look around the room and found her shoes on the floor underneath a chair, so she sat down and began putting on her socks, while Dwayne cleared the cobwebs out of his head and sat up.

“Thank you for your company last night ... and this morning, my Lady. Uhh ... would you need some help with the children?”

His reward was a quiet chuckle and a smile from her for his offer.

“You forget so *soon*? Your morning is already rather *full*, is it not?”

She watched as the memory of today’s plans suddenly slammed into the forefront of his mind, but made the effort to soften the blow.



## Picking up the Pieces

"I thank you for your kind offer, Dwayne." She finished slipping on her shoes, then walked over and kissed him goodbye.

With a heavy heart, he watched her leave and wondered how the Kantites could be content to give up their partners so casually, especially with the demands they all operated under to keep order in the Commonwealth.

Then it struck him that Spring Blossom had been a near-*constant* companion to Lady Lili, and that she was one of the Wives of the Emperor. It seemed they did what they needed to do in order to survive as a *society*. On the whole, it wasn't that much different than living in any of the few polyamorous groupings already existing on Earth – in *some* places – but was much more structured and easily more mainstream compared to typical Earth societies... Probably most of them, anyway.

He let out a sigh, before getting totally vertical and wandering into the bathroom to see if she'd left him a dry towel this time.

### *A Few Doors Down...*

As if a switch had been flipped, John woke up and saw that someone had rearranged him after Kiki attacked him again last night ... or perhaps this morning. He still wasn't sure. Whatever power that girl had over him was *amazing*, but at least it didn't leave him with a *hangover*.

He got up and headed to the bathroom, vaguely noticing the tidiness of the room in passing. A quick shower took care of the sweat they'd worked up, along with his full bladder. He paused while considering brushing his teeth either before or after breakfast, but a puff of breath into his palm convinced him it would be discourteous to present himself foulmouthed.

He brushed his teeth and made himself presentable, before knocking on the door to alert the guard he was intent on coming out.

"Good morning, John. I am Augustus. How may I help you?"

"Uhh, I was thinking of breakfast?"

"Excellent, Sir! I could use a snack myself!" So saying, Augustus backed away and followed along as he let John lead the way to the kitchen.

### *In the Babies' Room*

Maya was done pumping and had already transferred her excess milk to a vacuum container for the Center. Now that it was fully morning, she slipped into bed alongside Donald and tickled his ear in an effort to wake him up...

She almost felt guilty at what she and Déjà had put him through last night, but he'd managed well, considering he'd reverted almost all the way back to a full *native* Earthling – no thanks to the interference of that Vanir *scientist*. He'd lost the ability of the Gift, but Shu and Mary had told her Ronnie and Ling worked out a technique that compared favorably to it, and also affected human-Standards – even *Earthlings* – in a similar fashion. It just required patience and training, was all. That was for a *later* time, though – hopefully after this little problem with Nascha's husband was resolved, and they could *really* begin to settle into their new lives as a family group...

Donald finally swatted his hand at his ear, and she giggled mischievously when he continued to do so, finally opening his bleary eyes at her, then smiling sleepily.

"Good morning, my lover," she said, then spared him a closed-mouth peck on the lips – having already smelled his breath earlier this morning.

He looked over at the clock on the nightstand and groaned quietly. These two girls were gonna wear him out *prematurely*. He was *sure* of it. At least he'd die *happy* this time.

"Good morning, Donald," Déjà called quietly from the rocker she was sharing with – from the color of the shirt – presumably little Ronnie.

She smiled as he silently waved at her, then glanced down at the voracious little creature locked onto her nipple. Maya had told her letting the babies nurse on her longer would help build up her milk supply but it seemed like an awful lot of work – especially since Maya produced enough in half a day to feed not only the babies, but provide enough milk for several bowls of cereal. Then she smiled as she remembered her *first* bowl of raisin bran cereal with Maya's milk in it.

Maya had already left by the time Donald finished his shower and came out of the bathroom to find his mother sitting and rocking his daughter while Déjà still nursed his son.

"Maya has gone to breakfast first," Spring Blossom said.

He noticed the clean breast pump sitting there, which explained what Maya was doing in the bathroom while he'd still been in the shower. He got dressed, then kissed his mother and Déjà goodbye before leaving the room. After the door shut, Spring Blossom turned her attention to Déjà.

"Does he treat you well, Déjà?"

"Oh *yes*, my Lady. Donald treats us *both* well. And he seems to care about the *babies*, too."

## Picking up the Pieces

She looked at Spring Blossom's face and saw the smile on it as she turned to look down at Faith sleeping in her arms. Then she let out a quiet gasp when little Ronnie finally let go of her nipple. He stretched out his little arms before letting out an unusually satisfying belch all on his own. Afterwards, he seemed to curl into himself and settled in to nap for a while, all the while drawing his grandmother's attention at his very familiar actions.

"You've made me very happy, Déjà. You've given me the grandchildren I've wanted for so long now. We didn't know about Walter – not for the longest time. I see some of Rondal in David, and especially in Andy. Not so much in his skin, but some of his features, and some feelings that I—" She stopped and decided to keep the rest to herself. It was unimportant now, anyway.

"Déjà, I want you to know that *whatever* happens now, I consider you to be my *daughter*. No matter *how* the three of you choose to live your lives together ... or not."

In consideration of the baby in her arms, the gasp from Déjà was very subdued, but the look on her face was a mixture of shock and confusion. Spring Blossom continued to address it while looking down at little Faith now.

"Déjà, you knew Ronnie. When called, he would respond. He was cashiered from service – so he became the Madman. When Petrus reported him becoming despondent, he changed and started working the Gleanings. When he felt the call to rescue Maya, he broached the border of the Hegemony and *stole* her from the *Drecks*."

She paused and looked up to stare directly into her eyes. "And when Maya turned her back on him, his *brother* called – and he brought the Drecks to the bargaining table, then dragged the Vanir out of the shadows to broker a *peace* with us – and *again* the Commonwealth has turned its back on him."

Déjà was at a loss. Spring Blossom could easily feel that, and understood the confusion Déjà felt over it. It confused her as well, but her feelings were further burdened by this upcoming challenge to her son.

"The Elder's Council sends someone to *test* him. She will test him, and when he *fails*, she will *eliminate* him." Spring Blossom leaned back in the rocker and closed her eyes while holding the baby a little closer to her bosom.

"But – but he would *not* fail. He *cannot* fail. He ... he..."

"He is *still* my son. He is my son, and he cannot *help* himself. He will recover Fred, and do *everything* possible to recover those women and children – no matter *what* it takes."

***In the Pantry...***

John found the outside pantry door – bypassing the loop through the dining room and kitchen – and stood aside while the guard following behind entered to show him around.

The first thing they found was Maya, who was putting a vacuum container into the refrigerator.

“Oh, good morning, John. Did ... ahh, did you sleep well?” she asked him, following it with a demure smile.

He was about to say something, when Dwayne entered and made a beeline for the pantry shelves.

“Mornin’ John. Sleep well?” he asked, then found the corn flakes, and turned to the cabinets to dig out a bowl. “Having some cereal this mornin’ or you gonna brave that monstrosity of a stove and try to fry something?”

Before he could comment, Donald walked in, headed directly to Maya, then kissed her thoroughly, before asking, “Umm, what’s for breakfast?” She pushed him away and turned him around so he could see who else was in there.

“Oh... Good morning, Dwayne. Good morning, John. How’d you sleep?”

John’s mouth had barely opened, when the door opened again and two little girls rushed in. They got out more bags of cereal and waited while Dwayne handed them both a bowl.

They ignored him afterwards while hefting several of the vacuum containers from the refrigerator until they selected one of them.

Popping the lid, the little blond girl said, “Ohh, this one’s still *warm!*” then eagerly poured some cereal into her bowl, then carefully poured what looked like skim milk over it.

The door opened again, and Laisee walked in, asking the now familiar question, “Good morning, John. How did you sleep?”

He stood there in complete confusion, thinking, ‘*Does EVERYONE know what happened to me last night? The visit by that little woman ... my ... my rape, and then ... then...*’

“She didn’t rape you, John.”

He turned to look at Maya, and then Laisee, but they weren’t looking at him.

His eyes finally fell to the brown-haired little girl who was staring up at him with her bowl of cereal in her hands.

## Picking up the Pieces

"I said she didn't rape you, John," Jaiying repeated. "From what we could feel, it seemed like you were a willing participant. At least at the beginning..."

A snort from Donald caused him to turn towards him.

"Her species is *very* specific, John. Eat, sleep – and sex ... *not* always in that order," he informed him. "Just make sure she's *fed*, and you should be all right."

"Her ... her *species*?"

Dwayne dragged over a stool and directed him to sit down. Meanwhile, Laisee stepped over and reached out for his hand. He reluctantly held it out and watched as she smiled at him, then felt a warmth creeping up his arm and into his shoulder before feeling it flow through his body. He thought he should be alarmed, but for some reason he wasn't – even when he thought her hand was glowing where it was holding his.

"We *misled* you last night, John," she admitted somewhat contritely as he looked into her eyes.

"That's true, John," Donald agreed, which drew his focus back to him. "We told you Dwayne over there was the only American in the room, along with Wilber. *That* part was true. What we *didn't* say was that you three were the only *Earthlings* in the room."

'*Earthlings*?' John considered silently.

"That is the truth, John," Maya told him. "I was born on what we call Cletus. Lady Laisee and Jaiying were born on Kantor. Donald..."

She looked at Donald and considered what was safe to say – but he took over anyway.

"I'm a bastard son of Earth on my *mother's* side. My father was an *alien* devil come to wreak *havoc* upon a helpless woman of my tribe before we were spirited away in his magic flying box so he could claim his evil spawn as his *own*."

"*DONALD!*" Laisee snapped at him, and he immediately turned and bowed in her direction.

"My apologies, my Lady," he offered, then turned back to John with a somewhat calmer explanation. "My father found a native tribeswoman and performed what his people call a 'seeding' – which is a form of selective breeding intended to see if an improvement in the gene pool of humankind might be accomplished. The general advancement of humanity in all its many forms has benefited in some ways from the results of such unions. Granted, I'm not exactly a *prime* example, but some of the couplings have added tremendous skills.

Improvements in overall management *alone* have kept us from imploding on a regular basis.”

John looked from face-to-face, wondering if they were *all* insane.

“We’re not insane, John,” Laisee said, but looked at Donald and frowned. “*He* might be, but he’d suffered a terrible injury to his head, and ... and lost an arm in the process.” She surprised herself at keeping to the established back-story for “Donald.”

Donald looked down at his arms, realizing he’d never decided *which* one he’d lost. Since he was right-handed, he decided it must have been his right arm, and held it up with a smile.

“But I’m feeling *much* better now,” he said cheerfully, while flexing his hand and wiggling his fingers for effect.

“\*Now he thinks we ARE crazy,\*” Jaiying shared aloud, so Donald shook his head, knowing how to cement this alien controversy into John’s reality while not really wanting to do it *himself* this time, but sighed and pulled out his pocketknife anyway.

John watched while Don dragged a stool over in front of him and sat down on it. Then he saw him roll up his sleeve. Once he’d flipped the blade of his knife open, John became worried, but Don raised his empty hand and shook his head. With a deep sigh, he tilted the blade back and forth several times, letting John see that it was just a pocketknife, then laid it across his forearm and made a deep cut into his skin.

“CRAP! This hurts worse than *usual*!” he said loudly, then dropped the knife and clamped his bicep as tight as he could.

“H-Healer, I-I appear to have injured myself,” he muttered, then grimaced while tightening his grip. “Stupid fuck...” he added, as an imprecation to himself.

Maya came forward and was already glowing, but Jaiying held her back and spoke to John.

“John, look at Donald’s arm. He did this for *you*, John. He did this so you would understand and *believe* us. We mean no harm to *anyone* here, John. We want to bring Earth to the same level as the *rest* of the Commonwealth. To do that, we need to establish Healer Clusters all over the world. This is how we maintain our *society*, John – through the efforts of our *Healers*. Healer Tal, please Heal Donald Cato.”

Once Jaiying let her go, Maya stepped up and placed her hand over the bleeding wound. She pulled her hand away three seconds later, leaving a clean handprint where blood had been, and a cut that was nearly completely Healed.

## Picking up the Pieces

John looked at Don's arm, then started to reach out, but stopped himself. Don presented his arm for examination, and John felt it and ran a finger down the tiny ridge of scar tissue – knowing what he'd seen might have been a trick, but it sure hadn't *looked* like it. He even went the extra step and tasted the flavor of Don's blood – immediately recognizing the metallic flavor of it. Then he looked around the room, seeing everyone looking back at him expectantly.

*"\*He wants to believe,\*"* Jaiying said softly, then nodded her head at him.

John reached into his pocket and pulled out his own knife before looking at his arm and turning his left hand over – flexing his fingers repeatedly while beginning to breathe faster. He finally made a fist and sliced through the thumb palm of his left hand, figuring that if it were all a lie, the damage wouldn't be irreparable.

*"Fuck!"* he said, and looked up at Don with a grimace on his face.

"Gods! And they call *me* crazy," Donald muttered, then turned to Maya, but Laisee beat him to it.

"Men! They can never just take our word for *anything*," she said in exasperation, then clamped her hand over John's and flashed brightly – just as Lili had taught her.

She pulled her hand away and examined her work, the remaining tiny bit of scar dealt with by running a glowing fingertip along its length. Then she went over the rest of his hand and smoothed out half a dozen keloids from previous injuries.

Done with the left, she grabbed his right hand and did the same.

"Man... Glad I didn't have to go through *this* initiation," Dwayne muttered, which got a quiet guffaw from Donald, while the guard – long forgotten – responded similarly.

Laisee and Jaiying extended through John and silently agreed that his current status was sufficient – subject to revision. Laisee looked over at the guard, then stepped over to speak with him privately. Afterwards, he took his bowl and stepped into the dining room.

### ***Kantor, The Imperial Suite at the Capitol***

Lili found herself frustrated with her current situation. She was the Elder, yet also the wife of the Emperor. As much as she hated to admit it, she was finding that – in *some* respects – the two roles were becoming mutually exclusive...

Previously, as Radatel's mere loving wife, she was able to guide him and help maintain his sanity while he managed the role of First Lord under his father's heavy thumb. Radatel had been fully capable of the

task, but without her constant management and administering to his needs, he would not have been *nearly* as competent at it. That was the key reason Kita had assigned her to him in the *first* place. Once he became Emperor, his level of stress had become much greater, but she was divorced from her position as Elder Kita's watchdog over him and spent even *more* time assisting him in his new role.

Now that she was the *Elder*...

She let out a sigh before sipping from her crystal goblet while remaining slouched in the new reclining lounge; something that was attempting to surround her with a level of comfort comparable to a soft, warm cloud. She floated in tempered bliss for several minutes until a metaphorical dark cloud preceded the intrusion of her husband, fresh from an unpleasant encounter at court.

She kept her eyes closed and extended through him, searching out the nuances currently plaguing her lover at the beginning of this weekend. As expected, it wasn't the Vanir Ambassador this time, but Torga of the Dreds. She waited as she felt her husband slowly approach her, feeling his stress level dropping the closer he came.

Her smile was slight, but she wasn't about to grant him a sympathetic glance – not *yet*. The Emperor needed to express strength and stability, even among his immediate family, but she would reserve resolution of his self-doubts until *after* he calmed down and accepted her company civilly.

Once he stood beside her, she opened her eyes and smiled up at him – offering her crystal for his pleasure. He took it and sipped at it lightly, closing his eyes as the liquor wormed its way through his senses until he became much more relaxed from that minor altercation triggered by his ambassadorial staff.

"Lili, my love ... it is so very good to bask in your presence once again," he murmured, not even remembering the *last* time they'd shared a few days alone together.

"Come, my husband. Sit with me and float among the *clouds*, or so the designer would suggest." She let out a tiny titter that brought a smile to his face, and he kicked off his footwear and slipped off his outer robe before sliding in beside her to sample this new home furniture product.

"Oh, *my*..." his quiet comment was made with softened envy in it. "This is *very* comfortable. How deliciously *decadent*," he murmured. "I wonder if it wise to allow distribution of such? Perhaps we would worry if our citizens found it more preferable than actually performing the more *mundane* tasks of their existence? Can you imagine a populace stranding themselves in comfort while industry lies *idle*?"



## Picking up the Pieces

Lili let several seconds pass before finally letting out a joyful titter.

“My husband, that would be *too* cruel. Instead, require the device to *eject* the occupant after a certain time, and then harden itself until the *next* resting cycle. Thus, temptation would be monitored so that *excess* pleasure would be mitigated. Besides ... there are *other* ways to find enjoyment from life,” she murmured, then stroked his thigh meaningfully, before he caught her hand and pulled it up to kiss her palm.

“And how are things in *your* office, my dear,” he asked politely, throwing the burden of his duties aside in anticipation of sharing someone *else’s* for a change.

“Ai-*yah!* You spoil my *mood*, my Husband” she pouted, then closed her eyes for a moment. “If you *must* know, my staff has been evaluating the current population trends, and is somewhat concerned that, in *certain* areas, we are experiencing a *lower* birth rate than anticipated.”

He sat back and looked at her; surprised that she would speak of it in those terms.

“Well, if the citizens have no desire to *raise* a family, we cannot very well *demand* that of them, can we? Of course, we wouldn’t want the same situation that Samuel and *Sally* are currently anticipating, would we?”

They both knew Sally had prepared a special nest for her brood of eleven eggs, but neither of them could *possibly* imagine both of them managing to deal with even *half* as many infants at the same time, although Sally had told her they would be born walking.

Or was it *scampering*?

“No, my love, but there is a concern – a *tiny* one, true – but it is statistically out of the expected rates for a few areas, and we cannot assign a definite reason for the decline.”

Radatel thought for a second, then let out a quiet snort.

“Well. I suppose it’s too bad *Rondal* has left us, then. As I recall, he seemed to *surround* himself with fertile women.” He pondered the situation for a moment, before a related item clicked in his mind.

“Ahh, Lili ... what is the status of Donald?”

She opened her eyes and turned her head to look at him for a second, before settling back comfortably.

“I can ask. You may listen if you desire?”

He thought about it, but then looked at the room’s timer.

“Perhaps ... perhaps you may simply summarize it afterwards. I’ve yet to eat, and I would not like an unpleasant surprise to spoil my appetite,” he finally said.

“That is a *wise* decision, my Lord,” she murmured, then took the crystal back from him and finished it, before leaning back and reaching out to Earth...

### ***Earth, The Annex, The Center’s Dining Room***

Augustus set his bowl on a table at the far side of the room before pulling out his communicator and keying it to update the watch supervisor. Lady Caldaraus had left *new* orders – John Smith was to remain under observation, but it was to be a *loose* observation – whatever *that* really meant to her. In addition, for the time being, he would no longer require a personal guardsman assigned to him.

Once hearing it relayed back to him, he ended his communication and sat down to enjoy his cereal with the small measure of warm Healer’s milk.

### ***In the Pantry...***

Laisee was about to join the conversation and address their expectations from Smith when she felt a tingling in her scalp.

*‘Laisee, dear ... do you have a moment’* she felt Lili call out to her.

*‘I ... certainly, my Elder. How may I serve you?’* She remained where she was, seeing that no one was paying any particular attention to her anyway.

*‘You have told Donald of Elder Xue’s expected arrival. This is true?’*

*‘Yes, my Elder. We spoke of it last evening. He was less than receptive when told it was for Earth’s evaluation, and immediately deduced he was the reason for her visit’*

*‘WHATEVER the reason, he must be on his best behavior, Laisee! His existence depends upon it!’*

*‘I understand, my Elder. Donald – I believe he is aware of the situation ... truly’*

*‘See that he does. Just that ... he cannot be forced, mind you. She will know. His mind is open, this is true?’*

Laisee had to stop and think about it.

She’d kept his mental state to herself after having discovered he wasn’t as open as you’d expect for being genetically reduced to a mere Earthling. He certainly wasn’t as open as *Wilber*. Aside from needing

## Picking up the Pieces

Jaiying to intercede during Smith's interrogation, it was much like Ling had advised her during Aineias' experience with Donald; his mind was porous, but only to a degree.

*'Despite his recovery, he has a curious resistance to us. Jaiying can push into him, where I cannot. Aineias cannot feel him properly, even with his inborn Kantite warrior's skills. This is what Ling has reported'*

There was a fractional delay from Lili, presumably while she filed that away for further discussion.

*'The tribeswoman, Nascha. She is well? And the plans to recover her man ... Fred is his name?'*

This time Laisee easily went with the change in topic.

*'Nascha is well, and still a resident with us, although she stayed at the reservation for a few days while we were resolving the issue with John Smith. John has signed the NDA you approved through Wilber and is lending his knowledge of those who hold Fred hostage, along with the women and children we'd reported to you'*

Laisee paused for a moment, but when Lili didn't comment, she continued.

*'Lili, Jaiying reports that another child had been taken roughly and she needed to extend to the far side of Earth to effect a limited amount of Healing to keep her alive. The tool Engineer Arden created allowed us to secure an excellent graphic of the subterranean target area. If the Americans plan poorly – or if they do not plan at all – may we proceed with an attempt to recover the captives?'*

Laisee could almost feel the disgust coming back from fourteen minutes out. Whether it was for her, or for the situation she'd presented, was not discernable. Finally...

*'Laisee, as before, lost of life to OFFICIAL government personal is unacceptable, and I must be notified BEFORE any recovery attempt is made. I would really prefer it if better oversight was available locally'*

Laisee had been hanging around Ronnie for *way* too long, and it appeared that Donald was an even *worse* example of proper decorum.

That was probably why her private thought, *'Perhaps Elder XUE would like to partake of the mission?'* wasn't sufficiently suppressed from Lili's sharp senses.

*'An EXCELLENT suggestion, Laisee! I am delighted you are finally starting to think "outside the enclosure" I believe is the term Rondal often referred to. I will so inform Elder Xue that, should she arrive in time, such an opportunity may exist! Thank you, Laisee'* she sent, and the ether fell silent.

Laisee closed her eyes and grimaced while desperately suppressing the *groan* that longed to alert those around her that she'd just jumped into it with both feet. She opened her eyes and looked around, but only caught the astonished look on Jaiying's face before it turned into a bright smile at her expense. Jaiying turned to Rose, whose eyes suddenly opened wide, before they took their breakfast bowls and made their giggling way past Jaiying's mother on their way to the dining room.

***Kantor, the Imperial Suite***

"My dear, was that truly the *wisest* thing to suggest to her?" Radatel asked her softly, but her head snapped around, the glare from her eyes boring into his. "I'm sorry, Lili. My curiosity got the better of me, and I decided to accept your invitation after all. I *do* miss my daughter, you know."

Lili tempered her outrage and let it continue to dampen. Meanwhile, Radatel poured a *double* measure of ambrosia into her crystal, then delicately handed it to her. She finally took several sips from it before becoming calm enough to address him properly.

"Spring Blossom is worried about Donald. I felt that from her earlier this afternoon. Rad, he ... he is..."

"He is our Ronnie and he will do whatever we ask of him," he murmured while bending down to kiss her cheek, but she angrily pushed him away.

"No, Rad! He will do *whatever* is necessary to get the *job done*! He always *has*! He always *will*! He – he ... if he gets out of control, Xue will *destroy* him!" She was shaking now and took a bigger sip, before simply tilting the crystal back and taking a full swallow.

Radatel slipped down to sit on the floor while resting his head against the softness of the lounge's armrest.

"If that is the case, then why did you tell Laisee that you'd–"

"Because I trust Xue's *integrity*, Rad! She *WILL KNOW* if he is *controllable* or not. *She* will decide in what direction his future lies. At the very *least*, he is merely a simple Earthling working hard to support his wives and children," she said, letting it hang while taking another sip from her crystal.

"And, if it is ... *otherwise*?" he muttered from the area around her knees. It was several seconds before she let out a sigh and rested her hand on his head.

"*Absolute* honesty would be preferable to the slighted *hint* of evasion, my love. Donald has survived this long through his *own*

## Picking up the Pieces

efforts – helped along by those of his Senior Staff. Xue is somewhat *pleased* about their existence, although I haven't a clue as to *why*."

"That ... that is truly baffling," he offered softly, not knowing Lili already had a *very* good suspicion of Xue's reasoning ever since her visit after the Kantite remembrance.

### *Earth, The Annex, The Center's Dining Room*

Laisee had slipped into a funk after hearing Lili's cheerful announcement that Xue would be notified of their possible adventure. Rather than notify Donald in *mixed* company, she'd lagged behind while everyone took their breakfast selections out to the dining room and gathered around the large table to continue their meal.

After a few minutes of idle introspection – wondering just what in the *hell* Lili had been *thinking* of – she brought her meal to the table and noticed breakfast already seemed to be proceeding in a rather civil and somewhat calm atmosphere. Even John, the newest member to the alien conspiracy on Earth, seemed to be taking everything in stride ... even smiling during some of the idle chatter they were engaging in.

Laisee smiled when both Rose and Jaiying gathered their bowls and spoons and prepared to take them back to the kitchen. Then she caught the whisper they shared before heading to the door, so she checked the clock on the wall and saw that it was still a little before eight a.m.

"Girls, you must not disturb the residents in the house so early," she admonished them quietly.

"We have an open invitation, Mother, but I will ask..."

Jaiying paused while querying Shu and confirming permission. "Lady Shu bids us welcome."

"Very well. Please stay out of trouble."

"Mother!" was Jaiying's gentle rejoinder, coupled with a giggle from Rose as they headed to the kitchen.

John had been listening to their conversation and was beginning to make some subtle connections. Rather than blurt out any suspicions, he was wondering if he should wait until his hosts volunteered the information. It *would*, however, certainly explain a *lot* of things. He decided to probe *around* the issue ... just a little.

"Let me guess. The house has the only television on site?"

Dwayne looked at Donald, who shrugged and turned to John.

"I was here in the '80's and we had one then, but we only got two stations. Terribly boring. We could buy tapes, but didn't find much

time to watch them. I think Mary and her family have some DVD's, and maybe some old movies on tape."

"Jaiying likes to use Wilber's computer," Laisee offered. "She uses it to learn all about the ... the things that interest her."

"Ah! A good point!" Donald said, then turned back to John. "We can learn a lot of things from that ... ahh, that internet thingy, but we can't learn everything we need to know about Faridun. John, do you feel up to talking to us about him?"

John put down his spoon and wiped his lips; figuring this was as good a time as any to end his usefulness to them.

He put his napkin down and settled in his chair, before reaching back to the past.

"I first met Faridun at Cambridge. We were classmates. We got along well enough ... shared a few classes. Our last year there – just a week or so before graduation, his father was killed back home, and he left. I lost track of him after that."

They all looked on politely while waiting for him to expand on his explanation, but he just let it sit there. Dwayne pursued it from another direction.

"John ... how did his father die?"

John looked away, knowing that at least *one* of them should understand what Faridun's motivations were. He turned back to Dwayne and stared into his eyes as he told him.

"Like I said before, his father was killed ... during an *American*-led attack against terrorists close to where his family lived. His mother was already dead from cancer, and his few siblings had already been spirited away from the area. His father stayed behind because ... because it was his *home*. He was killed in a bombing ... 'collateral damage' I think the Americans called it."

Laisee closed her eyes and bowed her head, sighing in sorrow for the insanity the Earthlings continued to pursue. Donald leaned back while rubbing his hands up and down his face, before muttering, "Fucking *amateurs*." He sat up with a sigh of his own, while shaking his head and frowning at the unbridled stupidity of his supposed countrymen.

"John, please tell us about Daanesh," Don asked him.

"It – it means 'wisdom' and 'knowledge' but ... but you already *know* all that, don't you?"

Don spared him a grim smile while nodding his head slowly.

## Picking up the Pieces

"We know a *lot* of stuff, Barak, but *confirmation* of the truth is key in some circumstances. How is it that you became known as Daanesh?" John glanced around and gave out a resigned sigh, hoping his simple explanation of the truth would be believed.

"That's the nickname Faridun gave me for the skills I displayed at Cambridge. It was a *joke*, really, but he started using it when I would help him with his class work sometimes. Not that he wasn't a *good* student – he just had a different cultural background. After he learned how his father died, my research said he'd gone a little crazy."

"When you were IDF?" Dwayne quietly asked.

"No. After my sister—" He stopped and turned away, so Don gently filled in the blanks for him.

"You left IDF and ended up working for Mossad. That was after your sister died of an overdose." Don reached over and laid a hand on his arm. "You used their resources to track down the suppliers you couldn't eliminate on your own, and that's how you stumbled across Faridun's name. From there, you somehow managed to reach out to him, but forgot his mindset was significantly *altered* to the point that he *back-checked* your credentials and burned you with the Mossad."

Don squeezed his arm gently and John turned to look at him – nodding his head in silent agreement with that very exacting assessment.

"Which led you to *us*, John," Laisee said quietly. "We suspect you thought Asad or Nurani might have been able to pinpoint Faridun's location for you, but we've already determined that. What remains is how we go about extracting our tribe member's missing husband, along with those other prisoners he's holding."

"And you're not allowed to *kill* anyone in the process," John muttered sourly.

"That's true," Don said. "*We* aren't allowed to kill anyone. Not that we can't arrange for someone *else* to do it for us."

While Laisee let out a small gasp, Dwayne raised his hand to add his comment on the subject.

"Technically, the Taliban isn't recognized as a legitimate government, and neither are their associates. That's how everyone gets away with dropping bombs on them. Unfortunately, they're like cockroaches – stamp out one nest, and another one is ready to breed a new batch." Dwayne raised his hands in an expression of helplessness.

"Which means there must be *something* he's involved with that we can use to our advantage," Don suggested. "John, as far as we can

determine, Faridun's focus has been on the drug trade alone. It's overhead intensive, but not *nearly* as risky as sneaking bombs into cities to do major damage. Do you know any details of his operation that we might be able to exploit?"

### ***On the Way to Work...***

It had been a beautiful morning, so Aineias and Ling walked above ground together so they could enjoy the fresh air during the journey. Besides, when the enhanced garrison housing had gone in, they'd neglected to connect it to the Center with nothing more than the original ladder that led to the old tunnels going between the missing barn, and the bedroom in the residence. It was an oversight the Engineers had promised to fix ... *eventually*. He walked his bond-mate as far as the Center, where she headed in to her office, while he continued to his office in the motor pool...

Aineias set down his overnights and looked at the clock – still just a little after eight. It had been a relatively quiet night for a change. Equipment outages were under control. The rental car "kit" had been properly disposed of, and a report made to the rental company, along with payment for the loss of the vehicle, and Agent John Smith had enjoyed a quiet evening with one of their other guests. He picked up the *latest* report from the Center and noted John Smith's security had been relaxed by another notch this morning.

This was both good *and* bad.

His men would be glad Smith's level of observation was dropping, but he was concerned the lack of appropriate "busy work" for his warriors would tend to deaden their response times.

At least he still maintained a regular practice schedule for them – which reminded him.

He brought up his monitoring station and keyed in the latest training downloads from Commander Zickgraf before the *Kraken* broke orbit. They were supposed to contain recordings from as far back as when he was serving aboard the *CPS Microcosmus*. He didn't know exactly what he was looking for, but was sure he would recognize it as soon as he saw it.

### ***In Ling's Office***

Ling closed the file on her data pad and sighed. She *really* wasn't looking forward to Cocheta's visit tomorrow. The grudge the woman held over the years was *unbelievable* in its tenacity, but at least it was finally starting to break down. That business with Smith hadn't helped any when Nascha was sent back to the Reservation and bunked in with Gray Feather and his wife again – much to the anger of Nascha's



## Picking up the Pieces

mother, who'd complained bitterly that they'd "Already thrown her out!" because she was not as important as their *other* guests.

The report from Laisee that Agent Smith had signed the NDA relieved that worrisome burden, along with the success of Kiki in *completely* exhausting the man last night. She glanced at the clock – half past eight – and decided she could send Mary to recover Nascha to the Center after her scheduled shopping trip into town. Something about personal entertainment player programs of some sort?

She shook her head at that, not understanding how these Earthlings had managed to get so wrapped up in their visual entertainment programs. The program she'd observed on Nascha's small video display unit seemed rather mundane, even when Nascha had giggled over something one of the performers had stated. She supposed it was a cultural thing.

An errant nagging at her mind finally diverted her attention, and she suddenly realized her bond-mate was troubled. She extended outwards and found him engaged in something similar to Nascha's preferred form of entertainment – except that his was full of shouting, and the clash of swords...

### *In the Motor Pool*

Aineias watched one of the combatants circle the other warily, but it was a forgone conclusion who would win this round – just as he'd won all the others. The man on the recording was displaying the skills of a *master* swordsman, no doubt taught to him by the very *best* available at the time. His expectation was proven when the man simply stood his ground and waited for his attacker to move just the tiniest bit out of position – leaving himself open for the disarming flick of the wrist that launched his sword into the air and allowed him to fall victim to the swift toe hook of his opponent. In only moments, he fell to the mat – disarmed and helpless.

A look of surprise was still on his face when the master reached down and pulled him up by one arm before handing him back his sword. He began going over the steps he'd taken, and how the man had so unfortunately gotten out of position. Then they continued the lesson, and he saw the care applied to improve the student's skills – all without rancor or chiding but with *real* constructive criticism that many sword masters seemed to lack of late. He watched yet another encounter with a similar conclusion before selecting a different source.

### *On the Way to the Motor Pool*

Donald and John were headed to the motor pool. Laisee's instructions had been clear – show John the data they'd recovered over Afghanistan, and get his input on how Faridun would have

organized the cave complex based on John's research into the Taliban field structures.

Once they had an idea of where everything should be located, they might devise a much better plan of how to arrange a suitable "disagreement within the ranks" – otherwise known as sowing hate and discontent amongst your enemies so they were at odds with each other, while you conducted your *own* form of skullduggery.

Donald had seemed very enthusiastic about it, which caused Maya to leave in a snit at his eagerness to place himself in harm's way once again.

### *At the Residence*

Dwayne finally arrived at the house. He'd left the Center with Donald and John, but diverted to check in with Wilber this morning. Once he knocked on the door, it was opened by one of the girls' duty guardsmen who let him in and gestured helpfully to Wilber, sitting at the kitchen table.

Passing the girls with a silent wave of his hand, he walked over to the refrigerator and grabbed a juice box from it, before pulling out a chair at the kitchen table and sitting across from Wilber. Seeing that he was still busy, Dwayne popped the straw off and stuffed it into the foil hole in the top of the box before taking a welcome sip of Florida orangey goodness – that puckered his lips unexpectedly.

"Should have shaken it first," Wilber muttered, having paid more attention to him than he'd expected.

Wilber sat back with a sigh, and closed the overnight reports folder before dropping it on the table. He watched as Dwayne pulled out the straw and covered the tiny hole with his thumb before shaking the box. Then he stuck the straw back into it before taking a cautious sip, then smiling around the straw between his lips.

"Once again, youth and vitality succumb to old age and treachery," Wilber muttered, then suppressed a snort before asking, "What are your plans for today?"

"Got a call from the overnight place. Gonna go into town and pick up that package from the Embassy," he said, which brought a smile to Wilber's face.

"My new computer is here *already*? Balbinus works *fast*!"

"Oh, yeah. His crew is *really* good. Ripped up another conversion dongle for you, too, and sent along an updated security disk that should work on *both* computers. You still planning on shipping the other one back?"

## Picking up the Pieces

Wilber glanced away for a moment, but he'd already made up his mind after the incident with Smith's data attack.

"Yeah. After I get the new one working like I want it, I'll pack up the old one and send it back," he said. "It's probably all right, but it won't hurt to find out for sure."

"Well ... you never know," Dwayne offered sensibly, and caught the smile and nod from Wilber when he'd parroted this rule of thumb correctly.

Something else he caught was the sight of Jaiying when she walked over to stand beside Wilber. Rose had followed and was standing on Wilber's other side.

"We want to go with you," Jaiying said while addressing him directly. Rose nodded her head in agreement and smiled politely.

"Ahh... You don't know where I'm going," Dwayne murmured, but immediately saw a frown darken Jaiying's features.

"You're going into town to get a package. While you're there, you might as well stop at the house and pick up the mail. While you're doing *that*, Rose and I can go into the backyard and visit the rabbits," she rattled off easily, with Rose nodding agreeably.

Wilber let out a snort, but stopped it from becoming full-blown laughter.

"So, Dwayne ... while you're in town, would you mind stopping by the house and picking up the mail? Usually Danny and Kayla do it, but they've been staying in town because they both pulled double shifts this week and haven't made it back yet," Wilber asked him, then added, "You might also wanna check the tomatoes and see if any are ripe. And the rabbits *always* seem to enjoy visitors."

Dwayne looked at the girls while dithering over what he could say, but suddenly thought of the obvious.

"Ahh, girls, I'd love to take you with me, but it's a long drive, and it will be hot – and you'd need permission to go along, anyway. I'd also feel much better if someone *else* could go with us to ... you know ... do *girl* things ... with you," he said awkwardly, thinking the *last* thing he needed was having to explain why a *black* man was driving around with a couple of six-year-old *white* girls in his car.

Jaiying caught that image from him and frowned again – as if it really mattered *what* these Earthlings thought to begin with.

She reached out to her mother and flashed the situation to her. Laisee immediately queried Mary, who informed her she was currently unavailable.

Spring Blossom interrupted the silent chatter by offering to go along to “supervise” – as suggested by Rose, who’d contacted her directly – and Jaiying was subsequently told that permission had been granted.

It’d taken all of five seconds.

“Mother has just given us permission to go with you,” Jaiying informed him.

“Lady Spring Blossom will go *with* us!” Rose added cheerfully.

Wilber smiled at the panic on Dwayne’s face, before summarizing the trip for him.

“So – pick up the package. Stop by the house for the mail ... some tomatoes ... and the petting zoo...” he paused while Rose whispered into his ear. “And then maybe stop at the warehouse store and pick up a batch of churros ... as many as they need.”

Wilber pulled out his wallet and handed over a warehouse cash card.

“You guys have *fun* now!”

Dwayne looked at the kitchen clock. It wasn’t even *nine* yet, and his quick trip to town was probably going to drag on past noon.

He let out a sigh, then finished his juice, before crushing the box and getting up to throw it away.

“All right, girls. Once Lady Spring Blossom is ready, I’ll go get the–”

“A van is being prepared, Agent Sparks,” Aelius informed him from the sofa. Dwayne could see his communicator being returned to its holder as the young man smiled as he stood up and turned off the television, then tilted his head as a communication came in through his earpiece.

“Lady Spring Blossom has just left the Center and is headed towards the motor pool. Shall we join her there, or would you like the van delivered here, Sir?”

Before he could say anything, Jaiying grabbed Rose’s hand and they took off for the bathroom. “Give us a minute!” she called out, just before the hallway door closed behind them.

Wilber saw the look of despondency on his face and began chuckling all over again.

“That’s life on the Reservation,” he murmured, then caught Dwayne’s reaction when Spring Blossom opened the door and locked eyes with him.

## Picking up the Pieces

*'Talk about putting the FUN in dysfunctional,'* Wilber thought to himself while considering these two lovers spending half a day together in the company of Jaiying and Rose, and probably Aelius.

### *At the Motor Pool*

Aineias had been reviewing the practice session they'd held just yesterday that had left Aelius a bloody mess. That seemed to have been self-inflicted, as Aelius had gotten his dander up, and lost sight of the goal – getting *punctured* for his trouble by one of the more skilled guardsmen when his attention lapsed.

He watched the recording when Senior Tal came over to fix the hole in Aelius' chest, then observed when Donald squatted down next to him and simply chatted with him amicably. Then Donald had gently suggested that he focus on his training and *existing* skills before "reaching for the fruit at the higher branches of the tree – at least in practice." What had surprised Aineias even more was when Donald offered to *work* with him if he had the time.

Aineias closed his eyes and thought of Donald some more. He'd seen the security recording of the Center's great room when Donald had practiced solo two mornings ago. He'd looked pained and out of balance, and Lady Sai had taken him away to one of the treatment rooms to work him over. Afterwards that same day, he and Lady Sai had contrived a *diversion* to take Agent Smith by surprise, which had worked *extremely* well – almost as if they'd been working together for quite some time now.

And just yesterday, Donald had gone from an unbalanced, fumbling cadet, to a crafty competitor within just a few rounds.

He opened his eyes, searched for, then replayed that timeline ... watching for the trigger that changed Donald's competency.

He almost didn't catch it.

One round had him fumbling throughout, and the next round he'd been perfect ... and Donald didn't seem the type to hide under a shadow. He moved the timeline back and watched what went on between the end of one round and the beginning of the next.

Donald had been receiving a chiding from Lady Sai after that second bad round, but then became thoughtful. He'd closed his eyes and seemed to be thinking of his poor performance, while nodding several times before smacking his forehead with the palm of his hand. His lips could be seen moving, but the sound was too low to hear it. He reversed it again and turned up the volume until even the idle chatter between rounds was audible. After Donald had smacked his head, he'd clearly muttered *"\*Fucking Drecks\*"* and smiled grimly. His subsequent swordwork had been *flawless*.

Aineias leaned back and stared at the monitor while it played out the remainder of the practice session. When it reached the point where he'd faced off against Donald himself, he watched himself carefully while he'd tried to keep up with Donald's movements – which seemed *particularly* difficult to anticipate. They were much like the movements that master swordsman had displayed on the recordings from *CPS Microcosmus*.

### ***In the Center***

Ling was getting the feeling her bond-mate was coming too close to the truth, and feared what she might have to do if he discovered the great deception. It didn't seem fair, but she needed to discuss it with Lady Laisee as soon as reasonably possible ... which changed to *immediately* once she'd caught his thoughts that Donald and Lord Caldar's techniques seemed almost *identical*.

### ***Kantor, The Imperial Suite***

Lili and Rad were resting after a successful renewal of their marriage commitments, which had included a few choice words spoken lovingly and in the correct sequence. It was just a matter of regrouping before they could continue with another passage or two, when Lili had been surprised with a silent update from her missing lover. Afterwards, she was distracted by another, more *urgent* request.

*\*My Elder, a moment of your time, please. There is a concern\**

Laisee's sending was unexpected for being so soon, but at least she'd had the sense to avoid interrupting her and her father in the middle of his husbandly duties. She anticipated the further complication and jumped straight to it.

*\*Tell Donald that I ORDER him to comply!\** she sent briskly, then waited for acquiescence on Laisee's part, which failed to come.

*\*My Elder, it is about Aineias and Ling. She has worries regarding the situation with Donald\** she sent, then rushed on with a flashing explanation of Ling's concerns regarding her bond-mate's curiosity.

*\*Laisee, I will confer with your father\** Lili opened her eyes and stared at the ceiling while speaking softly to her husband, who lay peacefully beside her.

"Rad, Lady Wen believes her Aineias will soon piece together the riddle of Donald's birth. She has asked guidance from Laisee in the matter."

The implicit request for permission from him triggered his groan, and he sat up and stepped out of bed naked to pour them both a crystal of ambrosia. He brought both goblets back to bed, but sipped

## Picking up the Pieces

from his own while looking down at her and admiring her beauty. The demure smile she was sharing with him held promise of *more* physical joys to come – *regardless* of his decision, he was sure – but there was no sense making bad decisions for *foolish* reasons.

“Lili – what is his family?”

“He is a *Royal*, my husband, from the house of Anastasius,” she offered, then watched as the Imperial wheels churned while considering the political fall-out that might accrue if Aineias should be found *lacking* in any capacity – particularly if it ended up being *fatal* for him. He finally smiled down at her and presented her goblet, his mind churning again, but this time with *positive* outcomes from such an appointment.

“Anastasius is of a *lower* house, but they have served the Imperial throne loyally over the centuries. I suppose an accommodation *could* be permitted – provided you find no fault with *Ling’s* service?”

“Oh, my *Emperor!* Ling serves me *faithfully*, even though Earth is a cesspool of humanity that must be guarded against *constantly*. Even now, she is managing the interaction between the Center and the local tribe, and their interactions with the *rest* of the town’s citizens. In fact, she was instrumental in–”

“Yes Lili, she follows your guidelines ... within *reason*. Well, I suppose there’s *always* room for \*Jell-O\*,” he suggested blithely.

When her expression froze in confusion, he let out a sigh and smiled.

“Sorry, my dear. Earth problem, Earth rationalization. In order to ease her worries, *yes*, we will accept Aineias and Ling into the household. You may so advise Laisee on my behalf,” he allowed, but turned away and started muttering to himself about additional mouths to feed.

*‘Laisee, you may advise Ling that her bond-mate may be made aware of Donald’s parentage, but it should otherwise be kept a closely guarded secret’*

*‘Thank you, my Elder. She will be–’* Laisee stopped when she suddenly realized there was more going on she was not aware of.

*‘My Elder – Ling ALREADY knew about Donald?’*

*‘Of course, child. How else could we judge the situation on Earth if there were no separate routes of information to query? Just to be sure – who else is aware of Donald ... at the moment’*

*‘Right now? Ahh, Wilber has figured it out. Dwayne is waffling because of foolish comments Donald has made, but he is also*

*suspecting that Spring Blossom was Rondal's mother ... and that she is your lover'*

Laisee felt Lili's titter and wondered at the cause of it.

*'So Spring Blossom was just telling me. She and Dwayne are on a journey into town. She was considering a private encounter with him at the domicile of the \*rabbits\* but the children and their guardsman accompany them'*

*'I'm sure the girls would not mind waiting, nor would the guardsman. Dwayne, however, is an Earthling, and still has certain reservations he is bound to'*

*'It is his loss, then. Spring Blossom tells me he is a conscientious and thorough lover. I miss her myself'*

*'And she misses you, too, Lili ... as do the children and I'*

Lili smiled to herself at this admission of homesickness from her stepdaughter but it also reminded her of the visitor on her way to Earth, who'd decided to stop by Kantor in passing, and this time she'd interviewed the Emperor *without* her being present. Afterwards, she'd found no changes in her husband, but Elder Xue was of an unknown level – not sufficiently powerful enough to deal with the children *directly*, but still much more capable at certain things than she was herself.

*'Laisee, be truthful with Elder Xue. She straddles the extremes of the Elder's Council, and is moderate with her allowances. I truly believe she desires stability for the Commonwealth that includes a living Donald available to offer assistance. He is proceeding with plans to recover the prisoners?'*

*'We have suborned Agent Smith for his knowledge, and Donald seeks to tear apart the terrorists from within – much as he did with the Drecks, but without a traceable presence left behind. Your request of a "sponge and mop" has been noted ... along with the desire for a "light to moderate dusting" if at all possible. Dwayne points out the terrorists are not part of a recognized Earth government, but Donald is still working within guidelines that minimize loss of life and shield our involvement from public view'*

*'Well ... you know how creative Donald can–'* Lili broke off when Rad interrupted her with a wave of his hand before inserting himself into the conversation.

*'Laisee, perhaps appropriate talismans might be fabricated for our extended family ... much like Rondal had done in the past? You will need them for Lady Ling Mei Niu Wen sai Caldarous ne Cletus and Lord Aineias Anastasius sai Caldarous ne Kantor. Ask Donald ... should he*



## Picking up the Pieces

*remember how it was accomplished. Be well, Laisee. Our love to you and the family – even the new ones’* he sent, then turned away while considering how many *additional* hectares of land would have to be obligated for the support of two *more* members of House Caldarous.

Laisee could feel Lili’s silent giggle as her father walked away while muttering about how expensive it was to raise a family nowadays.

*‘Laisee, as you do for Ling and Aineias, do also for the others as your father should have suggested. Sai is family, as is Maya. The children, as well, along with yourself. See the examples Rondal had left with Wilber, Shu, Kayla, and her spouses. Donald may have lost the skill, but he might be able to explain it to you. You have my permission’*

*‘I ... Yes, Lili. I’ll try. My love to you and the family, Lili’*

*‘And our love to you, Laisee’*

Once Lili dropped out, she turned to watch her husband working on a data pad. She suspected he was micromanaging the *household* accounts again, and the surface impressions she was getting seemed to confirm it. With a suppressed sigh, she sprawled backwards across the bed in a pose intended to draw his eyes.

“My Lord *Hus-band*, you have *min-ions* to perform those trivial tasks for you,” she called out in a sing-song measure, before lowering her voice to a seductive murmur, and adding, “You have a more *important* task to complete right here in *front* of you.”

He looked up from his data pad and was entranced by the sight of her voluptuous body provocatively draped by the silky smooth bed sheets of the Imperial suite. He set his data pad down and drifted over to her while she smiled up at him.

“I have a few choice words to *share* with you, my love,” she murmured, and she just *knew* he would find them most delightful in nature.

### ***Earth, The Annex, Noon***

As Aelius drove along the access road to the Center, Dwayne was smiling while fondly remembering this morning’s adventure...

He’d managed to stave off Spring Blossom’s advances at the house, arguing quietly but successfully, that he would prefer not to be rushed in a crowded location, and they’d simply visited the rabbits and picked some tomatoes before packing up the van and heading off to get several dozen churros from the warehouse store.

Once there, the guardsman had taken the girls for a shopping tour of the store, while Spring Blossom had pleaded help from him in visiting the *family* facilities within the store – she not being familiar

with the *public* facilities, which seemed to have a constant stream of women both coming and going.

Once available, he'd stepped inside the larger single restroom with her and pointed out the amenities, while she hung back by the door and locked it behind her. It was only moments later when her clothes had been draped across the sink and she was left standing there in sneakers and socks – and nothing else.

Wisely bowing to the inevitable, he took her in his arms and lavished attention on her lips and neck before working his way down to her nipples, then falling to his knees to nibble at her lower lips. She, being an experienced lover, and he, being a man, they soon found themselves with her bent over the sink while he ravished her from behind – efficiently and quickly but not so quickly that she was left hanging. His resolution came immediately after hers, and they both giggled quietly while tidying themselves and taking turns on the toilet before washing and leaving the room.

As they walked to the sales floor, they made a point of conversing in *\*Standard\** to allay the curiosity of observers thinking that *regular* townspeople might have been up to mischief behind closed doors.

Spring Blossom had inerrantly led them to the girls and their keeper, finding them helping to push a shopping cart containing at least twenty canned hams, along with a dozen bunches of bananas.

The last item on the list had been churros, and those had been pre-ordered at the food court register.

After loading the van, the *last* stop had been the shipping office, where he picked up Wilber's new computer and the other package of accessories from the Embassy. Then they'd headed back...

The van pulled up to the front of the center, where they were met by two guardsmen standing beside three utility carts.

While the guardsmen unloaded the food, Dwayne transferred the computer and the other package to the third cart and headed over to the house.

Spring Blossom caught him, then spun him around for a lingering kiss, before pressing a warm bag into his hands and giggling at the look on his face.

She turned with a wave and strode back to the girls, gathering up bags of churros and parceling some of them out to the guardsmen to be shared amongst them. The last bag she handed to Jaiying, before she took Rose by the hand and walked with her to the Center's entrance. There were a few visitors in the center who would probably enjoy a churro this afternoon.

## Picking up the Pieces

Dwayne smiled to himself as he turned back to push the cart over to the house. Once there, he lifted it bodily up the three steps to the porch and knocked on the door before pushing it inside.

### *In Garrison Housing*

Laisee had a *lovely* lunchtime repast in the garrison quarters that Ling and Aineias shared. It was somewhat smaller in space, having an allowance for only two or three couples at most, or a couple with a family...

Instead of immediately pressing for a resolution, Ling had fêted her as befits the daughter of the Emperor, and they'd lingered over the somewhat lavish meal she'd prepared in their rather modest surroundings. Once dining was complete, Ling had presented an adequate vintage of ambrosia to help settle the meal before coming to the crux of their meeting. She was finally about to bring the subject up when Laisee informed her of a rather more *urgent* issue before she could even begin...

### *In the Center*

The girls were rapidly moving through the Center, swinging by the kitchen and dining rooms to share churros with the staff who'd managed lunch for the visitors. Then they continued to the occupied wing and passed some to the guards before knocking on Asad and Nurani's door to share the bounty with them.

From there, they went back to the room where Donald and his prospective bond-mates had been moved to, and passed churros to the two guardsmen in attendance before knocking on the door.

Without waiting for a response, Jaiying extended inside and found both Maya and Déjà busy with the babies, so she opened the door and brought the smell of warm cinnamon in with them.

"Oh ... what is that *smell*?" Déjà asked, but her mouth was already watering.

"They're called churros. They are made of dough cooked in oil, then covered in sugar and rare Earthling spices," Rose explained. "We brought some for everyone."

"That was very kind of you," Maya said in thanks. "The babies have kept us here, and we were thinking of calling for food."

"Why didn't you take the babies to the dining room with you?" Spring Blossom asked curiously.

"Because the dining room does not have rockers like this, and there are no facilities at the dining room," Déjà pointed out sensibly, and Spring Blossom smiled at her very sensible answer.

She settled on the bed while Rose and Jaiying stepped over and handed Déjà and Maya their churros. They each took one for themselves, then handed the bag back to Spring Blossom while they munched away and watched the babies nurse.

So far, the babies seemed to be satisfied with life. Jaiying extended into Faith, only to find a calmness within her that she found herself somewhat jealous of.

Turning to face Maya, she shifted over to little Ronnie and found him to be content with the *current* situation, as the milk Maya was feeding him was both filling and calming, so she pulled out and shook her head sadly before stepping a tiny bit closer.

"You know, I never suspected Grandfather was hiding inside *you* all that time," she murmured while looking down at his closed eyes. She looked up at Maya, then over at Déjà. "All those weeks... I felt him back on *Kantor*, but once we were on Earth, it felt like someone *else* had moved in."

Maya took a breath to comment, but Spring Blossom quietly said, "The Great Spirit moves in strange ways."

That seemed to satisfy Maya, but Rose came over and looked down at little Ronnie while considering the circumstances she and Jaiying had observed.

"*This* one will have to be watched *carefully*," she finally declared, getting a silent nod from Jaiying to accompany it.

### ***At the Residence***

Wilber looked up at the clock and noted it was only twelve-thirty.

"You're back *early*. I thought *sure* they'd keep you busy longer."

"Well, if *Spring Blossom* had her way..." Dwayne paused when Donald came back from the bathroom and walked around him to settle on the sofa bed next to John, before telling Wilber, "I brought this for you. It's from the Embassy."

He handed over the smaller package from the Embassy and watched as Wilber opened it with the glee of a young boy at Christmas time.

"What's in it?" Donald asked, just as Wilber finished tearing open the box to reveal a new dongle, and a CDROM, along with a list of printed notes.

"Says it's a new security disk for both computers, along with a *new* conversion dongle – this time with security protocols built *into* it. Good thinkin', that."

## Picking up the Pieces

John ducked his head in embarrassment, which made Donald chuckle.

“Not to worry, John. The Embassy geeks are pretty good at what they do,” he said, then turned to Wilber. “Well, you gonna try it out?”

Wilber glared at him, spared a glance at John, then looked up at the arrays and internet connection – making *sure* they were all disconnected, before reluctantly plugging in the conversion dongle. It made a cheery connection bonk before reporting “Working” from the speakers, along with a GUI that repeated the message in text. A few seconds later, the message changed to “Safe,” which was echoed by a spoken “Safe” from the speakers.

Donald pulled a data tab from his pocket and handed it to Wilber, who plugged it into the dongle. The “Working” message was repeated, but this time a new folder was created on the desktop and immediately opened to reveal several file names being written into it. The screen suddenly went black for a moment before it began to fill with lines going in all directions. The conversion dongle seemed to be working properly, and at an accelerated rate.

“Wow...” Wilber muttered, as he watched the entire cave complex rebuild itself from scratch right in front of his eyes.

“You’re gonna need a bigger monitor,” Dwayne suggested, but Wilber just smirked and looked around his packed office.

“Could... Maybe one of those displays from ... from the *ship*?” John suggested, and got a snort from Don.

“Afraid those are built in. Bonded to the interior surface of the inner hull. Besides, the inner hull is two inches thick and it’d *kill* Wilber if it fell over on him.” He looked at the room appraisingly and pointed to the wall beyond Wilber’s desk. “Probably pull the entire *wall* down if it was mounted there.”

John just nodded, and filed that away for later before spending a moment to dwell on the visit to the hanger earlier...

They hadn’t gone over the specifics of the ship when he’d been shown the cave layout on the huge front display, just reviewing the captured survey results and talking a bit about what he’d known or suspected what the contents of the caves might hold.

It would affect the type of intrusion that could be executed safely.

Then Donald had told him if they weren’t going in to rescue captives, the *easiest* thing would be to simply drive through the mountain in several places, suggest they’d had an earthquake, and call it a day. He’d said it casually, never giving an indication that he was anything other than serious about it...

“...paper,” Wilber muttered, and John said, “Huh?”

“You’re right, Wilber,” Donald agreed. “Gonna use up a lotta paper trying to get good drawing of the complex to plan with. Need lots of tape, too.”

“Uhh, you select the views you want, and I can take them into town on a USB drive and have Kinko’s plot them out,” Dwayne suggested.

“Naa. Just go buy a plotter and have done with it,” Donald muttered. “Gonna need frequent updates for planning purposes, anyway, and we don’t need to be runnin’ into town every time we make a change.” Donald noticed Wilber looking at him funny, so he added, “Hey, just take it out of petty cash.”

### ***In Garrison Housing***

Laisee was smiling at the expression on Ling’s face, truly surprised Lili hadn’t already informed her *Earth*-spy of her and the Emperor’s intentions.

“Laisee ... this is *true*? Lili ... the *Elder* and the Emperor are inviting Aineias and ... and me to join their *family*?” Ling whispered softly.

Laisee poured more ambrosia into Ling’s cup and pushed it in front of her.

“No. What I *said* was you and Aineias are part of House Caldarous *now*. He is now *\*Lord Aineias Anastasius sai Caldarous ne Kantor and you are now Lady Ling Mei Niu Wen sai Caldarous ne Cletus,\**” she said, shifting into Standard to emphasize the seriousness of the appointments.

Laisee reached over and gently closed Ling’s lower jaw just to get the image of her astonishment lowered by a few degrees, before she suddenly gasped and looked down in embarrassment.

“*\*Lady Caldarous, I don’t know what to—\**” Ling stopped when Laisee reached out and placed her fingers under her chin to lift her head up again.

“Ling, we are on Earth, and Kantor is a *long* way from here,” she said softly. “Besides, we are *family* now. My name is still Laisee ... except for *formal* occasions.”

Laisee giggled, then took a sip of her own ambrosia.

She was feeling an immense sense of relief coming from Ling that didn’t seem justified by the circumstances, and tilted her head in confusion before simply asking what the resident Senior was thinking.

“Ling ... what *else* has been troubling you?”

## Picking up the Pieces

Ling looked away and lowered her eyes again, only turning back when Laisee said, “Ling?”

“Ahh... Lili said... When I accepted the position here, Lili *promised* me I would no longer be ordered to ... to perform *sanctions*,” she murmured.

“Then it’s true. You used to do some of Lili’s *special* operations. I understand it took a toll from you. Lili once alluded to a Senior who’d found it difficult to sanction a person once they’d shared contentment with them.”

“Yes... Just so.”

“And you worried you would have to sanction your bond-mate,” Laisee said quietly, then reached out for Ling’s hand. “I do not see the necessity of that *ever* happening, Ling.”

“Oh... I understand, my Lady ... Laisee. Now that we’re part of the Royal family, a *third*-party would be put to the task, and my feelings would be spared.”

Laisee sat very still and stared at her – *astonished* that Ling’s interpretation of sanctioning would be other than as an absolute *last* resort. Of *all* the instances she’d gained knowledge of, *none* of the perpetrators had been found to have redeeming character attributes.

For all of his capricious actions over the centuries, even *Rondal* had never approached the depths of depravity that usually warranted sanction.

She’d certainly have to speak with Ling about this later. Perhaps even Lili.

In the *meantime*...

“I’ve been instructed to provide talisman symbols for both of you to indicate your relationship with House Caldorous. Rondal made neckpieces for some of the tribesmen, and Wilber and Shu have matching rings. Is there a—”

“*Rings!* Oh, I have *dearly* admired the rings Wilber and Shu present! Would it be possible to have rings like that for me and Aineias?”

Ling’s expectations had suddenly shifted for the better with the Elder’s generosity.

“Well ... good, then. Do you know where we can find some gold?”

“*Wilber!* I imagine *Wilber* should be able to locate some!” Ling eagerly suggested, with all thoughts of her bond-mate’s potential death washed away in her excitement.

*At the Residence*

Donald, Wilber, and Dwayne were crowded around the monitor and looking at the variety of plotters available online.

John, not wanting to be in the way, had settled for sitting on the sofa bed and was reading the newspaper.

"Damn," Donald muttered. "I bet they could make enough money on ink *alone*, even if they *gave* the plotters away." Wilber glanced his way before jotting down notes on a scratch pad.

"It's big," Dwayne said. "The one at the Embassy isn't *that* big."

"Guys, we don't need a *big* one," Wilber argued, while pausing his note taking to look at the screen. "Certainly, nothing that prints out something bigger than the kitchen table." He looked around the office and brought up another issue. "And where would we put it?"

Dwayne looked around at the filing cabinets, the desk, the computer table, the bookshelves, and the computer shelves for the arrays and network hardware. Then he looked down at the sofa bed where John was casually reading the newspaper.

"Move your office to the motor pool," he suggested.

"I like it where it *is*!"

"Well, can the *garrison* use a plotter for any—" Dwayne stopped and snapped his head around to look at John, with Donald and Wilber following suit, albeit a little slower.

John finally noted the silence in the room and looked up at them.

"Hey, I'm not *stupid*. How many holistic health centers have an *interrogation* room in the basement and house *spaceships* in the motor pool?"

Donald gave a shrug and nodded once before turning back to the monitor.

"So, have the techie guys run a line to the motor pool, or better yet, have them set up a remote office over there for you. Besides, then they can print up some of them motivational posters you see in banks and stuff," he suggested. "How much does the paper cost?"

Wilber had just started to check paper prices when there was a knock on the door. Since Dwayne was closest, he stepped over and opened it to reveal Laisee and Ling standing there.

"Please excuse us, gentlemen but I need to ask Wilber a question," Laisee said, then looked around Dwayne to speak directly to Wilber. "Wilber, do you have any gold lying around?"



## Picking up the Pieces

"Ahhh..." Wilber glanced at the clock, wondering if he needed to make an emergency run into town to visit the jeweler. It was only half past one, so it sounded doable. "How much do you actually need?" he asked her, and got a surprised look from both Dwayne and John when Laisee started counting on her fingers.

Then she reached out and grabbed Wilber's left hand before rotating it flat so the crest of House Caldarous was evident on his wedding band.

"I need enough for one of these for Aineias and Ling... Maya and Dèjà ... and probably Donald."

Donald grinned widely, and almost laughed in glee.

"Don't forget Sai," he suggested. "And how about you and the kids? And my... uhh ... Spring Blossom?"

Donald's gaff was lost on John, but Dwayne took note of it and put *another* piece on the table. It was starting to make a much *clearer* picture, which also tended to explain things a lot *better*. Laisee closed her eyes and quietly sighed, wondering how long Donald would *continue* to tempt fate like that.

"Very well," she said, then turned back to Wilber.

Dwayne avoided Donald's eyes when he asked, "Wilber, do we need to find a jeweler for this? Is there someone in town who can, you know, crank these out?"

"I... I *think* I can do it," Laisee said, then looked to Donald for confirmation, which he gave – after a sort.

"I've seen it *done*," he said, but smiled at her expression of concern. "As long as Lili's okay with it." He turned to Wilber, and asked, "Is there enough gold on hand?"

Wilber raised his hands in a semi-shrug, then stood and headed out the door, with Donald following along behind him.

"Uhhh ... Ladies, there's refreshments in the kitchen?" Dwayne suggested, then nodded for John to join them. They all accepted the invitation and trooped out to the kitchen, where Dwayne raided the refrigerator and pulled out drinks for everyone.

### *In Mary's Car*

The ride back from town had been relatively quiet since Nascha refrained from talking the closer they got to the Reservation.

Mary didn't really mind so much, but it was harder to drive and delve into the young woman's mind while she was concentrating on driving safely...

Now that the relatively *simple* expedient of a signed NDA had effectively neutralized any threat from Agent Smith, Ling had determined it was safe for Nascha to return. Instead of going shopping *first*, Mary had driven over to the Reservation this morning and picked her up, and the stops they'd made afterwards were few – the first of which was at the hospital.

At the nineteen-week mark, her obstetrician reported the baby seemed in fine health, and she should continue with her vitamin and mineral supplements unless developing a bad reaction to them.

He'd asked about her level of nausea, and she'd said it was now under control, deftly ducking the conversation of receiving periodic nursing visits from Maya when needed.

From there, they went to a store where Mary selected a portable CD player and picked up a few selections of piano music for Laisee. This had been requested by Donald, who'd seemed concerned that Laisee was without her preferred instrument while being stuck on Earth.

She smiled at that. Once he'd come back to his senses, Donald seemed so very thoughtful with everyone. She hadn't seen that much of him, but he seemed to fit in well with everyone. Wilber *especially* seemed to accept him as one of the family. Perhaps it was because they'd both worked with Ron Cal for so many years – Wilber here on Earth, and Donald out there in space somewhere?

Then they stopped at the grocery store and picked up a few things that didn't involve bulk quantities before heading back to the Center...

She made the turn onto the long driveway, and finally dropped Nascha off at the Center before driving around to the back of the house and her preferred parking spot. She needed no help with the groceries and came in through the laundry room back door, stopping only long enough to set the bags down and empty them out before sorting between fresh food and pantry staples. She grabbed the fresh food and headed into the kitchen, but found it full of visitors.

"Hello, everyone! Dwayne, can you give me a hand with the canned goods on top of the washer? They go into the pantry, over on my right," she said, then set the fresh food down while she opened the refrigerator door to her left, making Dwayne wait while the door was open and blocking the laundry room door.

"Bad design," he muttered, and she started to giggle.

"It didn't *used* to be this way. I'm told the house has been remodeled a couple of times, but the refrigerator was here *way* before the laundry room was added. I talked to Danny about moving it over to the other wall but there's no outlet over there."

## Picking up the Pieces

Dwayne contemplated the ease of putting a new outlet in a prefabbed building, but dismissed it when she closed the refrigerator and let him pass. Once he returned, it was an easy matter to stack the replenishing items on the pantry shelves. He even rotated the stock so the oldest dated items would be pulled first.

Mary folded and put away the shopping bags before heading to her room, catching Wilber and Donald just closing the closet door in the hallway. She saw that Wilber held a canvas bag in his hand.

“What ‘cha doin’, guys?”

Wilber shrugged and said, “New rings for the visitors.”

Mary let out an excited squeal, and bounced on her toes.

“Oh! When’s the *ceremony* gonna be?”

Before Wilber could speak, Donald interrupted him by saying, “Laisee has to learn how to do it first,” which got a surprised look from Mary.

“Doesn’t she *already* know how?”

Donald glanced at Wilber, then said, “Ronnie was a *bad* boy, but *this* time Laisee has permission.”

That left her a bit confused, but she followed them out to the kitchen, where Wilber dumped the contents of the bag on the Formica top of the kitchen table; it consisting of several clumps of raw, gold-embedded ore.

Laisee put her drink down and stared at the pile bewilderingly.

She pulled out a chair and sat down before timidly reaching out and picking up a piece of yellow-tinted ore. She knew Lili had given her permission to do this but the *horror* stories she’d heard about violators of such restrictions had insured that – unlike *Rondal* – she’d *never* delved into the dark side of her relatively recent capabilities.

With a stuttering sigh, she looked up at Donald imploringly, but didn’t find any comfort in his eyes.

“Sai Tal might have been exposed to Lord Caldar’s violations in the past,” he suggested, then smirked at the *chagrin* Sai would undoubtedly feel at performing the same. “Perhaps she might be willing to share her experiences – should you *ask*?”

Laisee swiveled her head to glance at the clock before turning back to him.

“I – I sent her to speak with Gray Feather and Lean Bear ... at the Reservation. She should be back in a few ... hours,” she said weakly.

Donald nodded, then looked around, finally spying an empty transparent plastic candy container on the counter.

He went over and picked it up before coming back and dropping a small lump of ore into it, then closing the lid - *tightly*.

"I suggest you start small," he said, then put it down in front of her. "I imagine it involves removing the granules of rock *away* from the base metal ... or maybe the other way around. Sadly, it's nothing I can help you with, Lady Laisee."

Donald turned to the men and suggested they adjourn to the motor pool to take an in depth look at the Korengal cave complex. He and John had only viewed the display while John was getting comfortable with the idea of the limited capabilities Donald had talked about.

What they *really* needed to do was get in and get back out with the prisoners, but *without* leaving fingers pointing their way.

They left Laisee and Mary behind with the pile of ore on the kitchen table.

### ***In the Van***

Sai looked at the digital clock on the dashboard and sighed internally while the guardsman-driver brought her back to the Annex.

*'Three-thirty POST meridiem,'* she thought to herself, then remembered the *other* twelve hours of the day. *'ANTE meridiem ... from midnight to noon. And they speak English ... but it's AMERICAN English, and yet their time is measured in a DEAD language? EARTHLINGS!'* she fumed internally, but considered that at least she'd been using this obscure time reference ever since joining the *Kraken's* crew a few years ago.

She rolled her eyes once, then closed them while thinking back to the futility of this morning's assignment...

Gray Feather and Snow Woman had greeted her politely, but she could already feel resentment coming from the old man before broaching the subject of her visit.

It was almost as if he'd *known* what she wanted to discuss.

When mentioning she also needed to speak with Lean Bear, Snow Woman had backed inside the door and welcomed her in, where she found Lean Bear just standing up from where he'd been sitting. Snow Woman then leaned down and picked up a bag from the floor, before stepping past her to leave the three of them alone.

Sai then exchanged greetings with Lean Bear and had been invited to sit with them at the kitchen table.

## Picking up the Pieces

The house was a bit smaller than where Wilber and Shu lived, but it was clean and very neat. She'd felt pride from Snow Woman when she'd entered the house, but there'd also been a bit of concern for some reason she'd not been able to discern.

Once seated at the table with the two men, she'd found herself at odds of how to begin until Gray Feather had abruptly asked, "How is TSĪSQSÉ BIYIGÉ this day?"

She'd frozen at the vaguely familiar words, but the surface feelings from both Gray Feather and Lean Bear reflected an image of Donald as he'd existed in a *previous* life.

She'd then quietly explained that it had been recognized – at the very *top* of the food chain, mind you – that Ronnie had been *officially* declared *dead* ... *despite* his living and breathing corpse having been successfully reassembled and brought back to a somewhat nominally living existence. Of course, that was at odds with the *official* declaration of his demise – hence the necessity of keeping his sojourn here on Earth a secret while plans were still in process to keep him safe from discovery.

Gray Feather questioned that his brother would proclaim such, and she'd stated it had gone even *higher*. Then Lean Bear commented that he'd thought *much* more of Lady Lili than that, and she'd assured him it had gone right to the *top*.

Both men stared at her for several seconds, until Gray Feather said, "Lili must have been *furious*."

She'd stared at him in confusion for nearly half a minute, until the pieces suddenly *rearranged* themselves on the table.

Gray Feather had *already* known about Ronnie, Radatel, and Lili, and what they each represented. That there was another layer *above* Lili had been a complete surprise to him, as it was to *most* who stumbled across the reality of it. It was then that Gray Feather had finally smiled and offered her a cool drink, and a sweetened, dried vegetable disk of some sort that had been kept in a ceramic container.

The conversation lightened considerably when she explained that Ronnie, now named *Donald*, had been successfully Healed by a special staff of Healers but many of his previous skills had been lost due to his encounter with a new species. She'd added the fact that he'd lived at all was remarkable, given that he'd been suffering from advanced aging at the time of his death.

Lean Bear had blanched at the memory of Laisee's admission of how Ronnie had died – beheaded by *accident* – and Sai had reached out and rested her hand on his arm with a comforting glow leaking from underneath it.

Both men then asked how secure Donald was with his new situation, and she admitted that Donald, like Ronnie before him, was *just* as likely to get himself into mischief. She'd then watched as they'd turned inwardly to think about the implications of that, which was when she discovered Gray Feather's mind was blocked from her intrusion.

She'd turned her attention to Lean Bear and found a similar resistance, but not *nearly* as strong – nowhere *near* as complete as the blocking Gray Feather seemed capable of. From what she could feel, Gray Feather's surface thoughts weren't affected, but anything deeper than that was *completely* secure from her prying, and she'd finally stopped trying. As Gray Feather was completely human, she'd been *sure* Ronnie probably had something to do with it but any further intrusion had been interrupted by Snow Woman returning home – this time with Cocheta in tow.

She'd decided the meeting was officially over when Snow Woman had offered a cool drink and some cookies – those flat vegetable disks – to Cocheta. As the women entered the kitchen, Sai and the men exited the house and took a walk around the small garden plot Snow Woman maintained. That was where she'd discovered the round, red vegetables that squished in her mouth and tasted so very fresh right off the vine.

Remarkably, Gray Feather had magically produced a brown bag from somewhere and knelt down to harvest a small amount of the vine's fruit for her because, as he'd said, "Fresh fruit is *always* better when it's right off the vine."

While he was bent over, she'd extended through him again – seeking out any changes to his body indicating anything suspicious going on within him. All she found was a gold medallion on a thong around his neck – similar to the one she'd seen on the neck of Dorcas, but with two sides to it.

As if he'd felt her intrusion, he'd gotten up and pulled it out for her inspection, telling her it had been a gift from Ronnie to quell the demon he'd accidentally shared with him. She'd seen the crest of Caldarous on one side, and the image of a half-blinded Drecks on the other – someone she *immediately* recognized. Then he'd told her the demon had been lost, but he'd kept wearing it anyway – just in case. He'd also said he felt the ugly face was *different* now, but not elaborated, other than saying he'd have to ask Donald about it one day ... in *private*. She'd almost told him, but instead held her breath for a moment. Had he been reading *her*?

She'd finally suggested that speaking with Donald in private would probably be welcome, as Donald had so very few family members left

## Picking up the Pieces

on Earth – especially since he'd often spoken of the both of them fondly, which had been true. Then she'd thought of Spring Blossom and suggested she might enjoy visiting with members of her tribe after such a long absence. He admitted that he'd accosted her at their first meeting but was honor bound to apologize for his behavior.

They'd parted then, and she'd gotten into the van for the ride back, thinking again about his abnormally strong block on the way to the Annex...

Sai opened her eyes when the van slowed and made the turn to the right, then smiled grimly as they made the final, mile-long approach to the Center. The bag in her lap had shifted during the turn, and she looked down at it, and opened it up. Selecting a small red fruit – a *tomato*, he'd called it – she twisted off the green top before popping it in her mouth. When she bit into it, the sudden burst of flavor was *very* satisfying.

### *In the Residence*

Laisee looked at the layer of rock dust covering the inside of the plastic candy container. It was a rather pretty mixture of browns and grays – broken only by fine powered streaks of dull yellow dusted randomly about the interior of it. Overall, she thought she was getting the hang of it.

She reached over and plucked two tiny pieces of dried fruit layered with a dark brown covering from a large bowl sitting off to one side. The moment she popped them into her mouth, she “Mmmm’d” with pleasure at the flavor and sweetness of the chocolate, mixed with the taste of the preserved grapes within. Then she reached for the *third* empty candy container, its contents having been added to the bowl just a few minutes ago, and made ready for her *next* attempt...

The first one hadn't gone so well, as the ore had exploded and dented the inside of the plastic container.

It also left physical extrusions on the *outside* surface of it, indicating it had just barely contained the contents.

Her second attempt had gone much better. Mary had returned from hiding in the laundry room – making *sure* Laisee was done for the moment – then entered the pantry before pulling out a fresh container of candy and dumping the contents into a bowl.

This time Laisee had put in very *tiny* pieces of ore, and worked *very* delicately – meticulously pulling apart the rock and metal over the course of the next two hours. This left her with a pile of fine power layering the bottom of the container. She'd held it up to the light and turned it horizontally several times while looking for any evidence of gold, but just before she'd put it down, she'd felt a sneeze coming on

and gripped it tightly – the result being a fine layer of rock powder interspersed with dull yellow over the *entire* inside of the container...

Laisee unscrewed the lid of the third container and dropped another piece of ore into it.

Rose and Jaiying were watching television behind the barrier of their guardsman sitting between them and Laisee. They'd moved after feeling Mary's sudden burst of surprise when the first lump of ore had separated itself so spectacularly.

Between the two of them sat a small bowl of chocolate-covered raisins offered by Mary, with a slightly larger bowl for the duty guardsman. He'd taken a small handful, sampled them individually, then in groups of two and four, and finally written notes in his notebook for the *next* shopping trip – remembering *exactly* where he'd seen that particular candy container on the warehouse's supply racks.

Rose concentrated on the program, while Jaiying felt the growing frustration from Grandmother Sai as she approached the Center.

"Mother, Grandmother Sai has returned," she called out, and Laisee immediately pushed the container away and almost launched herself out of her chair – stopping only to grab a few more chocolate-covered raisins before getting up and heading out the front door.

Mary, her entertainment suddenly departing, headed to her bedroom for a while.

The girls looked at each other, then both got up to see what progress Laisee had made. There were two used containers and one clean one with a small sample of ore in it.

They looked at each other again, then giggled, before each grabbed a lump from the pile and began playing with it.

Their guardsman, hearing them safely behind him, ignored their giggles and continued watching the animated feature. The large talking dog and his handler were running away from the much *larger* aquatic creature chasing them.

### ***In the Center***

Once she stepped outside, Laisee caught a glimpse of Sai as she entered the Center.

Instead of calling to her, she made her way across to the Center and extended out to find her, quickly locating her near the kitchen. She walked to the kitchen and opened the door but didn't immediately see her until a noise from the pantry revealed her location.

"Sai, there is something I need your help–"



## Picking up the Pieces

“GRAY FEATHER! You think you have *everything* under control, and then *THIS* raises its ugly head,” Sai complained bitterly. “I swear to the GODS that Ronnie *did* something to Gray Feather!”

“Gray Feather? What *about* Gray Feather?”

“I can’t get into his *head*! It’s like he’s learned to *block* somehow!”

### *A Walk Outside*

“See you guys later. Maya and I have a date in the garrison area,” Donald shared when he split off from John, Wilber, and Dwayne after they’d left the motor pool – or the *hanger*, as John now considered it.

They stood in a small group while Donald briskly walked away. No, he almost *skipped* on the way back to the Center.

“That man is *seriously* disturbed,” John muttered, which only caused Wilber to laugh out loud.

“Oh, if you only knew the *half* of it,” he said, then headed towards the house, with his companions lurching to keep up with him.

Once they got inside, Dwayne diverted to the refrigerator and snagged drinks for them all, pausing only to glance at the containers on the table – the lumpy one, the dusty one, and the one with little gold marbles in it. Then he shrugged and handed out drinks before they left the girls sitting there watching the end of an animated movie with their guardsman.

Once sequestered in the front office, they continued to discuss several of the options Donald had suggested. Some of them were somewhat reasonable, but *most* of them bordered on absolute *insanity*; something Wilber quietly pointed out was the *norm* for someone like Donald.

### *In the Living Room...*

With the movie over, Jaiying and Rose got up and put the movie away before heading to the door. Their guardsman took the bowls back to the kitchen counter and left them for the occupants, but grabbed another handful of chocolate-covered raisins when he passed the kitchen table. He really liked this duty of watching the young princesses. They were both very polite, and managed to stay out of mischief. As a *bonus*, he got to watch *television*!

### *At the Garrison Patio*

The afternoon wasn’t all that hot today, and Maya found it very pleasant, sitting in the shade of the trellis at the garrison’s housing area. The fact that she and Donald would be there for just a few minutes was all right with her, as sharing alone time with her

prospective bond-mate made it all the sweeter. She leaned her head against his shoulder and snuggled closer to him when he put his arm around her. She hated to disrupt the moment, but did have one tiny complaint to voice...

"You were very *mean* to Laisee," she murmured. "You *could* have told her how to do it."

It took him a moment to figure out what she was referring to, before chuckling quietly.

"I've lost that part of me, my love. I know how *I* used to do it, but I can't exactly explain it to Laisee without being able to *show* her. I can't even Fire my *sword* any longer," he added, then scuffed the heel of his shoe on the ground at that remembered frustration.

"Ummm, your sword seems to work all right with *me*," she teased him, and he hugged her a little tighter.

"Yes. Well, that won't offer too much protection during this upcoming mission."

"Donald, do you *really* need to go? Laisee was told to let our *host* perform the recovery. Would it not be better if the task falls to *their* hands?"

He sat there and tried to think of something that might appease her without pissing her off. The *obvious* example would be to remind her of the Commonwealth's failure to protect the diplomatic mission she'd been on where she'd lost her daughters, but it would be rather harsh to bring up now. Instead, he decided to try reasonableness.

"Maya, you've lived here before and seen the messes the Americans can get themselves into. They misplaced Fred over in a place where they did *not* belong. They don't have the *resources* we have, and they don't have the same *motivation* we do. Fred is *tribe*. Nascha *needs* him to be the father of her child. Even *I* concede the Americans are not ready to intervene on her behalf without making a big *mess* of it – and probably killing a lot more *innocents*, besides."

"And what about *our* needs, my Donnie? What about me and Déjà, and ... and your *chil*—" She stopped and lifted her head while looking around for anyone close enough to hear them.

He pulled her closer and kissed her cheek before settling her against him again.

"You are *safe* here, and so are Déjà *and* the children," he said pointedly. "If we're *allowed*, I've got the *Kraken's Child*, and probably a few willing volunteers to help out. We came up with a few scenarios this afternoon that might prove workable once we do a little more

## Picking up the Pieces

research into this Faridun fellow. I think we can screw things up enough to make him lose favor with his masters, thus freeing the world of another terrorist, and his supply line of illegal drugs.”

“These are *Earthlings*, my Donnie! *Nothing* you do will stop them!”

“And that’s why we have to arrange for *them* to stop *themselves*,” he muttered, before his attention was drawn to the couple approaching from across the patio.

He separated from Maya and stood to greet Aelius – his sparring partner for the afternoon. Beside him walked a woman, presumably his bond-mate, Drusilla. From the sour expression on her face, it seemed very likely this was her – *just* as she’d been described.

“Good afternoon, Gentleman and Lady,” Donald announced, then performed an intermediate bow between more or less equals. “Aelius, is this the beautiful *Drusilla* you’ve told me so much about?”

While Donald basked in the flush rising up Drusilla’s neck at his gallant comment, Maya locked a smile on her face when she stood to greet them both.

“Uhhh, yes ... this is my bond-mate, Drusilla,” Aelius finally got out, then turned and drew one arm around her waist. “Drusilla, this is Spacer First Donald Cato ... and his companion is Lady Maya Tal.”

Donald approached and held his left hand up to Aelius, just as Drusilla held her left hand up to Maya. Once semiformal introductions were made, they chatted for a while until Aelius looked down at his wrist and noted the hour on his portable timer.

“Donald, we have practice to attend, and I am eager to learn new skills.”

“Excellent! I may be somewhat past my prime, but I’m *always* glad to share my knowledge. Who knows? One day it may save *my* life – or the life of someone I *love*.”

Drusilla, having ragged at Aelius earlier for scheduling additional practice on one of his *off-duty* times, suddenly felt like she’d heard something disturbingly profound. After her gentle *silent* push to Drusilla, Maya smiled and took her aside to speak with her privately. Meanwhile, Donald and Aelius wandered to the Center where they could find room to practice in privacy.

### *At the Residence*

It was four p.m. when Wilber leaned back from his computer after sending out a handful of encrypted emails to the Embassy, and various other agencies he was familiar with. Meanwhile, Dwayne and John were looking over the decades-old satellite images provided by

the Embassy and comparing them to the map sections Wilber had printed from the internet.

"Oh, man," Dwayne muttered. "This could go bad in so many ways..."

He and John were focusing on the area surrounding the Korengal Valley, located somewhere in the Kunar Province of Afghanistan.

"A *river*? The only one that looks big enough is ten or fifteen miles below Asadabad," John pointed out. "Even then, it might not be all that deep."

"Oh, it gets *better*," Wilber said disgustedly. "This is *September*. The river isn't as wide as those old maps show it, and most of it turns into a muddy delta when summertime rolls around. Worse yet, you look *real* close, and you can see habitats all along the river. Gonna be hard to sneak in without being seen."

"Hey, dark of the new moon, and he goes in black, like he said," Dwayne countered.

"I thought he said 'cloaked'? What does that *mean*, anyway?" John asked, and Wilber began to chuckle.

~~~

It was approaching early evening when John returned from his room at the Center and approached the porch of the house with some reluctance. It was just after dusk, and Dwayne had come to tell him that Don and Agent Milton wanted to speak with him about his immediate future. He'd smiled when he'd said it, but that didn't always indicate a positive outcome.

He paused at the bottom of the stairs and turned to look around.

Nightfall had made the shadows too dark to see into, and it was doubtful he could escape the Annex on foot and make his way down the long driveway – let alone the ten miles into town. He was without money or proper identification, and his agency had already turned their backs on him. Shaking his head, he steeled himself and took the three steps up the porch, where the door opened before he could knock on it, and Wilber greeted him with a warm smile.

"Come on in, John!"

From outside the door, he looked around Wilber and saw Don sitting at the kitchen table, and appearing to be nursing a juice box of some kind. At Wilber's withdrawal, he stepped inside and almost jumped when the door closed behind him. He watched warily as Don pushed a chair out with his foot before sipping at his juice box again.

## Picking up the Pieces

On the table, he could see a bottle and a couple of glasses, so he followed Wilber over and took the proffered chair before drawing it up to the table and resting his elbows on it.

“Dwayne said you wanted to talk to me about my ... my future,” he murmured, and looked between the two of them.

Wilber and Don shared a quick rock-paper-scissors, with Don being the winner before turning to John with a grin on his face.

“John, I’ve got good news and even *better* news,” he said, then glanced at Wilber before turning back to him. “As it turns out, you know a *lot* about us ... certainly more than most people *anywhere* on Earth know about us. The *good* news is that we *trust* you.”

John sat there and waited for the *other* shoe to drop, but finally prompted for it.

“And the *better* news?”

“Ah, yes! The *better* news is that *Laisee* trusts you. As the Emperor’s daughter, she’s responsible for things at a level *way* above either me or Wilber. The *downside*, of course, is that you’re currently on the outs with the Mossad. I’m somewhat at a loss as to how to help you fix that, John – not without giving away our little secret here.”

“That’s true,” Wilber said. “Knowledge of us would be *very* valuable in certain hands – either friends or allies. In *unfriendly* hands... Well, the political repercussions *alone* would be unthinkable.”

John looked between Wilber and Don before finally shrugging his shoulders, so Don spread both hands and nodded.

“John, what we’d like to suggest is that you take a brief vacation and tour the beautiful Southwest – courtesy of ... well, *us*.”

“That’s right,” Wilber agreed. “We’ll provide you with cash, another car, a credit card with an open limit – within *reason*, mind you – and let you know when we have a resolution about Faridun, one way or another.”

“That’s a good point, Wilber,” Don said while nodding thoughtfully. “If we’re successful, we can arrange for John to receive full credit for it. It might help with his credibility. After all, without the *details* he’s given us, we’d still have no way to develop a value judgment on how to proceed.”

“But ... what if you screw up?” John asked him, and Wilber had a ready answer.

“That’s easy ... we blame it on *Don* – like *always*,” he said, and got a glare from Donald.

Donald let out a sigh tinged with frustration before turning back to John with a closed smile on his face.

“So ... what do you say?”

John looked at them alternately, and then stared down at the table for several seconds. He finally looked up and spoke to Don.

“What if I should slip? Let it out that I know about you?”

Don gestured to Wilber, who started counting on his fingers.

“*One* – who in the world would *believe* you?” Wilber muttered, then selected another finger. “*Two* – the *last* two people who signed the NDA were *reporters* – *always* a risky group. Now they’re... Where are they, Don?”

“Stephanie and Ralph are working for the Emperor’s First Wife as spies on one of the colony worlds to get a feel of how people are adjusting to Commonwealth life. Got a cute little daughter now, too. Couple of years *younger* than Jaiying or Rose, I think. Theirs was actually a witness *protection* kind of thing if I remember right,” he said, and saw the corresponding nod from Wilber.

“*Three...*” Wilber continued, “We hear of any leaks traceable to *you*, and that NDA you signed will have you in servitude so fast it’ll make your head spin.”

“Not that we’re *worried* about you,” Don quickly assured him. “I said we trust you. We also understand that sometimes things can be *forced* out of you. You get tortured and survive, then let us know and we’ll take care of it. If you *don’t* survive ... well then, either way, it isn’t your fault.”

John looked at them both and let out a sigh of resignation.

“Just how many people have signed that NDA of yours, anyway?”

Donald looked to Wilber, who nodded and turned to John.

“Well, there’s *you*. Me and Dwayne, of course. Kayla and Mary ... and Danny. The tribe’s medicine men and their wives – very helpful folks, by the way. Uhhh, the hospital director... Maya saved his life several years ago, and it kinda freaked him out. The Sheriff ... and her husband ... *now...*”

When he paused, Don jumped in.

“Stephanie and Ralph. Oh, and that renegade General who tried to kill them and Rondal Caldar. I think he came back in a *body bag*. Well, *most* of him.” Don saw the shock on John’s face, so he added, “I heard Dwayne was there. You can ask him about it.”

## Picking up the Pieces

The room remained silent for about a minute until Wilber lightly cleared his throat.

“So ... John. What’s your decision? I’ll even throw in a new identity for you – at least until you get right with the Mossad.”

John sat there and stared at his hands for a short while. When he looked up, he still had indecision on his face.

“Faridun ... he was a *good* guy ... once,” he said quietly.

“And Faridun suffered a great loss,” Don murmured. “And now he allows *others* to suffer at his hands – either directly, or by proxy. I promise you that my orders are to recover Fred and the other prisoners. No lives are to be taken on my watch. If Faridun loses favor with his companions, that’s on *his* head – not mine or yours.”

John looked at both of them, then nodded his head. Wilber let out a sigh of relief and opened the bottle of ambrosia before pouring John and himself a drink. Don reached over and clunked his juice box with them before finishing it with a sucking sound – getting John to snort in the middle of sipping his ambrosia.

They all shared a chuckle at that, before Don excused himself while Wilber took John into his office to start getting details from him for new identification cards, a driver’s license, and a couple of credit cards.

### *Friday, September 23, A Routine Day*

As busy as yesterday had been, Friday was a relaxed *dream* of a day.

Donald and Aelius had scheduled more practice time in the Center, where Donald shared more of his years of experience in the field and in training. At the end of two hours, carefully scheduled *around* Cocheta’s visit with Ling, Aelius was feeling *much* more confident with himself. He was even starting to heed Donald’s instructions to pay more attention to the *ultimate* goal, and not let his emotions affect the outcome.

The *ultimate* goal, of course, was to defeat the enemy, but if that couldn’t be accomplished, then surviving to fight another day won out – even if it meant disengaging and *leaving* the scene of conflict.

Naturally, different situations controlled how well that worked out for everyone – particularly when the safety and lives of the *principals* were involved. It was the routine expectation that you gave your *life* to save your principal – but it wasn’t to be wasted *foolishly*.

While her bond-mate was engaged with Donald, Drusilla had gone with Maya to the quarters she shared with Donald and Déjà, and two

babies who had just awoken and were *hungry*. While the women began feeding the babies, Maya had insisted Drusilla stay and visit for a while. The opportunity allowed them to explain more about Healers, which brought up the discussion of Healers in general, and how jealous Drusilla always felt when Aelius was being “pawed” at by a strange woman when he was injured.

Maya explained how beneficial it was for a warrior to have a Healer as a bond-mate, and Déjà expounded on the *many* benefits of Healer training between bonded-couples. That had brought a smile to Maya’s lips. Planting the seed had been *easy*. Now it was just a matter of waiting for it to sprout.

When Sai and Laisee returned to the house yesterday afternoon, they’d found the men in the front office, and Mary missing. They’d also found a pile of small gold marbles in one of the candy containers on the kitchen table. Sai had looked at them and frowned, having extended through them and seen the telltales of how they’d been created. From the expression on her face, she knew *Laisee* hadn’t done it, nor was it likely that *Mary* had done it. Shu had been visiting with Nascha after her return, so that only left Ling ... and *two more suspects*.

Once queried silently, the girls had confessed – not that they’d been hiding it – and admitted it had been easy but quickly became boring, so they’d finished the movie and headed back to their quarters. Having taken that knowledge directly from Donald’s memories, Jaiying said she could return to the house or her mother could bring the rest of the gold to the Center and she’d teach her how to manipulate it so rings could be made for everyone. She’d even offered to teach Sai, but was turned down.

In the late afternoon, Danny and Kayla had arrived together and made a beeline for the bedroom. It was time to wash off the grime of the day and hit the sack – which had lasted for all of an hour, until Mary had returned and seen Kayla’s car parked behind the house. The next time they saw any of the three was the following late morning, after the trio of lovers had finally gotten caught up with each other and slept away what little was left of the morning between about three and ten a.m.

### ***Saturday, September 24, Annex Parking Lot***

It was still before nine a.m. when John Smith packed his small bag into the trunk of the replacement rental car Wilber had arranged to have delivered to the Annex late Friday afternoon.

“Here’s my card, John,” Wilber told him, and handed him a grungy copy of his business card, along with his “sanitized” cell phone.



## Picking up the Pieces

John took it, saw that it appeared to be fully functional – no doubt lacking *certain* apps that he may or may not be tempted to reinstall at some point – and reached out to shake Wilber’s hand.

“I’d like to thank you for your hospitality,” he said, then turned to Don with his outstretched hand. “I want to thank you, *too*, Don. You know, for not killing me and all,” he said quietly.

Don smiled and took his hand.

“I find that it may be hard to understand a person’s motivations, but it’s usually preferable to planting them in the ground,” he said evenly. “All that *paperwork*, you know.”

John froze for a moment, then grinned before getting into the car. With a last look around, Agent Smith closed the door and started it up, sparing a slight wave of his hand before pulling out the driveway and heading down the access road, Wilber and Donald watching him as far as the turn-off into town.

They shared a sigh of relief between the two of them, before Wilber asked, “Are you *sure*?”

Donald shrugged and turned back to the house. A few steps into it, he said, “Hey, catch and release whenever possible.”

They were a few steps further along when Wilber asked, “What if he talks?”

Donald trudged along for another couple of yards, and said, “Who’s gonna believe him? Besides, you’ve already bugged the *shit* out of his cell phone, didn’t you?”

Wilber chuckled as they hit the porch steps.

“Cell phone, drivers’ license, ID card, credit cards, bags, rental car ... *both* pairs of his shoes...”

Donald stopped and started to laugh. “You’ve been watching too many *‘I Spy’* reruns, Wilber,” he finally said between chuckles, but Wilber shook his head.

“No. It was *‘Get Smart’*,” he corrected him just before opening the door.

## *A Change of Status*

It was nearly noon, and the participants had all gathered in the Center’s great room and taken seats that had been placed in a circle. Considering Laisee had led a mostly sheltered life in the Royal Homestead, she’d needed a few pointers on how to conduct the ceremony, which was to be semiformal in nature as befitted a purely *family* event...

The girls had shown Laisee how to manipulate raw gold the night before, and she'd practiced making ring blanks several times before getting the hang of it. She'd found it *much* easier to deal with once the gold had been separated from the ore, and was grateful Jaiying and Rose had spent the relatively few minutes needed to accomplish that initial task.

From what Jaiying had told her, it had taken Rondal only *seconds* to perform, which was surprising, since his Healings had always been rather slow and haphazard in comparison.

But then again, it was more in line with a *man's* proclivities, so she diligently followed Jaiying's teachings and managed to finish her last few samples in under a minute each.

Laisee's final test yesterday had been to mold a ring to fit Spring Blossom's finger without making it too loose, or cutting off her circulation. She'd placed a ring blank on Spring Blossom's finger, then extended *into* her hand, then simultaneously *into* and *around* the metal, before cautiously sizing it to perfection before finishing with a reasonable representation of the Caldaraus crest. Since Spring Blossom was already a member of the Royal Household, she'd kept the ring and worn it proudly this morning...

For today's event, they'd placed a flat podium at an opening in the circle, and that's where the overlarge ring blanks were arrayed while awaiting their final fittings.

Donald was sitting between Déjà and Maya. Mary and Kayla were seated nearby holding the babies, with Spring Blossom sitting between them. Wilber was standing by Shu, while Danny and Sai were standing behind his wives. It also allowed Danny to get a good view of the babies. The fact that babies had been born at the Center had been triggering nesting urges in *both* his wives, and he wondered how everyone would react if they both became pregnant. Dwayne, like Wilber, and not a participant, had been invited due to his close ties with the family.

Ling and Aineias were seated across from Donald and his group, and she was hard pressed to contain her excitement. Aineias was a bit more reserved, as he looked at Donald with new eyes now and understood the *seriousness* of the ceremony that would change their lives and loyalties from this point on.

At the appointed hour, Laisee, dressed in formal robes, stepped to the podium and addressed the group in Standard.

*"My Lords and Ladies, the Emperor and the Elder have burdened you, perhaps unfairly, with a huge responsibility affecting the stability of the Commonwealth. Your knowledge of certain events and realities*

## Picking up the Pieces

*could possibly create political chaos across the twelve clusters if verifiable proof of it ever leaked out,\*” she stated quietly while looking around the room.*

*“\*Note that I do not say rumors, as rumors are always with us – as was the Demon of the Commonwealth, and the Kraken’s Child. Careful management of those two rumors have stood the test of time, as they have allowed the armistice between the Hegemony and the Commonwealth to be broken, being replaced with Ambassadorial missions between the leaders of both seats of power in order to establish and maintain a PEACEFUL co-existence between us all.\*”*

She paused and looked over at Ling and Aineias, wondering if they’d kept up with the news from home.

*“\*At this point in time, the Master Pack of Zarox has sent his personal Ambassador, his son, Torga of Pack Gagsa, to the Capitol of Kantor, where he resides at the Royal Palace – one level below the Imperial suites. Likewise, with the Emperor’s permission, the new civilization discovered nearly an hour below us and identified by the name Vanir, has exchanged Ambassadors with the Imperial throne. They reside in similar accommodations at the Capitol.\*”*

She was satisfied to see surprise on Aineias’ face this time, and looked at each person in turn before continuing.

*“\*My Lords... My Ladies... The information you are privy to is private in nature – FAMILY private – and as such, the Emperor has decreed that this level of responsibility should only be asked of FAMILY members.\*”*

She stepped forward a bit and looked down at Ling and Aineias.

*“\*In recognition of your special relationship with the Imperial family, the Emperor deems that you now become official members of the Imperial family. To signify this, he has instructed me to provide symbols depicting such for each of you.\*”* She turned and selected two of the ring blanks, before turning back and smiling at Ling and Aineias.

*“\*Lady Ling Mei Niu Wen ... sai Caldarous ne Cletus... please step forward.\*”*

Ling stood and walked across the small circle, where Laisee took her left hand and put the ring blank on her left ring finger.

Pausing to take a breath, she folded her hands over Ling’s, closed her eyes, and started to work ... spending a careful minute and a half getting it *just* right. Once she was done, she opened her eyes and pulled off her top hand ... gratified to see the crest of Caldarous staring up at her.

For comparison, she stole a quick glance at the alcove where “Lord Caldar’s” ashes had been stored, and judged it to be sufficient.

*"Welcome to the family, Ling,"* she murmured, then leaned in and hugged her before pulling away to look at Aineias.

*"Lord Aineias Anastasius ... sai Caldarous ne Kantor, please come forward,"* she called out, and completed his ring in a little bit better time.

*"Princess Déjà sai Caldarous se Kee ne Lady Sai Tal, please step forward."* This was another surprise for both Ling and Aineias, as they'd never heard of anyone pledging loyalty to an *individual* before.

*"Lady Maya Kao Lai Tal sai Caldarous ne Cletus, please step forward."*

At the end of Maya's fitting, Laisee smiled and whispered, *"Now you're stuck with us FOREVER, Maya,"* and kissed her on the cheek.

*"Donald Cato sai Caldarous se Earth ne Kantor, please come forward."*

Donald was grinning widely while Laisee was trying very hard to make his ring just as nice as the ones he'd made for everyone else. At the end of the fitting, he leaned in and whispered to her – catching her completely by surprise. She gave a nervous glance at Sai, but nodded dubiously at him.

*"Lady Sai Maya Kao Tal ... sai Caldarous ne Cletus, please step forward,"* she announced, now catching Sai completely off guard.

Sai looked around once, then walked around the seated members to stand in front of her. Once Laisee completed Sai's ring, she gave the customary hug, but nervously glanced at Donald and his women. Steeling herself, she took a relaxing breath and went for it.

*"It has been pointed out that we have two new babies in attendance this day. Children are the future of our society, and it is the duty of society to ensure that children are provided with every opportunity to become a productive and useful member of our society."*

She looked over at the confused expression on Déjà's face, and hoped Donald hadn't screwed things up along the way.

*"Although she is now a member of the Royal family, Princess Déjà is without suitable companions to help raise her children. Are there any citizens here who would accept a bonding with Princess Déjà, such that her children may have all the support necessary, now and in the future?"*

Donald nodded to Maya, who smiled and took his hand, and they both stood and bowed to Déjà.

*"I am Donald Cato, and I desire a bonding with Princess Déjà."*

## Picking up the Pieces

*“I am Maya Tal, and I also desire a bonding with Princess Déjà.”*

Déjà was stunned for a moment before starting to cry. Donald and Maya pulled her up to hug her and whisper words of encouragement to her, before they stood back while she made her decision.

*“I-I am Déjà ... Princess Déjà ... and I gladly accept both Donald Cato and Maya Tal as my bond-mates,”* she said between tears, before lurching forward to hug them both.

*“I am Lady Laisee Caldarous, daughter of Emperor Radatel Caldarous. Under the authority granted to me by my father, I declare that a state of bonding now exists between Princess Déjà, Lord Donald Cato, and Lady Maya Tal. You will each need to adjust to your new situation as a bonded-family. You must learn when to rely upon each other, and to recognize when you need outside assistance to accomplish your goals. This bonding will expire on this date, one Earth year from now – at which time you may renew it, if you so desire.”*

Once Laisee had finished her proclamation, a long, loud sigh could be heard in the background close to the babies.

Those fast enough caught the frown that Spring Blossom cast towards Sai, who was the originator of that sigh.

“Ahhh ... Agent Dwayne Sparks? Please come forward.”

All eyes turned to Laisee, then shifted to Dwayne, who seemed just as surprised as everyone else.

He stepped gingerly into the circle and bowed before Laisee.

“Dwayne, it has been pointed out how valuable your assistance has been in support of Wilber, Ling, and the entire Healer Cluster. Although we do not yet accord you *family* status, I would signify that value by offering you a talisman indicating the esteem with which House Caldarous holds you.”

She reached into her robes and pulled out a medallion similar to the one she'd seen on Dorcas. The lanyard was neatly braided, and since he was still holding his bow, she reached over and placed it around his neck. Then she leaned in and hugged him, before sharing a chaste kiss with him, then straightened while smiling at him; speaking just above a whisper to keep her words between the two of them.

“Dwayne, the Emperor and the Elder have approved of this, and in the short time that I've been here, I have witnessed evidence of your loyalty, even in the face of *chaos* ... which is something that seems to follow *certain* individuals around like a dark *cloud*...” She'd glanced at Donald when she'd said it, but only Dwayne could appreciate that very quiet comment, and he smiled and nodded in agreement.

“Thank you, my Lady Caldarous,” he said, then bowed once again, before backing away and stepping over next to Wilber with his talisman resting on his chest.

He lifted it up to look at it, seeing the crest of House Caldarous neatly formed on the surface of one side, and smiled at Wilber. Wilber reached out and took hold of it, checking it out, front and back, before letting it fall back to his chest. His lips pursed into a grim smile before he leaned in to tell him something.

“You’re screwed *now*, dude,” he murmured. “The Ambassador’s wives see *that*, and they’ll *never* leave you alone.” Wilber basked in the shocked expression on Dwayne’s face that didn’t go away when he pulled it back up and twisted it around to look at it closely again.

“Yep! No more sleeping alone for *you*,” Wilber continued to tease him, and barely flinched when Shu pinched his side.

“My Lords... My Ladies... Thank you all for coming as witnesses to these fine additions to our family,” Laisee finally announced, and the party began to break up – which was fortunate, since *both* babies had decided they’d waited long enough, and it was time to eat again.

### ***In the Residence***

It was late in the afternoon, and Wilber had just checked his emails once again. Aside from random ads for penis enlargement pills, *none* of his requests had gotten a response yet, which was to be expected.

Asking the DEA for detailed information on illicit drug supplies coming out of Afghanistan was iffy at best, and the US Geological Survey offices were closed for the weekend. He leaned back in his chair and considered he should feel fortunate at his temporary reprieve.

Ideally, the information they were looking for would never be used – like when Ronnie had come looking for some surplus nukes for a *personal* project of his. He knew the days of routine would end once Donald got hold of accurate seismic activity maps for the target area, though. Then, either it was a matter of the American government stepping up, or Donald got the green light from Lili to proceed with his *own* covert recovery operation.

He’d like to have seen how their government contact had taken the news that at least one and possibly *two* American soldiers were being held captive in a hidden cave complex that had been identified by special operators *outside* of their control. He’d dithered between standing in with the Ambassador during that meeting, or handing it off to the Senior Healer on the Embassy staff. Her report confirmed the government contact had expressed the appropriate level of surprise at

## Picking up the Pieces

their findings, but the subsequent *military* contact had been ambivalent at the prospect of a full recovery effort.

The *detailed* locations – including interior cave complex maps – were being withheld until confirmation of a “no-bombs-dropping-until-everyone-was-dead” scenario was *definitely* off the table. So far, the response had been neutral, and the Senior had reported her feeling that if they couldn’t just go in and drop *bombs* on everyone, they would just have to sacrifice their two soldiers to the cause. Besides, they’d not been given any proof they were still alive to begin with.

Based on *that* scenario, Wilber was now faced with the unpleasant prospect of a Healer being sent along to act as a medic. After more careful consideration, he considered that, of the three Healers closest to him, neither Shu, Mary, or Kayla were sufficiently skilled enough to pull it off.

Maya was very good, but she faced the same problem – not accustomed to being under fire. The Emperor’s daughter and her youthful charges were out of the question, so that left Ling and Sai. Ling used to do dirty work for Lili, and Sai had both command and Senior talents she could fall back on.

It was too bad Donald had lost *his* special talents, but from what he’d seen of his swordwork and that little interaction with John, it didn’t look like it was going to slow him down much. Besides, the best plan Donald had come up with didn’t actually involve direct contact with enemy combatants.

He sighed and considered that scenario. Donald had *almost* everything they needed, but there was still one thing missing. It made no sense in reality, since natural gas didn’t really *have* an odor until they put it in there. However, what he was shooting for was the *shock* value of a strange odor causing a suitable reaction after a rather *tumultuous* event – something Ronnie used to *excel* at.

He smiled at the memory of some of the stories Ronnie used to tell, then glanced up at the clock before putting his computer into standby and getting up to leave his office. Once he opened the door, the smell of dinner wafted around him. As he entered the main room of the house, he considered that having his extended family around him was *all* he needed out of life, and knew he would continue working to ensure that his family was safe and secure for as long as he lived.

### ***Sunday, September 25, The Reservation, Making Amends***

Sunday morning found Gray Feather still flat on his back while Snow Woman had already gotten up to start the day. The silence of the room allowed him to dwell once again on the visit by Maya’s mother just a few days ago. He’d known of her anger against Ronnie

back when he was *still* Ronnie, but she'd pleaded his support in keeping Donald's *true* nature a secret – something he'd felt she'd already suspected him of knowing.

It was a very curious situation, and he'd later discussed it in private with Lean Bear. He'd *known* the body hadn't really been Ronnie's, as he'd still felt him around somewhere. It was like ... it was *almost* like when Ronnie's demon had infested his mind, but less tangible – with or *without* his talisman around his neck.

The argument he'd had with Spring Blossom over the issue was also a concern – especially when that other woman had attempted to explain why they should accept the body as really being that of Ronnie. The fact that she – *Laisee* was her name – had come forward to offer explanations of *why* he was feeling something wasn't right had only confirmed it for him. Of course, the lack of sorrow and remorse from the visiting family members had been a major clue, and now Sai had finally explained to him – *in detail* – the political implications of *any* truth getting out that was in denial of the *official* truth.

It certainly sounded silly to him, but remembering some of the things Ronnie had talked about had given it a sadistic sort of sense in the overall scheme of things. After all, his father's race had been running things under the guidance of women like Sai and that Laisee girl for the last ten-thousand *years* or so.

He finally decided he should go and pay his *proper* respects to the eldest daughter of the tribe, so he got up and prepared to ask Lean Bear for a ride to the Annex ... after breakfast.

As a bonus, he was certain Spring Blossom could provide them with interesting details from their tribe's history.

### ***The Annex, In the Center***

It was late morning when Dwayne and Spring Blossom finally got up and showered together before dressing and heading straight to the storeroom. Two special gifts had arrived for the babies late Saturday afternoon, and once Dwayne had told her about them last night, she'd been intent on making them available. It took very little time to assemble each one, and with lunch approaching, they decided *now* would be the perfect time to try them out.

Together they pushed the new contraptions down the hallway to Donald's current lodgings and shared smiles when the guards looked at them with alarm. Once it was clear what they were for, one of the guards let out a quiet chuckle, and flinger-flipped a short message to his partner before knocking quietly on the door.

Donald opened it only moments later.



## Picking up the Pieces

“Hello ... what? Buggies? Maya, the *buggies* are here!”

“*Shhhh...* we just got them back *down*,” she said softly, then stepped over to the door. “What are ... oh yes. I have seen these before.”

She looked towards the crib, then over to the bathroom, pressing silently to see if Déjà was more aware this morning.

*“I hear you, Maya. Who is at the door?”*

Instead of waiting for an answer, Déjà poked her head around the bathroom door jam, and smiled at seeing Donald’s mother and her temporary bed partner. She gave a little wave, then stepped back inside to put a robe on before coming out to see what they’d brought them.

### *Almost at the Annex*

Lean Bear turned down the Annex driveway, but still felt somewhat ambivalent about the situation. Gray Feather had insisted he needed to apologize to the elder daughter in person, but also that they leave their wives behind this time.

That was something he could understand, if only for the stereotypes regarding women and their gossip. Then he remembered Snow Woman’s admonition that she and Butterfly weren’t part of this issue and they needed to handle this *themselves*. Of course, they could have both just wanted some time away from their husbands...

Lean Bear pulled up to the house and parked next to Wilber’s car.

“Well ... we’re here,” he said, then checked his watch. “About lunch time.”

“I’m sure they’ll invite us to join them,” Gray Feather muttered, knowing Lean Bear’s fondness for eating on a regular schedule.

Letting out a sigh, Gray Feather unbuckled his seatbelt and exited the car, followed by Lean Bear. As they trudged up the steps to the porch, Wilber opened the door for them and smiled.

“I was in my office and checking my email when I saw you drive up. I’ve already eaten, but everyone else is still at the table, and there’s *always* room for two more.”

Gray Feather glanced at the luncheon group and got smiles and small waves from his grandchildren and their wife.

“That’s very kind of you, Wilber,” he said. “We’ve actually come to see Spring Blossom. The knowledge of the elder daughter has been neglected for too long, and we’d like to learn what she remembers from the old days.”

Wilber glanced at the table where Danny, Mary, Kayla, and Shu were finishing lunch. He saw Shu open her eyes, already knowing she'd heard, and sent out the request for the visitors.

She turned to him and said, "Dining room in the Center," before gathering her things and taking them to the sink.

"Hey, Grandfather," Danny called out. "I'm done here and I'll take you over." He quickly gathered his plate and utensils, then rinsed them in the sink before drying his hands and heading to the door, with Shu right behind him.

"I know where the dining room is, Shu," he muttered.

"I go to check on Nascha," she said. "She is not eating regularly, and I will see that she eats lunch, or discover why she does *not*."

So saying, all four of them left the house and headed across the parking lot to the Center.

### ***In the Dining Room***

The girls had left Laisee behind in their suite, as she was still intrigued with the gift Donald had asked Mary to get for her. One of the silvery disks provided familiar melodies she'd known from the past, but the *other* four had confounded her with the unexpected depth of their tug at the emotional level. A few passages on them had actually brought tears to her eyes, and it was after one such when she'd reluctantly shut it off and joined everyone else for lunch...

"Buggies?" Laisee asked again.

"It's like ... like a stroller but *bigger*. And there's room for the baby to lie *flat*," Donald explained quietly while gesturing to either side of him.

Donald and his partners were seated at the circular table, and he held a center spot with a baby buggy containing a sleeping infant on either side of him. Opposite the buggies from him were Déjà on one side and Maya on the other. As a bonus, Spring Blossom was seated across from him with Dwayne at her side.

"Laisee, please come join us for breakfast," Spring Blossom said while patting the unoccupied seat next to her.

Laisee looked to the corner table shared by Jaiying and Rose, but detected no imminent mischief, so she nodded before stepping back to the buffet to select her brunch. When she returned, she set her plate down and noticed Spring Blossom nodding with her eyes closed, before opening them and looking at her as she sat.

"We have visitors this morning," she murmured, but didn't explain.

*Outside the Center*

"Why so quiet, Grandfather?" Danny asked as they headed up the steps to the Center.

"I have been rude to the elder daughter of the tribe and must make amends," he explained. "Perhaps she will forgive me. Perhaps she will scold me."

While Danny was still trying to figure out what his Grandfather meant, they opened the doors and stepped inside.

The questioning look he'd given to Lean Bear was answered with a shrug, so he decided to wait it out and see what happened ... *if* it happened ... if something was *gonna* happen.

Shu split off to go visit Nascha, while Danny led them directly to the dining room, opening the door and gesturing them in before him.

From their viewpoint, the family was gathered around one table, with the children sitting at a smaller table over by the corner. Their guard could be seen sitting nearby.

As they looked at the diners, Gray Feather saw Donald watching him, and thought he felt a fleeting recognition in his eyes but couldn't be sure. Steeling himself, Gray Feather stepped up behind Spring Blossom and moved to one side.

"GOOD MORNING, ELDER DAUGHTER. IT SHAMES ME TO ADMIT I FAILED TO OFFER MY CONDOLENCES AFTER THE LOSS OF YOUR SON," he offered formally.

Donald looked up at him, then at Spring Blossom. Drawing her eyes, he tilted his head down at each baby resting in their new prams. She took his cue and turned to Gray Feather with a reserved smile on her face.

"It was a difficult time for *everyone* that day, Gray Feather. I am honored that you come to visit with me," she said in English, thus sharing a *feeling* of what he'd said to everyone else at the table.

Then she glanced at Donald, before turning back to Gray Feather and standing up to face him.

"Before his death, TSTLSQSQSÉ BIYIGÉ had finally given me the grandchildren I have long desired. Princess Déjà is the mother of Faith and *little* Ronnie," she said, then took his arm to walk him around the table to look at the babies.

Lean Bear followed along without prompting, knowing from his *own* experiences that displays of proper respect to the newborns was required – no matter *how* ugly they were.

A quiet titter of childish laughter was heard over by the corner.

***Just Outside the Dining Room***

"You worry too much for me, Lady Shu," Nascha repeated again, as Shu walked arm-in-arm with her to the dining room.

"Nascha, we are friends here. We are *family*. I am simply Shu," she said once again, then pushed open the dining room door to the welcome smell of food, and almost wished she'd not already eaten.

They checked the seating accommodations before Shu suggested a table separate from the crowd, and they agreed on one before heading over to visit the buffet.

~~~

Maya had not thought of tribal politics in a while, as it had always mystified her during her long stay on Earth.

Suffice to say that things seemed to have resolved themselves, and probably with a little help from Donald ... in a *previous* life.

She pushed her chair back to stand and greet Lean Bear properly.

"Lean Bear, I am very happy you have accepted the appointment as Medicine Man for the tribe," she said, then hugged him warmly before continuing as she glanced at Gray Feather standing beside him.

"Gray Feather has been deserving of an able successor so he could finally enjoy his retirement."

She felt Lean Bear begin to quiver, and separated from him, only to see the silent laughter that was shaking his body.

"You forget, Maya. Gray Feather is *married* now, and there *IS* no retirement for him!"

It took Maya a few seconds to catch on, while everyone else around her enjoyed the joke. Then she smiled and looked down at Donald.

"Do you hear *that*, my Donald? You have *four* mouths to feed, and there *is* no rest for you!" she teased him.

"Donald?" Gray Feather asked, and looked down at him.

"Princess Déjà has bonded with Spacer First Donald Cato," Spring Blossom announced proudly. "And with Lady Maya Tal, as well."

Donald looked at his bond-mates, then turned to Spring Blossom with a smile on his face, before standing and reaching out to Gray Feather.

"I am Donald Cato, Sir," he said. "I owe my life to Lady Sai Tal. I did something stupid and almost died. She put enough of me back together so I was able to recover ... or so I'm told."

## Picking up the Pieces

Gray Feather reached out and grasped his hand, sensing almost *immediately* that Ronnie was standing before him. Rather than say anything in mixed company, he continued to play the game.

“Bonded to *two* women? I’m married to only one, and I can’t imagine the balancing act that must require,” he said honestly.

“Truthfully, Sir, I just lie back and do what I’m told,” Donald told him, then grinned widely at the shocked expression on Lean Bear’s face.

A tiny whimper emanated from the area around his knees on Déjà’s side, and he looked down to see little Ronnie stirring.

“Ah! The *evil* stepchild stirs,” he murmured. “Best we step back to stay out of his glare.” So saying, Donald guided Gray Feather to the other side of Maya and gestured down at little Faith.

“Now *this* is the child of an *angel* – sweet and pure of heart. Hard to believe she’s the child of Ron Cal.” He looked over his shoulder to see Déjà lifting little Ronnie up from the pram and getting ready to feed him again, shaking his head as he pointed his thumb behind him in Déjà’s direction.

“*That* one is the very *image* of his father ... and his *grandfather*, if I’m not mistaken,” he said, triggering an indignant gasp from Déjà for his unkind remarks. “*Vicious* little bugger, too,” he added.

“Donald!” Laisee snapped at him, and he turned to offer a contrite bow.

“My apologies, my Lady, but you must admit, little Ronnie is *quite* a handful.”

“Then it will be up to *you* to show him how to *behave* properly.” It was more of an order than a suggestion, and he bowed to her politely in acceptance.

“The Lady speaks the truth, Donald,” Gray Feather said quietly. “Best that you honor the memory of Ron Cal by being a good husband to Déjà and Maya. They are *both* beautiful women and deserving of a man who will take good care of them ... *and* their children.”

“And I have no desire to lose their confidence in me, Sir. True, we are bond-mates only, but, perhaps one day – if they do not tire of me – they will consent to become my *wives*.” He turned to smile down at Déjà while she nursed little Ronnie, then turned to Maya and rested his hand on her shoulder.

Over in the corner, Jaiying had been paying attention to the byplay and extended into Gray Feather – only to learn he had an abnormally *tight* block in place that was not something Earthlings were supposed

to have. She wiggled around it, then started poking at it from the *inside* – discovering it wasn't a natural ability, but something he'd acquired at some point in time.

The most *likely* suspect was her Grandfather, and a quick perusal of Gray Feather's memories provided the timeline – when Grandfather had gifted him with extra life. That would have been *after* Ai had cursed him, and he'd needed a way to keep Rakel in check. She couldn't imagine what an Earthling Medicine Man could do about an Elder's geas, but *whatever* he'd done had apparently worked. Then Grandfather had finally lost both totems, and Rakel fled from his imprisonment, after which he'd somehow ended up in *little* Ronnie. Oh, how the mighty have fallen.

She smiled as she considered Rakel's new – and *limited* – lifespan, then wondered what *else* might have been transferred during a life exchange. She dove back inside Gray Feather, but couldn't find anything that could be copied back to Donald that might possibly help him recover more of himself. At this point, it was still an issue of genetics. Unfortunately, the only ones who *might* provide an answer were the Vanir, and they had enough on their platters with that whole “moving-to-another-set-of-healthy-planets” issue...

~~~

Shu and Nascha were sitting away from the other group, where Nascha had made a point of sitting facing *away* from the one named Donald. He was supposed to be trying to bring back her husband, but all he *seemed* to do was play with those two women and their babies.

The more she listened, the more she became confused, and finally leaned over to Shu and asked in a whisper, “What is a bond-mate?”

Shu swallowed the piece of banana she'd been chewing and took a sip of her juice while dancing around Nascha's thoughts. For some reason, she was upset with Donald, and when Gray Feather and Lean Bear had entered the dinning room, she'd frozen in her seat until they'd descended upon Spring Blossom instead of her.

There was a lot going on with Nascha, with her mother issues, her missing husband issues, her worry about her situation issues, and now she was finally starting to pay attention to this strange environment she'd been thrust into. Instead of delving into all of it – which would require most of a day or two – Shu kept it simple and answered her immediate question.

“A bond-mate is when two or more individuals decide to live as companions for a set period of time,” she explained quietly.

“Oh. Like a *commune*?”

## Picking up the Pieces

Shu had already studied this and was able to give a somewhat glib answer.

“I believe commune describes a more open association between individuals. Bond-mates are as if married – but for a specific length of time. Bond-mates share their lives as Wilber and I do, and may become married at some point. Not all bond-mates choose to stay together, and once they reach the end of their bonded period, they may freely choose to separate – or stay together, as Wilber and I choose to do.”

Nascha frowned at Shu’s apparent satisfaction with her situation. She couldn’t imagine *not* being married to the person she loved. There were other considerations, as well.

“But... But what about *children*? Don’t you want to have children with Wilber someday?” she asked, which brought a big smile from Shu.

“That would be a *very* happy day for me and my Wilber! We hope that *someday*, when things around here are more secure, we would like to bring children into this world. Just one, of course, but that would be enough for me.”

“Just one? Wouldn’t you like to have a boy and ... and a *girl*?”

“Nascha ... I have *read* about the Earth. Do you not know there are over 6.5 *billion* people here? That is already *way* too many people to support, and yet people keep having children who grow up hungry and without health care, or a safe place to live. Better that they spend the money from war and put it to taking care of the *people* instead. War is a *waste*, and only *hastens* the collapse of Earth’s societies.”

Nascha began staring at her blankly when Shu started going off on one of her weird tangents again.

She was already used to it from Ling, but the more she spoke with Shu, the weirder she seemed to be. At least Mary and Kayla seemed normal – if you considered glowing *fingers* normal.

Shu sensed Nascha was becoming concerned again – with *her* this time. She looked down at her napkin and peeled back the banana another inch while reaching out to Spring Blossom...

~~~

The babies were both nursing now – her little brother’s whimpering having finally awoken Faith to the fact that it was lunchtime already. Donald alternately stared between Déjà and Maya, then finally shook his head sadly. “You know, I get so *jealous* watching those two.”

He sighed, and both Déjà and Maya smiled up at him.

"You're a naughty boy, Donald," Spring Blossom chided him, but only for the benefit of the Medicine Men standing nearby.

With their eyes glued to the nursing babies, the memories of Lili's teachings from many years ago came back to her in a flash, "A well-rounded breast will tame *most* men ... *and* many women. If it contains *milk*, that is even *better*."

The look on Lean Bear's face was somewhat haunted. Maya had told her the story of the boy with the broken arm, and Lean Bear was the one who'd brought him to her.

She'd first nursed him to relieve his pain, then Healed him in front of Lean Bear, but warned him she would be forced to leave if he'd told anyone about it.

Spring Blossom reached out gently and felt that was *exactly* what he was remembering at that moment.

"Gentlemen, I believe a kind word from the Medicine Man would help ease Nascha's heart this day," she said in redirection. "She worries so about her missing Fred, and Wilber is working with the government to find a solution. Failing that, Lady Sai Tal will direct the recovery effort herself."

Both men turned to look at her in surprise.

"I would imagine *Donald* here would be in charge," Gray Feather said quietly, which got Donald to drag his eyes away from naked nursing breasts to comment about it.

"They'll let me pilot the ship all right, but Lady Tal will be in charge," he said. "I have *some* experience with things like that, but I don't think she trusts me all that much after my little accident."

Gray Feather looked at him and wondered if Ronnie was a distant memory yet, or if, as Sai had explained, he was back but just playing the role for public benefit. He shrugged it off and nodded before turning to Lean Bear.

"We've not seen the accommodations Cocheta has complained about, so perhaps Nascha will be kind enough to show them to us," he said, then turned back to Spring Blossom. "Elder Daughter, later we would like to hear your memories of the *old* days when you were here before. If you have the time, of course."

"Certainly. It is best that *our* history is not lost – something the *white man* would like to erase from *their* history," she said, then stood and linked her arms with both of them to walk over to the table where Shu and Nascha were dining – meanwhile giving Shu a silent heads-up they were coming.



***In the Residence, Later That Afternoon***

Wilber checked the clock in his office and wondered when Don would be willing to step away from the computer long enough so he could check his emails again before giving up for the remainder of the evening...

Yesterday, Don had arrived with questions about obtaining a supply of the odorant used in natural gas installations.

Wilber's initial search had found the Arizona Public Service Company. It was one of several in the state that managed electric and gas service within the various service districts.

The plan seemed rather complicated to Wilber. It basically entailed creating the illusion of a natural gas leak that should drive the militants out of the cave complex while hopefully leaving their prisoners behind as not worth the risk of saving them. The simple fact that natural gas *had* no odor had been ignored. In his mind, Wilber thought Don was taking a risk that third-world terrorists would even *recognize* what the smell of ethyl mercaptan indicated.

Then Don explained that a judicious application of *sleeping* rounds introduced into the confined spaces might trigger a panicked exodus once the militants saw bodies lying about, and smelled the telltale odor of processed natural gas. The kicker had been why in the world they would expect a gas leak to begin with since they were up there at the armpit of Afghanistan with no services whatsoever.

Don's answer had been simple ... provide the *illusion* of an earthquake that opens up a natural gas pocket in the mountain, thus making it unsafe for occupancy – at least long enough to recover Fred and the rest of the prisoners.

When Wilber asked how, the smile on Don's face had turned frighteningly mischievous – as if it wasn't the *first* time he'd created earthquakes on demand...

"Well, that's about it," Donald muttered as he closed out the web browser. "Lemme know if the topo maps show up from the USGS. Dwayne's been talking to one of the geeks who works for Aineias. He thinks he can do an overlay once the maps arrive and get it converted into something they can use of on their systems."

"How long is it gonna take?"

Donald turned to look behind him and shrugged.

"Don't really know. I know they're *good*. Turns out that some of his crew have done similar fieldwork in the past – planning and all that. They don't have a *proper* planning room here, but if that plotter shows up, it will help us figure things out on a table top."

Wilber smiled at the concept of using paper in interstellar warfare. It somehow seemed like a throwback, but Don had earlier explained that a *real* combat detachment would have a holo-tank to work with.

Sans a full-sized planning suite, large-format drawings were just as good for some applications – such as a simple ground assault.

Or an *underground* assault, in this case.

It was Donald's turn to check the clock, and he stood and passed the seat to Wilber.

"Time to go and have supper with my family. See you tomorrow, Wilber. Sometime after sparring practice with Aelius."

"Aelius again? How's he doing?"

Donald gave a silent snort and shook his head slowly.

"Boy's like a sponge. He's picking things up fast. One day he might even be able to take on *Sai*." At that, he turned and headed out to the Center, while Wilber shook his head and sat down to check his email before dinner.

"Earthquakes on demand," he muttered, then found nothing had come through yet from the USGS.

### *In the Center*

Ling had been surprised when her bond-mate arrived at the Center to escort her back to their quarters for the evening but they'd stayed in her office while discussing the upcoming potential mission with Donald and Sai.

It had been a simple argument.

He wanted to go along, and she'd said no.

Twenty minutes later, it remained the same between them, until she'd finally given up and issued the *order*.

"As I say *again*, Aineias, no more than *six men* – *preferably* none of whom are bonded or married. *You will remain here!* You have responsibilities to the Center which *cannot* be delegated!"

"And I remind *you*, my Lady, that the Madman had the reputation of protecting his men against *all dangers*," he stressed lightly. He knew it was a losing effort, but, by the *Gods*, it got so *boring* around here at times.

"Do you *forget*, my Husband? The Madman lost his *head* due to that reputation." They stared at each other while that fact slowly filtered through his brain...

## Picking up the Pieces

The Madman was known to practice *utmost* caution with his men – not that no one never *died*, but it was the exception rather than the rule. The Madman planned every event as well as could be expected, but stories that filtered back had included the occasional failure.

After his introduction to the “real” truth, Aineias had sought out Donald and specifically asked how he’d *really* lost his head.

The answer had taken half a bottle of ambrosia and a couple of sandwiches during a closed-door meeting in Aineias’ office in the motor pool. It began with Donald’s decision to train Lady Trenka with enough skills to become his executioner, before backtracking all the way to his failed personal mission to save the life of “Seven” – who’d been lost at the Vanir research station somewhere nearly an hour below them.

Donald had been painfully honest in his retelling, only leaving out Imperial secrets in some places, but reaffirming the Vanir were a *trustworthy* species – now that they’d done a little *housecleaning* – and things should normalize between the Commonwealth, the Hegemony, and the Vanir sometime within the next couple of centuries.

It had been quite sobering, especially when Donald admitted his *own* stupidity in giving up so easily, as he’d only found out *after* “getting himself together” that the medical staff on the *Microcosmus* had finally figured out how to fix him after all...

“Yes, my Lady,” Aineias finally said in capitulation. “Six men – preferably unattached. Infiltration armor and weapons from stores, but we’ll need to be included in the preparation before the mission – if the mission is a go.”

He stood and bowed appropriately, and Ling stood and hugged him tightly before kissing him thoroughly. She backed away and gathered her notes for tomorrow, it being another Monday with a Reservation visit scheduled in the morning. They left her office together and strolled through the proposed garden area Nascha and her mother had been talking about, before descending underground to the secure quarters for the garrison staff.

### *September 26, A Routine Monday*

Kayla and Danny had already left for work by six a.m., leaving Mary behind and sleeping in a little longer before she had to get ready for the clinic visit to the Reservation. It was only an hour longer, but she savored the surprise visit by Shu, who woke her with the teasing fragrances of breakfast following in her wake.

Once she was up, washed, and dressed, she headed to breakfast and found that Maya and Déjà were early morning visitors that morning, along with the babies.

“Oh! You brought the *babies!*” Mary whispered excitedly as she came over to see their little faces.

Faith was, as usual, very calm, while little Ronnie had a wrinkled frown that would have outdone his own grandfather’s.

“Yes,” Maya said calmly. “It was time to get them out into the fresh air.”

“And we needed to get outside *ourselves*,” Déjà said earnestly.

Although without a child of her own, Mary had baby-sat enough tribal kids in the last few years to appreciate the desire to be something *other* than a convenient bag of milk to feed a baby.

“Can we get you anything?” she asked, seeing only two glasses of juice on the table next to them.

“We’ve already had breakfast, Mary,” Déjà told her. “It is not too hot now, so we wanted to get out of the Center for a while.”

“Nascha and her mother have suggested that we put in a garden of some sort over by housing,” Shu said when she brought a plate over for Mary. “It sounds like a good idea.”

“That sounds very nice,” Maya thought aloud while nodding her head. “I understand the Royal Homestead is *also* putting in new gardens while we are away.” She shared a tight smile with Déjà before turning back to Mary. “Shu tells us you are holding clinic today? I would very much like to visit the Reservation while we are here and see some of my old friends.”

“Why don’t you come with us today?” Mary suggested. “We got car seats for the infants when we got the baby buggies. Didn’t Dwayne tell you?”

“He... No, he did not,” Maya said, then did a long blink while letting Spring Blossom know where they’d gone.

“Maya, could we go visit the Reservation today?” Déjà asked. “I would like to see how the native Earthlings live ... as long as little Ronnie does not make a fuss?”

In short order, it was decided that both Déjà and Maya would take a separate van to the Reservation while escorted by their guardsmen. This would allow them to visit and still remain independent from the clinic staff.

As it happened, once Spring Blossom was notified of the road trip, she’d gathered and packed spare diapers and jumpers for the babies and brought them over to the house in anticipation of showing off her grandchildren to the wives of the Medicine Men.

## Picking up the Pieces

When their departure time arrived, the group entered separate transport vans and headed for their Monday morning adventure.

### *In Wilber's Office...*

Back inside the house, Dwayne was looking out the window as he watched the vans leave.

"Well, they're off," he said, then turned to Wilber with a sad look on his face.

"Don't worry, I'm *sure* she'll be back this afternoon," Wilber told him, then quietly chuckled at his smitten liaison before turning to the notes he'd taken yesterday as Dwayne repeated his earlier comment.

"I *still* think it sounds too risky."

Wilber nodded his head reluctantly. It *did* sound risky, but it was only one of the options under consideration.

"You gotta remember, Don is *known* for pulling off risky jobs. This is just *one* scenario. Once we get more information, he'll be able to refine it better."

Dwayne looked out the window again, thinking of how much things had changed in the last several years, but remembered the past.

"Don't forget the *first* time I met Ronnie. He nearly *died* after being poisoned, and you told me he didn't think they'd really poison him," he muttered to the window. "And he was in *much* better shape back then."

Wilber just silently nodded to the back of his head.

### *The Center, In the Great Room*

Donald stepped back and disengaged from his sparring partner while considering how best to proceed with the lesson.

Aelius was a good student. He was a fast learner, and had the advantage of youth on his side – which was also a *hindrance* to some of the techniques Donald was trying to teach him.

"You must try to *contain* your enthusiasm, Aelius. If you get carried away, then you open yourself to opportunistic attacks by your opponent."

They faced off again, and began the training sequence from the beginning. Aelius initially held his own, but let his eagerness get the better of him again in just a few minutes. Instead of breaking away, Donald waited until he saw a tiny window of opportunity arrive, and took advantage of it – leaving Aelius flat on his back and weaponless. He squatted down and checked the bruised contact point where he'd

disarmed him prior to letting him fall – unbalanced – to the hard floor, and saw the flush rising on his face.

While Aelius was catching his breath and trying to sit up, Donald walked over and picked up his sword – noting it was a *Royal* sword, as were most of the guardsmen’s stationed here. It reminded him that he couldn’t Fire a sword any longer, and he frowned.

“Aelius, does the garrison stock any spare *powered* swords? My injuries removed my ability to properly Fire a sword, and if our hosts decline to pursue the mission, then it would be prudent to have one available.”

“I wanted to ask you about that. Is there a chance I could come along?” Donald paused while remembering what Laisee had told him earlier that morning, then turned back towards Aelius.

“You probably wouldn’t have any fun, lad. If the Americans fail to follow up on it, then it becomes a simple snatch and grab. No pellet throwers allowed, and we’d be sneaking around in the dark anyway. Besides, you handling all those *female* prisoners might make Drusilla *jealous*.”

He stepped over to help him up, before handing him his sword and beginning the sequence once again.

### ***At the Residence***

After plowing through the routine paperwork, Wilber finally got a response from the DEA, but it was less than helpful. For the most part, the DEA was unable to provide any further details about the drug situation in Afghanistan. They *did*, however, express their delight at the possibility of *any* third party willing to throw a monkey wrench or two into the pipeline at any given location.

If they could nail the *supplier*, that would be a *bonus*.

Wilber filed that away as “routine.”

About an hour later, the USGS finally came through with a public link to more *detailed* topo maps of the target area – actually a twenty-mile-wide area around it. The downer was the assortment of *earthquake* maps that were cross-linked with them...

“Well ... *that* sucks,” he muttered, then opened a search window to check the earthquake history of Afghanistan, which left him shaking his head.

“Donnie is *not* gonna like this,” he muttered, then got a call from a delivery service to confirm the shipping address for a large item.

~~~

## Picking up the Pieces

About an hour and a half later, Wilber watched the delivery van turn down the long driveway heading back into town. He looked down at his clipboard, then turned to see Dwayne as he was helping two of the garrison geek staff move the last of the plotter supplies into the motor pool. A quick check of his watch showed it was almost half past four in the afternoon, and he suspected it might be a late night tonight – if they got the plotter up and running, and if the maps all converted into something that could be printed on it.

He knew the Embassy staff geeks were *very* good – the security protocols they'd built into his new computer were an excellent example of such – but he didn't have any experience with the local technical staff. According to Aineias, he had a crew of five dedicated technicians on staff that could not only wield a gun or sword, but were also highly skilled in Commonwealth technical equipment. The fact that they were getting *Earth*-type hardware had not been anticipated with any dread, as long as it was from a major supplier, and they used all OEM supplies with it.

He'd no idea of what they'd *really* need over the long haul, but ordered a double set of heads, ink cartridges, and five rolls of paper to start with. If nothing else, they could print posters to help with some of the training classes – although having huge posters of couples in various sexual positions was something that might not be immediately well received for some of the *special* classes.

There was no network connection between the house and the motor pool – *yet* – and he wasn't sure if it was something he wanted to pursue. In the meantime, Dwayne had a laptop he could plug into a network hub shared with the plotter, and the files he'd received from the USGS – *downloaded*, actually – just barely fit on a USB drive ... as long as they were transferred one-by-one. For some of the *bigger* files, they'd actually had to plug the laptop into the network hub in the office. With that thought in mind, he turned and headed back to the house.

Don had come over earlier, and Wilber left him reading about all the faults located along the various plate structures underneath Afghanistan. As he was stepping onto the porch, he wondered if he'd gotten to the maps indicating the *hundreds* of earthquake points that seemed to swarm all around the target area.

### *In the Center*

Maya was nursing Faith this time, but had her eyes closed while remembering the surprise on Nitis's face when he'd seen her for the first time in something like ten years now...

As would be expected, Nitis Lonato's arm still worked just fine. He'd greeted her and then shyly hugged her, before remembering that – at

sixteen years of age – the Maya he remembered as a *child* was now a *full-bodied* woman who stood just slightly shorter than he was; the soft press of her full chest on his reminding him of it. He'd giggled a bit, then ducked his head before disappearing behind a door at the clinic...

"Do you think Donald will be back in time for supper?" Déjà asked her quietly.

She looked down at little Ronnie, who seemed to be approaching the drop-off point for this feeding session. Even as she thought of it, his lips broke suction and he fell away from her breast in slumber, giving her a thankful bit of relief in the process.

"Hmm? Oh, I am sure our Donnie will be up all night with his planning," she murmured, then opened her eyes and rolled her head in her direction to smile at her. "He is very thorough."

"But he doesn't know if he can go yet."

"No, Déjà. But he will *plan* for it just the same," she assured her. "It is not just Fred. There are *several* people to recover. He will take responsibility for *all* of them until they are safe. He cannot *help* it."

Déjà got up and placed little Ronnie in the crib, making sure the sides were secure before she stood back up. Avoiding thinking of the conversation she'd had with Spring Blossom, she checked the clock and compared it to the emptiness of her stomach.

"Do you want me to bring you something back from the kitchen? I was planning on making a sandwich or something."

Maya thought it over and decided she could wait a while longer.

"I will wait until you return, and then I will go and see what offerings there are. I do not feel very hungry for some reason," she murmured, then leaned back and closed her eyes to drift back to her memories of the tribal members who had come to express their happiness at seeing her again.

The fact that neither of the babies was hers by birth did not lessen the joy she felt when praising Déjà for carrying their bond-mate's children. Both Butterfly and Snow Woman had been impressed, and Maya had praised the beauty of Butterfly's little five-year-old, who had calmly and politely looked into the baby buggies to see the relatively new humans.

### *In the Residence*

Donald was still sitting in front of the computer and had been grumbling to himself – not exactly *quietly* – for the last half hour.



## Picking up the Pieces

“Bad news, Boss?” Wilber asked after he heard the third “Fuck” in as many minutes.

That *particular* imprecation had replaced “Ah, Crap!” about ten minutes after Wilber returned to the office. It was probably because “Fuck” was a shorter and more efficient word to use. It was also multi-purpose.

“You’d think *California* would be widely known as the earthquake magnet of the world, but *Afghanistan* ... it’s like a loose set of building blocks for the *Gods!*” Donald grouched. “There’s the three main chunks tied to the Indian and Eurasian plates, plus a little skinny one cutting horizontally across nearly half the country.”

Wilber got up to look at the map Don was viewing and smiled.

“Try looking at the file named ‘Map05,’” he suggested, then stood over his shoulder to await his reaction.

He knew it should be good because it displayed a *shit* storm of fault lines beginning at the south-west middle of Afghanistan that narrowed towards the northeastern portion of the country. It looked almost like the root system of a huge tree.

After closing out the previous file, Donald opened the one Wilber suggested and was appalled at what he saw.

“FUCK!” Donald slumped back with a disgusted sigh and shook his head.

“It’s not too bad, Don. Where’s your target area?”

Donald moved the mouse, and the cursor hovered over a back dot on the map.

“That’s Kabul. Go right about one-hundred fifty kilometers and that’s Jalalabad. The target valley is like eighty ... maybe a hundred kilometers above it and about fifty more to the right.”

Wilber checked the map and remembered what Don had previously suggested.

“So, the target area is on the North Afghan Platform – mostly,” he said. “All you gotta do is not fart around in the faults, and you should be good to go.”

Donald turned and gave him a dirty look before closing this map and bringing up another one – this time with historical earthquake information on it.

The number of red dots representing depths of 70 kilometers or less *far* outnumbered the number of green dots representing depths of more than 70 kilometers.

“That’s still not so bad, Don. The target area is *well* above the major swarms,” Wilber pointed out. “They aren’t even along the plate lines.”

“Oh, yeah... I can see where the Indian plate is pushing up under the Eurasian plate, but it’s making all the earthquakes show up in *Afghanistan* instead of Pakistan,” Don complained. He closed that map and opened another one.

“This is seismic activity taking place down to 40km or less,” Don said. “They still heavily favor north-east Afghanistan. Even got a couple of red dots near Kabul, and in the same general target area. Those are 6.0 to 7.9 category quakes.”

“But you wouldn’t be going that far underground, would you?” Wilber asked him, then reached out and closed that file, and selected one of the huge topo maps he’d downloaded earlier that afternoon. It took a while to open.

“Ahh ... them lines are too tiny to see,” Don told him.

“It’s at more than 25 percent on the screen,” he explained, and called up the file properties from within the program. “See? Its full size is 35x27 inches. And we can blow it up even *bigger* if necessary. I made a bunch of representative maps earlier to compare them to the topo maps I downloaded. Your operating area is only about one-by-two kilometers total. We just need to zoom in on the topo maps to find your entry/exit points, and the raw altitudes you’re gonna be dealing with. You’ll also have to overlay your scanned map of the cave complex with the valley topo map just to make sure you don’t hit the wrong thing.”

“Ha! You think?” Donald sat there and chewed the inside of his lip thoughtfully before making an observation.

“You know, I never tried that survey tool when it was *underground* before. I suppose we could find a spot where I can tunnel under something and run some scans to check it out.”

Wilber stared at the back of his head. The realization suddenly struck him that Don was *actually* planning to use the tank as a tunneling machine, and it *wasn’t* just idle fantasy on his part.

“You... Ahh, you *really* plan to ... to tunnel *into* the mountain. With a *tank*?” Donald glanced up at him, before focusing on the map again.

“Well ... yeah. Long as it’s not over an active *magma* plume or something like that – like an active fault, maybe. I mean, it’s not like I haven’t done it *before*...” Wilber stood there a moment longer before flopping down on the sofa bed with a grunt.

Donald swiveled in his seat to see the strange look on Wilber’s face.

## Picking up the Pieces

“Hey, with the shields up, you can’t hurt the tank,” he said assuringly. “The ride might get a little bumpy, but I’ve passed through small planetoids without a problem. Use to run through enemy ships when the *beamers* weren’t effective enough. Plays *hell* with their damage control.”

Wilber stared at him while slowly nodding his head. “I can imagine,” he murmured. “So ... you don’t need to use your gun or anything?”

“A series of explosions wouldn’t be effective in maintaining the illusion of an earthquake,” Don explained. “I’ve got some *special* rounds aboard, but the smallest yield still produces a void about six kilometers in diameter. I was planning on letting one off after we left the area, but with all these fucking *fault* lines...” He shrugged, letting the implication finish the sentence for him, but then tilted his head while reconsidering his decision. “Of course, if we can find a *good* spot...”

### *In the Center*

Laisee pulled away from her intrusion into Jaiying and considered how much longer they could delay. Jaiying was still monitoring the target area remotely, and performing remote Healings as best she could at that distance. Jaiying was doing it because only Jaiying *could* do it. Neither she nor Ling could reach out that far and produce any noticeable effect at that distance.

She was also becoming worried about her daughter. With the number of people in dire situations on Earth, it was hard for a Healer to ignore the pain and suffering a sensitive Healer could detect. She knew that at one point in his life, Ronnie suffered with empathic abilities, that he moderated with judicious applications of ambrosia to dull his senses. It was either that, or remain alone as much as possible ... or be distracted by the chaos of combat.

In Jaiying’s case, she’d been focused on Nascha’s need for her husband, and was determined to help as much as she possibly could before she’d begun helping the women slaves on top of that. Earth was a *cruel* place and *no one* seemed willing to deal with it.

Laisee stood and paced the floor while wondering if it was worth continuing to wait for the Americans to make up their minds or not. Perhaps a *personal* visit might prompt an answer?

But first, she needed to ask permission. With that in mind, she sat down and relaxed for a moment while working out the time differences between Earth and Kantor. It might even be wiser to reach out to Mei-Mei or Yin-Yin before bothering the Elder.

Especially if it was the middle of the night...

### ***In the Motor Pool***

It was later in the evening when Sai looked up at the clock in the motor pool's commandeered conference room and decided to call it a night.

"You guys can stay here as long as you like, but it's almost midnight and I'm going to bed," she said, then pushed herself away from the table and headed out the door.

Of the three of them left, Dwayne was the only one who'd looked at her leaving – *longingly*, she'd felt – while Donald and Wilber remained focused on the pile of paper splayed out across the conference table in front of them.

Donald grabbed the enlarged tracing-paper plot of the cave complex and laid it over the enlarged topo section of the Korengal range the local geek squad had artfully plotted to the same scale. It was a masterful piece of work.

Fortunately, the scanned tunnel complex was on a relatively flat plane that encompassed just the one major corridor with several rooms along the walls of it. They'd marked the location for Fred and his companion, plus the somewhat larger space used to house the women prisoners.

The only downside was there was no easy way to access the cave complex from *outside* of it – which is why he was planning to tunnel *into* it during a fake earthquake.

"You know, I'd really like to do another overflight to scan down at least another ten kilometers or so, and see if I can plant a special load far enough down to collapse just that section of mountain without affecting the rest of the valley," Donald suggested.

Both Dwayne and Wilber froze before looking up at him.

"You don't want it deep enough to trigger a *real* earthquake, remember?" Wilber quietly reminded him. "And the sides of the mountain are steep. Even if you collapse it from within, there's still a chance a major rockslide might take place and wipe out the civilians in the immediate area."

"That kinda, you know, invalidates what you were planning to do with the odorant, doesn't it, Don?" Dwayne asked him softly.

Donald pushed himself away from the table and settled back in his chair, then sat there nodding his head for several seconds before finally sighing in dejection.

"Yeah. You're *right*, of course. Damn civilians *always* complicate things like this. Too bad I can't simply..."

## Picking up the Pieces

He stopped and wondered if Sai would even *do* that for him. Planting visions of fearful things in people's minds was an old trick for him – in a *past* life. He knew *Jaiying* could do it – *any* of the kids, for that matter, except for maybe Rose – then remembered they still needed to destroy the heroin stores on the way out. In order to do *that*, they needed to know exactly where they were.

"I still need to get Jaiying to poke around and find out where the drug storeroom is located ... and maybe the weapons cache, if they have one... Well, they *should* have one," he concluded. "Otherwise, we surface close to a remote portion of the complex and poke a hole in the wall to feed odorant into the tunnels, followed by sleepy-gas. I figure once the bodies start dropping, we just cut our way in and start hauling out the prisoners. Then we make arrangements to drop the ceilings over the drugs and weapons caches."

"Where's the best place to do that?" Dwayne asked him, and they bent their heads to the task while considering several further options.

About an hour later, Donald settled back and looked at what they'd come up with.

"I need another copy of this topo map with the cave overlay imbedded in it, Wilber," he said. "I want Jaiying and maybe Sai to sit down and do a little prodding from here. If they can't get results, we're gonna have to do another overflight to get them closer."

Wilber took a few more notes before closing his notebook and standing up. Meanwhile, Dwayne was busy rolling up the maps to put them away for the next planning session. Before heading out, a thought struck Wilber, and he brought it to Donald's attention.

"You said you've driven tanks through ships and rock before, but have you ever done *delicate* penetrations ... like the kind you're planning to do? You're pushing through with the force of the shield protecting you, but what is it doing to the *surrounding* rock? I mean, it's not like there's a *drill* out there carving away at the rock, with a waste conveyer hauling away the debris."

Donald stopped and looked at him in for several seconds until his head tilted at a slight angle.

"I ... I never really gave it a *thought*, Wilber," he admitted, then started running through the shield systems in his head. He stopped after half a minute and shook his head.

"You're right. Can't just plow through rock without causing some *serious* fracturing along the way. Too bad we can't mount a handful of power swords on the front, and simply..." He paused in thought for several more seconds before shaking his head. "No... That's why I hire *professionals*. I'll have Laisee make a call in the morning. Or better

yet, Jaiying. She has a whole *list* of contacts that should prove useful. Goodnight, gentlemen.”

At that, he turned and headed out the door, muttering, “The *ONE* fucking time I need beamers for *anything*,” leaving Wilber and Dwayne pondering what the Madman was thinking of this time...

Donald stopped when he exited the motor pool and looked up at the waxing moon. It was only seven more days until the new moon, and they didn’t have an official “go” yet. Hopefully, they would have a reasonable plan in another couple of days – just in case.

### *In the Center*

Jaiying was quivering in frustration while still sending Healing energy across the planet to help stem the deterioration of Fred, his companion, and several of the female prisoners. Rose was holding her hands and feeding her energy – as much as she could – and could feel additional energy coming from Laisee in the other room. They continued like that for another half hour until Jaiying finally slumped in exhaustion. Rose gathered her in her arms and helped her stretch out on their shared bed. As she was being comforted by her cousin, Jaiying let out a mournful sigh and rolled her head to look at her.

“Oh, Rose... If Grandfather doesn’t act soon, people are going to start *dying*...”

~~~

Laisee had been feeling her daughter’s frustrations for the last hour and lent what Healing energy she could to help her in her self-appointed task. Unfortunately, Healing energy suffered the same energy losses associated with most forms of radiation.

It was oddly in contrast with the ability to communicate instantly across minutes of physical space, which indicated there was a decided *lack* of knowledge between these similar but very different processes. Perhaps one day the Vanir would study them and come up with a reasonable explanation.

She thought of her earlier conversation with Lili and decided to confront Wilber first thing in the morning.

Lili had given permission for her to interact with the American government in hopes of exerting pressure of some kind that would get them to make a decision, one way or another. In addition, if it was unfavorable, Lili had given her permission to pursue the recovery via any reasonable means under the existing restrictions.

More help might also be available soon, provided the mission didn’t start before she got there.

## Picking up the Pieces

Laisee knew Jaiying had been very patient so far, but her patience was running out. She'd heard what she'd spoken to Rose, but also felt what she'd *really* meant. If the rescue mission could not take place soon, the people who were going to die were *not* the prisoners.

### *Tuesday, September 27, Morning in Wilber's Office*

Wilber had just sat down at his computer to read his latest emails when someone knocked on his door. Without waiting for an answer, Laisee barged in and stepped over to him.

"Wilber, I need to ask a few questions from these government officials who hold the fate of Fred in their hands. I need transport to the Embassy so that my questions might be answered."

He stared at her in shock before considering the implications that would entail – not the *least* of which was getting her there and back safely, along with further exposure of yet *another* layer of the alien presence to Washington insiders.

"My Lady, if that truly something you feel—" He stopped at her glare, then bowed his head contritely. "Of course, my Lady. We can arrange for a commercial flight in the morning, and Dwayne can accompany you." He turned and began checking airline schedules, but she interrupted him.

"I would prefer it if *you* accompanied us for this effort, Wilber. I would have the benefit of your years of experience in the matter." He stopped what he was doing and turned to look up at her.

"My Lady, I agree that the fickle nature of government management is often very frustrating, but I will be quite happy to make the trip to Washington with you, if only to intercede on your behalf." He watched her face as that trickled through her mind, and saw her tiny nod of acceptance.

"Please make the arrangements, Wilber. If necessary, we may use the *Kraken's Child* to get there and back in one day."

Wilber closed his eyes to visualize the A/C enclosures and shrouds sheltering the exposed rooftop of the *new* Embassy.

The few improvements since the last visit of that nature hadn't affected the informal landing zone to a significant degree – as long as the pilot could keep the roof loading within a reasonable limit.

It wasn't beyond Sai's skills – or Don's, for that matter.

"We can leave here very early and arrive before dawn on Wednesday morning, my Lady. I will make arrangements for the meet at sometime later Wednesday morning or afternoon." So saying, he turned and started composing messages to the Embassy staff to plan for their

early morning arrival, then followed it with meeting requests with their government contacts for later that same day.

### *In the Center*

Donald had left Maya and Déjà minding the babies while seeking Jaiying at breakfast, spying both her and Rose the moment he opened the dining room door. Swinging by the buffet table, he grabbed a plate and threw on some bacon and pancakes before heading over to their table and sitting down with them.

“Good morning, girls!” he said jovially, which didn’t distract either of them in the least.

“How can we help you, Donald?” Jaiying asked him, but spared a glance at their guardsmen.

They were keeping an eye on the new Imperial Lord, who’d seated himself at their charges’ table without invitation.

She gave them a slight sideways slash with her hand, causing both of them to blink, before recognizing it as the command that it was, and automatically turned back to their own breakfasts.

“Well ... I was just wondering if it might be possible for you to narrow down the locations of weapons and any drug caches in the cave complex if you had a map to go by? It would help me plan the recovery operation.”

Jaiying folded her hands in her lap and stared straight at him.

“Donald, the prisoners are getting sicker, and they’ll need help very soon before something terrible happens over there.” Rose let out a gasp, and Donald glanced at her, then back at Jaiying.

From Rose’s reaction, and Jaiying’s blank expression, he was fairly certain that whatever terrible thing might happen would probably *not* be happening to the prisoners – not if Jaiying was observing them at an inopportune moment. He bowed his head accordingly.

“I promise I am working on a solution that will save lives and remain within the Elder’s guidelines. Uhhh, along those lines, can you get word through the Staff that I need to contact Donnel Ardan? I need a special configuration for using the dual shields on the tank to act in a tunnel-boring mode. I’ve always just driven through things – like ships and asteroids – but that tends to leave a mess behind. What we’re planning to do is travel underground, and I’d like very much not to cause a major cave-in while we’re trying to rescue the prisoners.”

“Or a major *earthquake*,” Rose muttered, and he turned to stare at her in surprise.



## Picking up the Pieces

"Perhaps merely the *illusion* of an earthquake, Rose," Jaiying murmured, before scooping up another spoonful of cereal. "I'll look into it, Donald," she promised him, then lifted her spoon to her open lips in dismissal.

Donald stared at her, now feeling a chill, as Jaiying was fairly *radiating* elements of both her mother *and* her mother's *stepmother*.

"I thank you for your consideration, my Lady Caldaraus," he murmured, then bowed his head before grabbing his breakfast and standing to leave the table.

Neither of the girls said a word to stop him.

### *In the Residence*

Wilber had just notified the Embassy that Lady Caldaraus would be arriving in the pre-dawn hours of Wednesday morning to attend a hastily scheduled meeting with the host's representatives. Once confirmed, Laisee left his office.

He let out a sigh and closed his eyes while rolling his head around on his neck. For some reason, having Laisee leaning over his shoulder had been somewhat unnerving, while the thought of her taking "Lili" pills made him snort.

"Good. You're in a good mood this morning," Don said when he stepped into his office.

Wilber turned and glared at him. Just for fun, he decided *not* to tell him they were taking the *Kraken's Child* to Washington, D.C. this evening for a one-day layover so Laisee could confront the government in person.

"And what can I do for *you*, Don?"

"Propane tanks. About how big and about how many would we need for faking a gas leak in those caves we talked about?"

Wilber slouched in his chair while continuing to glare up at him. He was about to suggest something, but Dwayne walked in with a roll of paper in his hand.

"Don, I got that map overlay for you. The geeks mixed the cave complex with the topo map," he said without pause, then spread it across Wilber's keyboard.

It was a good job. If it was accurate, it would be a *great* job. It was helped, of course, by the fact that the majority of the cave existed mostly on only one plane.

"Is that scale accurate?" Donald asked him, pointing to the fractional scale along one side of the plot.

“*Supposed* to be. I did some quick measurements and it seems to match the dimensions of both the separate cave file and topo file.”

“Well ... good,” Donald murmured, then leaned in closer. “Shafts are mostly four feet wide by six high ... little bit wider where the rooms are. Cubic capacity can be calculated. I know the capacity of my gas rounds. Wilber, what’s the capacity of a propane canister?”

Wilber glared at him again, then gritted his teeth, before moving the map out of the way to start banging out queries on his keyboard.

### ***In the Center***

Jaiying and Rose finished breakfast before sequestering themselves back in their room. Jaiying then reached out to their cousins with Donald’s request for engineer Donnel Ardan. Once she’d gone over it with them twice and gotten a promise from them to quickly get back to her, she dropped the connection and held hands with Rose, before reaching out to the other side of the world once again.

A quick check of the prisoners revealed the weather was still changing, and at the elevation of the caves, the temperature was becoming cooler during the day and even colder at night. They had few blankets and could bundle together on their sleeping pallets, but there was no source of heat for them in the confines of their prison. At least the walls were close enough to help their combined body heat help keep them warm, and they were almost a hundred feet from the outside opening of the cave.

Jaiying checked the clock – almost nine a.m. – and decided they had time to help some of the weaker young women before they were taken for the night. She called out to her mother, Ling, and Sai, to have them join them in the Great Room to help her send Healing to the weakest of the far away victims of the terrorists.

### ***In the Residence***

Wilber had called up the graphics on his monitor so Don could look over his shoulder and compare the diagrams Dwayne had presented to him against the original survey scans. Donald stepped back and made a few notations on the newest merged detail plot before rolling it up to take it over to Jaiying.

### ***In the Center***

Jaiying was sitting in the middle of a large cushion placed in the center of the Great Room. Surrounding her were her mother, Rose, Sai, Ling, Spring Blossom, Mary, and Shu, and they had all reached out and placed a hand somewhere on Jaiying’s legs, arms, or back to share the results of the energy they were channeling to her. Jaiying

## Picking up the Pieces

herself was glowing brightly while feeding the Healing to the weakest children and women in captivity, before spreading it around to the rest of the prisoners.

~~~

Donald entered the Center and started towards the VIP wing when he noticed the collection of garrison men standing by one of the doors to the Great Room. He stopped when he got alongside it, but instead of asking for entry, looked down at the glow coming from under the door jam and deduced what could possibly be causing that. Instead of interfering with the apparent Healings taking place, he continued to the VIP wing and left the rolled document inside Laisee's quarters on top of Jaiying's bed before heading back to the motor pool.

### *In the Kraken's Child*

It was noon, and Donald was still running through simulations based on his *own* modifications of the shield settings in the *Kraken's Child*.

He'd never really appreciated Ardan's talents as much as now.

The fact that Ardan had developed a *secondary* shield independent and external to the *primary* shield was an accomplishment in itself, but he was beginning to think it would be a *miracle* if the correct configuration for tunneling would suddenly become clear to him now.

Donald's primary contribution to the clever use of an activated shield usually involved programming "pointed" field configurations that were useful in driving through relatively solid objects – other ships and the occasional asteroid or small planetoid ... and ice minin'... He smiled in memory of good times with Sai, and was pleasantly surprised when the tromp of footsteps coming up to the airlock belonged to the target of his memories.

"Still think you can turn this pointed stick into a tunnel borer?" she called out from the inner airlock door before coming up the aisle and looking over his shoulder.

He took a breath and let out a sigh of resignation.

"Maybe... Probably not," he admitted. "I've managed to wrap the secondary shield around the primary, but I just don't see how that's gonna help keep the tunnel damage to a minimum. We can't really go plowing through a mountain if we're just gonna leave huge cracks in the rock behind us. Tends to cause other problems."

"Uh-huh. Well, aside from all that, Laisee needs to be at the Embassy in the morning and I'm taking her there tonight."

"What? In *this*?"

“Do you see *another* transport available dirt-side? Besides, I’ve always wanted to visit the seat of Earth’s power elite.” She’d smiled when she said it, which just made him chuckle. Then he thought of a little *side* trip they could make along the way.

“Think we’d have time to make a little *detour* to check on a few things? For the *mission*, I mean?”

She stared at him for a few seconds before asking, “Exactly *what* things?”

He held up a finger and turned back to the console, collapsing his simulations before bringing up the graphics showing his suggested approach path to the target area. Then he added an overlay showing a series of fault lines running through the travel path.

“I’d like to make another survey run to scan the entire approach path – about one-hundred miles worth,” he said. “That’s one-fifty ... maybe one-sixty kilometers.”

She stared at him while gauging his seriousness, before looking at the graphics. There were a *shitload* of fault lines running along the intended tunneling path.

“I’ll have to ask Laisee.”

“*Please?*” he asked, giving her his best “sad kitten” look.

She glared at him, but snorted, before turning back and heading to the airlock. She paused, and said, “Don’t forget to *eat*, Donnie,” before leaving the ship.

He raised his eyebrows in a happy arc before turning to look at the display one more time. Then he closed those windows and opened up his simulation once again. There *must* be a way to use the shields like a boring machine without bringing down the entire mountain around them. He was *sure* of it. Maybe he would figure it out after he got a bite to eat?

### ***In the Residence***

Wilber checked his email again, then checked the records of the multiple tracers he’d planted on John Smith.

So far, John had made it as far as Phoenix, where he appeared to have taken a room in a motel for the last few days.

At least the separation of his tracers would indicate he’d established a temporary residence and returned to it on a regular basis. None of the key triggers on his phone – either voice or text – had fired to indicate he’d been anything less than circumspect about his relationship with them.

## Picking up the Pieces

The other restrictions Laisee had insured he'd been afflicted with – similar to Deloris' husband – would prevent any verbal, pictorial, or written communications as well. For the time being, it was just a matter of waiting to see if John really was a man of his word. He certainly *hoped* he was.

He'd just finished reading the latest non-updates regarding inquiries put to his contacts in various and sundry security organizations when a knock came at his office door. A glance at his computer clock showed it was only three p.m., which meant it probably *wasn't* Shu coming to claim him for some afternoon playtime before supper. He sighed and reluctantly called out, "Come in," before turning his chair to face the door.

### *Getting Ready to Launch*

Wilber looked down at Rose, who was sitting in the aisle seat next to him. They were both seated behind Donald, who was sitting in the navigator's position in the *Kraken's Child*. Across the aisle, Jaiying was sitting next to her mother, with both of them sitting behind Sai, who occupied the pilot's seat. In both seats behind them sat a guardsman – Vibianus in the aisle seat behind Jaiying, and Aelius in the aisle seat behind Rose – both of them along in the role of bodyguards for the Imperial personages. After a moment's thought, Wilber considered that it even included *him* now.

He checked his watch and found that it matched the upper left-hand time display on the seatback monitor in front of him – 18:59 – which meant dusk had occurred a mere fifteen minutes ago. The time on the right-hand side showed the time over the target area – twelve hours ahead of them. Actually, eleven and a *half* hours. For some *unfathomable* reason, the Afghan's had decided they'd get an extra half hour's rest over everyone *else* in their time zone – *including* the Pakistani's, whose country ran alongside the Eastern edge of their border before curling around *underneath* it. It takes all kinds...

"Traffic scanning now, Sai," Donald murmured before clicking open his external coms. "Motor pool deck officer – please retract the roof," he requested. It was only a moment later when Wilber's monitor showed the motor pool lights going out, followed by blinking lights along the roofline indicating the roof was opening.

*"Kraken's Child, roof retracted. Departure at your discretion."*

Donald waited another minute while checking for local air traffic again. Once he was satisfied, he enabled the cloak and said, "Anytime you're ready, Sai."

She let out a cross between a grunt and a snort, then raised the ship about a foot before he retracted the landing struts. Once that was

done, she brought them up just above the roofline and examined the display just as intently as Donald had previously. Meanwhile, Donald brought the shield up – no more farting around in the unfriendly skies for *him* – and waited for her to decide the course...

They'd flipped a coin earlier – head either East or West. Donald had previously gone East while worming his way through the maze of crap in low orbit, but he'd suggested going West this time.

The downside of going East was the number of congested population areas they'd have to cross – not that they wouldn't remain cloaked for the entire trip. However, even a cloaked ship left a distortion that could be noticeable, and the more observers there were, the possibility was higher they could leave questions behind.

That was why Donald had marked the display with the coverage zones of the various observatories – national, collegiate, and amateur – so they wouldn't take any unnecessary chances. That was courtesy of Wilber, who'd conducted a search of public records, then had it confirmed by the Embassy staff, who'd also added a few *clandestine* observation stations as well. Earthlings were so untrusting...

"Let's go *West* this time," Sai muttered, and he could see the curve of a tiny smile grace the side of her face.

He laid out his pre-planned course to dodge the most congested areas of population, then sat back when she raised the elevation control and brought them up in a straight line – horizontally – like an elevator. He'd never actually considered doing that before.

"Gutsy," he muttered, while keeping watch on the crowded overhead they would be nearing in about ten minutes.

At the appropriate altitude – 130km, or about 80 miles – she headed West and began the convoluted twisting dance dodging ground-side observation stations while staying low enough to avoid low Earth orbiting objects another 30km above them.

"I fucking *hate* Earth," he heard her mutter half an hour later, but wisely kept his comments to himself, already having a suspicion *he'd* be the one piloting them back in the morning.

### ***Annex, In the Center***

Maya opened her eyes and looked down at little Ronnie.

He'd fallen asleep in her arms, but she'd kept rocking him while following Donald and her mother when they'd raised ship and left the area. At least this was just another survey mission. With Laisee along, it could be nothing more. She was about to get up when she felt the silent inquiry from outside the door and invited her guest to enter.

## Picking up the Pieces

“Hello Spring Blossom,” she whispered. “He has just fallen asleep.”

Donald’s mother glanced over at Déjà resting on the bed, then stepped over to look down at her grandson. With Maya’s nod, she reached down and cradled her grandchild in her arms for a moment before taking him to the crib and installing him next to his womb mate. She looked at the sweet expression on the face of little Faith, then shook her head at the perennial frown that seemed to grace the face of little Ronnie.

“Another few months and they’ll need separate cribs,” she murmured, then leaned down to kiss her grandchildren good night, before stepping over and hugging her son’s lover.

“You should get some sleep while you can, Maya,” she said, then leaned back to see the tiredness in her eyes. “I will be down the hall with Dwayne should you need me.”

She glanced at the dozing Déjà, then turned back and kissed Maya lightly before letting her go and leaving them to rest.

~~~

Dwayne was just leaving Asad and Nurani after assuring them John Smith was still safely miles away from them. The relief in Nurani’s eyes was genuine, but the woman coming up to stand beside Dwayne and looping her arm with his distracted her.

“Dwayne, is everything all right with our guests?” Spring Blossom asked him.

“Just making sure they got the message Smith has moved on. Did they ... ahh, did everything go as planned?” he asked cryptically.

She smiled and turned to Asad.

“He refers to another survey pass over the country where the prisoners are being held. They are finalizing the recovery plans,” she explained.

“They ... the man ... Donald ... he is going to ... to...”

“Uhh, yeah,” Dwayne interrupted him. “Donald is planning a party to go in and bring out a bunch of prisoners ... soon. I think in the next week or so.”

Dwayne waited while Asad translated that for Nurani. She whispered something to him, and his eyes opened wide, but he didn’t explain what it was when he turned back to them, and said, “We thank you for taking pity on ... on our friends that they ... they...”

“We’ll try to get everyone back safe and sound, Asad,” Dwayne promised him, still wondering if that would be the case once Laisee got

back from her meeting in Washington. “Good night,” he added, then turned and walked away with Spring Blossom on his arm.

As they continued to his room, they could hear urgent whispering between Nurani and Asad just before the door closed behind them.

“She sounds very upset,” he muttered.

“We’ll ask Laisee or Jaiying to speak with her upon their return,” Spring Blossom assured him just as they reached his door.

He opened it for her and bid her enter. Following behind, he turned and closed the door. As he turned around, he caught sight of her naked backside as she wandered into the facilities. The sound of the shower came on only moments later, and he let out a happy chuckle as he dropped his clothes and headed to join her.

*September 28, 12:30 Afghanistan Time (AFT), Over Afghanistan*

Once they’d made it outside the continental United States, Sai turned them Southwestward and headed for Antarctica – the thought being to avoid observation stations by passing over the open ocean near the ice covered Southern end of the Earth. From there, she turned upwards across the Indian Ocean and carefully piloted the ship along the Iran/Pakistan border until they crossed over into Afghanistan.

Once *there*, she had Donald check all the shield and cloaking settings once again before dropping them down to forty-kilometers above Kabul so Donald could begin his detailed scanning pass. Then she’d headed northeast from Kabul and up through the Korengal mountain range in search of fragile fracture zones to be avoided.

Starting from Kabul, Donald took almost three hours while extensively scanning the fault lines along the path to the target zone. After arrival at their final destination, he locked them in a fixed position over the cave complex before doing another security scan to see if anyone was taking an interest in them. Then he shot his “gotta pee” look at Sai and got her nod before getting up and heading to the forward toilet.

“Gentlemen, once Donald gets back and takes over monitoring our position, the Ladies will withdraw to the bunkroom and assist with the evaluation of the prisoners. Food is in the refrigerator. Please don’t make a mess you’re not prepared to clean up afterwards.”

Sai waited while that sank in, but Jaiying and Rose both stood up and headed toward the rear compartments.

“Gentlemen, the girls don’t need help peeing,” she said quietly, catching Vibianus and Aelius in mid-rise, and seeing a satisfying



## Picking up the Pieces

blush running up their necks. “This ship has a new poop dispenser – courtesy of the engineers from Kale,” she continued smoothly. “Should you wish to try it out, I understand it creates an amazing texture of simulated food. I believe I saw buns in the refrigerator for just such a purpose.”

Both guardsmen bowed their heads, but Wilber had already nodded off about an hour ago and remained slouched in his seat.

Sai had left out the part where she knew damn well how much better it was than the Commonwealth standard version.

When Donald came back to relieve her at the console, he reached down beside his seat and pulled up a rolled document.

“You might wanna have Laisee poke around down there and see if she can find anyone who knows *exactly* where the weapons and drugs are located,” he murmured, then glanced over to see Laisee getting a drink from the refrigerator before joining the girls in the bunkroom. “She already speaks the language ... one of them, anyway. Just have her jot it down on here if she can figure out where they are.”

Sai nodded thoughtfully and accepted the rolled-up map sheet. After she’d retreated to the bunkroom with the girls, Donald spared a glance at the guardsmen while they read the directions on the poop machine and got ready to sample its brand of minimal sustenance.

He spared a smirk in their direction, before sitting down and transferring the navigation controls over to his position in the pilot’s seat. Once he was sure he was in command, he brought up Ardan’s scanning device again and proceeded to see how well he could improve the details over their previous survey mission.

While *that* was running, he made another contact pass to insure that everyone seemed to be ignoring them – not that anyone could really do anything about it ... not with their shields up and tight.

Well ... maybe if they lobbed a *nuke* at them...

He chuckled mirthlessly at that. The concept of a *terrorist* organization having access to nuclear weapons was a nightmare shared by *all* the nuclear powers.

The mere *thought* that a poor, disorganized group of insane fanatics could even *acquire* such a weapon, something that took *millions* of dollars, and tens of *thousands* of hours of research and labor to produce, was sobering ... which is only *one* of the reasons the world was in such a paranoid state.

That was the *sole* reason Earth had been pushed into a class-four status to begin with. Now they just had to live long enough to make it to class-*three*...

He was tempted to continue with his shield settings simulation, but there was just too much going on to keep him occupied.

That didn't stop him from smiling when he heard the farting noises coming from the poop dispenser when it squirted out its first sample.

***Wednesday, September 28, 06:15 (EST), Washington, D.C.***

Donald set them down lightly on the Embassy rooftop after making *sure* the absolute position settings kept the roof loading within safe parameters. He would remain onboard the entire time of their visit just to make *sure* of it.

This *new* Embassy location was a vast improvement over the old one, which had been located somewhere close to downtown Washington, D.C. This one was much larger, and surrounded by trees and some small garden areas, along with the usual accessories associated with more prominent Embassies. In this case, a driveway dived underground after turning towards the building – not that they'd be able to squeeze in there. The sheer size of the *Kraken's Child* had precluded a ground landing anywhere on the property...

They'd stayed over their Korengal target until about 15:30 local, at which time he'd *officially* swapped seats with Sai and pulled them up to head West over the less militaristic areas on their way to Washington D.C. He'd wanted to make their arrival prior to dawn, and as it was, they'd made it back close to six a.m. Eastern Time without apparent observation, something he'd excelled at over the years.

The survey improved the cave details somewhat. There were vague shadows of anything not exactly rock-based, but he'd been unable to define the probable contents of any of the various rooms cut into the sides of the corridors. They'd just have to take a look when they actually made it down there ... *if* they made it down there. That was still in the air until later, when Laisee met with the American representatives concerned with the mission.

Likewise, he wanted to hear back from Donnel Ardan about modifications to the shield settings. It still seemed like a good idea to tunnel in and pull them out from the inside. It was certainly *cleaner*, if not labor saving, than lobbing gas loads down and approaching from the outside. Unfortunately, the chance of inexplicable observations and the possibility of unacceptable recordings being propagated around the world kinda pushed it *way* out there to Plans Y and Z...

Donald locked his console and looked over at Sai, who was sitting in the navigator's position and looking exhausted.

A further glance to his left saw Rose nestled under Wilber's arm, with both of them dozing for the time being.

## Picking up the Pieces

“Well ... we’re here,” he announced unnecessarily, then checked the console once again before enabling the pass-through so Wilber could call the Embassy to let them know there was a delivery for them on the roof.

He saw Wilber stir, then watched when he looked down at Rose, who was still curled under his arm. Wilber looked up and saw Don make a thumb-and-little-finger “phone” gesture. Then he shrugged before pulling his phone out with his left hand and keying in the Embassy’s number. A quick glance at Don got a nod from him in confirmation of the pass-through, and he pushed the send button.

It was only a minute later when a surprised squawk came from the phone after Wilber had explained – for the *second* time – that they were on the roof, and needed an escort for Lady Caldarous and her retinue, which, they were assured, would happen almost immediately.

Donald took pity on him and stepped over to pull Rose into his arms. Without really waking up, she sleepily wrapped her arms around his neck and rested her head on his shoulder. He stepped back to see Vibianus looking around, before he stood and reached over to wake Aelius. It’d been a long night for the both of them, and they’d taken turns catnapping during the survey and transit passes. Laisee finally stirred and looked down at Jaiying, who was slouched in her half of the seat and sleeping soundly.

“We can stuff them in the bunkroom,” Donald murmured, which seemed to ring the alarm for both Jaiying and Rose.

“Please let me down, Gra... Donald,” Rose said sleepily, and he set her down next to Wilber, where she seemed to gather her senses and looked over at Jaiying, who seemed to be doing the same.

As a team, they both got up and moved to the rear compartment, with Sai following along to keep them company. Laisee got up without comment and went back to join them.

“Shoulda brought a change of clothes,” Donald muttered, and got a snort from Vibianus while he continued to bring Aelius back from the dead.

With a sudden start, Aelius sat up straight, then stood – looking around in a panic for their principals. A quick finger flip from Vibianus calmed him down, before they took turns in the forward toilet. Meanwhile, Donald took the last two seats and turned them against the wall before pulling up the small tabletops that were built into the base of them. Now it looked more like a pair of small breakfast nooks – smaller than the Ceti’s, but functional just the same.

Like he’d learned the last time he was aboard, Wilber accessed the external cameras and watched as several embassy staff approached

along the rooftop walkway and began looking around for the ship. From the camera's viewpoint, Wilber could see over the edge of the A/C shielding panels.

"Don, I think we're sitting too high up to turn off the cloak. You'll probably have to open the..." He stopped when he saw an enterprising staff member approaching while waving the soft end of a broom across the walkway.

Donald looked down at the seat back monitor and nodded, before going over to the airlock and popping it open. The gasps coming from outside were appropriately satisfying, and he came back and flopped down into the pilot's seat while Wilber struggled up to go stand in line at the forward toilet. Donald was giving an idle thought to the proprieties involved when he suddenly realized he was a mere *minion* at this point. *That* issue resolved, he closed his eyes and ignored the greetings and salutations the returning Laisee and Sai were forced to endure while things were being sorted out.

He was finally shaken awake, having actually dozed off during all the ruckus, so that Sai could tell him she and the girls were going downstairs to meet the Ambassador. He reminded her to tell the guardsmen how to ring the doorbell, then set the audio alarm to a higher level to make sure it would wake him. Then he went back, folded down the tabletops from one of the seats, and curled up on it for a proper nap.

Three hours later, Donald was awoken by the alert signal, and immediately lurched up and headed to the console.

Seeing nothing out of sorts, he canceled the alert, then noted the blinking light indicating that someone wanted access. He popped the lock open from the console and turned to discover Vibianus leading Rose, Jaiying, and finally Aelius into the ship.

He watched as Rose took Vibianus' hand and held it to her forehead, just as Jaiying did the same with Aelius. Then both girls headed to the rear compartment and shut the door behind them.

"The girls quickly tired of the excessive fawning by the Ambassador's wives and staff," Vibianus explained quietly, then tried to stifle a yawn ... mostly unsuccessfully.

It was successful enough to trigger one of Donald's own, and from the corner of his eye, he could see Aelius catch one as well.

"Why don't you guys take a seat and I'll go and check on the girls," he suggested.

Vibianus looked at him appraisingly, then remembered where he was and whom he was dealing with. He smiled and nodded his

## Picking up the Pieces

thanks, before sitting down at one of the dinettes, while Aelius had already slouched across the one without the tabletops set up.

Donald went back and heard the toilet flush just before both girls came out and looked up at him. He could see from their eyes that they were both exhausted.

“Did you wash your *hands*?” They both rolled their eyes and dropped their heads before turning back to the small facilities.

As a measure of his compassion, he stepped in and ran the warm water before stopping the tiny sink and adding a bit of surfactant to it.

When it was full enough, he took out a clean washcloth and wetted it, wrung it out, then squatted down to wipe Rose’s face and arms. Then he rinsed it and repeated the process for Jaiying. He stepped aside when the girls reached in to wash their own hands, before handing them each one end of a towel so they could dry themselves.

He stepped outside as they finished, and said, “Your bedroom awaits you, my Ladies,” then escorted them to the bunkroom.

From the selection of three bunks, they chose the bottom one, and both of them curled into it together. He opened up a thin blanket for them and left them the option of using it or not before turning the lights down to dim and leaving them alone to sleep. He came forward and slid the partition door almost shut before turning back to the sleepy garrison members.

“Kids... I just don’t see what the big hassle is with them,” he said jovially. “You feed them, shelter them, make sure they got clothes, and go to school. You just gotta make sure they know how to *feed* themselves before you turn ‘em loose in the wild.”

Both guardsmen looked at him as if he were demented, before he asked them, “How was the ships poop?”

Aelius looked away, but Vibianus was a little braver, and said, “I really didn’t see much improvement.”

Donald gave him a shocked look, then went over and checked the settings on the dispenser. He’d forgotten they were still labeled in Drecks, then realized the *current* settings were kinda lame, so he reconfigured it for a firmer texture and better flavorings before warming it up for another run.

“I think you’ll like *this* batch a bit better,” he muttered, then pulled out some hamburger buns from the refrigerator.

He checked for condiments, and found mustard, catsup, and an almost new container of mayonnaise – courtesy of a quick replenishment grab from the Center’s pantry, it would appear.

He pulled out a roll of paper towels – a *luxury* aboard a Commonwealth ship – and ripped off enough strips to lay three buns on, just about the time the poop dispenser dinged at him.

“What was *that*?” Vibianus asked him.

“*That* ... was the new and *improved* crew sustenance system telling me the gruel is now at the *proper* temperature,” Donald told him, then brought over a bun bottom on a paper towel and held it under the adjustable nozzle.

That had been *another* improvement, and by the engineers at Claxon Shipworks this time – this one allowing the paste to come out as a flat ribbon, rather than a stool. He carefully extruded a rather firm, approximately square section, and brought it back to apply the proper accessories.

“Mustard, mayonnaise, or catsup?” he asked, and Vibianus got up and followed his nose to the *deliciously* smelling concoction Donald was standing guard over.

“That ... came out of *there*?” Donald could see the astonishment in his eyes, and he slid the paper towel over in front of Vibianus.

The guardsman looked down at it hungrily, then glanced at Donald for permission. At Donald’s nod, he picked it up and tasted it – almost *moaning* when the delicate flavor of synthetic beef assaulted his senses with promises of more to come.

He looked at the offered condiments and decided on a thin layer of mayo, along with a few strings of mustard to spice things up.

The obvious pleasure he was experiencing was catching, and Donald went over and extruded another synthetic burger for himself, then one for Aelius – who was now showing signs of life.

After two burgers apiece, with just one for Donald, they were *all* feeling much more relaxed and happier.

“You know, there’s a place in town that sells a square hamburger,” Aelius said. “I think it’s made out of *real* meat, though.”

“This will certainly do in an *emergency*,” Vibianus declared, and backed it with a sigh.

Donald checked the ship’s timer, 07:30 (MST), added two hours from Mountain Time, and considered that Laisee and company should be back in another three hours or so.

“So, how is garrison life in the new quarters?” he asked. “The last time I was there, all there was were some adobe huts and a couple of trailers.”

## Picking up the Pieces

“Ha! That’s were we stayed when I *first* got here,” Vibianus said, then turned and pointed at Aelius. “You should have seen the look on *his* face when he arrived. He’s a new one – got here after the ‘hostile environment’ improvements were made. Thought he was gonna *lose* it when he saw the huts.”

“Hey, they’re better than living in tents,” Donald said. “The huts are how these people lived after they became growers more than hunters. Anything here that you like? Besides the hamburgers?”

“Churros,” Vibianus offered, but Aelius scoffed.

“No – *television!*” he said. “It provides a mindless escape from the tedium. Well ... not so much tedium, but down here, we really don’t see much action.”

Donald watched the silent byplay between them; the older Vibianus recognizing the benefits of a *safe* duty station while the younger – and more *reckless* – Aelius yearning to expand his horizons and meet, greet, and *kill* the Commonwealth’s enemies. Ahhh, youth...

“So... Have you asked about getting televisions for your quarters?” Donald asked. “At one time they were touted as being an essential educational medium to help raise the public’s knowledge and consciousness ... which was before game shows and reality TV, of course.”

“Well, the *musicals* seem entertaining enough,” Vibianus murmured, and Aelius nodded eagerly. “The little *Ladies* certainly seem to enjoy them.”

“I fear that’s becoming a rarity in this society,” Donald lamented. “That, and the loss of the older stories that actually *told* a tale instead of just mindless action. It’s all about the *story*, really.”

“But Lord Anastasius would *never* allow them in our quarters,” Aelius muttered.

“That’s true enough,” Vibianus added. “An ‘excess of distraction’ I think were his words.”

“Well, perhaps I can talk to Aineias about it?” Donald suggested, but Aelius shook his head.

“You’d have to convince Lady *Ling* first,” he said.

Donald thought back to how Ling was when he’d first met her, causing him to nod his head a few times.

“Well, now that we’ve eaten, how about a movie? I’ve got a wide selection on file, and I can think of something you’ve probably *never* seen before.”

At their subdued, eager nods, Donald got up and cleaned the sink area, with both guardsmen chipping in. An offering of juice containers, out of the many that had been packed in the refrigerator, preceded a run through both toilets before they settled down by the front of the ship where he opened a window on the large display and called up a movie from memory, something he hadn't seen in probably forty years.

Donald settled back to watch, hoping they wouldn't be too disappointed with his selection of a black and white movie. It didn't seem to matter, as Aelius giggled while Vibianus read aloud the title on the screen, "Bringing Up Baby."

~~~

The movie had been over for almost an hour before the alert sounded again, but this time Donald went right to the source and popped the airlock. Wilber stepped in quickly, apparently fleeing from an angry and frustrated Laisee as she stormed aboard the ship and turned to Donald with a scowl on her face.

"DONALD! How soon can you be ready to act on the mission!" she demanded.

Wilber began with, "My Lady Caldarous, the new moon is only--"

"WILBER! *LIVES ARE AT STAKE!*" She wasn't quite glowing, but gave the impression she was on the verge of *blowing*, which Donald tried very hard to temper.

"My Lady, once we return to Arizona, I will incorporate the latest scans, and work on refining the intrusion so we remain in compliance with the Elder's demands," he said assuringly. "We can, of course, act within any reasonable time frame once we are prepared to move -- within the week, certainly."

He turned and stepped over to a storage compartment, and pulled out a dusty bottle of ambrosia before getting a cup from the overhead cabinet. He set it down, then pried open the bottle, letting it settle for just a moment before pouring her a double measure of an *extremely* well-aged vintage, then holding it out to her. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Jaiying looking on from the partly closed partition door.

"My Lady Caldarous, it has been a particularly long night for everyone, but I assure you that a few hours of rest will help *all* of us achieve a level of calmness that will enhance our understanding of the task ... and how best to accomplish it."

He stood still as she silently glared at him -- not knowing if she knew he was paraphrasing from the Healer's manuals or not. Either way, it was the proper direction to take, and he hoped she'd realize it and take a break from her anger.



## Picking up the Pieces

He saw her focus shift from his eyes to the cup in his hand, before suddenly growling in frustration and snatching it from his fingers. Without further comment, she tossed it back and closed her eyes while the green liquor dived down her throat to puddle in the bottom of her stomach, where it was instantly channeled to the *secondary* processing center, which had just received an extra “kick” from *outside* her body.

She stood still for several seconds before her eyes opened – not *quite* in shock – then closed. Then she began to wobble before starting to slump to the floor. Donald lurched forwards and caught her – holding her up at an angle while fumbling to get a better grip.

The guardsmen – ironically caught off guard – started forward, but Donald called out, “Wilber, can you please lend me a hand?” so they stayed out of the way while Wilber stepped in to help stabilize the Emperor’s daughter more or less vertically.

“Just how old *was* that bottle?” Wilber muttered, but Donald merely snorted.

“Didn’t think it would hit her *this* fast,” he said, then caught sight of Jaiying when she stepped into the forward cabin.

“Mother was very angry at the Americans, but we will take care of it ourselves now,” Jaiying told him quietly.

Donald looked at her, then nodded towards Laisee, who was now leaning mostly against Wilber. She gave him the slightest of nods before pointing her arm back to the bunkroom and leading the way to it. Sai, a late comer to the party, chose that moment to come aboard, and stood by the airlock while glaring at Donald and Wilber.

“Talk to your *Granddaughter*,” Donald muttered, then focused on Wilber.

He grunted, getting Wilber’s attention, before tilting his head in the direction of the partition door. Wilber nodded in understanding and let Laisee slide down far enough to get a grip underneath her armpits, while Donald reached down to her knees and lifted her from there.

With the guardsmen watching bemusedly, Wilber and Donald carried the now comatose Laisee to the bunkroom and stuffed her into the middle bunk. Once settled, Wilber covered her with a light blanket, and Donald brought up the sleep web and secured it at her shoulder level.

By the time they came forward, Sai had already closed the airlock, picked up the cup dropped by Laisee, and poured herself a measure, along with matching measures for Vibianus and Aelius, who both stood there looking warily at the liquid in question.

“Ahh, that’s a *sippin’* liquor, not a *chuggin’* liquor,” Donald said helpfully, but Sai tossed hers back in one gulp with no apparent ill effects after a good number of seconds.

Still, the warning was enough to have both guardsmen sipping carefully at the very rare vintage and receiving a quite delightful gift in the bargain. Donald pulled out two more cups and poured a measure for himself and Wilber before carefully capping the bottle and stashing it away for another emergency.

Once they’d all finished taking a break, Sai ordered, “Donald, take us home,” and he went forward to bring the ship’s systems fully online for the return trip.

### *Arizona, At the Annex*

It was three in the afternoon when Donald had chosen a break in the air traffic patterns and finally settled the cloaked *Kraken’s Child* into the motor pool before shutting things down...

On the way back, Sai and Wilber had briefed him on the results of the meeting with the government representatives, only one of whom Wilber had recognized – his liaison for that branch. The impression he’d gotten was there was something going on in the background that no one really wanted to talk about.

Sai had backed him up, saying the thoughts flying around seemed very concerned about obtaining *specific* details on the location of the cave structures but didn’t seem to be terribly concerned about a recovery effort of *any* kind. They had insisted the *government* would launch their own effort, but the exact details of what that effort would entail remained illusively vague. Between Laisee and Sai, *neither* of them could extract a specific reason for the Americans non-commitment to conduct the rescue mission on their own.

By the last half hour of the meeting, Laisee had been forcibly probing the minds of the attendees to discover the secrets they were keeping, but without success. Sai had followed along, but she’d said it was like they’d been scripted to *pry* for information, but had not themselves been told *why* it was so damned important to the Americans.

The topper had been when the Americans told them *not* to interfere, lest it damage their currently *friendly* relations. Both Sai and Laisee had felt the chagrin from Wilber’s NDA’d liaison, reading from him that the other representatives in the room had no actual clue as to who or what they were *really* dealing with. As a result, Laisee had refused to divulge the precise location of the caves, and the meeting had effectively terminated at that point. The Americans had gathered their paperwork and left the room in a huff, with only Wilber’s liaison

## Picking up the Pieces

remaining behind and waiting for the door to close behind everyone else.

Once they were alone, the liaison sat there, then slowly crossed his arms before raising his right hand and rubbing his face with it.

Without it leaving his face, he'd said, "Wilber ... is it *true* that the Ladies..." and then he'd tapped his forehead three times before pulling his hand down and covering his mouth.

Wilber had shifted into Standard and told Laisee, "*\*He wants to share his impressions with you. I suppose this room probably has listening devices. He will think very hard about them.\**"

Laisee had reached out and held his hands, then listened silently while this minor official shared his candid thoughts that he didn't know what was *wrong* with those guys but he was certain that *someone* was trying to keep a secret of some sort that would probably be politically *disastrous* should it become publicly known. Then he'd *specifically* thought that they didn't seem to care about the rescue effort, nor did they seem all that concerned about illegal drugs. There was something *else* going on, but he didn't know what it was.

She'd sighed and patted his hands, before lifting one of them up and placing it against her forehead for a moment – getting a gasp of surprise out of Sai for her largesse. Then they'd all shaken hands and made their separate ways out of the government facility – with Wilber's group of three picking up the Embassy detachment standing just outside the door and ready to take them back to the Embassy...

Donald stood and stretched. He was tired, not quite hungry, and needed a shower – and then a good night's sleep.

That's what he was thinking when Laisee slid open the partition door and looked at him meaningfully. At least it was better than *glaring* at him, but he got the message anyway. No sleep for him ... not for a *while*, anyway. He sighed and nodded his head, before heading to the airlock and tromping dejectedly down the stairs, followed by Wilber.

He was already thinking of coming back later to review the entire set of survey recordings when Wilber stopped him in the middle of the motor pool.

"I'm going to reach out to some of the spook agencies and see if anything shakes out," he said, then held up a data tab. "I'll process this and bring it back to the geek squad so they can update the mission maps. You should get some rest."

"Yeah ... but that's not on the menu. Thanks, Wilber. Maybe I'll see you later tonight," he muttered, then raised one hand in an errant wave before proceeding to the Center to get cleaned up.

***Mid-Evening, In the Residence***

Donald stared in amazement at the selection of geological maps he'd found on the USGS web site. Despite the fact that he hadn't found any comparable maps covering some portions of the United States, the USGS seemed to have *no* problem publishing free digital maps of foreign countries – like the ones he was currently viewing of Afghanistan. After a few misstarts, he'd been successful in finding both a geological map of the target area and one covering the approach path from Kabul. The fact that they'd been there – *all this time* – was a tempting tidbit to tease Wilber about, but his heart just wasn't in it right now.

So far, the only downside was the considerable amount of *granite* they'd have to move through to even *get* to the target area. The upside, of course, was that the resultant subterranean noises would probably pass as minor shocks of an earthquake. He wasn't quite sure how the geologists would explain an earthquake traveling in a more or less *straight* line from Kabul to the Korengal Valley, though.

Donald stretched his neck and checked the clock next to the monitor – approaching nine p.m.

He'd been on Wilber's computer for almost three hours now, and still wasn't sure if he could pull it off. That's where he was at when Wilber knocked lightly before stepping into his office to check on him.

"Still with us?"

"Huh? Oh... Hi, Wilber. Yeah. Still. Laisee has obviously *never* planned a covert operation before, 'cause we still got too many variables."

"Does it *have* to be an underground approach?"

Donald leaned back and stretched before letting loose his yawn without any guilt.

"If there was *any* other way... I mean, Petrus and I lobbed gas rounds into a compound on Kee, but we weren't concerned if anyone saw us or not. I'm not sure we've got enough rounds to even *cover* an external approach, let alone dealing with anyone already inside the tunnel ... although we'll probably get much better coverage once inside the tunnel since there'd be way less dissipation. That tunnel runs from one side of the mountain to the other, and I've already convinced myself the *first* thing we should do is collapse it somewhere in the middle – far away from the prisoner rooms the girls targeted on the scans."

Wilber tapped him on the shoulder and thumbed him out of his seat so he could take his place. After sitting down, he called up one of

## Picking up the Pieces

the converted scans in a CAD program and displayed it on the screen. What it showed was an overhead view of the external edges on both sides of the ridge, with a very narrow pair of parallel lines that wandered from one side of the ridge to the other. There were a number of small rooms near either end of the tunnel, with the majority of them clustered on the Korengal Valley side of the system.

“Right about here?” Wilber asked, and pointed to the approximate middle of the tunnel, going from one side of the ridge to the other.

Donald looked over his shoulder.

“What’s the scale?” he asked, and watched as Wilber clicked a command and ran a line from one cave entrance to the other.

“From East to West, it’s about a kilometer and a half ... just a little under a mile.” Then he watched as Wilber zoomed way in to the Eastern side and drew a single vertical line starting below the tunnel entrance before keying in more commands. A few seconds later, a row of vertical lines ran from East to West. “Those are each ten feet apart... Wait, I can do better.”

Wilber erased all those lines and redid them as a single group of ten. Then he made the last one longer than the other nine. Finally, he grabbed all of them, keyed in a few more commands, and replicated them across the bottom of the page.

“There. Ten foot divisions with one-hundred foot dividers. How far away do you want to put that tunnel collapse?”

Donald moved his fingers across the screen and frowned.

“That last room on the right closest to the middle ... how far is that from the valley?”

Wilber did a quick click-swipe, and said, “A little over two-hundred feet from the entrance.”

“Okay. From there, measure three-hundred ... better make it *four*-hundred feet from that room. Then draw a vertical line to mark it.”

When Wilber finished, Donald nodded and said, “Okay, we park the ship there and cut our way into the tunnel.”

Wilber drew a one-hundred foot diameter circle and zoomed in to place it adjacent to the north side of the tunnel.

“Push it north about another ten or twelve feet, Wilber. That way we can cut our way in, pump in odorant and sleepy gas, and wait to see what happens.”

Wilber repositioned the circle and asked, “How tall is the back hatch of the tank?”

“Three meters ... about sixteen feet at full extension. About half that without extending it, but it makes a steeper ramp. Tripped down one of those damn things once.”

Donald watched as Wilber drew a rectangular box that fit inside the circle and added a small rectangle to one end of it.

“Okay... The tank is about eighty feet long and twelve feet wide. Tack on another sixteen feet at the rear and... How tall are the struts? Two feet? That makes it ... from the assault deck ... about fourteen feet from the ass end of the ship to the end of the ramp on the ground.” Donald watched as Wilber rotated the box and dragged the whole thing down within the circle, leaving room for the assault hatch to drop down and still leave a few feet clear to access the wall for manual cutting.

“Where do you want that tunnel collapse to happen? You gonna cut a hole and go plant charges or just drive through it?”

Donald stared at the screen for several moments, then shook his head slightly. Now he *knew* he was tired if Wilber was coming up with simpler ideas than he could.

“Uhhh, yeah. Running through it should collapse it nicely. Put it .... maybe another hundred feet west of there. We still gotta get the shields configured and go test it somewhere. Laisee’s hot to move, but we don’t even know if it will work like we think it should.”

He sat back and rolled his neck around again.

“This really sucks, Wilber,” he muttered. “The *best* solution would be to go in there and lay *waste* to the outside area before dropping an armored squad in and taking down all the bad guys. Then we just recover the hostages and blow the shit out of the rest of it. My smallest A-M round will take out a sphere about six-kilometers in diameter. Unfortunately, that would leave both a political and *humanitarian* disaster behind us, not the *least* of which would include killing innocents and screwing up the local ecology.”

Wilber turned and watched his friend of over half his life run his fingertips through his hair before rubbing his cheeks and the front of his face, ending with his hands finally dropping listlessly into his lap afterwards.

Donald’s eyes looked heavy, and he took a breath and let out a weary sigh while shaking his head slowly.

“My Earth countrymen have absolutely *no* idea how to deal with a civilian population that is treated better by their nominal *subjugators* compared to their liberating *enemies*. Wilber, from all I’ve read so far, the folks in that particular valley don’t get along with *anyone*. Not *us*,

## Picking up the Pieces

not the *Russians*, not the *Taliban* ... hell, not even their *own* government. The US is fucking around over there now, and they'll probably *still* be over there for years to come – trying to deal with people who just want to live their *own* lives and be left *alone*." He closed his eyes after he said it, and Wilber understood *exactly* what he'd been trying to express...

Wilber's time in service was spent in beautiful Southeast Asia – slogging through rice paddies in a very similar situation that Donald had just described, but with different results.

The US had finally come to its senses and bailed on Viet Nam, but left behind chaos and death, both for the government of South Vietnam, and for those Vietnamese who'd worked with them.

There *were* no winners in a situation like that, just the fortunate few who managed to survive and rebuild their lives...

"You should go get some rest, Don," he murmured, then placed a hand on his friend's shoulder to emphasize it. "Time enough to deal with this in the morning."

Donald opened his eyes and stared at him for a moment.

"Gotta go back to the ship and check a few things first," he muttered, then stood up and gathered his notes before heading out the door.

Wilber listened when Donald paused in the bathroom to splash water on his face before finally leaving the house.

### ***In Garrison Housing***

It was after nine p.m. and Laisee was still with Ling and Aineias in their quarters while talking about the mission.

"Laisee, Aineias and I have spoken about it, and we agree that six warriors should be sufficient for the mission as tentatively planned," Ling reassured her.

Aineias, not willing to add familiarity among his few sins, remained carefully formal with the Emperor's daughter.

"Lady Caldarous, I will select six unattached men and present them to Lord Cato for his approval. Once he has accepted them, a mission briefing will be conducted in the motor pool's conference room. I understand more detailed scans have been taken. My technical staff will reprint the maps with the additional details as noted by yourself and the other Ladies involved."

Laisee closed her eyes and nodded, adding a slight smile to show her agreement before opening them again and looking at Ling.

“One remaining regret is that we have only one among us with Combat-Healer training – Lady Sai – but she will be concerned with running the mission in accordance with the Elder’s instructions,” she said, and Ling shared a long blink with her.

*“My Lady, the Elder has said Elder Xue would probably do if she arrives in time”* she pressed silently, and Laisee gave out an audible sigh but declined to comment.

“I thank you both for your commitment to the goals of the Healer Center,” Laisee said politely. “It is a difficult situation we find ourselves in, but the Elder has hopes the Earth can be saved ... perhaps even in *our* lifetimes...”

Laisee watched the shock on their faces before letting out the slightest of titters to let them know it was a joke ... mostly.

She stood up, followed immediately by Ling and Aineias, who both bowed appropriately.

“Thank you for sharing your evening meal with me, Ling. Perhaps we may find some time to reacquaint ourselves with each other once things settle down a bit.”

“I thank you for your kind offer, my Lady,” Ling said. “*We* thank you for your kind offer,” she added hopefully, already looking forward to an evening of relaxed play with two very knowledgeable lovers.

Laisee leaned in and shared a chaste kiss with Ling, before holding out her hand to Aineias, who bowed over it and pressed it to his forehead in proper familiar protocol before straightening up and releasing it.

“Goodnight, my friends,” Laisee said, then gathered her notes and was escorted to the door by Ling, while Aineias started dealing with their crystals.

After she’d left, being joined by the guardsman waiting patiently outside the door, both Ling and Aineias let go of all their stress in a pair of heartfelt sighs.

“My love, I fear the good Lady is *very* concerned about the prospect of a safe recovery for the prisoners,” Aineias muttered, then wrapped his arms around his bond-mate.

“I feel she is even *more* concerned about Donald’s *survival*,” Ling murmured, then looked up at her bond-mate.

They shared a look that spoke volumes before heading to the facilities to shower and prepare for bed.



***In the Motor Pool***

It was almost ten p.m. and Sai was still in the *Kraken's Child* going over the updated scans in detail...

Laisee had been able to poke around and assign contents to several of the carved-out rooms that lay along the tunnel on the east side of the mountain ridge – most notably, identifying what should be the armory and what appeared to be quarters for some of the Taliban fighters, both of which were located close to the Eastern entrance. Aside from the previously known locations for Fred and the other prisoners, there also seemed to be a small room containing provisions – a pantry of some sort – and a room deeper in the mountain that held marketable drugs in bags.

She'd finally managed to look through the eyes of men who'd walked the tunnels and entered various rooms but the last room – blocked by a thick door – was guarded by two men who'd never seen the contents of it. In addition to that, they'd never been told what was in it, just to guard it from everyone except Faridun himself...

*\*Grandmother, Walter has called about our request\** Jaiying shared with her silently. *\*Please join with us\**

Sai leaned back and closed her eyes, already anticipating *another* delay. No doubt Donald's grand scheme to tunnel his way through Afghanistan would have to be reworked in its *entirety*. A few moments later, she sat up and opened a file for editing on the display in front of her.

*\*Walter, please repeat those settings very slowly\** she sent. *\*I'm keying them into a file for Donald, and don't want to make any mistakes\**

After two repeats – just to make *absolutely* sure – Sai thanked them, then almost told Walter to promise Donnel some *private* time with her, before realizing it was rather pointless – she being on Earth, and Donnel being ... somewhere else.

She sat back and stared at the numbers on the screen while trying to visualize the possible results of such a bizarre configuration. Then she mentally smacked herself for forgetting she had a *simulation* window sitting in the background. She was still keying in the new settings when Donald came up the stairs into the tank.

***Thursday, September 29, Morning in the Center***

Aineias had passed on a morning meal with Ling in their quarters and waited until someone called from the Center's kitchen to tell him when Lord Cato had arrived for breakfast. Once that call was received, he quickly made his way through the underground corridors, climbed

the ladder to the Center's facilities, then headed straight to the pantry where he tracked down the caller.

"Where is he?" he quietly asked his staff lead for that morning, and she pointed to Donald's location over by the windows.

Aineias entered the dining room and passed by the buffet to grab a plate before loading it up and wandering over to where Donald was sitting.

"May I join you this morning, Lord Cato?" At Donald's smile and nod, Aineias set his plate down and pulled a chair out to sit.

"Good choice for this morning, Captain," Donald said. "Your kitchen crew has adapted to the preparation of Earthling fare quite nicely."

"Not at all, Lord Cato. The residents – Lady Mary and Lady Kayla – have been most generous with their time," he said, then took a bite of his crisp bacon.

Donald smiled at the delight he read in the man's eyes, and decided to mess with him while he still had the chance.

"You know, on Earth, not that many centuries ago, the vessels that plied the ocean waters by way of wind and sail would sometimes be left adrift without means to move. They were *becalmed* – left with no wind to drive the ships," he murmured. "When they were lost for a sufficiently long enough time, they would sometimes run out of food. What they would do then is take some of the *junior* men aboard and butcher them for their meat. They called it *long* pork. I'm told it tastes very similar to the pork your bacon comes from."

He'd said that last while looking down at his own plate and selecting a strip of bacon, all the while watching Aineias out of the corner of his eye.

Instead of losing his composure, the Captain merely paused, processed this new information, then took another – *thoughtful* – bite of his bacon.

"I would imagine they must have been desperate men, my Lord," he finally said, then chewed a bit more of his bacon, before adding, "Still, if a ship's poop dispenser could produce a suitable comparison to *this*, it would be of *great* comfort during times of crisis. Vibianus mentioned a simulated hamburger patty coming out of the dispenser in the tank. In time, I'm hopeful those enhancements would eventually work their way throughout the *fleet*."

It was Donald's turn to become thoughtful, and he decided Aineias was right. He had no need to sit on the technology, and had already

## Picking up the Pieces

given the go ahead for Clax to distribute the design freely. It only made sense to pass it off to Radatel and have his minions put it into production – probably starting out as retrofits during yard overhauls.

That, and if they marketed it *properly*, it would enhance the productivity and profitability of the Imperial *family*. The Imperial auditor would be *delighted*.

“Good idea. I’ll have to suggest it to Laisee,” he finally murmured, then began wondering when Aineias would tell him why he’d chosen to seek him out this morning.

### *At the Residence*

Wilber had decided to enjoy breakfast for a change, so he’d forgone the reading of the overnights and concentrated on sharing the morning meal with Mary and Shu. From the small pile of dishes still soaking in the sink, he surmised that both Danny and Kayla had left for work a couple of hours ago. With any luck at all, things would remain quiet in town and at the hospital that would allow them to return at a *normal* time for a change ... *hopefully*.

Once he finished, Mary took his plate before he could move, and Shu came around and hugged him before leaving to go check on Nascha. Wilber looked around and cleared the remainder of the table before heading into his office to read the overnights – which indicated it had been quiet last night.

He’d fired up his computer while reading the overnights, so it was ready when he culled the current logs for John Smith – finding he still appeared to be holed up somewhere in Phoenix and not using his phone for anything, other than checking the weather, and ordering deliveries of food to wherever he was currently staying.

Other than learning John liked Chinese food, the rest of it was a bust, so he checked his “to do” list and groaned when he read it was time to review the monthly budget.

He slumped back in his chair in defeat and cleared off as much of his table as he could. Then he set up a small folding table next to him and pulled a few binders over from one of the bookcases. Checking his “in” basket, he found a dozen or more statements, invoices, and notes, then began stacking them logically on the small table. Then he unlocked the file cabinet and pulled out one of several checkbooks.

Once he was ready, he opened the Administrative folder on his computer and starting checking the file name dates, making sure they were all concurrent from the *last* update cycle, before copying them to a backup folder, and then *another* backup folder on one of the arrays, and finally a *third* backup folder on the second array. He wasn’t *paranoid* about the security of the data, but he’d had an unfortunate

mishap in the past that had required *manual* reentry – from *hardcopy* – of an *entire database*. It had taken him the better part of two *weeks* to replicate the original.

Wilber was about to wield his letter opener when he sat back and looked at the pile in front of him, then had a sudden epiphany. Perhaps it was time to pop *another* one of Dwayne’s cherries?

He opened a couple of easy files and adjusted a couple of lines in a somewhat obvious fashion, changing a few negative numbers to positive numbers, but where a negative number *really* needed to be. Then he closed the file and grabbed his phone, catching the time on the display before keying in Dwayne’s number.

“Hope Spring Blossom is done with him for a while,” he chuckled evilly, while waiting to invite his unsuspecting auditor over for a visit.

### ***In the Dining Room***

With the inconsequentials finally out of the way, Aineias had broached the subject that was on his mind – the mission.

He’d told Donald that Laisee had asked for warriors to support the rescue mission. In return, Donald told him that it should be easy, but it never seemed to end up that way. Aineias admitted it was true, and that it happened more often than anyone would care to admit.

In the end, they’d gotten up and headed to the motor pool together so Donald could show him the logistics of the plan using the big displays inside the *Kraken’s Child*. Upon their arrival, they found Sai already in there and plotting potential paths to the target area.

### ***At the Residence***

Dwayne settled back and looked at the clock. It was only ten a.m. but it seemed like he’d been sitting next to Wilber *forever* while going over the budget records of the Center with him, along with the account summaries of the garrison – *both* of which were items he’d never known Wilber was responsible for.

Over the last hour and a half, Wilber had taken him through it all, account-by-account, so he could gain a base understanding of how it all fit together. At least the man was *organized* to an extent he’d never suspected. In addition to the Center and garrison funding, what had surprised him even more were the monies expended on maintenance for the *tribe’s* health and welfare.

That was in addition to the fully funded scholarships that had sent seven young men and women to several of the Arizona State University sites located less than a hundred miles north of the Reservation.

## Picking up the Pieces

He'd been suspicious of the student records Wilber had obtained indicating the progress and grade level achievement patterns of the various sponsored tribe members, but Wilber simply commented that it was Ron Cal's way of making sure money wasn't wasted on lazy boys and girls, then tapped his finger on the title of the funding account.

That's when it finally struck him. The money being used to support the Reservation, the Center, *and* the garrison wasn't coming from the Embassy. It was coming from something called the Kraken Collective, which had a suspiciously familiar ring to it.

"Wilber ... you aren't planning on *retiring* soon, are you?"

Dwayne's thoughts had suddenly turned on a tangent, now wondering if Wilber was planning to leave the fold, either as a guest of the NDA, or a victim of it.

"No. I just thought it was time for you to start learning a little bit *more* about the job. I won't be around *forever*, you know. Shu and I might even like to take a vacation – other than in *town*, I mean."

"Uh-huh..."

"Dwayne ... *really*. Look, I review these records at the end of every month, and I thought it was about time somebody *else* looked at them ... just for a second set of eyes. When Ronnie left, he ... well, he dumped a lot of *shit* in my lap, and I would welcome someone *else* going over it just to check my numbers. You know, sometimes I swear it makes my head swim."

The look Dwayne gave him was not inspiring, so he added, "Hey, at least I'm not as crazy as *most* of the aliens around here."

They both turned at the sound of a giggle coming from the doorway behind them. It was Shu, and they watched as her smile turned into a soulful pout. Dwayne spared a glance at Wilber and immediately noticed the blush running up his neck before he stood to go and apologize to his wife.

"Dwayne, why don't you look over those spreadsheets and see if you can find any errors?" he asked him. "I'll be back ... after a while."

Dwayne watched Shu reach out to her husband and pull him through the door, hearing her giggle return just before the door closed behind them.

### *At the Center, In Laisee's Suite*

"*\*Truly that is the feeling both Sai and I detected, my Elder\**" Laisee reported to her stepmother. "*\*There was a sense of something being withheld, but the minions sent to the meeting were not informed of it.*"

*Wilber's contact had no knowledge of it either, but he shared our suspicions\**

*\*Then let Donald make a reasonable threat assessment, and leave it up to the Americans if he finds it impossible to resolve on his own\**

*\*My Elder ... Lili, is this wise?\** Laisee was less than enthused with the prospect of Donald deciding things on the fly – especially now that his abilities had been so severely hampered.

*\*Elder Xue should be arriving shortly. Perhaps she will be there in time to assist him personally. She is to be trusted, Laisee\** Lili sent in family mode.

*\*I hear and obey, Lili\** Laisee sent, then felt when her stepmother left the conversation.

"Oh Donald. *Please* don't screw this up," she murmured to herself, but thought she heard a tiny bit of silent laughter coming from the other bedroom.

### ***At the Residence***

It had taken almost an hour, but Dwayne found the intentional errors Wilber had left for him. Once discovered, he'd saved backup copies of them, then renamed the file so he could make the corrections and start entering the latest spreadsheet updates to it without corrupting the original ... just as Wilber had shown him.

He was about to dig a bit further into the computer's administrative file structure when Wilber returned.

"How did it go?"

"I found ... I *think* I found a couple of errors," Dwayne said, then went back, opened the edited file, and pointed to the suspected errors. He'd even highlighted the cells so they would be easier to find.

"Good. You found *both* of them," Wilber confirmed for him, and caught the dirty look Dwayne passed to him over his shoulder. "Hey, just checking to see if you were paying attention. And I see you went ahead and updated the file with the *current* statements. Good! It will save me extra time. It's getting close to lunch. You wanna break now and–"

"Excuse me, gentlemen," Spring Blossom said from the doorway. "Wilber, may I please borrow Dwayne for a little while. I need him to help me with something over in the Center."

"Sorry Wilber. Duty calls." The smile Dwayne passed to him was full of delight, and when he stood to leave, the spring in his step was even springier.

## Picking up the Pieces

Wilber watched them walk over to the Center from his office window while considering just what she could *possibly* want from Dwayne in the middle of the day. Then he remembered what he and *Shu* had just gotten finished with, and let out a chuckle before settling into his seat and checking Dwayne's work.

### *11 A.M., At the Motor Pool*

Aineias stepped out of the security office and looked at the ten men standing in two rows in front of him – surrounded in the background by nearly every *other* man in the garrison who was not actually on duty elsewhere. It was an hour before noon, and word had apparently gotten around that a little diversion was in the offing, and *no one* wanted to be left out. He spared a glance at the visitors still in the office, then cleared his throat before addressing his men.

"Gentlemen ... I've called you here because there has been a request to support a special rescue mission in a hostile environment here on Earth. I'm looking for volunteers—" He stopped when the ten men in front of him all raised their hands, along with everyone *else* in the motor pool.

"I'm looking for SIX volunteers," he continued, but no one made a move to lower their hands.

"They must be single, or in an uncommitted attachment," he continued again, seeing only five hands drop. "And they must have prior covert operations experience."

At that last, several more hands dropped, but none from the ten men in front of him, which is why he'd selected them to begin with. With a shake of his head, he continued with the mission summary.

"The *primary* goal will be to recover several prisoners held in an enemy location ... *without* the enemy discovering they've been stolen out from under their noses." He smiled as several of the bystanders hands wavered, then began falling, the mission parameters deserving of further consideration, it would seem.

"Just to make it *more* interesting, no pellet throwers or beamers will be allowed. You *will*, however, have use of power swords – *Royal* power swords." That last caused half of the rest of the bystanders to lower their hands.

"Black ops armor will be worn for protection against Earthling projectile weapons similar to the ones you'd seen demonstrated upon your arrival. Note that they may not stop fatal effects from small explosive devices, heavier pellet throwers, or some of the fuel-powered portable flight weapons." As the seriousness of the situation continued to develop, the ten in front of him lowered their hands but crossed their arms – not against going, but simply waiting to learn more.

“The *secondary* goal will be to damage or destroy weapons and illegal substances through deceptive means after recovering the prisoners.”

A hand shot up and he pointed at him.

“Sir! Who will lead the ground assault?”

Aineias closed his eyes and tilted his head down for a moment...

### *Inside the Office*

“Well ... that’s our cue,” Donald murmured, and Sai joined him when he walked out on the main floor and stood beside Aineias.

Aineias opened his eyes and spared a glance at the feet of the persons next to him, Donald on his right, and Sai on his left, before taking a breath and looking up at his men.

“Lady Sai Tal will be in charge of the *overall* mission, while Lord Donald Cato ... sai Caldarous ... will be leading the ground operation,” he said, catching the surprise in their eyes that the mentally damaged man before them had turned out to be related to the Imperial family somehow – probably through the two Ladies he was bonded with.

Donald looked over at Sai and tilted his head towards the group, but she shook her head and raised her chin a tiny bit in his direction.

For some reason she was giving him first crack at it, but he remembered she usually worked alone – even at the Fringe.

With that subtle reminder, he figured it was as good a place as any to start.

“Good morning, gentlemen. As many of you probably do *not* know, Lady Sai Tal was a covert operative working under orders of the Elder’s office on Kantor. After the armistice was in place, and while it was still a bit *weak* in places, *one* of her assignments was to go to the Fringe and find out who the Madman was. Lady Tal was subsequently *suborned* by the Madman and put to good use, such that the borders were widened, and the cross-border raids were significantly reduced. I should know. I *also* served with the Madman.”

Donald waited as that was digested, with several appraising glances being shared between him and Sai after he’d dropped this slipper.

“Lady Tal has overall responsibility for this mission, and will remain out of harms way at all times within our transportation – the *Kraken’s Child*.”

He paused and gestured to the moving jungle mural on the far side of the motor pool.



## Picking up the Pieces

“The ground operation will entail tricking the enemy into exiting a cave and tunnel structure – ideally leaving their prisoners *behind* – and then we just walk in and pull them out ... *ideally*.”

He waited while they digested the tentativeness of that supposition before laying out further details.

“The plan involves releasing a gas odorant to alert the enemy that a health and safety hazard exists within the caves, followed by letting off sleeping gas charges to knock out the slow ones. Once that is accomplished, we should be able to walk down the tunnel, pull out the prisoners, and bring them back to the ship. As your Captain has told you, the enemy has a cache of weapons we’d like to destroy, and a stockpile of illegal drugs they intend to sell in order to fund their terrorist operations. It would be a bonus if we could either destroy both of those items or simply collapse the cave structure around them.”

He waited for all *that* to sink in, before one hand rose in the middle of the ten men, and he smiled when recognizing him.

“Yes, Vibianus?”

“Sir! The Captain said we were to recover the prisoners without letting the enemy know they were gone. If we chase the enemy out of their caves, how can they not know we’re going in behind them to recover the prisoners?”

Donald shared a grim smile with him before dropping the *second* slipper.

“Well ... what I plan to do is start on the *inside* of the mountain and work our way to the main tunnel,” he explained quietly. “Then it’s just a matter of scaring them out of the mountain, and recovering the prisoners. Power swords should make short work of target rock structures – at least collapsing the walls surrounding them. Come to think of it, driving the tank *through* them would probably be more efficient and leave a *bigger* mess to clean up afterwards,” he considered aloud, while nodding.

He contained his laughter at seeing a few jaws drop in the small group in front of him.

“That’s ideally... If we could make it look like a *major* fuckup by the enemy, their local command structure just might eat itself from the inside. At the very least, we’ll just have to make do with creating the illusion of a natural disaster to cover our tracks, but we can always remain hopeful. Gentlemen, I won’t lie and tell you this will be a walk in the gardens. *No* projectile weapons, *no* beamers, and we *have* to stay out of sight of the enemy. Worse yet, the Elder has laid *other* restrictions upon us that require *zero* loss of enemy life. I take that to

mean – within *reason*. As always, we leave absolutely *no* evidence of our existence here on Earth.”

He stopped there to let it soak in again, before tempering the strictures with something they could appreciate from a *seasoned* warrior.

“Otherwise, I’d recommend an initial aerial assault, backed with a standard ground insertion. Take out the enemy, pump the tunnels with sleepy gas, pull out the prisoners – and *level* the mountain.”

He saw several professional nods at that, but shrugged his shoulders and let out a sigh.

“Alas, the Elder has *no* sense of humor that I’m aware of, so we must play the game under *her* rules. Would that we had an unscrupulous *Healer* among us who could simply *scramble* a man’s brains, but *that’s* illegal. I trust the irony is not lost upon anyone here ... as well as the irony of me needing a *powered* blade now, but – shit happens.” He let the few chuckles die down, then looked back at Aineias before raising three fingers of each hand. At Aineias’ nod, he turned back to the group.

“The Captain tells me that *everyone* in this group has the qualifications we need. We need six men. The rest of the space will be taken up by the prisoners – mostly women, a few children, and two injured American warriors who weren’t so lucky – depending on how you look at it.” He tried to read their expressions, but decided to let them choose from among themselves.

“Please confer amongst yourselves to decide which six of you should be on this mission. Lady Tal and I will be in the conference room.”

The summary completed, he bowed formally to the men before proceeding to the conference room with Sai.

Ten minutes later, Aineias, followed by six successful volunteers, joined them. He hoped they were still willing to go along when they heard the *details* of what he actually planned to do.

### ***At the Residence***

It was a quarter to noon, and Shu had talked Wilber out of eating another breakfast sausage, egg, and cheese croissant sandwich for lunch, instead having a breaded chicken patty warmed in the microwave and placed between the sides of a rectangular bun.

He suspected it had something to do with his fixation on the croissant sandwiches, but he liked the chicken patties just as well, so he didn’t complain.

## Picking up the Pieces

He'd finished his sandwich and was sipping his juice when his cell phone rang. The caller ID told him it was a "must take" call, so he got up and headed straight to the privacy of his office.

Just as soon as the door closed, he answered it with, "I'm here."

"*And I'm not – but I'd rather be,*" the voice said, matching the coded challenge with the correct response ... not that it mattered, because Wilber recognized his voice. It was Dwight.

"Got news?"

"*Little – but not little enough. A package is headed your way. You know the courier. You already trust him. Should be there soon.*"

With that, the phone clicked, and the call dropped.

"Soon? That's *today*? No, that's *tomorrow*," he muttered, after remembering the timing code.

"Should be there" meant *now*, while "should be there *soon*" meant tomorrow. After that, it was day of the week, plus one.

It must be something important for his NSA contact to be *this* evasive, and it was being sent by *courier*? Someone he *already* trusted? Instead of dwelling on it, he keyed in Dwayne's number to call him over for a quick conference.

"Dwayne. I just got a call. Can you please come over so we can—" He stopped when the office door opened.

"Wilber, please excuse me," Shu said. "Donald needs you and Asad over in the motor pool conference room. It is important."

"Ahhh, Dwayne, can you gather Asad and bring him over to the motor pool. It sounds like Don needs something from him. From the *both* of us. I'll meet you there."

He gave his girl a hug and a quick kiss before heading out the door.

### ***1 P.M., The Motor Pool Conference Room***

Over the course of the last hour, Wilber and Asad had taken turns bringing the garrison volunteers up to speed on the political background and current political history of the target area. Much to everyone's dismay, it had the makings of a *total* cluster-fuck should any little bit of the plan go wrong.

It was a totally bizarre situation they faced – just as was the fact they would not be able to assure the majority of the prisoners they were there to rescue them and not hurt them. When one of the men suggested they be given flash cards to explain themselves, Asad had told them that many, if not *all* of the women would probably not be

able to read. The thought of the primitive situation they were facing was sobering.

As Asad was being escorted back to the center by Dwayne, Aineias stood at the front of the room and placed his hands on the layers of maps laying on the table while leaning forward to address his men.

“Gentlemen, you’ve heard the situation on the ground, and you’ve reviewed the mission parameters in detail. Is there anyone here who wishes to change his mind?”

Donald cringed at that word and held his breath, but the ceiling didn’t appear to be on the verge of falling down, so he mentally crossed his fingers and waited out the silence.

“Very well,” Aineias continued. “When the mission is a go, you will be given – *hopefully* – a reasonable amount of advance warning. Meanwhile, I recommend that you eat lightly, and review the material that will be left here in the conference room for your use.” He glanced at Donald, who nodded his head in acceptance of that condition.

“Lord Cato served with the Madman and knows well that situations are always subject to abrupt and unexpected challenges, but you are to follow his lead.” He straightened up, and Donald stepped forward to speak to them again.

“I remind you again – the Elder has ordered that no *official* government personnel may be killed during the rescue attempt, but the enemies we’ll face are not considered part of an official government by most of this world’s nations. That said, it would look better if it could be arranged that they ate themselves from *within*, rather than doing stupid things like the Americans appear to be doing without producing any positive results at all.”

After the few snorts died down, Aineias ordered his senior men to get armor passed out and verified for all participants – and to find a powered sword for Donald. Lady Tal would remain in the tank so she would be without armor, but would wear a ships suit for the duration because of exposure to the gas.

The meeting broke up after that, and Donald and the men followed the lead to the armory to pick up their armor.

Meanwhile, Sai headed back to the tank to make sure the ships suits and collars were charged and ready to go.

### ***Late Afternoon, The Center Dining Room***

Donald wiped his lips with his napkin, then looked down at his son. Little Ronnie was in the pram on his right, with Déjà sitting next to him. In the pram to his left, a slight murmur from Faith caused him

## Picking up the Pieces

to turn and look down at her. He smiled and looked up at Maya, but saw the reserved smile she'd given him earlier was still in residence.

He glanced down at his empty plate, then looked up to see Dwayne and his mother making goo-goo eyes at each other across from him. Well, at least *Dwayne* had gotten over the whole issue of him bedding down with his mother over the last few days.

He caught a quick motion over to the side, and saw Laisee grip Jaiying's arm tightly. The room brightened sharply when Jaiying suddenly flashed; then they heard a gasp from Laisee, followed by a sob, while Jaiying slowly dimmed out. Rose leaned over and wrapped Jaiying in her arms, while Laisee sat there and covered her face with her hands. Both Maya and Spring Blossom got up to comfort the girls, leaving Donald, Déjà, and Dwayne sitting there in confusion.

Sai entered the dining room in a rush, but froze while taking in the scene before her. Most of her extended family was in crisis, while the two men before her were merely confused. She calmly walked over and sat in Spring Blossom's seat to bring them up to speed.

"One of the pregnant children has just been killed by one of the men who'd taken her," she muttered flatly. "He made it as far as the door of the chamber when he slipped on a loose rock and fell – striking his head against the far wall of the tunnel and breaking his neck."

Donald quickly made the connections, then glanced over at Jaiying. When she looked back at him over Rose's shoulder, she merely nodded once in confirmation. Donald let out a sigh while considering the consequences, but Sai allayed his fears.

"The prisoners were all chained in place so there was no way for them to be involved with his accident," she explained. "I was listening when Jaiying... She's been monitoring their situation closely. It's early tomorrow morning there, and she felt a burst of panic and sought it out. She was still connected to her when the child was killed."

Donald closed his eyes and slumped in his seat.

He knew *exactly* what that felt like, and not just once. Unfortunately, Jaiying was too young to appreciate ambrosia – certainly not to the extent *he'd* exercised during most of his life.

He made a decision and passed it to the mission commander.

"Sai, I suppose there's no *real* reason to delay any further. If you're up to it, we can take the ship out tonight and try the shield settings. If it works, we can leave here before dawn tomorrow morning, and be onsite over the drop point at dusk their time. Then it's just a matter of pushing our way through about a hundred kilometers of granite."

"We've both been up all day–"

“Yes, and once we get into position, we can nap while we’re waiting for the rocks to settle. If need be – if the tunneling is a bust – we can drive straight through from the west entrance. Then we’ll just have to hope it’ll be easy to clear an opening in front of the forward airlock.”

She ran that scenario through her mind, but saw that it was *full* of holes. Aside from that, getting the shields to work as Ardan had suggested would make things easier overall and might prevent a *complete* collapse of the tunnels and caves while they were in there. It was worth a shot.

“All right. I’ll let Ling know we’re taking the ship out tonight and trying a few things. If it works, then we might be leaving as early as pre-dawn tomorrow. She’ll let Aineias know,” she said, then blinked for half a second before getting up and heading over to the motor pool.

***September 30, 06:45 (AFT), Afghanistan, Inside the Mountain***

Faridun looked around the crowded room carved out of the side of the tunnel. Personally, he’d have thought they would have taken the body and dumped it outside the cave. The man had died three hours ago, but they’d only carried it as far as the men’s quarters, and left it on his bunk for the rest of the night. Now that the sun was nearly up, along with the *rest* of the men, he’d been informed the man had died – presumably by *accident* – and had come to investigate their claims.

He stepped over to the pallet and flipped open the blanket. Sangrez’s neck was tilted at an acute angle, and there was a scrape on the side of his head suggesting he’d hit his head on the tunnel wall, but that didn’t explain the *blood* on the man’s chest. He opened the shirt, then pulled it up higher, but found no signs of injury. A quick search of his arms showed his hands covered in blood, but none of it appeared to be his.

“<Show me where you found him,>” he ordered, and was led into the mountain for another thirty feet until they reached the ragged wooden door blocking the opening to the women prisoners. The guard stopped and pointed to the opposite wall that showed an impact point that included a bit of blood and a few strands of hair. Part of a bloody handprint was also found.

Faridun turned and pointed to the door.

“<No one has been inside?>”

The guard shook his head no, but there didn’t seem to be much conviction in it. Faridun jerked his hand towards the door, and the guard opened it. Considering it contained a group of unwilling sex slaves, instead of the usual number of suppressed shrieks, the room was strangely silent. It was a first in his experience.

## Picking up the Pieces

*"<You're sure Sangrez never came in here?>"*

*"<Faridun ... he said ... he said he could not sleep. I told him to walk outside with me. He said it was too cold, and that he would walk the tunnel and back. I went outside for a little while, and when I came back, I found him there,>"* he said, pointing to the floor of the tunnel.

Faridun took a breath, then ducked his head to step into the small room where the women captives were kept. Each was chained to a pallet and frame by one leg. Two lidded buckets were on either side of the narrow room so they could relieve themselves as necessary. Other than that, they each had simple clothes to wear, and a thin blanket to cover themselves with. He considered that while remembering the upcoming winter. He'd have to get more blankets in here, and soon.

Looking around the room, he saw eyes peeking out from beneath the blankets on either side of him – all except for one blanket, whose owner's eyes stared straight up at the low ceiling. He looked closer and noticed they did not blink ... neither did the woman – one of the *girls*, he now saw – breathe. He crouched down and flipped the blanket back, revealing the handle of a knife jammed into her belly and surrounded by a dark spread of blood. The sound of whimpers began to break the silence, and he stood and turned to his favorite.

*"<Who was she?>"*

The silence remained until a blanket shifted two pallets over, and a familiar head popped up with a hateful scowl on her face.

*"<She was called Roshina. That DOG of yours – Sangrez – HE STOLE HER LIGHT!>"* she said defiantly, which is why he'd asked her instead of anyone else...

Orzala was *anything* but compliant, but she gave a good ride, and wasn't afraid to speak her mind. If their backgrounds weren't so different, he might have considered a relationship with her ... if she could be trusted not to *kill* him in his sleep. He knew she could never return home. The fact that she'd been taken against her will was no excuse for these country fools. Once a daughter was "ruined," she was a shameful blight on family honor and would have to be *killed*...

He ignored her, then backed out of the room, getting the guard to quickly scoot backwards to make room for him.

*"<Zalmay... Go get someone to help you carry the girl out and dispose of her body ... politely. Then drag that fool out and put him on display. Tell everyone he is an example of someone who has killed without permission. Tell them that if he hadn't tripped and broken his neck, I would have gladly killed him MYSELF!>"*

*"<Yes, Faridun! Right away!>"*

The guard turned and took off at a trot, while the terrorist leader sagged against the tunnel wall. He did *not* need this now. Raping infidels was *one* thing, but killing them because you got them *pregnant* was not right – not even for *him*. If he ever got Orzala pregnant, he would make sure she carried the baby to term so they could raise it to become another fighter to bring down the *Americans!*

He glanced further into the tunnel and wondered if Sangrez had actually intended to walk all the way to the other side of the mountain and back. There was just a small barracks room there, along with a small cache of weapons and supplies. Otherwise, no one lived in that valley, and it was just a way to escape should it become necessary.

For a moment, he thought of the last room on this side of the mountain, but then dismissed it. It would only be a short while longer before the package would arrive and become a pacing item.

As he was standing there, he considered a freeze on recreational sex might be in order, if only to reinforce his position on the senseless deaths of their prisoners. The more he thought about it, the more it sounded like a good idea.

At the sound of approaching footsteps, he turned and headed outside to get the smell of death out of his lungs. Nodding his head, he decided he would put the word out this morning – no more visits for sex until further notice.

*That* should deal with this ragged bunch of mindless dicks.

***Thursday, September 29, 9:20 P.M. (MST), The Annex, In the Center***

Now sequestered in their suite, Laisee, Jaiying, and Rose all took a breath and relaxed. Faridun had investigated the death and determined it was “accidental” in nature.

Better yet, an hour later, he’d announced his decision to place a moratorium on rape for the time being ... with a little bit of help.

“Very nicely done, my girl,” Laisee softly praised her daughter.

“It helped that he was already upset with that other guy – the one who killed the girl,” Rose reminded her.

Jaiying looked at them both and shakily said, “I-It gives us a little more t-time. Donald and Grandmother can rest when they get b-back tonight. Then they will be r-ready to go on Saturday m-morning.”

Her voice had quivered when she’d said it, and Rose wrapped her arms around her in a hug.

Laisee recognized her distress and empathized with her, but there was nothing more they could do at the moment.



## Picking up the Pieces

“Jaiying, I know you don’t feel that we’ve done enough, but we’re in no position to do anything other than remote Healings,” she said quietly. “Now that Faridun is telling them to keep their hands off, it will give the women time to relax and compose themselves. Hopefully, they’ll be ready to leave when Donald and the men come to get them.”

“No, Mother,” Jaiying said sadly, and let Rose pull her head down to rest it in her lap before she continued. “Once Donald scares the men out of the tunnels, the women will become scared, too, and that will make it *more* difficult for them.”

“Then Donald should use the gas on *everyone* and take them while they sleep,” Rose said. “It will mean more work, but they would no longer be fearful and crying. That should help a lot.”

“I will suggest it to Sai,” Laisee said, but changed her mind when she remembered who would be leading the assault. “I will discuss it with Sai and Donald tomorrow – after they get back from their practice drilling session and get some sleep.”

“How are they doing, Mother?”

Rather than telling them outright, Laisee just said, “As good as may be expected,” and left it at that.

### *With Asad and Nurani*

Nurani was staring at the bathroom mirror and looking at the puffy eyes in her reflection. She dipped the washcloth into the cold water – again – and wrung it out before pressing it against her face – again. At least she was over the whimpering.

It was nearly eleven p.m., and Asad was lying on the bed and considering what he’d just discussed with the mother of his unborn child. Nurani was quite correct. It would be *foolish* of him to go along to help the Americans. He was an *interpreter*, not a fighter. They’d just barely escaped once before, and that was *after* her parents had found out she’d been “soiled” by this young outsider who’d helped the Americans disrupt their lives even more than the *Taliban*.

He closed his eyes and remembered the *first* time he’d seen Nurani...

She’d been walking with her older sister, and he’d seen nothing of her other than her hands and her feet, and not much of either. Still, the grace she exuded when she walked, and the silkiness of her voice when she’d spoken, had entranced him. He’d finally found the courage to present himself to her under the guise of asking about specific variations between standard Pashto and their local dialect of Pashai, which had eventually led to further conversations and more *forbidden* meetings, which had proven to be their undoing.

A sympathetic non-family member had warned that her parents, and more specifically, her *brother*, had begun paying attention to their activities. So much so, that Asad had petitioned the Americans for their withdrawal from the valley. His request had been approved, and they'd been spirited away and relocated to a staging area maintained by the Americans and other foreign fighters coming to deal with the terrorists – as if they really could.

Then they'd been requested to travel further away so they could be "interviewed." That would allow "specialists" to increase their knowledge about the embedded terrorist base. After that, it was a blur of movements and questionings until ending up in America itself, and finally into the hands of Agent John Smith...

Asad sat up and swung his legs over the edge of the bed before planting his feet on the floor. They were in a fix, with no way out, other than remaining here for as long as these Americans would let them remain. Still, it was better than letting Nurani's family kill them both. He stood and padded over to the bathroom.

"<Nurani... *The Americans will need help with the prisoners,>*" he said softly, and saw the eyes in the mirror dart to him when she pulled the washcloth away.

"<*You would leave me here? You will not take me with you?>*"

"<*The Lady and the child ... both of them speak Pashto, but neither will be allowed to go, my love. You must stay here and remain safe until I return,>*" he said, raising his arms up from his waist helplessly.

Her eyes turned back to the mirror in front of her, before her hands came up and covered her face.

Quiet sobs came moments later, and he stepped in to hug her.

"<*I will go with them, my love. We know who Faridun took, and I will see that they bring everyone out,>*" he said, leaving out the possibility that their number had changed once again since their original departure...

Nurani already knew of two young women who'd died under the tender mercies of their Taliban captors – *accidents*, or so they'd been told. She'd helped bury them. From what the older women had said, they weren't just being used for serving girls. *No one*, no matter *what* God they prayed to, deserved to be treated like that...

"<*Asad, you cannot be seen in the valley. The people know you and will kill you. My father will kill you on sight. You cannot->*"

"<*They already told me. I am to remain in the vehicle and not be exposed. They are the fighters, and I am the interpreter. I will help calm*

## Picking up the Pieces

*those whom they recover. Then we will bring them here and help them while they stay safe in this place.>*

She leaned back and looked into his eyes, suddenly considering the deadly penalty these women would face if they escaped.

*<They cannot go back, Asad! The village leaders would KILL them for being soiled!>*

His smirk was slight, but his voice rang true.

*<Just as your father would kill both of US,>*” he reminded her.

### ***11 P.M., In the Motor Pool***

While Donald was shutting the converter down to standby, Vibianus unstrapped himself and shakily stood up. He caught the smirk from Lady Tal when she exited the navigator’s seat and stood there waiting for him to turn and make his way down the aisle.

“Try to get some *sleep*, Vibianus!” she said cheerfully, and he glared at her before *carefully* turning in the aisle and *slowly* making his way to the airlock, where he could escape from the Madman’s assistant, and his evil female accomplice.

Without asking for permission, he punched the button and just barely waited for the doors to open and the steps to extend. She listened to his footsteps and was gratified to learn Donald had extended the landing struts the very minimum amount so it wasn’t that far to the ground. It didn’t keep Vibianus from swearing when he’d lost his balance, but at least he hadn’t fallen very far. She couldn’t imagine how the assault squad would deal with five or six *hours* of the same rough passage they’d just put the ship through over the last two hours or so...

She and Donald had been looking over the geological maps of the area south of them, and found some strata similar to the target area between two and three kilometers below the surface.

They’d been making preparations in the motor pool for the test flight, when Aineias had arrived to speak with the squad leader for the assault – Vibianus – which was where he currently was with two of his men. They were going over the Afghanistan maps and working out a few scenarios to deal with some of the “surprises” that typically popped up on a covert mission.

Of course, the toughest part of this particular mission was the need to remain *absolutely* covert.

It was just a fluke that the ship was going out for a test run, and Vibianus had been “volunteered” to go along to get an idea of what that might actually entail.

The first hour had been *particularly* rough, as Donald and Sai were kept busy “fine-tuning” the settings to produce a relatively smooth passage through sandstone before progressing through rock of a more granite formation. It wasn’t that the tank wasn’t capable of going through rock on its *own*; it was just a hassle to penetrate the rock without splitting it with such huge fractures that would collapse the entire area *around* them.

Donnel Ardan’s solution had been to use the dual shield systems in concert. The primary shield would be tightly maintained around the front and sides of the tank, while the secondary shield was distorted just a few feet around the primary shield, then made to oscillate like a rippling worm working its way through the soil.

In effect, the secondary shield’s oscillation would push the rock backwards so that it was simultaneously crushed against the primary shield, before filling the subsequent void behind them. Closing entrance or exit holes was easy – simply “burp” the shield before relaxing it, and it would collapse the surrounding rock.

Aside from the loud and rough ride, Donald had managed to program a few custom settings he’d tweaked to deal with specific strata densities to maximize their transit speed.

That would have been enough, but during one of the lulls, Vibianus asked about the large diameter circle in the middle of the paper map – the one with the tank drawn in the middle of it – and Donald had thanked him for reminding him of it. Then they went looking for “a good spot” and started fiddling around with the shield settings once again until they’d hogged out what seemed to be a large circular room full of rock and rock dust from floor to ceiling, or so the external cameras would suggest.

Then Donald – in a fit of *insanity* – had keyed in a few commands, before giggling maniacally while the tank started pivoting in a horizontal circle.

His goal had been to pivot the tank around its center until the floor of the space was relatively clear – which hadn’t worked out so well when the debris still hadn’t found a place to vacate to.

Afterwards, Sai had started working with him to come up with a different solution involving reprogramming the shields, and they’d made another attempt at clearing the floor. This one seemed to work – right until they’d cut the shield and heard the thumps of rock falling on the tank. The view from the external cameras showed pretty much what they’d expected to see – rock and dust piled high.

Their time on site would be limited, and they had no time to dig out a workspace by hand.

## Picking up the Pieces

They'd decided to take a break and stretch their legs, and Vibianus had accepted a cup of Healer's milk, cherishing the relief it had given him. He'd made the comment that Healer's milk would be a good item to bring with them for the prisoners, and Sai keyed that into a file on a data pad before contacting Ling and making the request from the Center.

With ten p.m. approaching, Donald and Sai had begun talking about a more *risky* scenario – plunging through the middle of the tunnel and using the airlock to access it and bring in the prisoners. The downside was it could expose the ship to view for a long period of time, and the airlock wasn't particularly large enough for moving people through in a hurry.

They were counting the pros and cons of it when Vibianus had swiped at a bit of dust that had come loose from somewhere and drifted across his vision. Donald had locked eyes on him, then reached out and grabbed Sai. A few moments later, they both headed forward and started making further adjustments to the secondary shield settings. Twenty minutes of trial and error produced settings that seemed to have worked – according to the aft camera, anyway – and they'd shared a laugh before telling Vibianus to strap in again.

The reason for that became obvious when Donald easily cranked the tank around and started heading back through the tunnels they'd already bored – traversing the route very quickly now that a path had already been plowed through it.

The subsequent return to the Annex was uneventful...

Footsteps were heard coming up to the airlock, and Donald turned to see Wilber standing there with a smile on his face.

"Hey, Sai ... Don. Did you guys hear from Laisee? She said you can probably wait until Saturday morning to start the mission. Something about Faridun cutting off access to the women for a few days."

He caught the surprised look in each of their faces. While Sai was noncommittal, Donald looked like he was giving it a bit of serious thought before finally nodding slightly.

With no actual comments coming back, Wilber pressed on gamely.

"How'd you guys make out?"

"Fifteen ... maybe twenty miles per hour through the hardest of it without leaving much of a mess behind," Donald said.

"Not *too* much of one," Sai added. She'd already shut down the console and begun policing the forward cabin. "We'll need mattress pads and belts ... *lots* of belts. We'll need them to tie the prisoners to the assault deck."

Wilber looked at her in surprise, but his thinking was readable – even by Donald.

“Rough ride, Wilber,” he said. “Even *Vibianus* didn’t like it, and he had a *seat*. Mattress pads? Hell, *mattresses* even. Maybe those inflatable ones? Yeah, that’s probably better.”

Donald nodded to himself as he worked it out in his mind. Then he looked around the forward cabin to see where they could throw some extra pads in for more people up front.

“Saturday... Yeah, you’ll need the extra time to pick up a few things tomorrow,” he added thoughtfully.

As they left the airlock, Donald thought of something else.

“Ahh, you might want to have a story ready about a swarm of earthquakes somewhere in the desert south of us. Shallow swarm. Couple of kilometers down,” he suggested, then turned and keyed the airlock closed before heading back to the Center.

### ***Kantor, Elder’s Quarters***

Lili was sleeping fitfully.

Letting Rondal run loose hadn’t always seemed that much of a risky proposition, but now that *Donald* was standing in for him, the risks seemed to expand by an order of *magnitude*.

Laisee had alerted her earlier that one of the captives had died, and Jaiying had become dangerously affected by that outcome. In response, the child had reached out and caused the death of the assailant by the simple expedient of causing him to trip over his own feet, then fall and strike his head – which had masked her *extended* effort to snap his neck under the guise of an unfortunate accident.

All things considered, it was a wise application of the lessons learned during her extended study of the Cletus management of their Kantite leaders; the stories of the various Emperor’s lives being shortened for seemingly inexplicable reasons over the centuries having been discovered in the Elder’s *private* journals – as had been pointed out by her Staff. Lili had almost achieved a somewhat calm period of rest when she was awoken by a silent call.

*“\*Elder Liling, this is Xue. I have arrived over Earth, and will descend upon the Embassy within the next three segments\*”*

*“\*Xue? The Embassy? Why—\*”*

*“\*A justifiable excuse, Liling. I will meet with the Ambassador, then speak with his wives and Seniors separately. What of that business with Donald?\*”*

## Picking up the Pieces

*\*Laisee reports the rescue mission will leave this day. They mean to recover—\**

*\*You must tell the child to wait for my arrival. I will go along on that mission and observe how this Donald behaves\**

Lili's pause was slight, already having an idea of what Xue planned to do.

*\*I hear and obey, Xue\** she sent back.

*\*I have every confidence\** she heard from the void before the conversation abruptly ended.

Lili reached out and adjusted the light control to brighten the room slightly before sitting up in bed. She looked down at the empty space beside her and felt a sudden desire for a return to the relative peace she'd enjoyed with her extended family at the Royal Homestead.

She missed her husband, and missed her co-wives – *especially* Spring Blossom. She cast a thought of finding a wilderness meadow somewhere and sucking it devoid of life so that Spring Blossom's youth and vitality could be restored to her, but it would be unbecoming of the sitting Elder to act so selfishly.

She ran a hand through her raven tresses before getting up to use the facilities. Upon returning, she found something to drink and settled into a comfortable chair, before leaning back and reaching out to her stepdaughter on Earth.

The mission would be delayed while Donald's potential executioner was making her way from the Embassy to the *Healing* Center, the *irony* of which was not lost upon her.

### ***Friday, 04:00 (EST), Washington, D.C., Over the Embassy***

Xue listened with interest as both the pilot and navigator of the cloaked transport wove their way through the near-Earth obstacle course on their way down from orbit – both of them swearing very quietly from their seats in front of her.

To her memory, she did not recall *anywhere* she'd been transported to or from that had elicited the same level of vindictive as this simple drop to the Embassy's rooftop.

Apparently, it had something to do with the primitives' lack of routine maintenance of their orbital debris as evidenced by the tens of *thousands* of bits of space litter that surrounded the planet – along with the few thousand constructs of Earthling origin. Stealing a glance at the aisle seat next to her, she could see the slight smile that graced the lips of one of her personal bodyguards as he silently translated the vulgar stream into the Cletus equivalent.

After safely dodging the majority of potentially dangerous obstacles, landing had been a simple matter. The pilot lined up the small transport over the designated spot on the roof, and descended as directed by the Embassy staff, finally settling in at well under the roof top loading limit. They'd been told the roof top equipment shields would provide adequate shelter from view, but both pilot and navigator had looked at each other and simply shook their heads, deciding instead to remain cloaked for the duration.

Xue was almost tempted to reach out and fill in the blanks drifting across their surface thoughts, but decided it wasn't important. Instead, she waited patiently until being formally advised that the Ambassador was still dressing – this being the *very* early morning at this particular Earth locale – and staff would be coming to the roof to guide her and her retinue into the Embassy proper.

She got up and visited the small facilities while they waited for their escort to arrive. To conform to protocol, she needed to be *formally* introduced to the Ambassador and his staff. Once that was accomplished and she'd gleaned whatever she could out of his mind, she would move on to private meetings with his wives and Healers, where she expected to learn the *factual* nature of his punitive assignment to Earth.

Afterwards, she had an appointment to keep that was located partway across the continent upon which they'd just landed.

### ***Friday, September 30, Arizona, The Annex, The Great Room***

It was barely six a.m., and Donald was already in the Great Room warming up for his morning exercises. He hadn't been in close quarters combat since that last bit of nonsense at Site A, and didn't want to be unprepared during this little side trip.

After performing his routine of stretches and forms, he stepped over to two swords lying on the floor and drew the power sword of the loaner to check the power pack. He'd brought it back with him last night in anticipation of this morning, and if they left this evening, he needed to know the capabilities of the weapon they'd loaned him.

Checking it over, he noted that it still needed a new handle wrap so he could get a decent grip on it, just like the wrapping on his Royal sword that still lay on the floor. Holding it away from himself, he triggered the switch, and was somewhat disappointed with the subdued purr coming from the blade, along with the pale pinkish glow.

He tried a few thrusts and slashes, then keyed it off. His *own* swords had fired violet and screamed *loudly* – all dependent on his mood and enthusiasm. During fits of anger, the violet would shift to a



## Picking up the Pieces

dark purple, and the screaming almost turned into a growl, but that was all over for him now. He suppressed a snort at how impractical that would be on a mission of this nature, before sighing at this very *concrete* example of how far he'd fallen. Well, at least he was still alive.

He pulled out the power pack and swapped in the other – firing it again and confirming the sword was fully functional. He keyed it off and headed to the center of the room to begin his sword exercises.

While performing the precise movements of his training routine, he considered the entry phase of the mission. Cutting through a foot of rock wall with a sword would be *nothing* if wielded by a Royal. Royal swords would Fire as long as you were alive and awake, unlike simple power swords that were good for flesh and blood but limited to relatively small amounts of harder materials – like body armor and spaceship hulls. He had a suspicion that cutting through rock would cause the battery level to drop quickly, and considered it was probably something he should test if they had the time.

He completed his exercise and turned back to where his other sword was located, but as he turned, noticed Aineias standing in the doorway.

“Good morning, Lord Aineias,” Donald greeted him formally, then ignored him while walking over and popping the power pack out and replacing it with the original one.

“Good morning, Lord Donald,” Aineias finally said, still somewhat mesmerized after personally watching Donald perform his sword exercises. “The staff alerted me that a sword had been Fired in the Center ... and then told me it was *you*.”

“Come to have me turn in my sword?” Donald had asked this while cradling the sword in his arms and scratching his nose with one hand.

“Not at all, my Lord. It's against Ling's instructions, but you ... I doubt she would be all that upset.”

Donald shook in silent laughter, but then made a decision. He put down the power sword and picked up his Royal sword – looking it over and finding not a nick or scratch anywhere on the blade or upper guard. The lower guard had taken a few dents, and the handle had been wrapped and rewrapped *many* times over the decades. It was a fine weapon and suitable for an Emperor. In fact, it *had* been wielded by an Emperor – his natural father – but that man had been a complete asshole to his son, and the sword was of no further use to him.

“Aineias ... I have something for you,” he said, then turned with his father's Royal sword cradled in his arms. “This has served me well over the years, but can serve me no longer.”

He stepped over and held it out to him. As Aineias stood there and looked at him in shock, Donald let out a quiet snort.

“Come, my Captain. A sword is not meant for mounting on a wall as a remembrance of *past* glories. A sword such as this was meant for defending the Commonwealth against all enemies. Please accept this as a ... a *parting* gift – whether I come back or not.”

Aineias stared at him in surprise for several seconds, before coming to his senses.

“I-I thank you, Lord Cal...Cato,” he finally said, then gingerly reached out to accept the perfect-bladed weapon.

Donald smiled to see the light in the man’s eyes, then thought of something else, and dug through his pockets, finally holding up one of his “butter knife” power blades.

“This,” he said, “is a particularly *useful* little tool – as long as you don’t cut your *fingers* off with it. It’s small, easy to conceal, and you *really* need to maintain a good grip on it.”

He ran a finger along the precision fabrication of the blade, then pointed out the *thickly* dulled edges of the “handle” portion – in his case, wrapped with more handle wrapping.

He also reached over and tapped the blade guard on the Royal sword, then pointed to the *lack* of one on the palm-sized weapon.

“Works just like you’d expect it to, and like I said, it cuts just like a regular Royal sword. Aelius has been a good student, and I’d like him to receive this from me – when you think he’s *responsible* enough for it. Maybe *after* Drusilla becomes a little more skillful as a Healer?”

They shared a silent moment together, then shared the accompanying laughter of that potential situation. Waiting for Drusilla to have the skills necessary to Heal a few wacked off fingers would be a *wise* decision.

“Well... I’ve got some handle wrap in the tank, and I think I’ll pop over there and do up that one,” Donald said, gesturing back to the standard power sword on the floor behind him.

They both left the Center – Donald heading to the motor pool, and Aineias back to his quarters to store his new prize.

On the way there, Aineias looked at the wrapping on the Royal sword and suddenly realized there was no way for Donald to touch the *base* metal of the blade.

Of all the Royal swords he’d seen, they’d all had a narrow band of base metal that was gripped by the wielder, as Firing required that it

## Picking up the Pieces

be touched. The blade guard was part base metal, with a separate backing that faced the hand wielding it, effectively insulating it.

Aineias stopped and looked around. With no one else out this early, he gripped the sword tightly and held it out before calling the Fire, but without result. He looked down at the handle, then snugged his hand up to the blade guard before trying again – with the same results.

Very gingerly, he carefully touched the side of the upper base metal guard and called the Fire – now seeing the blade light up, and hearing it begin singing his personal tone. He let it pop out and thought what that might possibly mean before coming to only one conclusion.

If Donald had ever *truly* Fired it in combat, it must have been done *through* the wrapping. He continued to his quarters with determination, now, deciding to cut away the wrapping to see what lay beneath. If nothing else, it would expand the myths surrounding the “deceased” Lord Rondal Caldar.

### *7:30 A.M., At the Residence*

Wilber was up early and working down the list on his clipboard, augmented by the list Sai had given him last night. Many of the items could be purchased outright, but some were simply easier to rent. He was still torn by his decision to rent the propane bottles, though.

Buying them might have entailed having to wait while they were filled, while renting them would immediately give them full bottles they knew had already worked at some point.

Of course, from what Don was planning to do with them, the likelihood of returning rented bottles was questionable – even if they found all the pieces of them. Besides, they were already stacked in the hanger and ready to be loaded.

He'd reached the inflatable mattress section of a recreational store website when someone knocked on his office door before barging right in.

“*Wilber!* Lili tells me we must delay the mission until another Senior arrives from the Embassy,” Laisee quickly told him.

“*Another?* I don't recall the Ambassador having anyone who might be willing to–”

“It is Senior Xue ... from Cletus,” she interrupted him. “She comes to make a courtesy call upon the Embassy, before coming here to inspect the Center. Lili told her about the mission, and she has decided to go along.”

Wilber stared at her for a moment, then turned to glance at his calendar. He turned back to her, but before he could speak...

"She will be here sometime this day ... perhaps this evening after dark," she said.

"I..." Wilber looked up at her, but slightly shrugged his shoulders before letting out a sigh. "Sure. Probably just as well. It will give me more time to get the last of the supplies Sai asked for last night. We can still leave by..." he paused to look back at the calendar, "...tomorrow *morning*?"

Laisee's confused look made him point to the calendar – saying "today" over today's box and "tomorrow" over tomorrow's box. He watched as she did a slow blink while discussing the issue with someone else before coming back into focus.

"Yes, Wilber. Tomorrow morning should do well. Senior Xue should have plenty of time to arrive and become apprised of our intentions. Thank you, Wilber," she said, then pivoted and left the room, closing the door behind her.

Once out in the short hallway, she reached out to inform Ling there was a delay until the Senior arrived this evening and she was to let Aineias know so he could inform his men. Then she left the residence.

### ***The Motor Pool***

It was a quarter to nine a.m., and Donald was still running down his inventory list. He'd just finished checking off the propane tanks. Twenty of them should be enough – *reasonably* enough, anyway – and they, and the odorant tanks with their long hoses littered the assault deck in the rear of the *Kraken's Child*.

The next item on the list – air mattresses – still had him flummoxed.

They would have to empty the assault deck of all the propane and odorant bottles to fit all the prisoners inside the tank. If the intent was to fake a natural disaster, then leaving them behind was the *last* thing they wanted to do. After setting off the decoy explosions, they'd need to recover the metal debris from the blasts and find some place to stash it.

"And this is why I fucking *hate* covert ops," he muttered, just before hearing footsteps approaching from the forward part of the tank.

"Donald ... is that *you* I hear bitching back there?" a familiar voice called out, and moments later, Aineias stepped onto the assault deck and took in the pile of bottles and hoses. "Got quite a collection. I understand Lady Tal has requested *softer* quarters for the prisoners. Vibianus also mentioned it."

Donald turned and frowned in his direction.

## Picking up the Pieces

“Air mattresses,” he said. “At least they won’t take up too much space on the way out. Should probably bring an air pump, or a bottle of air.”

“And straps,” Aineias reminded him. “Vibianus mentioned the ride was a bit rough in spots.”

Donald swung around and stared at the cluttered deck. “Fuck! Gonna need straps for the *bottles*. And *more* straps for the prisoners. If we’re lucky, we’ll only have a couple so messed up they’ll need to use the bunkroom.”

Aineias didn’t bother to hide his smile. Seeing the Madman become flustered while prepping for an upcoming mission was very humanizing for him. That, plus the shift from formal conversation to team conversation within the confines of the tank. Vibianus had already been told his “mission” name was to be “One” from the time they left until they set foot in the motor pool once again. As a matter of habit, Donald had taken “Tank” as his mission name.

“Aineias ... if we stack them three high, do you think they’ll fit in the weapons room?” Donald turned to look back at him, then stepped over and grabbed one of the twenty-pound bottles before leading the way forward and sliding the loader room door open to let Aineias in.

Donald handed him the bottle before stepping in behind him and watching as Aineias did a few test fittings. Then Aineias stood there nodding while he sketched out the floor space in his mind with a pointed finger.

“I make it twenty bottles, all in a single layer, along with the odorant,” he finally said. “Throw a cargo net over the top and strap it down from the top and sides.” He pointed out hard points on some of the storage cabinets and weapon lockers.

“I ... yeah. Good work,” Donald said, then looked him over appraisingly. “You wouldn’t care to go along for the *ride*, would you?”

That triggered a guffaw from Aineias that curled him over and took him several seconds to recover from, before finally being able to face Donald again.

“As much as I’d like some *play* time, I’m afraid my bond-mate would take exception to it – on principle alone.” Donald watched as Aineias’ face went from smiling to shock.

“Make that *GREAT* exception, Lord Cato,” an icy voice said from behind him, and Donald turned to see the angry face of Ling standing in the doorway.

“Welcome, Ling. Your bond-mate was just helping me pack for my *trip*.”

“You’ll have *another* traveler, this is true,” she muttered, adding a frown directed at Aineias. “The Elder has directed that your mission be *delayed*. Someone comes from the Embassy later this day, and *she* will be accompanying you on the mission.”

Donald looked at her in surprise. He didn’t think the Ambassador was aware of the danger involved, nor was he aware of anyone on the Ambassador’s staff who was in the *least* qualified for this type of intrusion.

“My Lady Ling, I don’t think the Ambassador is quite–”

“Senior Xue arrived early this morning, and is currently interviewing the Ambassador and his staff,” she interrupted him. “She will transit here to inspect the Healer Center and review our progress. Once she was made aware of the mission, she decided to go along to *personally* offer her services.” She smiled grimly at Donald, then dropped the other slipper. “I understand she comes all the way from *Cletus* for this trivial task.”

Donald stood still, then closed his eyes before letting his face scrunch into a frown. The groan he let out was suppressed, with just the tiniest grumbling tone leaking from his nose as it changed slightly while his head slowly shook from side to side. He finally brought one hand up and rubbed his eyes while accepting the truth before him.

Lili’s masters had finally sent someone to check on him and make good on their previous orders. How clever of them to arrive early.

“Well,” he muttered, then tried to make light of the situation. “We’d best have everything *ready* for her. Aineias, she can have the seat next to Vibianus in the first row... No, she’ll have probably brought a guard of her *own*.” He paused in thought, then shrugged.

“We’ll see what she wants, and work from there. Straps... And a cargo net. I have to go see Wilber.”

Donald nodded to Aineias, then bowed to Ling, before making his way around her and heading over to the residence.

He also remembered the *other* item he’d thought of last night but wasn’t sure if Wilber could find it in time – if he could find it at *all* – but it might help distract what they planned to accomplish from being detected by the enemy.

### ***Coming Back from Town***

As the driver took the turnoff to the Reservation access road, Wilber glanced at the van’s dashboard clock – almost Noon. He resisted the urge to check his clipboard for missing items again, knowing he’d checked them off as he’d completed each step...

## Picking up the Pieces

They'd hit the camping store first and cleaned it out of inflatable mattresses. Then they'd gone to both auto parts stores in town and purchased most of the ratcheting strap kits containing the widest straps available. The most desirable solution would be to have custom seat belts fabricated, and there was even an auto upholstery shop in town that carried belting for just such purposes, but the lead-time wouldn't get them one pair of belts, let alone the twenty or so they would need by pre-dawn tomorrow unless if their guest was sufficiently delayed at the Embassy.

Wilber still didn't understand the necessity of dragging along another Senior for the recovery, and had mentioned it to Donald when he stopped by his office earlier that morning but he'd simply muttered, "Two is one, and one is none," with a disgusted frown on his face before heading back to the motor pool.

Wilber had joined him and determined the probable seating chart on the assault deck by cutting out paper rectangles and laying them over a quick sketch of the space to get the maximum yield for horizontal passengers. At least the deck was littered with flush tie-downs similar in purpose to the ones on aircraft carriers. With ratchet straps and hooks, getting twelve bodies tied in place should be no problem. It would just be a bit crowded. As for the *overflow*, the forward cabin could support maybe three mattresses total, along with one more on the floor of the bunkroom.

The cargo net was found at a small surplus store. He'd gotten *two* of them, because ... well, you never know.

He'd thought to ask about extra first aid kits, but Donald looked at him dubiously before he remembered Sai was going, along with another Senior visiting from the Embassy. He was still at a loss as to why Lili had chosen *this* particular month to send someone all the way to Earth just to check up on the Healer Cluster, but figured it must just be a coincidence...

The van eventually turned down the Annex driveway, and he let out a sigh. If nothing else, at least he'd be home in time for lunch. He just needed not to think too much about the contents of those two, five-gallon pails in the back of the van.

### ***The Annex, The Motor Pool***

Donald had just finished reviewing the revised timetable with his selected crew, and apologized again for the delay because of the arriving Senior. The only response, and this from Vibianus, was that *two* Healers are better than one, and Donald had to reluctantly agree. In his past life as a male Senior, he'd certainly found himself in situations that could have used the deft touch of a practicing Senior. Even after all the skills he'd learned, he'd actually had very little in

comparison to Ling, let alone Lili. Now it was all he could do to remember his *current* limitations.

He was still dwelling on that when the men filed out of the conference room, but his mood changed when he saw Wilber standing in the doorway behind them.

“Got your goodies. Where do you want them?” Wilber called out, and Aineias took off for the motor pool deck to shanghai some of the team members to help load the tank.

Under the leadership of Vibianus, the team members got the propane bottles relocated and secured in place using one of the cargo nets and some strapping. The air mattresses – all twenty of them – were stacked inside the weapons room on top of the propane and covered with the other cargo net. Before strapping them down, Wilber pulled out one of them and took it to the assault deck for show and tell.

He had two of the men unwrap the package and go down the list of parts. As it was an “international” manufacturer involved, the parts and assembly drawings were just that – drawings – and the parts consisted of the mattress and a manual foot pump. Assembly and pumping were accomplished within a reasonable amount of time, and Wilber pointed out the mattresses weren’t meant to be *jumped* on, but should be good for at least one transit. Then they went through the exercise of letting the air out and rolling it back up so it would fit in the weapons room.

After that, it was show and tell again, but this time with Wilber’s seating chart. The ratchet straps were handed out and everyone got a chance to learn how to apply this particular bit of Earthling technology for their intended usage. Wilber had been quite relieved when Vibianus had easily slipped the hook end of a ratchet pair into the deck mount. The mounts themselves didn’t line up perfectly with the mattresses, but they would do in a pinch.

With the remaining items secured in the shower, Donald and Wilber were the last ones out of the tank before it was sealed, until the mission ... or until something *else* came up. They both wandered out of the motor pool – Donald to the Center, and Wilber to the residence.

### ***Evening, The Motor Pool Conference Room***

Laisee, Ling, and Sai were sitting in the conference room with Donald and Aineias. An earlier conversation between Laisee and Senior Xue had indicated she’d be arriving sometime after dark, and after arrival, her *first* order of business would be to peruse the mission plans, which was why Donald and Sai were reviewing and updating them with their latest findings before she arrived.



## Picking up the Pieces

At eight p.m., their conversation became subdued when the motor pool lights went out, and the rumble of overhead doors was heard. They watched from the conference room windows as they retracted to allow a transport to settle within the sheltering walls. It was a rectangular craft, somewhat smaller and shorter than a Galaxy-class, that settled dead center over a pattern of lights in the floor before shutting down.

“Uhh, why don’t you Ladies go out and welcome Senior Xue to our humble Center and see what she wants to do first?” Donald suggested while gesturing weakly to the door.

His hopes were that she’d simply express a desire to snack on something and head to bed, but his *gut* was telling him she was going to insert herself into the operation in a *not-so-trivial* way. He couldn’t imagine what that might *actually* entail, but would probably include something related to his *not* coming back from this mission with a vertical component left in his body. As the Ladies dutifully trooped out to meet their guest, he watched with the condemned’s acceptance of his sentence.

~~~

Laisee stood in the forefront, while a small honor guard of two of Aineias’ men waited on either side of the transport’s airlock. Once it opened, a guardsman looked out, shared a few finger-flips with the lead guardsman, then headed back inside to escort Senior Xue out of the transport.

When Xue stepped out, she was struck with relief at seeing the members of the semi-formal group that were there to greet her. She knew Laisee and Sai, of course, and remembered Ling fondly after having suggested that she replace Sai while Lady Tal was indentured to the Demon of the Commonwealth. That bit of subterfuge seemed to have worked out well, and Lili had never caught on to it. She was also happy for Ling to have finally found a bond-mate while at such a primitive duty station!

Xue stepped up to Laisee and immediately presented her left hand, granting Laisee the honor of higher position. Greetings exchanged, she moved over to Sai and swapped hands before exchanging greetings with her. Having spent decades in her service, Ling presented her left hand first, then renewed her greetings with her mentor on the Elder’s Council.

The transport crew waited until the formalities were over, before bringing out Xue’s luggage. When the Ladies headed back to the conference room, Aineias’ men shared the load and carried on a quiet conversation with their Cletus counterparts until they reached the door. Once the Ladies had entered, the arriving guardsmen were

brought up to speed on quarters and meals. Then the four of them remained outside while the meeting continued within.

After entering the conference room, Xue stopped and stood very still. Even after the door had closed, she remained still and stared at the familiar face on the far side of the room. She knew that it *couldn't* be true – the build and color were very different – but the *face*...

It was a very good likeness of Iko Pang, a previous companion to her body's host. She finally shook herself out of her stupor and stepped forward to greet his doppelganger.

*"Senior Xue, it is so very good to finally meet you,"* Donald greeted her in Cletus. *"I am Donald Cato sai Caldarous se Earth ne Kantor."*

She raised her left hand, but found herself at odds with Donald's left hand. After a moment of confusion, Donald nodded politely and waited for her right hand to meet his left in greeting.

*"Senior Xue ... from Cletus,"* she managed to murmur, all the while staring up at his face.

She saw the underlying modifications someone had performed to change the features of Rondal Caldar into a reasonable likeness of the deceased body she'd left with Lili. No doubt, the body had received the same treatment in an effort to resemble the "deceased" First Lord.

Her focus was distracted when the other man in the room stepped forward and stood beside Donald.

*"My Lady Xue, may I present the Captain of the Garrison, Aineias Anastasius sai Caldarous ne Kantor,"* Donald announced in Standard, then stepped aside while Aineias and Xue lined up with each other, Aineias raising his left hand as Donald had done.

After joining palms and reciting her name and planet again, Xue finally realized what Donald had said, then glanced at Sai and Ling, before turning an accusing eye on Laisee. Laisee failed to wither under her glare and instead confirmed her suspicions.

*"Lady Xue, the Emperor and the Elder determined that certain information was best kept WITHIN the family ... something the LATE Lord Caldar had history of doing,"* she explained before frowning at Donald.

Donald folded his arms before raising a hand up to hide the smile on his face, while Xue turned to look at them all, then let out a disgusted sigh.

*"I suppose you're all wondering why I've chosen this time to come visit with you?"* she muttered flatly while glancing around at them.

## Picking up the Pieces

“To see if I fuck things up again?” Donald murmured in English, causing Xue to snap around at his comment.

“Fucking things up are the *least* of your worries, Donald!”

Xue’s command of English was quite good, as was her impression of Lili in a snit. Donald performed a formal bow, then held it when he spoke.

*“\*My Lady Xue, I meant no disrespect. I dwell upon the uncertainty of my existence on a daily basis while I continue to strive for the security of family, Commonwealth, and Crown. I serve by the grace of the Elder and the Emperor, and I will continue to do so for as long as I’m allowed.\*”*

Xue glared at him while her temper simmered, then finally cooled.

*“\*Noted, Lord Cato,\*”* she said flatly, then turned to Sai. *“\*Lady Tal, I would hear the plans for this intrusion into another political area on this poor excuse of a planet. I might, perhaps, suggest modifications that would help keep Donald from\* fucking things up!”*

At a daggered look from Sai, Donald wisely kept his own counsel and watched silently as she laid out the mission parameters from start to finish. It took nearly an hour, after which Xue sat back and stared at the wall for a few minutes while going over it in her mind, before finally taking a deep breath and letting it out slowly.

*“\*Lady Tal, do you concur with this ... this convoluted, overly complex, mishmash of steps contrived merely to recover a handful of Earthlings whose OWN governments care not one WHIT about their circumstances?\**”

Sai was not *quite* caught off guard but gamely rallied forward.

*“\*My Lady, this does appear to be a plan devised by a madman,”* she said, but slowly turned her head in Donald’s direction. *“By a strange set of coincidences, we appear to have one available who is determined to participate in it.\*”*

She glanced down at the plans on the table before looking up at Xue and continuing.

*“\*Lady Xue, the plan is, as you say, a complex and cumbersome undertaking. That said, in keeping with the Elder’s restrictions concerning Class-Four societies, our options are rather limited. We would – all of us – prefer to go in openly, suppress the combatants, and recover the prisoners. Unfortunately that is not within our current operational guidelines.\*”*

Sai looked at Donald, almost *daring* him to say something he thought might help paint this turd a better color, but knew deep down

that he was a politically incorrect moron as evidenced nearly every time he opened his mouth in mixed company ... not that it stopped him *this time*, either.

*"Ahh, Lady Xue... If I may..."* Donald paused and waited until Xue turned to look at him. *"In point of fact, the Earthlings do not publicly know about us. To reveal ourselves at this point in their development would prove disastrous. Out of all the disparate societies on this planet, I chose THIS one – not only because I was born here, but because I thought the political structure was of a suitably byzantine nature that we could easily manipulate them into believing that we simply do not exist."*

He paused for a few moments, but the lack of a reaction prompted him to continue.

*"Now, obviously, we DO have relationships within their political structures, but the conditions are such that if we don't like the way things are done, we can remove certain benefits we provide to their society. Not that we are in CHARGE of their society, just that we're trying to give them the opportunity to GROW as a society ... eventually ... one of these days."*

Xue looked at Sai, then at Laisee, before finally settling on Ling.

*"Ling ... this Healer Cluster... Its function?"*

*"It ... it is an attempt to reintroduce Healers back into Earthling society. Our historical archives told of prior attempts that ended due to natural or political disasters. It is the hope of the staff that a covert introduction of Cletus Healer techniques will eventually influence the public to demand a more stable society from their political leaders. Earthling history suggests it will be a delicate balance to achieve, but the current political and social structure within this particular political system is promising."*

*"But, why here? Why so far away from the CENTER of their society?"*

*"My Lady—"* Ling began, but Donald interrupted her.

*"Xue, I chose this place because of family, Commonwealth, and Crown,"* he said. *"Commonwealth – because Earth is a Protectorate in SERIOUS need of social engineering. Crown – because the Emperor and his family are beholden to the rest of the Commonwealth to try to stabilize the situation on Earth. And family..."*

Donald paused to look around at everyone in the room.

*"I was BORN here, as was my mother. My TRIBE is here – my CLAN, if you will. We have been given permission to attempt the*

## Picking up the Pieces

*reintroduction of Healers at this ONE location on Earth – WITHIN my tribe – just to see if it will work out. If it succeeds, then there is a chance for Earth. Xue... You, of ALL Seniors, know the importance of proper management of testosterone poisoning among those in political power.\*"*

Ling was shocked, while Laisee and Sai – having been exposed to Donald for a *much* longer period of time – were impressed at how he'd said all that with a straight face.

*"\*My Lady, the ONLY reason we're attempting this RIDICULOUSLY insane rescue attempt is that one of my tribe's women is married to one of the prisoners we're going after. The woman asked me, PERSONALLY, to see if I could help. I just thought that ... as long as we're going over there to steal back Fred, why not take everyone else while we're at it?\*"*

He suppressed the urge to shrug, not knowing if Xue would accept it in the spirit intended.

Xue didn't say anything, but slumped back in her seat, tilting her head while pushing through the madman standing in front of her. She sat still for several seconds while probing in and around his glands and parts of his brain while looking for evidence of damage or tampering.

She saw the tiny bits of leftover debris they'd first seen back when he was delivered over Cletus, but the corresponding parts of his brain seemed to be *lacking* something – something *genetic*. Her hand slipped into her robe, her fingers wrapping around the pendant on her necklace, her thoughts running through the pros and cons of letting this fool run loose or putting him down.

Refocusing on his memories, she was surprised to learn he had *offspring* ... residents here on *Earth*. *Newborns!* The thought of babies made her smile. Cletus births were carefully controlled, as were births on *most* of the systems in the Commonwealth. She still couldn't fathom the *tremendous* number of humans living on Earth, especially considering their lack of adequate space and the basics of life – home and hearth, food and time. The Ambassador's wives had been *most* adamant about the insanity of the primitives.

Donald couldn't detect Xue's intrusion and wouldn't really care one way or another. What he *did* care about was finishing this mission before being taken out of play. He glanced at the wall clock, then cleared his throat.

*"\*Lady Xue, the evening progresses, and we plan to leave before light in the morning. Would you care to refresh yourself? Perhaps have something to eat before getting some rest?\*"* he suggested politely.

Xue shook her head at his distraction, then played that last comment back internally before coming to a decision.

*“\*Ladies, I would prepare for an evening of rest. Perhaps a small bit of fruit or a grain product beforehand?\**”

Taking that as their cue, Laisee and Sai stood up and prepared to escort Xue to guest quarters in the Center. Ling said her goodbyes and stayed behind to wait for Aineias, who was looking at Donald in dawning comprehension – having revealed even *more* of himself this evening.

### ***In the Residence***

It was a few minutes shy of nine p.m. when Wilber saw the small group of women heading to the Center and figured the meeting was over. With a shake of his head, he went back to watching his monitor tracking John Smith’s beacons as they continued to approach the cut-off to the Annex...

The phone call he’d received yesterday had warned him a messenger was coming, and the call he’d received from John half an hour ago only confirmed it. From the vantage point of his office window, he could see lights on the Reservation access road that suddenly turned onto the Annex driveway.

Three minutes later, John parked his car in front of the house and trotted up the steps to knock on the door. Wilber heard Mary open it to greet him, then their footsteps as they headed to his office, but he beat them to the door with seconds to spare.

“John. It’s been soooo long and you haven’t changed a *bit!*”

“Hi, Wilber. Got news for you,” he said, then pulled an envelope out of his pocket and handed it to him.

Wilber noticed it was addressed to him and had a stamp on it.

“You know, if you knew you were coming, you could have saved thirty-seven cents,” he muttered, which finally got a chuckle out of John.

“Yes. Well ... best laid plans,” he said, then added, “Gotta use your toilet.” He turned and whipped into the bathroom, where the sound of his voiding was loud and sustained.

Wilber took that time to open and read the missive – hand-written, with cross-outs in places where the writer had misspelled or mistaken a word or number. What *wasn’t* misspelled was the word “yield.”

“Ahh, *fuck*,” he said quietly, just before John walked into the office. Wilber looked up at him with a frown, and John nodded his head in agreement.

“Is Don around? He’s gonna want to know about this.”

## Picking up the Pieces

Wilber let out a sigh and pointed to the door.

Don *wouldn't* want to know about this, but it would be better if he did. They were halfway to the motor pool before he wondered if Aineias had the appropriate tools to deal with this tiny complication.

### ***Motor Pool, Conference Room***

The Ladies had already left, with Ling walking with Aineias while he made the rounds to alert staff that a new departure hour had been set. Donald was rolling up the maps and getting ready to make one more pass through the ship, when Wilber knocked on the door and stood there with John at his side.

"John, I had *nothing* to do with it. It was all *Wilber's* doing," Donald called out from across the table, then smiled at the confusion on both their faces. "Hello, John. Miss us so *soon*? We got still your old *room* ready for you. How long are you staying?"

He finally stopped when his barrage failed to get a rise out of either of them, but it only got worse when they both walked in and closed the door behind them.

"Don ... that courier I mentioned yesterday?" Wilber gestured to John with one hand, while holding up the envelope with the other before sliding it across the table to him.

Donald caught it and opened it to read, before sitting down heavily.

"John... Is this number correct?" he asked numbly, shifting his gaze from the page to John's eyes and seeing the sadness reflected there. John knew *exactly* what number he was referring to.

Wilber pulled out a chair and sat down across from Donald, with John joining him a moment later. They watched as he dropped the paper to the tabletop, then leaned over and rested his elbows next to it; the solid base of the table supporting his arms, which supported the hands holding the fingers that were slowly rubbing his temples

"Any idea of how big ... *physically* big the package is, or how heavy?"

Donald kept his eyes focused on the tabletop while waiting for any suggestions from the two men ... which were not forthcoming. He reached out, grabbed the planning maps, and unrolled the one with the tunnel structure details on it.

Most of the tunnels varied from three to about five feet wide, with several carved out pocket rooms located closer to the Eastern entrance. There was another, *larger* room further inside the mountain, then the long, *long* passage that meandered its way for over fourteen hundred yards to the other side of the ridge. From the scans, it didn't

look nearly as finished or as regular as the eastern area of occupation. It was probably more on the order of a glorified ventilation shaft and bug out route.

“Well, if it’s not *too* heavy they could probably haul it in there by hand. A *cart* would help – if the tunnel was wide enough – but it would also depend on the footing. Lots of dirt would make rolling something heavy a lot more difficult. Loose rock or pebbles would make it even worse.”

Wilber glanced at John, then turned back to Donald.

“Don ... do you have ... ahh, you know, in your *past* life, do you have any experience in ... ahh, making something like that ... defective? *Sabotaging* it so it was worthless, I mean?”

Donald looked up, then sat back with folded arms.

“I have the *means*, but I’d like to leave the mountain in *mostly* one piece.”

At John’s gasp, he waved a hand lazily.

“Hey, a bomb’s a bomb. I’ve got a low-yield device that is *very* clean ... relatively. Put the two together, then get the hell away. It goes off, vaporizes a six-kilometer sphere, and everyone is happy ... except for anyone caught in the gamma burst.”

They both stared at him for a few moments before John cleared his throat a bit.

“Ahh, I might be able to disarm it. If ... if it’s one of the ones that have been disappearing ... upon occasion.”

Donald studied him for a moment, then smirked.

“Well... Aren’t *you* the Renaissance spy. Unfortunately, we’re gonna have a full house coming back as it is...” Donald paused for several seconds, then smiled at him.

“Hey... Would it help your credibility any if you were to recover that device for the Mossad? I mean, ‘Look guys, I used my resources to find out what that asshole Faridun was up to, and arranged to steal this from him. You want it for the collection?’ It’s not like *I* want to lug it around anywhere – unless it was to take it down about a hundred-kilometers and ‘dispose’ of it in a blinding flash.”

John’s mouth dropped open at the mere thought of it before considering the possibilities. Personally, he didn’t think *anyone* should have access to nuclear weapons, and decided against it. At least Donald would make a concerted effort to dispose of it *safely* – *relatively* safely, anyway.



## Picking up the Pieces

"I think I'll pass, Don. There'll always be *somebody* with a nagging suspicion that I'm no longer trustworthy, and that would just gnaw at me until I lost my mind over it. Besides, I'm probably getting too *old* to play these games anymore. Hell, I couldn't even take *you* down."

Donald and Wilber stared at him for about three seconds before letting the tension bubble away in a burst of sudden laughter. John joined them moments later when he finally let go of the worry he'd been holding ever since his *own* Israeli contact had violated protocols to give him a heads up about it...

Three days of gut-wrenching stress had been followed by an anonymous phone call from an "undisclosed" source somewhere within the bowels of the American security establishment. That individual had finally connected the dots and found a way to ask for help in dealing with a problem affecting world security in such a wide scope that he didn't trust his *own* government to deal with it and risk starting World War III in the process.

The result was a request being sent through a roundabout way to John's NSA contact that ended up with him being sent to deliver a message to a recent acquaintance that "trusted" him. Wilber had received a message from *his* contact that a courier was on the way for a private meeting ... and here he was.

Too bad the message *sucked*...

As things calmed down, John found Donald staring at him and slowly nodding his head, not quite hearing the gears grinding in there, but thought it might have something to do with him. He became *sure* of it when Donald reached out and started unrolling maps and diagrams across the table.

### *In the Center*

"\*Déjà, your babies are beautiful,\*" Xue assured her, while leaving out the skepticism she felt about little Ronnie. She couldn't help it. He looked *way* too much like his father ... and his *grandfather*.

It was probably the frown...

Sai and Laisee had brought her to the dining room, while one of her guardsmen went with one of the garrison's guardsmen to locate where his Lady would be staying temporarily. After a very light snack, Laisee had escorted Xue to visit with Déjà and Maya so she could see the babies. It had turned out quite well all around, with both Faith and little Ronnie snoozing contentedly after having just been topped off.

As they exchanged pleasantries, Maya had set up her pump and began emptying herself into a transparent container for the men to take along with them for the mission...

*"Maya, you won't run out of milk for the babies?"* Xue asked, after seeing how quickly the liter-sized bottle was filling with her fresh milk.

*"My Lady, I am preparing my milk for the mission. Many of the prisoners are in poor health, and this will help them during their recovery. Too, our Donald has said the transit through the mountain will be very difficult and cause much upset to the crew."*

Xue watched Maya turn off the pump when the bottle reached over three-quarters full. It didn't seem nearly enough for the number of people they were intent on recovering.

*"You will pump again later in the morning?"* she asked, but Laisee filled in the details.

*"We will ALL pump this evening, my Lady. There is Maya, me, Sai, Shu, Ling, Mary ... and Kayla may provide some if she returns from work at a reasonable time. She does not even need to be awake for that, as Mary can pump for her while she sleeps. We will add what we can before they leave in the morning."*

*"We anticipate providing six ... perhaps as many as seven liters before they leave, my Lady,"* Maya added.

Xue nodded her head, silently estimating the number of Healers available to provide such a bounty. She knew of Maya and Sai, certainly, and Laisee had been a surprise.

Ling was a given, being the Senior of the Healer Cluster. She did not know of either Mary or Kayla.

*"The ones called Mary and Kayla ... what Clan are they from?"* she asked, and saw the smiles flash on Maya and Laisee's faces.

*"They are Earthlings, my Lady,"* Laisee explained. *"But their milk has enhanced properties. It is similar to our own because of a special gift from Lord Caldar. You recall the Farman Cluster?"* Xue made the connection immediately.

*"Oh, yes. All of Lord Caldar's new Healers,"* she murmured. *"And I understand he even created a Healer out of a ... a Drecks girl."*

*"Lady Dorcas, my Lady,"* Laisee said. *"She is the mother of my daughter's traveling companion, Mistress Rose."*

Xue sat back and smiled before closing her eyes for several moments, then opening them and looking at Laisee.

"My English appears to be functional, which will be helpful, as Donald has selected *another* crewman to join us," she said, followed by another long blink. "And he's adjusted the seating arrangements to accommodate him. The second gentleman also speaks English, as

## Picking up the Pieces

does the interpreter who has volunteered to assist during the mission. It should prove very interesting during the transit.”

Xue stood up and stretched before leaning down to look at Faith and little Ronnie one more time. Then she shared a kiss with Déjà before turning to kiss Maya.

“My Ladies, please take care of these new citizens and try to get some sleep,” she said quietly, then turned to Laisee. “Lady Caldarous, I would meet with the interpreter for a few minutes so that I might become familiar with the language of the natives we will be recovering.”

They said their goodbyes before stepping out the door and walking down the hallway to where Laisee stopped. They stood there while Laisee probed gently, before knocking quietly at Asad and Nurani’s door.

### *In Laisee’s Suite*

“Last chance, girls,” Sai said, while shutting down the pump and breaking down the hoses.

“We’re good, Grandmother,” Jaiying told her. “Save it for the prisoners. They won’t need much if you reach inside them and distribute it a little more efficiently.”

“Some ambrosia might be helpful, Grandmother,” Rose added. “Do the same thing Jaiying did to Mama Laisee, and it should help relieve any stress and pain after their recovery.”

Sai smiled at them, then focused on her task, only saying, “I suppose it would help them sleep off the transit,” and getting giggles from both of them in return.

Both girls got up and helped clean the pump and hoses so it would be ready for Laisee when she returned to quarters in a little while.

### *Reflections on a Limited Future*

Donald had returned to the Center with John after giving him an overview of the mission parameters.

John had continued down the hallway to the same room he’d had before, while Donald stopped at his own door before giving quiet greetings to Déjà’s and Maya’s guardsmen.

It was a little after ten p.m. when he slipped in quietly and was immediately drawn towards the bed by his partners – not even given a chance to view his children asleep in their crib. He was able to hold them off long enough to visit the toilet and clean himself before they latched on to him and demanded servicing of their needs.

As he'd been all for it, it hadn't been that much of a struggle, and they'd apparently been at it for a while, themselves, as the condition of the bed and their bodies would seem to attest. After a relatively short amount of time, they'd finally relented and granted him his relief, knowing he would be getting up again in six hours or less.

Only an hour afterwards, Donald lay staring at the ceiling – having come to the conclusion that he'd *finally* gotten everything he'd wanted out of life.

Maya was by his side once again and had become his bond-mate, along with Déjà, who currently occupied the space on the far side of Maya. In a fit of subconscious wish fulfillment, he'd somehow arranged for Déjà to bear the children she'd longed for after so many decades of hidden desire.

His brother's government had managed to pull off *two* remarkable feats in the span of one chaotic year – peace with the Drecks, and peace with an entirely *new* species below them both.

It would appear that the Demon of the Commonwealth was no longer needed, and the *true* leaders of the Commonwealth had sent someone to insure that the Demon who'd died, *remained* dead.

Sobeit ... but he had responsibilities to contend with first.

There were prisoners to recover from an unfriendly environment.

There was the possibility of interrupting the flow of drugs ... for a *short* while, at least.

And then there was that *new* problem he'd try to resolve once they arrived at the target area. Perhaps it would show up with *further* scans on their approach? Perhaps he or Sai could pick it out from their *previous* recordings along the way? Or perhaps even *earlier*?

He glanced at the clock and saw it was only a little after eleven p.m.

With a quiet sigh, he slipped out of bed and padded into the bathroom to pee, wash, and brush his teeth. Coming out, he stepped over and kissed his son and daughter goodbye before picking up his clothes and slipping them on. He considered kissing his girls goodbye, but the risk of them waking up and arguing with him was not appealing. Besides, from the lactation pump already set up on the small table, it looked like Maya would be up in another five hours to pump another liter of milk to take with them.

He carried his shoes outside the door and put them on in the hallway, trying not to fall over and look like the fool he was in front of the guardsmen before making a pass through the pantry and picking up a bag of fruit and some juice boxes. With a last look around, he

## Picking up the Pieces

walked out, leaving the Center and making his way back to the motor pool.

He had some scans to read. Maybe he'd get lucky, maybe not. But he *knew* – with the experience of *decades* behind him – that the *best-laid* plans were only good until you set *foot* on the field of battle.

After that, it was a matter of planning, training, but sometimes just plain *luck*.

### *Saturday, October 1, 5 A.M. (MST), The Motor Pool*

Staff had already started arriving before five a.m., and crew started trickling in right at the top of the hour. Several non-crew had joined them to share their goodbyes and good fortune for a successful mission. Vibianus had walked in, along with his partner, Aelius, who was trailed by his bond-mate Drusilla; the impression being that she was along to make sure Aelius didn't do something *incredibly* stupid – like joining the party.

Aineias and Ling were there, and Ling had presented Donald with a contribution of Healer's milk in a vacuum flask that he'd taken into the ship and set into the refrigerator. Sai, Asad, and Xue came in together, followed by their guardsmen carrying more containers of Healer's milk. When Wilber and John arrived, Asad looked at Xue nervously, but she nodded at him. Then she stepped over to intercept John. She directed him to speak with Asad, and after pointing him in the right direction, the men joined in for a quiet conversation together.

Donald caught that activity, but was drawn by the sight of Maya arriving with two vacuum flasks of Healer's milk. He drew her into the ship with him and stored the milk in the small refrigerator before giving her a *proper* kiss goodbye, then escorting her back out.

Once standing on the motor pool floor again, he noticed Asad and John shaking hands, apparently having come to some sort of working arrangement. He certainly hoped so, since they were gonna be cooped up together for the better part of a day. Dismissing the issue for the moment, he saw where Aineias had started gathering the crew into a line, so he joined them in formation. Once people started noticing, the motor pool crowd began to quiet down, and when things seemed to have settled, Aineias raised his arms and signaled for silence.

"Gentlemen ... you have served the Commonwealth with honor, and I thank you for your service. In a moment, I will turn you over to Lady Sai Tal and Lord Donald Cato for the duration of your mission," he announced loudly, before stepping in closer to speak quietly to the immediate crewmembers.

"Good fortune on your journey – *all of you*. Gentlemen, your legacies please."

As he walked down the line, each man handed him a data tab containing his last instructions: information about family, finances, and perhaps a final message to their loved ones.

Aineias was surprised when Donald reached out and handed him one of his own, but didn't comment on it.

Once Aineias was done, Donald gathered the crew and brought them over to the tank for a quick update. He had John, Asad, and Xue standing beside him and Sai.

Donald addressed them quietly and quickly.

They had a schedule to keep.

"Gentlemen, we have been fortunate to gain the services of Asad, an interpreter for the language of the local people we'll be picking up. He will remain aboard the ship at all times," he said, then saw that Asad had raised his hand to make sure they recognized him.

"We have received *new* intelligence that the enemy has obtained a *hot* toy of some sort. It is of Earth manufacture, and we don't know the physical size of it, or the exact yield. We're estimating somewhere in the range of ten to fifteen kilotons."

While that sank in, he stepped over to John and laid a hand on his shoulder.

"Agent John Smith, having been revealed to be an agent of a friendly nation, has volunteered to lend his expertise in attempting to disable this device should we actually manage to locate it. I reviewed the survey scans last night, but found no evidence of radiation sources in the target area. It may be that it is not yet in place. It may also be that the shielding is enough to keep us from finding it unless we're right next to it."

He moved back to Xue and stood beside her next.

"Lastly, we have gained the services of Senior Xue, who has volunteered to come along and assist us as she can. Her Healer skills meet or exceed those of Senior Sai or Senior Ling, and she is to be treated as *essential* to our survival."

He looked around and found blind acceptance in everyone's eyes.

"Number One, please board the crew. Note that Senior Xue will share the seat immediately behind the navigator's station with Asad and John." He turned to look at Asad and John. "It should be a *cozy* trip."

He gave it a three-count before gesturing to the airlock with one hand to kick it into gear.

### *A Dark Launch*

At precisely six a.m., the *Kraken's Child* raised landing struts and drifted up and out of the motor pool. Sai paused while Donald ran another set of traffic scans before letting her know it was clear to launch. With shields up and tight, and cloaking enabled, Sai took them to their transit altitude and began a two-hour trek around the world to reach Afghanistan by the seven-thirty p.m. Afghanistan local time when it would be dark enough to drop with little chance of observation. As before, they made every effort to avoid accidental ground observation of their passage, and having planned the trip *properly* this time, they would launch and land in darkness, then launch and land in darkness on the *return* trip.

With Sai at the controls, Donald took the opportunity to bring Asad and John back by the suit storage area and got them fitted for a ships suit. Ideally, they would only require it to avoid the smell of odorant and propane, but it also made an excellent life preserver when needed. Once becoming comfortable with that, Donald took them back to the bunkroom and had One join them. Vibianus wasn't really needed, but he had to feel comfortable with John and Asad in a working relationship, and this was the quickest way to gain it.

Once there, Donald folded the small desktop down and laid out the plans for the mission – refreshing it for John, and bringing Asad into the mix.

As he stood there and listened, Asad already knew he wouldn't be involved all that much. His job was to stay aboard and deal with the language barrier between the prisoners and the Americans. While he was listening to Donald's briefing, the calm that had washed over him after he'd sat down next to Xue suddenly vanished. What had suddenly come to mind was the comment Vibianus had made to him when he'd remarked that, "I did not know the Americans had ships such as this."

Vibianus, sitting across the aisle from him at the time, had calmly said, "We're not Americans."

Asad looked up at the men, then slowly started backing towards the door, only to be met with a soft resistance.

"<Asad, these are not Americans. I am not American. John is Israeli. Remember that you are among friends here, Asad,>" Xue said quietly, then laid a soft hand on his shoulder before flooding it with calmness. "<Can you please do that for me?>"

He glanced at the hand on his shoulder and noticed the slight glow of it in the indirect lighting of the room. For some reason, it didn't seem to bother him. Then he gasped, not realizing he'd been holding his breath. He took a few shallow breaths and focused on his

relaxation until he was ready to pay attention once again. Once the meeting was over, Xue spoke to him again before he went forward to sit down. Then she turned to speak with Donald.

*“Donald, Asad was not aware of his situation during this mission.”*

He turned and looked down at her quizzically.

*“He’s the interpreter. He talks to THEM, they talk to HIM. It’s that whole communication thing,”* he said lightly.

*“Donald! He did not know what he was getting INTO on this mission! He is unaware of what we ARE!”*

He stepped back from her and caught himself at the edge of the bunks while thinking through his options. He had a decision to make – play honest or play stupid – then remembered how poorly it’d gone the *last* time he played stupid with someone with power over him.

The sigh he released was heartfelt, but he’d already accepted his fate before they’d even left the surface.

He stepped over and checked the doorway before sliding it closed and giving them some privacy. Even so, he switched to Cletus on the off chance that no one but him and the two Seniors could speak it.

*“My Lady Xue, Asad would not have found himself in this position if he hadn’t felt a great need to contribute to the welfare of the prisoners. It is unfortunate his desire to come with us wasn’t tempered by knowledge that has been denied to him. Our normal course of action would be to judge a person’s likelihood of revealing our existence, and then obtain their acceptance of certain conditions by way of a signed document allowing us to take certain drastic measures to insure our secrets are kept.”*

She stared at him, but her eyes opened wider as she thought of what those measures might entail.

*“My Lady! We would do no harm, I assure you! The document – it is called a Non-Disclosure Agreement – is a legal instrument of law that binds their silence for the length of their existence. If they attempt to break that silence, then the agreed upon resolution is relocation to a place of Lady Lili’s choosing. It usually involves relocation to some place where they can become more directly useful to the Commonwealth.”*

He left out the post-hypnotic muting of vocal cords, paralyzed hand-writing or typing, and the ever-popular projectile *vomiting* – but they liked to save those options for someone who might have an *accidental* relapse.

*“And what of Asad?”*



## Picking up the Pieces

He endured her gaze for a few moments, then looked away ... almost regretting his decision to remain truthful.

*“My Lady, it may be kindest ... in some circumstances ... to adjust the ... ahh, the memories ... of certain events... If only to preserve our anonymity and their own piece of mind, my Lady.\*”*

He gave it a few seconds to sink in, then spared a glance to see how she was taking it, but the grim smile on her face wasn't that hopeful. She turned towards the wall and pulled down one of the two in-wall seats before sitting down, so he decided to accept her non-invitation and remained standing.

After about a minute, she let out a sigh of her own, and spoke to him – in *English* this time.

“You know, Ai had many *problems* with the Demon,” she muttered mirthlessly. “He would constantly *push* the limits – sometimes right to the very *edge* of the sword in order to accomplish his tasks. *Over and over*. Sometimes, he would stop and *ask*. Sometimes, he would just *do it*, and get the *job* done – *whatever* might be returned upon his head.”

She reached out and pulled the papers and maps towards her, then flipped through them before stopping at the detailed tunnel layouts.

“Donald, if the Demon were still alive, how do you think *he* would conduct this mission?” She'd kept her attention on the map when she asked, but slowly pivoted her head upwards in his direction.

He reached up a hand and rubbed the side of his nose before stepping around the table and pulling down the other seat, suddenly stopping until she motioned for him to sit. Once settled, he told her *exactly* how the Demon would proceed.

### ***7 A.M. (MST), the Center***

Nurani woke up facing the wall. She hadn't moved all night, leaving Asad to sleep on the other side of the bed by *himself* for a change. In the middle of the night, she'd even cast off his advances to snuggle with her, and was *still* angry with him this morning...

Last night, the young mother, Lady Laisee, had come and brought with her a new visitor.

The newcomer was older than the girl, and seemed much more reserved. Her name was Xue. Just Xue.

Asad had invited them both in, then made apologies for not having refreshments for them, but Laisee had waved it off as unimportant. She'd said the reason for their visit was to learn if Asad was still determined to go along as interpreter for the mission. She had asked this last in Pashto ... probably out of courtesy to her.

As might be expected, she had reacted by gasping, then grabbing Asad by the arm, tightening her grip until her knuckles turned white.

The woman, Xue, had reached out and rested a hand on her arm, and she'd felt a fuzzy feeling flowing up from it. She'd pulled away and folded her arms across her breasts, but the woman had merely smiled at her and said, "<Do not be afraid.>"

Both of them stared at her in surprise. Then Laisee had begun asking simple questions about the village in Pashto and listening intently to their answers. She kept doing so until they both realized they'd gone through this with her once before, when she was first learning to *speak* Pashto.

They'd become reluctant to continue, but Laisee seemed earnest in her efforts. That lasted until Xue had reached out a raised hand – only to ask, in Pashto, the *proper* pronunciation of a word.

Asad had said one thing, and she had said another, then given him a look of frustration. Laisee said something to the older woman, who had nodded agreeably, then begun speaking only to her, and very slowly. The questions eventually became more detailed, and Xue's repetition of the Pashai dialect became perfect – more so than Asad's, who was an outsider himself.

In the course of half an hour, Laisee and Xue had thanked them for their friendliness, and Xue reminded Asad he should be ready to leave very early in the morning.

Once the two women had left, she and Asad had begun the worst argument of their young relationship that had ended with them sleeping on opposite sides of the bed...

Nurani blinked at the wall. It seemed like she'd hardly slept at all, but she must have, because the translucent skylight over the center of the room was starting to glow with faint traces of dawn. Last night had been *bad* between them. She knew it, and he *must* know it, but it didn't have to be that way between them.

In fact, he did not have to *go* any longer. The woman, Xue, spoke the valley dialect almost *perfectly*, and they did not need Asad's assistance at *all*. The thought brightened her face, and she sat up to turn around to tell him so, but he wasn't in bed. She called out for him, then got up and rushed to the bathroom, but he wasn't in there, either. She looked at the clock, then remembered what Xue had said.

"<Early in the morning. Before daylight.>"

She made a move to the door, but stopped, already knowing it was too late. She sat down and leaned her elbows onto the table, using it as a crutch to hold up her arms so she could cradle her chin in her

## Picking up the Pieces

hands. She could have gone along to help her village friends, but instead was more concerned with staying *safe* – for both them *and* their unborn child.

Asad was already gone, and the *last* thing he would remember of her was the terrible argument they'd had on the eve of his departure. She slowly slid her face towards the table and cupped her hands over her eyes. It wasn't much longer before tears started slipping through the gaps between her fingers to fall upon the table itself.

### ***19:30 (AFT), At the Bottom of the Kāsah-ye Band Naghalū***

Xue had spent the last hour holding Asad's hand and quietly talking with him in Pashto, along with occasionally flowing some calming energy into him. She'd earlier considered simply dealing with him in *traditional* Healer fashion – taking him into the bunkroom and *draining* him of all concerns for a while – but had given up that idea after listening to the supposed “secrets” he'd shared with her.

On the whole, that simple conversation convinced her that Earth was an entirely *too* complex a problem to be handled so lightly. It would need decades – most likely *centuries* – to grow into a society stable enough to formally join the Commonwealth. After having listened to Donald earlier, she wondered if they were even worth keeping as a *Protectorate*.

She *still* could not imagine the elaborate level of subterfuge he was willing to put up with just to maintain the fiction of a *natural* causation for the loss of the prisoners.

Xue looked at the seatback monitor in front of her and watched the mission timer roll over again. Three hours ago, they were on the ground in Arizona, and now they were sitting at the bottom of some water-filled reservoir halfway around the planet. Donald was busy in front of her, while Sai was checking over her console.

It was almost time...

~~~

Sai sat back and relaxed. The ordeal of transiting around the planet had been accomplished, and it would appear that no one was the wiser. At least, Donald hadn't heard any communications chatter indicating such. Ground observers might have noticed them, but it was very unlikely. Even when centered over the reservoir, she'd dropped them nose down and penetrated the surface with hardly a ripple thanks to years of experience Donald had called upon when configuring the shields for the drop.

After programming in the next portion of their track, Donald stood up and stretched, then turned to face the cabin.

“My Ladies... Gentlemen... One will be passing out ear plugs for your use during this next portion of our journey,” he called out from the navigator’s position. “It shouldn’t be all that bouncy, but the *noise* might be a distraction. We’ll take random breaks during the transit to pause, verify our location, and check the makeup of the strata. Once in a while, we’ll also reach out and grab a portion of land around us to give it a good *shaking*.”

He paused and saw how pale Asad appeared to be, before switching to Standard.

*“For those who develop a level of discomfort, we carry Healer’s milk in the refrigerator. During the breaks ... if you have a need, please limit yourselves to a single measure each, as we anticipate a need among the prisoners we are recovering.”*

He looked down at where Xue was holding Asad’s hand, and caught her eyes before switching to Cletus for a private conversation.

*“Your companion has a sociological aversion to Healer’s milk. We carry ambrosia for situations of extreme duress. You are aware of ways to manipulate ambrosia for beneficial purposes?”* he asked her, and saw her eyes light up in surprising delight.

*“Even more efficient and economical than Healer’s milk, if not as beneficial. Yes, I can use it to calm, to relieve pain, or to help someone fall sleep. A peaceful sleep during the return would be beneficial to most.”*

*“Just so,”* he agreed, then looked up to see One standing there and holding out a pair of ear plugs, so he gestured to him to give the spiel.

“Ear plugs,” One said, then held his own pair up in the air. “Roll one of them between your thumb and fingers until it is very narrow. Then feed it into your ear canal until it is in as far as it will fit. Hold your finger over it until it expands in place. Once it is fitted well, you should hear only muted sounds.” Having said this, he demonstrated it by fitting one into his ear.

It was silly, really, but mostly for the benefit of Xue and Asad. The rest of them were already familiar with similar methods, and the covert combat armor they would later wear was fitted with noise-canceling ear buds that doubled as communication links.

While One was passing them out, Donald continued.

“This next transit will take between seven and eight *hours*. You all have monitors in front of you, and you all have guest access to the entertainment selections available. There are textual documents that might be of interest, and there are visual programs that might *also* be

## Picking up the Pieces

of interest. How *well* they present themselves might be affected by the method of our transit.”

He looked around and saw a lot of nodding heads.

“Myself ... I would rather sleep, but I’m stuck driving for this leg of our journey. We’ll start in about ten minutes. Please take your relief break now before we start. I don’t know how safe it will be to move around during the transit. Personally, I wouldn’t risk it, but if an issue comes up, hit the alert button on the monitor in front of you.”

With that, he walked back and headed to the refrigerator to grab one of his juice boxes, but saw that someone had taken most of them out to fit in the rest of the Healer’s milk. He poked around in the cabinets until locating them – piled like packing peanuts in and around the half-dozen bottles of ambrosia he’d brought along. Erring on the side of caution, he went to the suit locker, pulled out one of the Drecks-sized ships suits, then stuffed it into the cabinet with the ambrosia. No sense taking chances.

Sai stepped over during the fitting and looked down.

“Think you packed enough?”

“Ha! Hey, can you do that thing with ambrosia? You know, like what Jaiying did?” he asked, then watched as she glanced forward towards the other Senior.

“Xue’s already onboard with it,” he added quietly, and she turned and nodded with a smirk.

“Good!” He got out of his squat and popped the juice straw into his box before trying to drain it all in one go.

### **8 A.M. (MST), *The Annex, In the Residence***

Wilber had been up for the last three hours, the last of them spent with Dwayne by his side. For some reason, this felt a lot different from when Ronnie used to go sneaking around the Hegemony in search of places to make mischief. He checked the time-difference spreadsheet he’d printed out and noted Don should be about ready to start tunneling through the mountain in the next few minutes.

That was if they’d made it safely to the Kāsah-ye Band Naghalū reservoir, and if they could safely tunnel from there without actually *draining* the reservoir by accident, or knocking out the dam in the process. He was certain Don had already planned for that eventuality, but it remained a concern.

In the meantime, Dwayne was currently logged on to the internet and monitoring for earthquake activity in the target region. They didn’t know what to expect, but the local test trip they’d made had created

spurious reports in the news of a “strange earthquake swarm” affecting the area Don and Sai had played in. Dwayne gave out a disgusted snort and leaned back from the monitor.

“Okay, *NOW* I see why I didn’t understand your time spreadsheet,” he muttered in frustration. “The Afghans have their *own* time zone that runs half an hour *later* than their neighbors. Even *Pakistan* – which rolls under them towards the far *Western* side of their border.”

Wilber turned and smiled in his direction, adding his own sarcastic grin at the geological conundrum of a butchered time zone.

### ***At the Center***

Laisee and the girls were approaching Nurani’s door when Rose suddenly stopped – causing their guards to shift sideways so as not to walk into them.

“She is *really* upset, Mama Laisee. They had a fight last night, and he was already gone when she got up this morning.”

Laisee patted her shoulder while wondering if Rose would eventually stop worrying about others, but then considered she was *already* a Healer and couldn’t *help* but worry about others.

“Then perhaps we’d better go take care of her while Asad is away, shall we?” she suggested, and Rose smiled up at her and started for the door.

Jaiying looked up at her mother and rolled her eyes, but gamely plodded along to see how this emotional roller coaster could best be tamed. Then she started thinking about roller coasters in general, and wondered where the *nearest* one might be located.

### ***22:30 (AFT), Making Progress***

Starting out had seemed smooth, as the limestone had easily given way. Then he’d stopped about a thousand meters in and scanned their back track, only to discover water was following them. That had caused him to dive down another thousand meters, then “burp” the shield out to about a quarter of it – collapsing the route behind them with solid ... *mostly* solid rock. Then he’d continued for another thousand meters and stopped again – scanning for evidence of a water trail behind them and finding nothing past the giant plug he’d left behind. Just for fun, he’d reached out in a thousand-meter sphere and vibrated the ship for thirty seconds in a randomly sequenced pattern of half-foot fluctuations. Then he let it taper off before continuing on track – having created their first artificial earthquake. After that, they made pretty good progress...

~~~

## Picking up the Pieces

They'd been at it for almost three hours now, and even with the few random breaks they'd taken, seemed to be keeping to schedule. The sandstone had run out early and he'd had to adjust the shield settings for harder material. That was the cause for their first stop after nearly half an hour of progress. They'd taken two more short breaks over the next hour after they'd changed directions slightly to avoid tunneling along a known fault line, even though it was still located several kilometers below them.

Donald had developed a deft touch with the shield parameters over the last hour. It didn't do anything about the noise, but reduced the amount of jarring within the cabin. He'd found that the tightened inner shield worked just fine at keeping rocks from grinding against the hull but it still transmitted the constant rumble of crushed rock through the rigidity of the shield and into the generation apparatus supporting it. He'd had a moment of clarity after the second hour and pushed the shield out a little further, then softened it just a *tiny* bit – allowing it to act like a shock absorber. It just wasn't a very *good* shock absorber.

The *secondary* shield being projected from the rear array seemed adequate to the task of scooping out the surrounding rock and channeling it against the inner shield where it was crushed before being ejected as compact gravel in rippling bursts of shield fluctuation. The really *clever* part was Donnel Ardan's programmed variable transience settings that let the rock leak through at the rear without building itself into a gigantic rock-based turd that fused itself around the ship between the two shields.

Donald *knew* it could be done. He just didn't know how to program it *himself*.

### *11 A.M. (MST), The Annex*

With Laisee and Ling following close behind them, Nurani was being led by Jaiying and Rose after they'd left the Center and wandered around towards the rear of it. It was there where they entered the rock garden and slate pathways of the grade-level garrison housing area.

There wasn't really that much to see, other than adobe hovels in various stages of disrepair, and an isolated trellised patio with a pair of swing gliders. They were augmented by a stack of plastic resin patio chairs and a round plastic resin table that was close by.

The girls eagerly drew their guest along and had her sit in one of the gliders with them. Ling and Laisee took the one opposite them and sat down to enjoy the relative shade under the patio trellis, while their two guardsmen stood off to either side, insuring they would not be disturbed...

Laisee and the girls had rescued Nurani from a morning of despondency, and dragged her somber countenance to the pantry so she could find something to eat. She'd passed on cereal once Jaiying announced they were all out of fresh milk, so she'd settled for the novelty of bananas and berries. That didn't cheer her up very much, but at least she'd gotten some fuel into her body to feed the baby growing within.

During the meal, Laisee tried to cheer her with assurances that Donald was very good about bringing his men back from missions *much* more dangerous than this very simple one. Then she'd explained that Asad would remain safe within the ship, while Donald and his crew brought back the prisoners for him to deal with. She'd reminded her again that Asad would help relieve their fears among the strangers simply because he would be able to speak to them easily...

Now that they were out in the open, Nurani seemed able to relax on the glider, sitting with both of the girls next to her and holding her hands. It was rather peaceful sitting outside in the late morning, while the dry breezes of early autumn drifted around them. Even the presence of the two huge men lent an impression of security to the patio.

Jaiying had been looking at her mother's eyes and saw how they'd frozen for a split second. Then she glanced up at Nurani before looking back at her mother and tilting her head towards the adult sitting next to her. Laisee considered her options, then glanced at Ling and got a silent concession from her. Not that it would have mattered either way. She *was* the Emperor's daughter.

"<Nurani, they are about half-way to their destination,>" Laisee said quietly. "<They should be in place in another three hours.>"

She waited for some sort of reaction from her – other than the sudden burst of anxiety Nurani began radiating – then frowned thinly before getting up and walking over to join her.

Without a word, both Jaiying and Rose left the glider to join Ling, while Laisee sat down and took one of Nurani's hands in hers.

"<Do not worry, Nurani. Asad does what he feels he must do to help protect the women of your valley. You will be here to help him when he arrives home with them.>"

Laisee wasn't prepared for the sudden burst of anger pushing out of her, and grasped her hand tighter and flooded her with more calming energy in hopes of alleviating her fury. Somewhere along the way, Nurani began to hyperventilate, and Laisee reached around her shoulders to pull her in closer, taking hold of her arm with her free hand and pushing a somewhat less urgent calming flow into her to



## Picking up the Pieces

help restore her balance. Once she got to a stable level again, Laisee tapered off and started poking around to find out what had triggered it, before finally sharing it with Ling.

*“\*She cannot go home. They would kill her and Asad, and all the others\*”*

*“\*You can speak with her. I cannot. You have already offered them safety here. If the Elder permits, extend it to the rest of her Clan, and she might be comforted.\*”* Ling suggested helpfully.

Laisee gave it only a moment’s thought before making up her mind. If it didn’t work out *here*, then there were *plenty* of safe havens within the Commonwealth that would enjoy an influx from a novel gene pool.

*“<Nurani, we spoke of this before. You and Asad are welcome here for as long as you need, or as long as you want. Our resources will be extended to those of your valley who cannot return to their families or villages for whatever reason is behind it. They may remain safe here until a suitable location for them is found.>”*

Nurani looked at her hopefully, but her eyes turned hollow, and she turned away while mumbling something that sounded like obscure mythological nonsense to Laisee.

*“<Nurani ... why would a merciful God speak only to men and allow them to punish women for a man’s sins?>”* she asked her gently. *“<What kind of God deserves your prayers if his word only comes down from MEN – who then steal you away from your families and mistreat you for their OWN base pleasures?>”*

*“<B-Blaspheme,>”* the woman uttered painfully, even though the reasoning behind Laisee’s words had struck a hidden cord within her.

*“<Nurani ... the Gods on this world are MANY ... yet they ALL tell a different story. Who is to say WHICH story is correct? Who is to say WHICH God tells the truth ... and which is a LIAR? Or more correctly ... who among the MEN may we believe to tell us the TRUTH? We are the LIFE-GIVERS, Nurani! We are not the makers of WAR!>”*

She’d strongly pressed that last and gotten the feeling Nurani was becoming a bit more malleable from her efforts.

Laisee sent a silent call to Ling, who called Aelius over and requested an item from him that she brought it over and handed to Laisee. Once seeing what it was, Nurani immediately pulled away and folded her hands under her arms.

Laisee looked at the folded knife in her hand.

She knew what she had to do, and didn’t like it. The fact that Ronnie had done it numerous times over the years notwithstanding.

It was simply the easiest and quickest way to prove a point. She certainly hoped it was *sharp* enough.

*"<Nurani ... this is a tool created by men,>"* she said, then unfolded the blade and laid it across her palm. *"<It is a useful tool – but it can also KILL when used foolishly by men.>"*

Laisee took a breath before lightly slicing across her thumb palm for a little over an inch, letting the wound bleed freely while she handed the knife back to Ling. She reached out with her undamaged hand and slowly drew one of Nurani's hands towards the wound, finally dipping her fingers into the blood before letting it go. The blood continued to dribble across her palm and drip onto the patio.

*"<This is the legacy of MAN. It is left up to WOMAN to deal with the aftermath.>"*

She held out her damaged hand, cut side up, then brought over her other hand and held it near, but not blocking the view of the wound.

*"<The women of MY village decide what WE will believe ... and WE believe men need to be CONTROLLED so they do not become INSANE with power. WE choose to believe what we KNOW ... and we know that MEN cannot do THIS!>"*

Laisee began a Healing flow that caused her hand to glow and begin to seal the wound. She did it slowly and carefully, fully aware that Nurani needed to see it in detail, and with the conviction that it was truly taking place right in front of her.

While she was working, she extended into Nurani, then finally took hold of her hand again; directing one of her fingers along the ridge of new scar tissue, sliding it up and down the wound until it evened out and sealed over flush with the rest of her skin. Instead of recovering all the available blood, she let it remain as a reminder of what had just happened, including the smear on Nurani's index finger.

When she was done, she sat back and relaxed ... leaving her hand out and letting Nurani process it all while monitoring her emotional stability. She was gratified the girl wasn't wiggling out, and instead was actually becoming somewhat thoughtful about the whole situation. After several more minutes, Nurani looked at her, then over to the men. She looked at a smiling Ling, who then turned and handed the knife back to Aelius.

Then she caught the cheerful waves from Jaiying and Rose, before she turned back to Laisee with a question on her lips.

*"<W-Who... Who ARE you people?>"*

Laisee smiled for a moment, then settled back to *tell* her.

***Sunday, October 2, 01:30 (AFT), In the Target Area***

Donald paused a little over a kilometer south of the tunnel and stopped cycling the outer shield with *everyone* enjoying the ensuing silence when the constant rumbling finally subsided. He asked Sai and Xue to reach out to the locals and see if they'd noticed any ground movements, or heard any special noises, before firing up the scanner to get more exact data on their current position.

He pulled up the current digital maps on the left front display and watched as a more detailed counter part was being created on the right front display that would take a little while longer. Since that was the case, he leaned back, took a breath, and nodded his head.

"Okay, folks! This would be a good time to take a break and cycle through the toilets," Donald called out as he twisted around in the pilot's seat. "Lightly on the Healer's milk, please. We'll have passengers in a few more hours who'll likely need it more than anyone else. If you're hungry, the emergency sustenance system is functional, and last night I programmed it to emulate *hamburger* meat. Estimated next ship's movement in thirty minutes."

Donald locked in their current position, then checked the shield settings before standing up and stretching.

Seven hours through the mountain had taken a toll on *everyone*, and there was a line for the front toilet and another one leading to the rear compartment. He looked down at Asad – trapped on the wall side of Xue – and smiled. The young man had gone back during one of the breaks and grabbed a pillow from one of the bunks so he could lean away from Xue instead of dozing on her shoulder as he'd done earlier.

At the moment, he seemed a bit antsy because Xue had her eyes closed and it looked like he needed to pee.

Donald waved him up, and he cautiously stood and worked his way around her. John was already standing so it was easier to maneuver in the second row seat.

It hadn't really been all that terrible, even considering the three of them were sharing two seats among them; the only thing allowing it being the fact that Asad and Xue were both relatively slender individuals, while John didn't come anywhere *close* to the size and bulk of even the smallest guardsman aboard.

When Asad reached the aisle, Donald set his hand on his shoulder and glanced around to see where John was – and saw that he wasn't.

"Asad ... you and John ... are you guys all right now?"

"All right? Oh ... Yes. I ask John ... if I do not come back, I ask John to ... Nurani will need help, yes?"

This confused Donald. Asad seemed able to converse well enough with Laisee and other people, but became flustered when he spoke with him. No matter.

“You are staying in the ship, Asad, and then we’re taking you and the prisoners back to the Annex where we can take care of you until you’re on your feet again,” he said, but saw the confusion in his face as he worked out that last idiom. “You are part of my team, Asad. I will rely on you and Xue to help the prisoners. Xue, because she can speak Pashto. You, because you understand their *feelings*. Together you will make them comfortable until we return to the Annex.”

He left out the part where everyone sustains a considerable amount of *culture* shock, but that was somebody else’s problem. It would have been nice if Dorcas and Nathan were there to help deal with them, but seeing a seven and a half foot tall *alien* couple would probably not be as comforting as sticking with Asad and Xue.

After Asad got in line for the forward toilet, Donald headed to the bunkroom to check the notes Xue had scribbled on the tunnel maps again. He’d thought they’d already sorted it all out, but she’d made some good points. He intended to incorporate them as much as possible once they got an idea of the current level of stress in the local populace, and how best they could screw with it using the tools they had available. He smiled in memory of the shock on Xue’s face when he’d told her *just* how he’d proceed if he were doing this mission as the Demon. He couldn’t tell if she was scandalized or not.

While still bent over the notes, he cleared an errant lock of hair off his face before sitting up straight. With a quiet sigh of disgust, he got up and headed to the crowded rear facilities to check himself in the mirror. Then he rummaged through the toiletry supplies and found what he needed.

In the course of five minutes, he’d added a bit of keratinized protein to the emergency sustenance feed stock processor and shortened his hair to a “working” length. It was only after washing that he realized he probably wouldn’t have a chance to shower until the mission was over. A subsequent glance in the shower stretched that estimate until *after* they’d returned to Arizona.

~~~

From their hidden perch within the mountain, Xue flitted from mind to mind, sharing notes with Sai upon occasion as she’d already been there a couple of times and had experience with the Afghan emotional content, even if not able to interpret the language.

The locals weren’t all that concerned about the artificial “earthquakes” they’d created. The shaking had been very light – barely

## Picking up the Pieces

felt – but she was sure Donald could correct that easily enough. Their fear level was neglectable, as were any concerns about the stability of the mountain. The whole area was subject to the occasional earthquake, and they were endured to the reality of it.

Of course, Donald had not yet even *begun* the reign of terror he'd planned a few days ago. At least it wasn't the anathema the *Demon* would have perpetrated upon them...

Donald had been forthright when he'd told her *exactly* what the Demon would have done.

He would work *alone*, and breach the mountain in a suitable location before settling down and laying in wait. When the midnight hour was past, the Demon would *insinuate* himself into the enemy's dreams and flood them with *nightmares* that would drive them from the tunnels in *terror*, leaving them afraid to return and face the *visions* he would implant in their minds upon doing so.

Then he would cut his way into the tunnels and simply *sever* the bonds of the prisoners before guiding them back – *unwillingly entranced by him* – to the safety of the ship, where he would then fire up the shields and plow his way up and into orbit for the journey back to the Annex.

He'd made it sound so *simple*.

It was no *wonder* Elder Ai had been so upset with him all the time!

~~~

Donald was coming back to check on the new scan when Xue let out a breath and stood up to stretch.

"What did you learn, Xue?"

She returned a smirk in his direction and shook her head, while Sai related her findings from the navigator's seat.

"No one seems very worried. They're used to it. They are a *little* uneasy about it, but it's still pretty much routine for the area."

"Some of the men are up and talking about sleeping outside the caves until it settles down," Xue added, already sensing the snub Donald was feeling from his efforts being ignored.

This would be the part where the Demon usually upped the game a little. She wondered what *Donald* was going to do.

"Well," he said, "As much as I'd like to bring the *mountain* down around their ears, we still got live bodies to recover, so we'll stick with the current plan – with some of your slight modifications, Xue. I should have thought of them myself. Probably too many late nights."

"You're just not used to working with a *team*, Donnie," Sai chided him, then finally took note of his appearance. "You could have simply *asked* me to cut your hair," she added, then got up to go back and use the toilet, followed by Xue.

"Healers. Can't live without them, and can't... I guess that just about sums it up, I suppose," Donald muttered to himself, then heard a chuckle to his left.

"You're right, Tank," One told him when he turned to look down at the source of quiet laughter.

Vibianus had remained slouched down on the hull side behind the pilot's seat after they'd stopped, but now he was sitting up. Then he yawned, triggering a sympathetic yawn from Donald, while giving every indication of having *slept* through the whole transit.

"Never had the luxury of *Healers* coming along on a mission before," he said, then yawned again. "Don't know if I like it or not, but I guess we'll find out."

Donald stared at him a few moments more, then began to chuckle – which was interrupted by a ding from the console. He turned to see the results of the scan, which turned out to be *incredibly* detailed.

After sitting down, he ran through the scan results, and found positive life signs just where they'd expected them to be, the Taliban berthing area, the prisoner area, the location where Fred and his companion were supposed to be, and then a few other locations indicating guards or possibly roving patrols.

He set the scan to continuous track on the higher organics, then focused on searching the radiation bands to look for the missing hot toy, but he couldn't find it, and sat back in disgust. It was either shielded too well, or just wasn't there, but he had a suspicion it was the latter. It was just as well, since he *really* didn't want to recover something like that with the load they'd be bringing back.

He spared a glance at the continuous track on the display and only saw one moving body now, so he got up and stopped to get a drink before cycling himself through the toilet again.

When he got back, he settled into his seat and began programming some detailed routes through the rock that – *hopefully* – would shake things up without bringing the mountain down or collapsing the tunnels before they could even get to the prisoners.

Afterwards, he checked the continuous track again, and saw the occupied eastern side of the tunnel now had three bodies moving in a staggered pattern from the eastern opening for about two hundred meters into the tunnel before reversing. Adjusting the scan detail

## Picking up the Pieces

showed no reason for turning back at that particular point, other than the ceiling seemed a bit lower for a few hundred feet from that point on. He was still pondering it when Sai came back from the rear compartments, and he sought out her impressions.

“Sai ... if you had to walk a long patrol for no particular reason, would you be inclined to avoid a couple of hundred feet of low ceiling simply because you’d have to duck your head to get past it in both directions?”

He pointed to the stretch in question where it was displayed on the map scan in front of her side of the console. The turning point was three-hundred meters closer to the eastern side than their planned intrusion point. For all they could see, the only thing past that point was the other end of the tunnel several hundred meters away to the west.

“I would say *anyone* would be crazy to walk that far,” she said. “Certainly no further than that one storage area furthest from the eastern entrance. Besides, if the ceiling is as low as you suggest, then it would make sense for us to move our pocket closer to where our guys can stand up in it – mostly.”

She turned and looked over her shoulder at three of the men. They had bowls in their hands and were standing by the emergency sustenance system while snarfing down clumps of fake hamburger. Each of them was close to two meters tall and would probably appreciate the change in entry point. Donald noticed what she was looking at, and, aside from feeling a bit peckish himself, had to agree with her.

“Good idea, my Lady Tal. I’ll readjust my entry point and cut off the tunnel a little closer to the East. Then I’ll create our staging pocket, sweep it with the shield, and see if we can drive them out with a gas leak scare.”

He checked the console’s timer and settled in for a ten-minute wait. With five minutes to go, he called out, “Five minutes to ship’s movement,” and started tightening the shields.

They would start out with a slightly more noticeable earthquake before beginning their final approach – right towards the section where the tunnel ceiling became lower. He would leave a collapsed portion of it behind them before turning to prepare a pocket just a little more than four hundred feet to the west of the last storage area ... just as Xue had suggested.

### *Saturday, October 1, 3 P.M. (MST), The Annex, In the Center*

Nurani was thoroughly enjoying the experience of sitting in the rocker with Faith, who was sleeping peacefully in her arms. Maya was

in the other rocker and topping off little Ronnie. They could both hear the shower going in the bathroom while Déjà was taking a welcome break from motherhood.

Maya glanced over at Nurani, then looked to Laisee, who was sitting at the small table in the corner.

*“\*She longs to hold her child in her arms\*”* she shared silently, then gasped when little Ronnie took note of her lack of attention and reminded her that he was still attached to her.

*“\*You feel it from her. You are very perceptive, Maya. Would you like to...\*”* Laisee broke off for a moment, then smiled.

*“<They have arrived and will start preparations to drive the men out of the tunnels,>”* she spoke aloud, while passing the essence of it to Maya.

*“<They are there? How do you know what they are doing?>”* Nurani asked her, but Laisee just smiled.

*“<Because that is what they have planned. They will release a bad smell, and the men will believe it is a gas leak that will be dangerous for them. They should run away and leave the prisoners behind.>”*

*“<But... But what if they decide to kill the prisoners?>”*

*“<That will not be allowed, Nurani. Donald has promised.>”*

Both Laisee and Maya certainly *hoped* things went according to plan.

### ***Sunday, October 2, 02:30 (AFT), Parked in a Good Spot***

After everyone had finished donning their armor or ships suits for the intrusion, Donald dropped the assault hatch and stepped part way down it, but stopped...

The first order of business had been to extend the shields and begin gently shaking a sphere of rock nearly a thousand meters in diameter to the point where the guards became alarmed. It had taken both Xue and Sai working together to determine the level of stress from the awake guards, followed by the ensuing panic from the ones being awoken so they could flee the tunnels for their own safety. They were all glad when the Ladies reported success, and Donald could stop the shaking. Then phase *two* kicked in.

As amended, the *new* plan had them slicing through the short section of tunnel nearly a hundred meters closer to the eastern storage areas than before. Then Donald had curved left, making a *huge* 270-degree circle until they'd swung back parallel to the tunnel wall but separated from it by about forty feet. He'd finally stopped



## Picking up the Pieces

nearly thirty feet past the collapsed tunnel section and downed the tank. He was able to clear a space to work by using the secondary shield to sweep the rock debris from the south to the north side of their pocket. It had actually been much quicker and easier than spending the extra time hogging out a hundred-foot diameter pocket, then trying to maneuver the tank in such close quarters...

Donald paused for a moment longer and asked Two to request Lady Tal's presence on the assault deck. About a minute later, he watched as she followed Two into the aft compartment while carrying a power sword in her hands.

"You didn't need *me* to bring this to you!" she chastened him, but realized from his expression that it wasn't what he'd wanted.

"Time to do that *Healer* thing, my Lady. Tell me how thick the wall is." He left out the part where he'd already gotten turned around and wasn't quite sure *which* side was which.

Letting out a disgusted huff, she handed him the sword, then walked down the ramp before carefully stepping over the remaining debris and turning to the left. She reached out and placed her hands on the newly cut surface before extending through and finding they had a ways to go yet. She took a few steps to the left and then moved back to the right again. Then she moved further to the right and stopped almost at the collapsed portion of the bore behind them.

"Here. It's about five meters from here," she said, then reached out for the sword. When it didn't arrive, she looked back as he approached and saw the determination in his eyes.

"Time to earn your *keep*, 'Tank'," she teased him, then stepped away from the wall before he lined up on it.

A moment later, his sword fired pink, and the blade hummed contentedly – until the point of it touched the rock, and it began to complain *loudly*. He pushed it in almost to the hilt and began a circular cut about two feet in diameter until the ends met.

Several diagonal cuts later, the two-foot plug had been removed for the better part of a yard in depth. He stepped away so Five could bring in a crowbar to pry out the deeper remains, while Six began piling the cut pieces on the other side of the assault ramp.

By this time, One had come out with Two and Three, and they were armed with swords and a shovel. In no time, the hole was enlarged to the point that a tall man could walk upright and easily carry someone in their arms ... if they maybe stepped sideways through the opening.

Otherwise, the width was perhaps three and a half feet wide ... just enough for two men to carry a stretcher.

One stopped carving after the fourth pass, and called for Tank to come and examine the opening. Tank followed him back and tapped the sides and overhead along the way – finding them pretty much just as solid as he'd hoped – then made his way to the deepest portion.

“Sai, how about now? How close to the tunnel?” he called out, and she slipped in and stood next to him in the crowded space, before laying hands on the divider and extending through it.

“Feels like a couple of feet ... maybe a little less,” she said, then tested her reach over the surface, both sideways and vertically. “It’s pretty even at this spot, but you’ll have to duck your head when you cut through it.”

“How about the residents? How are they taking it? Anyone coming back to check on things?”

She shot him a look of disgust. This was something the Demon could have done on his own if the Demon hadn't *died*, then felt a moment's chagrin at her comparison, and turned to the task while reaching out to Xue for assistance.

### ***02:45 (AFT), Outside the Entrance***

Faridun was already up and getting dressed...

His second had run to him and burst into his shack to warn him of the sounds coming from the mountain. The men quartered in the mountain – along with the posted guards – had all fled and gathered down the hillside, away from the entrance to the tunnels.

No one had dared to go back inside and try to assess any damage, or check if the prisoners were still safe...

Faridun looked down at his bed partner from last evening. Orzala had slept through his rude awakening and simply rolled over as far as her bonds would let her. He almost couldn't blame her, as spending the night with him had included warmer accommodations, a more comfortable pad, and a *real* meal – even if it meant she'd spent the last half hour before sleeping while lying on her back with her legs spread.

He let out a silent snort and turned to leave, then stopped and reached down to draw the blanket up to her neck, but not before squeezing one of her breasts in the process.

Faridun found the men clumped into several groups surrounding small campfires in the darkness outside.

They'd left the carved out rooms in a hurry, carrying only their shoes and blankets – and their *weapons*, of course.

He wondered if they'd remembered to bring any extra ammunition.

## Picking up the Pieces

His second hadn't waited for him to dress, and was even now going from group to group, counting heads and checking for readiness. The *last* thing they needed was to appear defenseless in front of the villagers. It was only a slight risk, but still...

When the eyes in front of him focused behind him, Bazgar stopped his inventory and stood up straight before turning to face his leader.

*"<Faridun – the men are all here! And with their weapons!>"* he said, then waited while his leader turned and surveyed the makeshift refugee camp.

*"<Very good, Bazgar. What of our food? And the other weapons? Are the prisoners still safe? OR DID NO ONE BOTHER TO CHECK?>"*

His expression hadn't changed from disdainful indifference until that shouted last. He wasn't a particularly *cruel* man, but knew the needs of his men, and knew they'd already pulled *enough* unwilling bed partners from the local villages. Taking any more "housekeepers" would begin to tax the credulity of even the *stupidest* of those peasant village leaders.

*"<The tunnels, Faridun! The sounds... We heard falling rock, and ... and we thought it safer to leave until it was ... quiet ... again?>"* Bazgar offered weakly, while letting his voice thin out at the end.

He watched Faridun cup a hand over his ear and listen towards the hillside. The longer he stood there, the lower Bazgar felt. The moment Faridun began slowly lowering his hand, he knew his fate was sealed, so he stepped up to save it.

*"<I will go and look, Faridun! I will see what has happened! I->"*

*"<Take two men with you. Send them to the other side to see if the tunnel is still open. Then report back to me ... AND CHECK ON THE PRISONERS!>"*

Instead of saying anything else, Bazgar turned and looked around for two men he could rely on. He chose two of the three guards who'd passed the alarm ... mostly because they were fully dressed and ready to go. He grabbed them and headed up the slope to the entrance.

Faridun watched him go, then looked around for the third man who'd been on duty that evening. He knew Bazgar would have been asleep, so he wanted to talk with someone who'd experienced the event in *person*.

### ***03:00 (AFT), Still Parked in a Good Spot***

While waiting to hear Sai's report, Donald pulled his power sword and checked the remaining charge. In just that short amount of time cutting the rock, he'd already gone through a *tenth* of it, and his sour

look showed he never expected it to deplete so quickly. He was still trying to rationalize why that would be, when Sai turned to speak to him...

**03:00 (AFT), *Creeping Along Slowly...***

As they approached the weapons cache, Darwesh nudged Hask in front of him. The door remained intact, and they waited nervously beside it until Bazgar finally saw fit to join them.

"<Open it, Hask>," Darwesh prompted him.

"<Why me?>"

Darwesh took a step back and almost bumped into Bazgar, before saying, "<Because you're closer.>"

Hask still hesitated, but heard the disgusted snort from Bazgar before he pushed in front of them both, saying, "<Move aside, fools!>" then flipped the crude latch and opened the door.

Shining his light around the room, he could see it was still intact, so he closed and latched the door, then turned and pointed to the men's sleeping space opposite.

"<Check the room. See if anything has fallen,>" he ordered.

Hask sucked it up, and parted the cloth covering the entrance to flash his light around their cots. Aside from the impression of everyone leaving in a sudden hurry, there appeared to be no damage to the space.

"<Go on,>" Bazgar ordered. "<The supply room next!>"

They opened the supply room and found that a few things had fallen, but most likely they'd been stacked precariously.

No packages had split open, and nothing had been broken.

"<Move along. Check the women next. We might need their comfort after things settle down.>"

The men shared a chuckle, then opened the door to quiet whimpers.

**03:15 (AFT), *Still Parked in a Good Spot***

"Three of them are coming this way," Sai announced. "Xue says Faridun sent them to check on the tunnels and rooms. Right now, they're at the women's pit. After that are Fred and his friend."

"Good," Tank muttered, then turned back to look for One. "One, have the men bring out the odorant and hoses. Also, have them bring

## Picking up the Pieces

out a propane tank with a hose on it. Oh, and don't forget the *inspection* camera. It's time to get this party *started!*"

Once everything was ready, Tank turned to One again, and asked, "Who here has the quietest sword?"

One turned around and called out, "Three! Front and center!"

The man came forward and suppressed a salute, but still nodded his head respectfully.

"Three, please Fire your sword and touch the point to this rock," Tank asked him while pointing to the wall closest to them.

The purring after being Fired was faint, and didn't seem to escalate very much once it was put to the test. Unlike the Demon, Three's psyche seemed very stable at this point in his life.

"Three – you're our point man for the door," Tank explained. "When Lady Tal tells you, I want you to cut a small hole in the tunnel wall about a foot above ground level and big enough for either of these hoses." He pointed to the odorant and propane hoses lying on the ground.

Once they were in position, Tank turned to Sai, and said, "Sai, let him know when the men in the tunnel are distracted. That's when he'll punch the hole."

After a few minutes, Sai called out, "Now," and Three's sword Fired and slipped through the rock in one smooth motion. Instead of sawing it around like Tank had, Three simply twisted the blade and made a neatly cored tube in the rock wall before sliding it out and letting the Fire collapse.

"Beautiful. Just beautiful," Tank muttered, then stepped back to let Three exit the opening before going in himself and squatting down with the inspection camera to scope out the tunnel behind the safety of the wall.

Rotating it around, he played it across the collapsed section but could barely see anything other than what looked like loose rocks that had rolled away and ended up close to where they were working.

He turned it back around and saw a distant light reflected from the approaching party. Then he pulled it out and pushed in the odorant hose.

"For right now, let's see how they react to stinky air," he said. "Everyone button up. You *don't* wanna smell this. Sai, I want you back in the tank to relieve Seven at the con ... and keep the front cabin isolated from the rear. Make sure the kids are dressed for the occasion. You know, because..."

"You never know," she parroted automatically, then headed up the ramp.

"You can send Seven back. Oh ... and be sure to let me know when they *smell* us!" he added cheerfully.

He squatted down, then opened the odorant tank wide to let it freely vent into the tunnel. Now that the tunnel was closed on one end, he wasn't sure how it would be distributed, but knew it should at least have to go east because there was no way for it to go west. He already heard face shields popping up behind him before he stood up.

"Everyone go to burst coms now, please," he ordered, then keyed his com to the console receiver. "Seven. How do you hear me up there?"

"Loud and clear, Tank."

"Very well. I don't expect them to have anything that will detect us, but stay in burst mode just the same."

"Yes, Sir! Headed back now, Sir!"

They stood around for a few minutes before Tank walked over and sat on the sloping edge of the assault door. Now it was just a matter of waiting.

### ***03:30 (AFT), Creeping Along at a Snail's Pace***

Darwesh and Hask were on their own now since Bazgar had turned back to report the rooms had suffered little or no disruption, and the prisoners were still alive and well...

Once they'd finished checking the women – with a little fondling for their trouble – they'd moved on to the Americans, who seemed to have slept through it all. Then they moved further into the tunnel to check the shipment of drugs Faridun had prepared for delivery.

Then it was another hundred feet to the *newest* storage room the men had just finished. From there, the tunnel curved for nearly five hundred feet before the ceiling sagged another foot lower and made the next few hundred feet miserable to pass. After that, it was a long, *long* walk to the other side of the mountain through a passageway that was inconsistent at best, and a snug fit for even their skinniest men to pass...

They'd passed the new storeroom and were approaching the longest part of this inspection when Darwesh, who was *definitely* in the lead this time, stopped and started sniffing the air.

"<Hask... *There is something wrong,*>" he whispered, then held out his arm to ward him back.

## Picking up the Pieces

"<What? What is it?>" Hask asked loudly, causing Darwesh to startle in fright.

"<Shhhh! Listen! I smell something!>" he whispered confusingly.

"<We both had eggs last night, remember?>" Hask reminded him sourly. "<Let's get going. At this rate it, will be six more hours until we can sleep again – and then we'll have to be awake again.>"

### **03:40 (AFT), Almost Ready to Pounce**

"Another thirty meters, Tank," Sai called from the console, and heard broken chuckling coming from him...

Almost as an afterthought, Tank had Three cut another hole in the wall at just lower than waist height and big enough for a ten-centimeter gas round like the one he held in his hand. This was one of ten of them he'd modified the night before they'd left.

It was simple, really. You removed the protective cover, then located the fill valve, which could easily be jammed with something as common as a piece of wire, or even a toothpick – just like the ones he'd prepared last night – then slide the cover back on. Then it just was a matter of having things ready to go when you needed a little gas. Pull the cover off, jam the wire or toothpick in place, then drop it away from you ... or through a convenient hole in a wall...

"Twenty meters," Sai continued after another thirty seconds.

"Ten meters..."

Donald popped his head shield, glanced around one more time, then slid the cover off the shell before jamming the valve open and stuffing it through the hole in the rock wall. Then he planted his butt against the hole, and waited for another update from Sai.

### **03:42 (AFT), Considering Their Options**

"<What was that noise?>" Hask asked very quietly.

At the sound of something falling, Darwesh stood absolutely still and concentrated mightily on the darkness before him. So far, the only things he'd heard were the pounding of his heart, and the stifled breathing of both of them.

"<Maybe... Maybe it was just a rock settling?>" he suggested. "<Why don't you go ahead and look?>"

"<It would be better for YOU to go and look,>" Hask countered from behind him. "<You're closer.>"

Darwesh glanced back and frowned at him before turning and slowly creeping further into the tunnel. He proceeded one step at a

time while noticing how *smelly* it was becoming. In the light of his flashlight, he could see loose rocks on the ground in front of him that seemed to have rolled from further inside the tunnel.

He finally got close enough to see the loose rock pile from the tunnel collapse, and called out, “<*Hask! The tunnel has collapsed! We can’t get through. It is totally...*>” which is as far as he got before collapsing on the spot.

“<*Darwesh? Darwesh, where are you?*>” Hask called out softly as he warily approached.

His footsteps echoed flatly in the tunnel. The noise seemed dampened, the further he progressed. He could see a light shining away from him just ahead. It seemed to be lighting up a rock fall. Finally, when he reached a particularly *ripe* spot in the tunnel, the beam of his flashlight caught the outline of Darwesh’s body far before him, with blood leaking from his head where he’d struck the ground.

Hask started to rush forward, but suddenly became dizzy and stopped. Something was making him dizzy, and he was becoming disorientated. For some reason he tied his dizziness to the smell, then turned around and staggered away towards the entrance. It took him nearly a hundred feet before his senses cleared up enough that he was finally able to scream.

“<*Aiiiii!!!*>” echoed through the tunnel in advance of Hask’s terrified flight.

### **03:48 (AFT), *In the Kraken’s Child, Feeling Guilty***

Xue wanted to feel ashamed of herself, but in point of fact, she’d rather *enjoyed* planting that bit of misdirection into the mind of Hask. She’d read what he and the rest of the men had done to the women, and considered that if he had *nightmares* for the rest of his life, it would *still* be worth the shame. She silently admitted her guilt to Sai, who then reported a modified version of it to Tank.

### ***Standing By...***

“*Tank. Xue reports the last man standing has run away in fear of the gas leak in the tunnel.*”

“Wonderful! Please pass my thanks to Lady Xue and keep me informed of updates. Gentlemen, it’s time to go shopping!”

With that, Donald pulled the hose out to allow Three to finish cutting the opening into the tunnel, while having four men ready on stretcher duty to haul out Fred and his companion. He checked the gas charges in his kit, saw that Seven now carried the odorant tank, then glanced at his team to see they all had their head shields enabled



## Picking up the Pieces

before leading them into the tunnel; their armor's infrared vision systems showing a clear path along the way.

### **03:55 (AFT), Outside, Reporting In**

*"<Bazgar! Truly! There was a bad smell in the tunnel like – like gas! It killed Darwesh! It almost claimed me, but I got away in time! The tunnel has collapsed passed the new room! There is rock all over the floor!>"*

Hask finally wound down enough to catch his breath just as Faridun walked up behind him.

*"<Gas? What kind of gas? Gas for a truck? Gas for a camp stove?>"*

*"<I – I don't know, Faridun. Like ... like eggs! Yes! Like rotten eggs!>"*  
Hask exclaimed while nodding frantically.

Faridun looked down, then reached up to pinch his nose.

*Peasants! He was surrounded by peasants and fools!*

He looked up and considered Hask's background, what little he knew of it. Hask was a country boy, and as far as he knew, Hask had *never* left the country. Rotten eggs was the smell of *processed* gas, like what cities used for heating and cooking. Why would it be out *here*? Ignoring that question for the moment, he came to a decision.

*"<Bazgar – get two more men and stop in the weapons cache to get gas masks. Go back to where Hask says the tunnel collapsed and see if you can recover Darwesh's body. Oh... And do not strike any sparks. If it really is gas, it might explode,>"* he said calmly, before turning away to think about it some more.

### **04:05 (AFT), On the Move**

Tank's first order had been to have Darwesh's body cleared out of the way so it wouldn't be a hazard for them, and it was expedient to simply drag him a bit closer to the rock fall so they wouldn't trip over him when bringing the prisoners back to the ship.

From there, they proceeded down the tunnel and started checking rooms along the way. The first one, nearly one-hundred forty meters eastward, turned out to be a relatively new room that was somewhat spacious and littered with several boxes of supplies. There was a large open space in the middle of it that was currently unoccupied, so they moved along to the next room thirty meters further and checked it next.

What they found were stacks and stacks of bundled heroin. Tank made note of which side of the tunnel it was on, just in case they needed a Plan B or C.

Before they could leave the room, Sai called out and said, *“Movement at the entrance. Three men coming in and heading to the weapons cache. Xue says they’re getting gas masks.”*

Tank wasn’t sure if sleepy gas was effective through Earth-type canister filters, but was sure there was a work around available if he could convince Sai to go along with it.

“Sai, I’m not sure how effective sleepy gas will be with masks on. Do you think you or Xue might convince them they don’t really need masks? Or maybe they need to remove something from them? The canisters maybe?”

*“Tank, I don’t know the construction of those things. I–”* Sai stopped talking, and John came on a moment later.

*“Tank, I can explain what is needed to the Ladies. Hunker down and we’ll let you know.”*

Tank checked his timer, looked around at his crew, then slouched against a pile of heroin. “Looks like we’re in here for a while,” he muttered.

He considered the four gas rounds in his kit and the other five rounds that One was carrying. Fred and his friend might be better off asleep for the recovery, so there wouldn’t be a lot of moaning and groaning echoing down the tunnel. The women’s recovery *definitely* called for sleepy gas, as there was simply *no way* to keep so many women quiet during the intrusion they were planning.

They continued to wait a few more minutes until Sai reported, *“They’re starting to come towards you. Thirty meters away.”*

#### ***04:20 (AFT), To Boldly Go***

Bazgar slowly led Mateen and Perzo into the tunnel, where they made steady, if *plodding*, progress towards Darwesh’s body, at least according to where Hask had said it was. The sound of their breathing was loud in the tunnel. It was certainly louder than *any* of them could remember from their last training session, but they all considered it part of the circumstances – the fact that the one-way exhaust flaps had all been disabled having been *completely* dismissed from their minds.

Ignoring all the doors along the way, they passed the last room and continued towards the reported collapse, eventually coming across the rock fall and Darwesh’s body.

*“<Look. He’s still breathing. He’s alive!>”* Mateen called out, and Perzo squatted down by his legs and helped Mateen lift him up over his shoulders.

## Picking up the Pieces

As they were dealing with Darwesh, Bazgar was checking out the rock fall. The tunnel had split right across itself and was filled with rubble up to the ceiling. As the ceiling was only about five feet high at this point, he reached up and pulled a few rocks out, only to be replaced by more settling rock.

Rather than risk another collapse, he backed away, but noticed a shadowy broken section on the North wall.

Shaking his head in dismay, he turned away and directed the other two back to the tunnel entrance.

### ***04:30 (AFT), A Head's Up***

*"They're on the way back, Tank," Sai reported.*

"Thank you much," he said quietly, then turned to Seven and pointed to the odorant tank.

Seven nodded, then stuffed the hose under the door, before opening the valve – *greatly* appreciating the fact that their armor was rated for vacuum. Earlier, he'd decided to see what the fuss was all about, and almost lost his last meal.

Tank prepped his sleepy round and squatted by the door, hearing movement down the tunnel that sounded like it was headed this way.

Sai started the count down.

*"Fifty meters ..... forty meters ..... thirty meters..."*

Tank triggered the round, then set it on the floor just outside the door while leaving the door open to just a crack. He could see flashlight beams skittering across the cave walls.

### ***04:33 (AFT), To Boldly Return***

Bazgar was starting to feel dizzy and wondered if it was from lack of sleep. Then he noticed the distinct smell of something *rotten*.

He shook his head and watched the men in front of him when they both stumbled at the same time. Then they bounced off the wall before falling to the floor only moments later.

Bazgar almost stopped but *forced* himself to keep going – desperately holding his breath for the next hundred feet until he could hear sounds from outside the tunnel. As he passed the weapons cache, he tore off his mask and threw it aside in his rush to get outside, finally standing in the clear black sky and taking *huge* gasps of air while waiting to see if he would recover from his dizziness.

He was surrounded by several of the men, one of whom asked, "<Where are Mateen and Perzo?>"

**04:35 (AFT), Making Their Move**

“All right. Fred and his partner are the first to go,” Tank said. “They’re just under thirty meters from the entrance and we should be able to sneak in there and pull them out. If I had a choice, I’d rather we’d collapsed the entrance, but it’s too close to the other prisoners.”

“Seven, there’s a curve in the tunnel just past where Fred is being held. When we head out, I want you to place the odorant there and be ready to let it go. One, I want you to go with him and be ready let off two rounds of sleepy gas in the tunnel, but only if needed. Then slip another one underneath the door where the women are. We’ll move them when they’re out.”

It was mostly a refresher to their previous planning, but modified slightly given their current circumstances.

“Sai, what’s going on outside?”

*“They’re asking what happened, and the last man out is telling them he lost two more men,”* she said. *“They’re arguing about going back in, or waiting until morning.”*

Tank was thinking furiously about what they could do to keep them out. He could blow up one of the rooms near the entrance – they had plenty of propane – but didn’t want to risk collapsing the tunnel around either them or the prisoners. It would have been better if he’d brought along something *awful*...

Something like a flesh-rotting *chemical* of some sort.

***Back in the Ship...***

“By the Gods, is that man *seriously* considering chemical *warfare*?” Xue asked aloud.

John looked at her in shock, not being privy to what he’d obviously just missed. Meanwhile, Sai merely chuckled.

“He means well, and I can understand his point. He’s having Seven place the odorant near the entrance and preparing a couple of sleepy rounds just in case. It might drive them further away. It’s too bad we can’t simply–” Sai stopped and looked down at the console. It couldn’t be *that* easy, could it?

***Still Inside the Drug Storage Room...***

*“Tank, I got an idea.”*

“Shouldn’t we be a hundred kilometers away from here first?”

There was a moment’s pause while she remembered the reference, but continued anyway.

## Picking up the Pieces

*"You've used the shield to pick up stuff, right? What if I extend the shield in a sphere that includes the entrance? As long as I hold it, that will keep them out and let you move freely, right? ... Tank?"*

"I'm thinkin' about it," he said, then held up a hand to indicate a pause in their operation.

He'd *really* wanted to make this look like a natural disaster to minimize their potential exposure. Getting Fred and company were the *original* goals. The drugs were *secondary*.

And then there was the mysterious *hot toy* to consider. The shield sphere idea would work, but a sphere at the tunnel entrance big enough and hard enough to block a bullet, could fracture the mountain severely when it was released and cause major loss of life in the valley below.

"Can either of you probe Faridun to see where he's hidden that damn nuclear device? We haven't seen it yet. Unless it's with the guns and bullets, he's got it stashed somewhere else."

*"I'll ask Xue."*

Nearly two minutes later, he got his answer.

*"Xue says he hasn't got it yet. It's coming by truck and, will be here tomorrow. That's what those drugs are for. Payment for the device."*

"Ahh, when's it coming?"

After another minute...

*"Late... After dark,"* she said.

"Gimme a minute," he muttered, then started crunching scenarios.

Drugs for Americans being traded for a bomb for Americans. He turned around and looked at the bags of heroin. It was a *lot*. Enough to buy a *nuclear* device, anyway. How best to utilize these new pieces? Sai could use the shield like she says, but it was still dark outside. Someone standing by the entrance and shining flashlights into the dark could still see them only twenty meters away ... right about where the women were located.

"Sai, *new* plan. Plan *D!* Reprogram the secondary shield to engulf some of the soil below the entrance and shake it loose. Do you remember how that works? If you can't safely target the soil below, grab a chunk just above the entrance – make them too scared to get close for a while. Maybe grab it and shake it first – a mini-quake? That should be more reasonable than walking up to an open tunnel and bouncing off an invisible wall."

He waited another couple of minutes until...

“Tank ... *your man Ardan is insane. It looks like you could open up a void inside a person just like the Vanir can. I’ll let you know when it’s ready.*”

“Great. We’ll go get Fred and his buddy now. Let us know if they make any moves.”

“Got it!”

“All right! Seven ... One ... you’re up. Go let off the gas, and One, watch out for lights shining in from the entrance. The rest of you, follow me.”

They ventured into the tunnel, and delayed long enough to move three sleeping bodies into the room with the drugs, before heading further East to recover Fred and his partner.

As they approached Fred’s location, they could see Seven standing by the odorant bottle, and One just darting back across the tunnel from the door to the women’s room.

“I heard some whimpering in there when I cracked open the door, but they quieted down as soon as the round went off,” One reported.

“Good. Let’s get Fred,” Tank said, then turned and worked the funky latch on the door and shined a light inside.

A set of bleary eyes looked in his direction, but they dulled over just before the owner passed out. The other man was already out.

“Stretcher team. You’re up,” Tank quietly ordered, then stood to the side and held his IR hand flash to help them see where *not* to pick them up by.

After transferring them from their cots to the stretchers, the four men moved out and almost trotted down the tunnel on the way to the ship.

“Which one was Fred?” One asked him.

“From what they told me, he was the *pretty* boy – the one with blond hair,” Tank told him. “Gonna hurt like a *bitch* while his leg is growing back, though.”

One looked at him while churning the idioms and putting them into context. He knew “gonna” was a local English alternate. “Bitch” was a female dog, but also referred to an undesirable situation. “Pretty boy” had him stumped, though.

Both of those men were anything *but* pretty at the moment.

Tank looked at his timer and saw it was already after five a.m. local.

## Picking up the Pieces

“Sai, how’s that mini-quake coming?”

*“Almost there. Xue says Faridun’s pushing to get the prisoners out,”* she reported.

Tank counted his remaining sleepy rounds, then handed two of them to One.

“If they start coming in, we’re gonna have to risk exposing ourselves to knock them out,” he said, but saw the betrayed look in One’s eyes. “Hey, those are the *Elder’s* rules, not mine. If it was up to *me* they would’ve been running in terror the moment we set down *outside*.”

*“Tank. John here. We got Fred and someone labeled Hernandez in the bunks. Xue’s looking them over.”*

“Great! Uhhh, please ask Xue if any of the women need stretchers, or can we just carry them out over our shoulders.”

*“Wait one.”*

Less than a minute later...

*“John again. Xue says they’re beat up but not fragile. A few of them are pregnant – a couple of them noticeably. All four of the children are pregnant. She says she’ll radio you guys if someone picks up one of them wrong ... somehow.”*

“Understood, John. Ahh, we might be able to use your help in hauling them back if Sai ever gets that shield working.”

*“Got it, smart ass! Hold on to something. I may be off a couple dozen meters or so.”*

Tank refrained from verbalizing an “Aw, crap!” and instead grabbed hold of the wall by the door, where One and Seven quickly joined him. Two, Three, Five, and Six trotted up in time to see all three of them jammed in the doorway and hanging on for dear life. A low, slow rumbling was heard coming from the entrance that was sustained for a couple of minutes until there was the sense of release. Then they heard the sound of rock and soil moving down the slope from the entrance.

*“You are now free to move about the tunnels,”* Sai reported proudly.

“Thank you, Sai. You do beautiful work.”

*“Yeah. Well they all ran away when the ground started moving underneath them. The current consensus is to stay away for a while.”*

“Good. How about you send John back after the next delivery to lend a hand?”

*“Will do.”*

***Saturday, October 1, 5:35 P.M. (MST), Annex, in the Babies' Room***

Maya and Déjà shared a weary glance before flopping back in the comfy rockers to rest for a moment.

Both babies had been difficult during this last feeding, and after trading off in the middle of it, they *both* had sore nipples because of little Ronnie, with Déjà in particular feeling *very* flustered.

"Ugh... Maya they are three weeks *old* now! How much *longer* will I need to *feed* them?" she complained quietly, but got no sympathy from her co-wife.

"They are human – like us – and we will feed them for several more years," she murmured. "Even Jaiying and Rose still nurse from me and Laisee. Even *Sai* nurses them. She nurses *you*, too."

"Years ... and years ... and years ..." Déjà said faintly, her voice fading with each repetition.

Maya smiled at the memories of feeding her *own* children. Her daughters would still nurse from her, even well into their adulthood, and she'd cherished every moment along the way until... She closed off that portion of her memory and felt a presence at the door.

Getting up, she opened it to see Spring Blossom standing there with her hands folded across her waist.

"I just wanted to see the babies, but I see they are asleep now," she whispered, now feeling the tiredness of her daughters-in-law. "I will have dinner with Dwayne and then return to watch them so you and Déjà may go and eat. Will that be all right?"

Maya looked back and saw Déjà had sagged even lower in her chair. Her eyes were closed and she'd probably not heard Spring Blossom's kind offer to babysit for a little while, so she turned back and leaned in to hug her mother-in-law.

"We would like that very much. Thank you for thinking of us," she murmured, then leaned in again and shared a kiss with her.

Once Spring Blossom had left, Maya closed the door and returned to the incredibly comfortable rockers Wilber had delivered after the babies were born. They both rocked and swiveled. They were also overstuffed, and she'd already fallen asleep in one of them more than once. On the way back, she picked up a blanket to place across Déjà's lap, which she did before sitting down and relaxing once again.

She'd thought Déjà was asleep but heard a groan come from her. She lazily rolled her head to look over at her and saw her nestle the blanket up as far as her neck and settle back in. After another minute...



## Picking up the Pieces

“Maya ... do you think Donald is all right?” she murmured.

Maya paused to think it through.

Donald was alive, so that was a *definite* plus. She'd not felt anything untoward since he'd left the Annex. In fact, the Healer Bond they shared had sent her feelings of satisfaction for *whatever* reason.

Even now, she felt a faint sense of *anticipation*.

“Donald has done this *all* of his life, D  j  . He is *very* careful not to do foolish things,” she assured her. The unexpressed subtext – “*usually*” – she kept to herself.

### ***Sunday, October 2, 05:05 (AFT), Down Slope of the Entrance***

Faridun was *fuming*! There were *still* supplies in the caves: *food*, *weapons*, and their *prisoners*. And *no one* would make the effort to go up there and *get them*!

He stalked through the group of frightened, men who cowered at his approach while he sought out his second-in-command and found him huddling for warmth in front of one of the new campfires.

“<Bazgar, I want you to get the men together and start clearing a way to get back into the entrance,>” he said calmly, trying not to show how frustrated he was.

His second didn't move, keeping his shivering form planted in front of the fire.

“<Faridun, the men. They will not go. Not now. We already lost Darwesh, Mateen, and Perzo. They are afraid of->”

“<YOU seem to have survived! NOW GET THE MEN TOGETHER AND RECOVER OUR SUPPLIES!>” he shouted, finally getting a reaction from Bazgar, who stood up to face him.

“<The men... Not right now, Faridun. Please... When it is safer. When the mountain stops moving. It is not safe right->”

“<You will get the men together, or I will start SHOOTING THE COWARDS! DO YOU UNDERSTAND ME!>”

“<Please, Faridun. Being shot is better than being crushed by rock or blown up by a gas pocket. It is too dan->”

Faridun had already started to draw his weapon, but the sky up the slope lit up with a flash, followed by a loud BOOM...

### ***Back in the Tunnel***

Tank sent Seven over to recover what was left of the propane tank, if anything...

Only three runs had been needed to bring back a total of eighteen women and girls. Then it was just a matter of cleaning house. All the spent gas rounds had to be recovered, and evidence of their visit obscured. The first part was easy, as the men picked up their trash on the way back to the ship. The next part was a little more off the wall, and Tank was about to start the grand cover-up operation when he'd gotten another call from Sai.

She'd relayed Xue's reading of Faridun's escalating level of frustration, so Tank had fallen back on *another* option. Wilber had dug up the information for him, and now he finally had a *proper* use for it.

Once it had completely expanded, a fully loaded propane tank held nearly 140 cubic feet of propane, but of itself, propane wasn't explosive unless it was exposed to an *oxidizer* ... like *air*. Wilber had calculated the optimum explosive limit concentration was about one part propane to two parts air, thus 16 pounds of expanded propane would reach the explosive limit concentration in about a 10 x 10 x 5 foot room.

They didn't have the space, but what they *did* have was Sai's new, self-taught techniques in shield configuration. In this case, while Faridun had begun searching for men to force back into the mountain, Tank had gone with Seven to set the propane tank near the entrance to the tunnel and attached a detonator to it. Once Sai was ready, Seven opened the valve wide, and they both hurried back to get behind the backside of the contorted shield she was constructing around it by the entrance.

The shield itself was invisible, but enveloped the bottle and extended outward from the tunnel entrance. It should protect the tunnel walls and the adjacent rooms while projecting over the edge of the drop-off for dozens of feet – or so they surmised. Then he'd just waited to trigger the detonator until Sai had called out "*Now*" – right *after* she'd softened the shield, then immediately tightened it right *behind* the propane tank...

During the lull afterwards, the next evolution went quickly.

Tank had originally thought to destroy the prison rooms with fake natural gas explosions, but people would still question where the body bits had gone. Collapsing the rooms could effectively do it but they might be tempted to dig out the bodies unless there was ample evidence that it wouldn't be worthwhile. He'd asked for, and Wilber had managed to procure blood – in *buckets*. Ten *gallons* of blood. The idea was to pour blood into the spaces previously occupied by the prisoners, then collapse the rooms – thus offering the odor of death, and perhaps a few drips of it merely to enhance the artistic verisimilitude of the presentation.

## Picking up the Pieces

One had been kind enough to supervise the transport of both blood and a few propane cylinders. The propane had been vented into a couple of the rooms, and a detonator left behind to trigger it once the empty bottle and crew were safely away.

Tank had taken pleasure in distributing the blood near the doorways of both prisoner locations, then scattered the remains of it on and around the empty cots. As a courtesy, they'd checked the women's accommodations, but recovered very little of what could be considered personal belongings. The excess clothing they left behind – ripped, splashed with blood, and scattered closer to the doorways.

As a *final* incentive to leave the spaces alone, he'd taken childish glee in emptying the waste containers a few feet back from the door in each space – close enough to smell, but not close enough to determine whom it might have been squished from. A reasonable person might simply block the door and seal the smells inside. As a bonus, Sai's experience with the secondary shield had pointed out a *new* trick to accomplish structural failures.

In keeping with the Elder's restrictions, on the way back, they had taken the precaution of moving the three sleeping Taliban from the drug room to the large storage room further towards the Western end of the tunnel. Their exit plans should leave them a margin of safety – *maybe...*

### ***06:55 (AFT), Ready to Go***

Tank looked at the local time on the console before heading back to make one more pass through the crowded ship. It was almost seven a.m. local time, and there was only half an hour left until daylight.

He started from the back and confirmed the expanse of women were carefully strapped in place before heading forward and checking the remaining propane tanks in the weapons room.

Moving to the bunkroom, he saw Fred was webbed into the middle bunk and the other man, Hernandez, was webbed into the top. One of the pregnant women occupied the bottom bunk, and two of the younger women were sharing an air mattress crammed onto the floor.

The forward cabin held three more air mattresses and occupants. With any luck at all, they would be back in Arizona before everyone woke up. He saw four seat-backs had monitors on and were showing various internal views of the ship. Along with Xue, the men were keeping an eye on their passengers. After the trip in, they were all fully aware of how “bouncy” it might get, and they intended to keep an eye on everyone. It wasn't a vicarious inclination, because Sai had made a last minute addition to the supply list by bringing in two dozen blankets to cover the passengers – courtesy of Wilber's warehouse

membership card. Besides, none of the women looked all that attractive at the moment...

"Ladies and Gentlemen, *please* keep your hands and feet *inside* the ride at all times until we come to a *complete* stop in Arizona," Tank cheerfully announced from the pilot's seat, before triggering a semi-soft secondary shield to encase the surrounding rock for several hundred feet and began shaking it gently.

Five minutes into the shaking, he triggered a gas explosion in the weapons cache, followed by one in the drug room. Then he set off a final charge in the space where they were currently parked. Even if it didn't collapse around them, it certainly wouldn't leave anyone the wiser once they burrowed their way out of it and left it filled with rubble. He let the shaking continue, before slowly tapering it down and letting it die out all together.

"Sai, you have the shield," he murmured, then watched the scanner display in front of him for the results of her efforts.

She was looking at a duplicate of that display on her side and applying delicate adjustments to the shield settings until she felt they were *just* right – and then *triggered* them.

"The brothel is *closed*, my Lady," Tank murmured.

She repeated the settings for the space across the tunnel width and triggered them again.

"Ack! There goes Fred and what's-his-name," he muttered, then began setting up for their departure.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, in a moment, I'm going to adjust the internal gravity to compensate for our orientation, but you will experience the sensation of acceleration just the same, so please don't be alarmed."

Tank shut down the scanner and fired up the sensors to perform a detailed sweep of the outer area.

He intended to launch at a diagonal from their current location and exit at an obscure spot on the *west* side of the ridge. That *would*, of course, entail a complete 180-degree circle to head in the exit direction. The bore would collapse behind them, and they would transition to a vertical orientation once cleared of the mountain. On the way out, he would just nick what was left of the drug cache in passing, but the rest of the rooms were too close to the eastern edge of the mountain to risk it.

"Shields up tight. Cloaking on. Secondary shield to standby, *annnnnd* here we go..."

## Picking up the Pieces

The difference was abrupt and quite noticeable. Instead of emulating a tunneling machine, the *Kraken's Child* was plowing through the mountain by virtue of his primary shield configured like a giant wedge. They were through the mountain in less than a minute before he launched them vertically towards their 130km transit orbit only seconds later. After Tank reached orbit, this time he headed west, chasing the night. He also helped Sai run additional searches along their flight path before settling back and thinking of his to-do list...

They hadn't gotten the nuclear device. It just wasn't there yet.

They'd done an adequate job of keeping Faridun's men alive – even making sure the three sleepers in the tunnels had been relocated somewhere relatively stable. They might be *trapped* in the tunnel, but at least they'd still have food from the pantry – if the adjacent explosion of the weapons cache hadn't brought *that* down as well.

And they'd recovered all the prisoners.

Overall, it had been a good day's work. He smiled and changed the ship's timer back to Mountain Standard Time, noting absently that it was still yesterday in Arizona.

### ***Saturday, October 1, 8 P.M. (MST), Arizona, The Annex, The Center***

Laisee was surprised at the news she'd just received. Xue had told her Donald had taken a short cut out of the mountain and they were now on the way back with Fred, his companion, and eighteen traumatized women and younger girls. The expected arrival would be within three hours. She looked at the other person in the pantry and called out to her.

"Maya, tell Déjà that Donald is on the way back, and everyone is all right!"

Maya paused from putting another vacuum flask of fresh milk into the refrigerator and turned to face her. She turned back and put the flask away before coming over to hug her tightly – letting her tears of joy fall freely from her eyes at this good news.

"I will go and tell Déjà and Spring Blossom!" she forced through the trembling smile on her face.

She took a few steps towards the door, then stopped to pick up the crackers and juice Déjà had asked for, before rushing out to tell her co-wife and mother-in-law the good news.

A wistful feeling washed over Laisee as she watched her go.

She had no bond-mate of her own, as it just hadn't seemed to be that important to her. When she was home, she sometimes shared evenings with Andy and Shay, but usually maintained a comfortable

physical relationship with her Father's third and fourth Wives. Spring Blossom had been a delight to be with, but she'd seen the change in her since her son had suffered that unfortunate "training accident" with Lady Trenka after they'd returned.

There was no real necessity for her to actually *marry* someone, certainly not for ensuring the continuity of the Imperial line. There was David, and there was Andy. In a few more decades, even *Walter* could assume the throne if necessary.

That thought made her smile. If there was a concern about Ronnie being in charge, they had *no* idea of the changes that might accrue if *Walter* chose to flex his power. By the *Gods*, if Walter and his cousins decided to run the Commonwealth, there would be no *limit* to their potential for good. Or was there?

She decided to shelve that internal dialogue for another day, then remembered there were *others* who would like to know about the successful mission. She extended out and told Ling, before reaching out to Jaiying and Rose. She found them over in the house and watching animated programs with Nurani. Wilber and Dwayne were with them, as well. With nothing else to do, she grabbed a couple of cookies, and headed over to the house to join them.

### *At the Residence*

Mary and Shu were still stuck at the Reservation and working with a woman in the middle of labor. It promised to be a long night.

Danny and Kayla had come in exhausted after their long shifts, and grabbed a quick couple of microwave meals before heading in to shower and catch some sleep.

Wilber and Dwayne had fixed themselves a couple of sandwiches for dinner and were sitting at the kitchen table. Nurani sat between Jaiying and Rose in front of the television, and all were laughing joyfully at the antics of the animated fish on the screen.

Aelius was sitting behind them, and Dwayne glanced over at him when he suddenly shook in silent laughter.

"That is just *freaky*," Dwayne murmured, then nodded towards Nurani.

"What? That she's enjoying a children's program, or she's having fun, even though she doesn't understand it? You heard Jaiying. She translated the plot to her," Wilber said quietly.

"Well ... yeah. But I still can't imagine watching a movie without knowing what they're saying," he said, then turned back to Wilber with a shrug.

## Picking up the Pieces

“It’s all a matter of *context*,” Wilber murmured. “One time they let me take R & R in Subic Bay, and I went off base and hung out at a bar. I didn’t go there to get *laid*, I just wanted to relax for a while, you know, *away* from people in uniform for a while. I got to talking with a bar girl and ended up paying her and her girlfriend’s ‘bar fine’ so all three of us could go to a movie just down the block. It was a comedy, and it was in *Tagalog*. Even *without* the sketchy translation by ... Emy, I think her name was... Anyway, it was *funny*. Comedy, romance, bizarre mix-ups, and a bumbling hero – *everything* a good comedy needs. It’s a pretty universal concept.”

Dwayne looked at him and considered that interpretation, while Wilber pressed on.

“Hey, I know this guy. *Old* guy. He’s got movies from China, Japan, France, Spain, Korea, Russia and probably a few others. He only speaks English, but he sight-reads subtitles at a glance. Says he’ll watch a movie once, then go back and watch it again while ignoring the subtitles on the second go-round. Says he picks up the subtle nuances of the action during the second time around – especially with comedies. Says the only thing he hates is when the subtitles are translated by someone who only *thinks* they know English.”

While Dwayne was processing *that*, there was a knock at the door, and it opened to show Laisee standing behind it. She came in and stepped around the viewing crowd to join them at the table.

“Donald is on the way,” she quietly announced. “He’s bringing back Fred and his friend, and all eighteen of the women. Everyone made it out without any trouble. They should be here around ten this evening.”

“That was *fast*,” Dwayne murmured, then glanced over at the guardsman. “Did they pick up the, ahh – you know – the *hot toy*?” he barely whispered.

Laisee smiled at his caution, thankful for it but already knowing the mission parameters were no secret among the garrison’s rank and file.

“It wasn’t there, and it won’t be there for another day. Someone is delivering it, and it’s currently expected sometime tomorrow night in Afghanistan ... if there’s still someplace for them to store it.”

Wilber stared at her skeptically – already knowing the level of destruction Donald was capable of.

“Oh, nobody *died*. It’s just not as neat and tidy as it was before they got there,” Laisee assured him. “By the way, Xue says you’re *disgusting*. Something about buckets of *blood*?”

"They didn't spill them all over the *ship*, did they?" Wilber could just imagine Lady Xue tripping over a five-gallon pail of pig's blood and making a fuss over it.

"No. She just thought the use was somewhat ... 'overkill' I believe is the expression," she said, which brought a smile to his face.

"Well, if you have no body parts to pick through, then having ample evidence that *somebody* died might distract them from looking for them. Does the garrison know?"

"Yes. I informed Ling before I came over to tell you," she said, then turned to look at Nurani. "She seems happy for now."

"As I was just telling Dwayne, *physical* comedy is universal ... mostly. Why? Is ... ah, is her boyfriend all right?" he asked quietly, purposely *not* saying "Asad" aloud.

"Everyone is coming back in one piece with only emotional issues to deal with." She looked back at Nurani and debated mentioning her *other* issue until they had confirmation of it one way or another, which would happen in a few hours.

Wilber followed her look and knew something was up, but also knew he'd be told about it when necessary. He glanced at the clock, then at his sandwich.

"My Lady Caldarous, would you like me to fix you something to eat?"

Laisee looked at him and easily read his surface thoughts. He genuinely enjoyed her presence, and was happy to do what he could to make her stay here more comfortable ... which triggered a memory from a little while ago.

"Wilber, there *is* something you can do for me. I would like to have your opinion on something, but I've left it over in the Center. Would you have some time to come over and look at it with me?"

"Certainly, my Lady. Right now would be just fine," he said, then gathered up his plate and covered it with wrap before stuffing it into the refrigerator.

After wiping his mouth with a paper towel, he washed his hands and dried them before turning back, only to see her waiting by the front door with his jacket in hand.

"You should bring your jacket, Wilber. It gets colder in the evening now."

"Dwayne, you got the watch. I'll be back ... later," he muttered, then joined Laisee at the door and opened it for her.



## Picking up the Pieces

He was surprised when Laisee looped her arm in his and let him escort her back to the Center. He hadn't a clue of what couldn't wait until morning, but that was the price of being the on-site liaison for the Healer Cluster.

### *20:30 (MST), The Kraken's Child, In Transit*

Donald was tiptoeing back to the navigator's seat after having visited the forward toilet. The compartments were operating under dim lighting, and Sai was following a pre-programmed track that should have them back in Arizona in less than two hours now. He smiled when he paused by the tiny kitchen and looked around at the bodies lying there peacefully, all sleeping quietly under the stupor of sleepy gas that – *hopefully* – would last until they were home, and he was out of range of the predicted chaos.

As he started back towards the console, he reviewed once again the semi-success of their mission...

They had both Fred and someone named Hernandez. Nascha was tribe, and by extension, so was Fred. The men would both require some *serious* medical intervention once they got back ... at least *Hernandez* would. Hernandez was pretty fucked up, but Fred had a *much* better medical plan...

Donald was in the aisle when he paused in mid-step behind his station. Xue was out of her seat. Checking the monitors around him, he could see her outline in the bunkroom. She was bending over the middle bunk and doing something with Fred. Then he saw her stand up and step on the bottom bunk rim to take a closer look at Hernandez. She was a *Senior*, wasn't she? She could check on these guys while still sitting in her *seat*, couldn't she?

He watched when she stepped back down, then looked *squarely* at the camera and frowned – directly at *him*, no doubt – and he flinched, then quietly sat down like a chastened school boy.

He took a breath and let it fall out of his lungs, now thinking that maybe she intended to extend the medical package to *Hernandez* as well. He couldn't blame her. If it were up to him, he would have done it without giving it a thought. Hell, he *had* done it, and to a nominal enemy of the *Commonwealth*, to boot!

He rolled his head around on his neck and stopped to look over at Sai. She was sitting back in her seat, but her attention was focused on the tracking updates displayed in front of her. Even at 130km up, there was enough miscellaneous crap floating around that you really needed a guide dog to make it through safely.

At least it was low enough that lots of stuff just fell out of the sky for not moving *fast* enough...

The route they were taking was similar to the last time – dodging ground observation stations on the outside chance that they *might* obscure an astronomical object at an inopportune moment. Or the *recording* of one. He'd heard that astronomers now spent their time in university labs while their minions toiled in the observatories by themselves; setting up the observation targets for their masters, which were then processed digitally and transmitted through the all-pervasive worldwide network. He just could not imagine...

He got back on track and switched on a security window in front of him to cycle through the cabin views. The front one he'd already seen in person, and Xue had now exited the bunkroom. Opening up the assault deck camera, it showed the girls lying there asleep – except for the *one* whose arms were flailing about behind the blocking presence of Xue.

After a quick look at the ship's timer, a little over three hours since gassing them, he shook his head and made a command decision.

"Sai, we're gonna need an extra Healer in a few minutes, and you're up."

He stood up, turned to see John and Asad asleep in their seats, then reached down to shake them both awake.

"Asad... *Asad!* You're up! Show time," he said, catching Asad in mid-yawn.

"Teach John here how to say 'you are safe' in Pashto. Then I need *both* of you to go back and help Xue and Sai. They're gonna start waking up soon, and..." He paused when he heard a groan from one of the women on the floor in the front cabin.

"*Real* soon," he emphasized, and pointed behind them.

"Sai, gimme your spot. You might wanna pee before the riot starts," he said, then waited for her to lock the console for the length of time it took her to abandon it and let him take her place.

"Sai, don't forget the *milk!*"

Donald settled in and unlocked the console. At least it wasn't going to be a bumpy ride back to the Annex. *Noisy*, maybe, but not bumpy.

### ***9 P.M. (MST), In Laisee's Suite***

Laisee had thought it charming that Wilber insisted she let Shu know he was being put into service for the Imperial family.

She'd silently contacted Shu and gotten a cheery expression of joy for filling in for her while she was busy at the Reservation. Then she'd asked that she not *spoil* him for her. Laisee allowed that when she was

## Picking up the Pieces

through with him, she'd reward him with a *special* word that only she and Shu would know.

At the moment, Wilber was being put through his paces, and she was *thoroughly* enjoying him. It would appear that he and Shu played on a regular basis – *daily*, according to Shu – and oftentimes more than once.

It was Laisee's turn to be on the bottom this round, and she'd just climaxed for the umpteenth time. Wilber was working up to his third when she began to giggle. Then he lost it all together when she began laughing outright. Losing his concentration was inevitable, and he stopped thrusting and pushed upright to look down at the beauty below him.

"Don't tell me. I've found one of your *ticklish* spots," he teased her, and his honest sense of humor only made her appreciate him that much more.

She finally got hold of herself and reached out to him, and once they were together again, rolled him to the side and kissed him *deeply* before pulling away, then diving back in to plant a kiss on his nose.

"You are *wonderful*, Wilber, but *no*. I heard Sai complaining about the chaos aboard the ship. The women are waking up, and only Asad and Xue are able to deal with them. They are all talking at once, and worried about what is going on. At Xue's request, the men have remained seated so as not to frighten the women."

After sharing that, she maneuvered herself onto her side, then pushed and pulled Wilber into an upright sideways scissors position with her.

She and Ronnie had enjoyed this position, and from the ease with which Wilber reentered her, it seemed that Shu had practiced it, too.

"How many women? *Eighteen*? That must be *zoo* up there," he said, then began thrusting gently while working his hand down to tickle her clitoris.

She gasped when the stimulation doubled, and smiled up at him again. "That is *very* nice, Wilber. Sai says that only five of the women are awake now. Ah! Now it is *six* ... no, *seven*!"

They both shared a round of laughter, which was only limited by their imaginations about the situation, and this time Wilber didn't get distracted. Instead, he did his very *best* to please his Royal guest.

### ***21:10 (MST), The Kraken's Child, Crisis Management 101***

Donald was getting frustrated by all the squalling, and considered flooding the tank with sleepy gas to shut them up. The only problem

was that *no one* was wearing a ships suit now, and he didn't want to wake up lost in orbit with a headache.

At least some of the fear seemed to be turning into anger, as the only persons they could speak to were the strange woman named Xue and the somewhat familiar man named Asad. Even without understanding them, from what Donald could overhear, the women were getting downright pissed, and not even letting the straps loose seemed to calm them down any. For a just moment, he considered asking Asad what they were saying, but the poor man seemed particularly cowed at the moment. Meanwhile, Sai was back with Xue and trying to keep a lid on things with the four loose ones they had in the rear.

He had a couple of more options available, but when two of the women in the forward compartment slipped out of their straps and started lurching wildly about while screaming at Asad he decided to put the easiest one into effect, then announced it loudly throughout the ship.

“GOING TO *THREE TIMES NORMAL GRAVITY IN FIVE SECONDS! EVERYONE SIT DOWN!*”

It wasn't a *horrible* thing to do, but would make the loose cannons fall to the deck. He didn't like to think of them hurting themselves, but he just couldn't tolerate the distraction any longer.

From a small window on the main screen, he watched when Sai let go of two women in the back, dropped flat to the deck, and Xue immediately followed her example.

Asad was still trying to calm down the three in the front cabin when Donald applied three G's to the ship, and everyone not already down was *flattened* by the sudden change in gravity.

Donald felt a sense of vindication when all he heard were whimpers before asking for a little cooperation.

“INTERPRETERS! PLEASE INFORM OUR GUESTS THAT THEY WILL EITHER *SIT DOWN AND SHUT UP* OR I WILL MAKE THIS EVEN *WORSE! THEY ARE SAFE! THEY ARE ALIVE! MILK AND BATHROOM BREAKS ARE PART OF THE DEAL! IF THEY BEHAVE, THEY WILL BE REWARDED!*”

Once his amplified voice died out, the whimpering in the front cabin petered out to a few quiet sobs ... and a groan. He switched cameras and saw that Asad was lodged under two of the women in the front cabin, and it looked like he'd barely avoided landing on the third.

“Fucking country girls,” he muttered, then waited while Asad tried to extract himself from beneath the pile of feminine boulders.

## Picking up the Pieces

“Hey, John? Are you strong enough to help Asad?” he quietly asked over his shoulder. “I can take it back down a bit. Two G’s... Maybe a G and a half?”

John struggled but couldn’t move. At over a quarter of a ton, he was *stuck*.

“Maybe just a couple of G’s, Don,” he suggested with difficulty, and Donald slowly turned it down to just below two G’s and left it there.

As soon as John was able to stand, cries of alarm sounded from the floor. Asad, in a fit of *anger*, finally found his balls.

“<SHUT UP YOU STUPID GIRLS! HE HAS SAVED YOUR LIVES, AND NOW YOU WOULD ANNOY HIM? BE QUIET AND WE WILL FEED YOU! WE ARE TAKING YOU TO SAFETY. NURANI IS THERE, AND SHE WILL EXPLAIN HOW SAFE YOU WILL BE!>”

“Good for you, Asad,” Donald murmured, not even knowing what he’d said, but then smiled at the gyrations he was going through while being extracted by John.

### *Crisis Averted*

It had taken them a surprisingly uncomfortable quarter of an hour but once the women presented tacit acceptance of the conditions for their release, Donald brought the gravity back down to ninety percent of normal and left it there. Then Sai came forward to check on Asad and the women. While Sai was working on them, Asad spoke quietly to them. Then Sai asked him to bring them back to the other women so it would at least give them the illusion of safety in numbers, and probably keep Donald happy.

Donald had overheard that and appreciated the thought. Then, as he’d suggested, Sai grabbed a handful of cups and pulled out a couple of vacuum flasks of milk to hand to Asad before they made their way to the rear. Several of the women were sitting up and being updated on their current situation. On the monitor, he could see the discomfort in their expressions – sleepy gas left a *nasty* headache – but once Sai and Xue started passing out measures of Healer’s milk, those expressions seemed to soften significantly.

“Movement in the bunkroom,” Seven reported from behind him, and Donald relayed it to the rear, prompting Xue to come forward.

He found it interesting that one of the women followed her and seemed to show no fear, or at least, not very much trepidation. He switched to the bunkroom monitor and saw the woman on the bottom bunk trying to get out while fighting the sleep web. She cried out in fear when Xue and the other woman entered but the woman squatted down and reached in to hug her, apparently telling her it would be all

right, before moving out of the way so Xue could release the web and let her up. They left the room and started forward, but never made it.

Donald *could* have enabled the toilet cam, but he already knew how to use the toilet aboard ship, so he called back to the assault deck with an update.

“For those of you who need it, Lady Xue is giving toilet lessons in the rear facilities. For those of you who just *can’t* wait, you can brave the forward toilet – but there is little privacy.”

He watched and saw Sai explaining it to Asad, bit-by-bit, and then he turned and explained it to the women, bit-by-bit. When he was done, a bunch of them raised their hands.

Donald suppressed a chuckle and checked the ship’s timer – about half an hour to go.

**9:45 P.M. (MST), *The Annex, The Residence***

Wilber staggered into the living room and only turned a cursory glance in the children’s direction. Nurani was still there, along with Aelius. He sometimes wondered how Drusilla felt about him hiding out over here just so he could watch movies with the kids.

He passed them and looked up at the clock on the wall. It was still relatively early, but he was *exhausted* by the workout Laisee had just put him through. Instead of coffee, he settled for a box of apple juice and some cookies – if only to get his energy up again. *One* thing he was sure of, though. Without the years of training Shu had given him, Laisee would have *killed* him.

He heard Jaiying giggle, and turned to see what they were watching. It looked like something from the Mouse, but he didn’t see anything particularly funny at the moment, so he focused on his juice and cookies again.

His peripheral attention caught the murmurs between Jaiying and Nurani, as she was presumably pointing out plot points in Pashto. Then the front row suddenly erupted in laughter.

This time he *did* see the humor, and recognized which movie it was. He seemed to recall seeing it several times over the last few weeks, then guessed it was true – you *can* watch a movie more than a couple of times if you have someone new to share it with.

He hung his head at that thought. Nurani had never even *seen* television before, and Jaiying and Rose were *hooked* on it. Well, they were family, and family made accommodations, and kept food on the table. He staggered to his room to undress and shower, leaving the girls and their guardsman to shut everything down when they left.

**21:55 (MST), *The Kraken's Child, Getting Really Close***

In a remarkably short amount of time, Sai, Xue, and Asad had cycled eighteen women through the two toilets, holding a sheet up to cover the door over the one in the forward cabin, so instructions could be given in private. Everyone had received a soothing measure of milk, and One had volunteered to prepare small bowls of mystery meat for them from the emergency sustenance system.

Now that they were drained, fed, and had calmed down, the women seemed to be getting curious about their surroundings but Xue had only told them it was a special transport so they could bring them to safety.

The woman who'd assisted her, Barsala, had told her that one of the women had been left behind. Faridun had taken that woman, Orzala, for the night, and she was worried for her.

Xue had further explained that they'd not hurt anyone *outside* the mountain, but just brought them and the missing Americans back with them. Barsala seemed to close herself off after that.

With the little bit of time left to them, the women were herded into the back room and instructed to sit still until they were told to do otherwise. Asad sat with them to keep them company, and so he could explain a little more about the accommodations they would be sharing while "things" were sorted out. He admitted he wasn't sure exactly what those "things" would be, but so far their "benefactors" had treated him and Nurani respectfully – even if they were *not* of the same faith.

**10:10 P.M. (MST), *The Annex***

In a carefully orchestrated operation, the *Kraken's Child* landed *outside* the motor pool for a change, with the assault door oriented towards the Center. All of the Center's women on site had come out to greet them, including all of the garrison's wives and girlfriends.

The concept was to show them this was a *safe* place for women. To help make that point, Nurani was standing on the top stair of the Center's porch and waiting for the rear door to open, while on either side of her were Jaiying and Rose.

Inside the tank, Donald put the systems into standby for the unloading, and stood up to share goodbyes with his crew.

"Vibianus ... Appius ... Jovian ... Caelius ... Ennius ... and finally Aetius," he said aloud. "I want to thank *all* of you for your work this day – or *night*, as it turns out."

He waited for the chuckles to die down before approaching each one to offer a handshake and a hug to show his appreciation.

"It wasn't really that much of a challenge, Donald," Vibianus said jovially. "The enemy avoided us, and the Ladies kept things in order. The worse part of the trip was *getting* there!"

They all shared a laugh at that, before Caelius added a comment.

"I don't know," Caelius said. "That *last* hour was pretty awful."

That brought out guffaws, and they all shared handshakes with Donald again, and then with each other.

In spite of being *insanely* complicated, it had been a *good* mission.

No one had *died*.

"Donald, we're ready now," Sai called out from the corridor, and he took a breath and let out a sigh.

"Culture shock, gentlemen. I have absolutely *no* idea how this will all play out, but we know they can't go home after being turned into camp girls. I'll thank you to advise the garrison of their somewhat fragile nature, and expect understanding from everyone during this painful process. It would be better if they could *understand* us – or we, *them* – but you know Earthlings. Over six thousand voices, yet *none* of them talking to each other."

With that, he waved a hand in passing, then headed back to drop the rear door.

Meanwhile, Vibianus gathered his crew to discuss the final cleanup of the tank: flattening the mattresses, folding the blankets, and once the tank was moved into the motor pool, removing the armor, propane, and anything *else* they'd brought along. The motor pool staff would then come in and service it, getting it ready for use at a moment's notice.

Vibianus felt that moment would be coming soon. There was an unmonitored nuclear device on the loose, and their hosts were *particularly* concerned that it never reached its final destination.

### ***10:20 P.M., The Residence***

Wilber had taken a shower, then come out and sat in his office dressed only in his robe. The juice and cookies had helped, but ever since Laisee had brought him up to speed on the mission, he knew Don was probably going to be visiting him before he hit the sack.

Instead of getting dressed, he puttered around the office in his robe and checked his emails, before going over some of the paperwork that *never* seemed to stop coming. He was still in his office when the *Kraken's Child* finally grounded – in *front* of the Center this time. He'd waited for the assault hatch to drop open, then watched as the women



## Picking up the Pieces

slowly exited and stood in a tight cluster while Nurani addressed them from the steps of the Center.

As soon as Don wandered out and headed his way, he stood up and meandered into the kitchen to dig out a bottle of ambrosia. It wasn't a *rare* vintage, but there was never really a *bad* vintage of ambrosia, and he didn't think he'd mind. Just so things wouldn't get out of hand, he poured two shot glasses worth and sat down at the kitchen table.

Only moments later, Don rapped lightly on the door twice, then walked in like he owned the place, which, in point of fact, *legally*, he probably still did.

"Wilber, I need you to—" Donald stopped as soon as Wilber raised a shot glass in his direction.

He smiled and nodded, before walking over and dropping down on the seat across from him. As soon as Don was sitting, Wilber put the glass down and pushed it over it front of him.

"Not a *great* vintage but..."

"There's never a *bad* vintage," Don finished for him, as he picked it up. They carefully clinked shot glasses before Don brought the tiny glass up to his lips and sipped it delicately.

"Ahhh... Wilber, if I wasn't already bonded, I'd marry you *myself*." He took another sip and closed his eyes before relaxing back in his seat.

"Bad trip?"

"Well... The *general* consensus was that the trip *out* really sucked, but then someone brought up the *last* hour as being even *worse*," he grumbled. "I'd say it was a toss-up." He let out a snort, then took another tiny sip while Wilber made an idle comment.

"Laisee and I were in the middle of something when she started laughing. Then she told me the women were waking up," he admitted obliquely, but Donald didn't offer a comment on it. "So... Did it go according to plan?"

Donald opened his eyes and turned to look at him, almost smirking as he did so.

"In spite of my *overly* complex mobile *cluster-fuck*, we managed to recover everyone we were after – except for one woman, who wasn't in the cave at the time. *Downside* is, the reported nuclear device that 'someone' was so hot to get a line on just wasn't there. Other than that, *we* took no casualties, and *they* took no casualties that we know of. We left three guys back in a deep room and dropped a lot of rubble to cover our tracks where Fred and the women were being held.

Thanks for the *blood*, by the way,” he muttered, then nodded slightly before taking another tiny sip.

Wilber sat there nodding his head, already thinking something was brewing below the surface. He was almost *sure* of it when Don pivoted his left arm up and started massaging his temples. He was about to ask him, when another knock came at the door, and Don called out, “Come on in, John.”

Wilber looked around in surprise, not quite believing that Don – or was it *Ronnie* now? – had become prescient again.

“Hello, Wilber,” John said after closing the door behind him. Wilber got up and got another shot glass, and John’s eyes lit up, followed by a big smile as he filled it for him.

After joining them at the table, Wilber passed over the glass and noted John took his time sipping it carefully while relishing the results with a sigh.

“Mmm.... Wilber, *whatever* this guy promises you, *don’t* go tunneling with him,” he murmured, then took another sip. “I’ve been in major *fire-fights* that weren’t as nerve-racking.”

Wilber waited patiently while these two combat veterans finished their drinks. He didn’t offer more, and they didn’t ask, so he left the bottle alone and continued to wait. Finally, Don broke the silence.

“Wilber, I’ve asked John to stop by because his contact will probably want to know that we *didn’t* get the nuke. He’ll need a secure line bounced all over *hell* and gone, because as soon as the mere *hint* of a nuke is mentioned, *everyone* listening in will go berserk trying to locate us.”

“Everyone listening in? Who would be–”

“The usual. NSA... CIA... Probably not the FBI, but if the *DIA* gets hold of it...” Donald grunted and shook his head slightly. “*Spooks* in *combat* boots. I don’t *even* wanna go there. I doubt even *Homeland Security* sitting on our front porch would keep them from knocking on our door. Best case is we convince them that it’s in Earth’s interest to leave us alone. Worst case is we pack up and move shop – probably off-planet. Probably out of the *system*.”

“Don? Are you *serious*? We’ve been here since ... since the *70’s*! Why would they give up all they’ve been getting? What would be their motivation? Besides, we’ve already *got* friends in the NSA and CIA – and a few *more* places.”

Don’s look of surprise confused Wilber for a moment before realizing he’d been out of the loop ever since going back on active duty

## Picking up the Pieces

for the Emperor. Still, he couldn't imagine his friend had never considered it before.

"Don, we've had fingers in the *intelligence* community ever since that little fiasco with Andrews and *Pack*. You remember that 'package' you dropped off at the Embassy? When his handlers finally got what was left of Johnston back, they were somewhat concerned that things like that *never* happened again."

"Wilber, not even the current *President* knows we're here," Don pressed him. "Of *all* people, *you* should remember our cover position with their government. To them we're just 'civilian subcontractors' that come across stuff, then feed it through *you* to their intelligence community using a handful of NDA'd contacts. So far, we've just been a shadowy presence that gives up trivial technological advancements as rent for the space we've been using here in Arizona. And we've been pretty damn *good* tenants, too!"

Donald paused and went to take a sip from his glass, but found it empty. That still didn't stop him from ranting, though.

"The *tribe* is on track, the kids are getting a *decent* education and a chance at a *real* future, and the Healer Cluster is becoming accepted by the tribal women, *and* most of the men. Aside from the *assholes* who tried to shoot me down a few years ago, I'm surprised the 'straights' haven't really caught on yet," he said, tilting a thumb over at John before continuing.

"We've been here since the 70's, but Lili planted the Center here just a few *years* ago. It's only a matter of *time*, Wilber. Already we've latched onto Fred. Fred is *tribe*, and Xue and Sai are gonna grow his leg back. I don't know what the deal with the *Hernandez* kid is, but for *sure*, Xue's planning on fixing *him*, too. Once word of *that* gets out..."

He threw up his hands, then slouched in his seat. "Anyway, John needs to pass the word back that the 'special' order wasn't on the shelf yet, but we have a projected shipping date, and I plan to stop by the store later to pick it up."

"You ... you're *what*?"

"Jeeze, Wilber! *Spook-speak*!" he chided him while shaking his head. "It's coming in tomorrow night – *Afghanistan* tomorrow night. Xue pulled it from Faridun's mind, and it seems he's the *only* one that knows it's coming. Or exactly what it *is*, for that matter. They've carved out a bigger pocket deeper in the tunnel to stash it in, too. I guess it takes time to arrange transport for something like that. After the mess we left, I doubt they'll be able to get it in there until they clear the rubble, which might take a ... few ... days..."

He paused and tilted his head while nodding thoughtfully.

"No ... what would be *better* is to snag it while it's still in *transit*. *That's* something I can do and not leave a mess behind ... not too big of one," he considered.

"Don—" Wilber stopped while he thought about it.

They didn't get the nuke, and it wasn't their fault. They could simply give those most concerned about it an anonymous tip and let them deal with it.

"Don, we can feed them the updates, and let *them* deal with it. We don't have to be involved."

"Wilber, you were *at* that meeting. Sai told me they kept dodging the prisoner issue, and had no *real* knowledge why they were instructed to do so. Both she and Laisee said they had *no* intention of recovering the prisoners. All they wanted was the *location* of the enemy. *Think* about it, Wilber. American prisoners were being left to *die*. The Taliban *slaves* were being left to die. All they had was a *specific* target in mind, and they didn't care *who* died when they took it out."

Wilber was dumbstruck for a moment, before he could respond.

"That's *crazy!* That mountain is made out of *granite!* There's no *way* they could drop enough bombs to dig that deep to destroy it!"

The pause after Wilber's exclamation was broken by John's soft voice.

"Wilber... They'd only need one," he said quietly, causing them both to turn in his direction. "They're after a *nuclear* device, Wilber. It would be a *terrible* thing if that mountain collapsed and killed everyone within a few hundred yards, but if the Taliban got themselves a *nuclear* bomb – and then *accidentally* set it off? That would take out everything within maybe five miles. And who's to say it was just *one* bomb, or was it maybe ... *two?*"

Wilber looked from John to Don, then back again. He slowly raised both hands to his mouth while trying to wrap his head around the scenario he'd just been presented with. He didn't want to believe his country would do something *that* stupid, but then again, his government wasn't all run from one location to begin with. There were *always* factions who were focused on doing the 'right thing' but would use *any* means to achieve the 'right results' as a consequence, such as the Iran-Contra debacle. Or that rogue covert action group that had blown up the Center a few years ago.

He sat there shakily before reaching out with a trembling hand to pour another shot of ambrosia into his glass ... followed by pouring another shot each for Donald and John.

## Picking up the Pieces

As they clinked glasses again, Don quietly offered up a toast, “Gods bless America,” then tossed back his drink.

They sat in silence for a while longer until Don looked at the clock on the wall and started touching his thumb to his fingertips.

“Six hours,” he murmured, then pushed himself to his feet. “Wilber, please leave orders for someone to wake me in about six hours. I’m gonna go back over and look for a radiation pattern on the move from low orbit. When I find it, I’ll grab it with the shield and haul it out of there.”

Wilber watched as Don, with a shake of his head, turned and walked out the door, leaving John and him sitting there wondering if this really was the best way to proceed.

“Uhh, Wilber ... is there a chance I can make a phone call tonight?”

“Yeah... Sure... We’ll route it through the Embassy, and let *them* deal with the security issues. Do you ... ahh, do you do that ‘spook speak’ thing like Don mentioned?”

“Talk *around* a subject using euphemisms? Sure... Just like *most* criminals do,” John assured him, and they both got up and headed to the office to make the call.

### *11 P.M., The Center, The Babies’ Room*

Déjà was sleeping, as were the babies, but Maya was wide-awake and wondering where their Donald was. It had been a long mission for all of them, but she knew he needed sleep as both he and Sai had been up from start to finish. She was about to get up and go pee when the door quietly opened and she saw his face sneaking a look around the edge of the jam. Instead of making a sound, she waved him into the room, and once he got close enough, dragged him into the bathroom before wrapping him in her arms and attempting to smother him with kisses that he somehow didn’t seem to be interested in at the moment.

“Oh, my Donald! You must be *very* tired,” she whispered, before starting to remove his sweaty clothing.

He stopped her movements long enough to say, “I love you,” before helping her shuck himself down to naked. Then he stepped into the shower and turned on the water. While he was washing, and conveniently peeing in the shower, she took advantage of the moment to use the toilet herself. Then she gathered up his dirty clothes and dumped them into the hamper. He didn’t say anything while showering, so she left and quietly pulled out fresh underwear and socks for him, then selected another pair of pants and a shirt to match it, which wasn’t all that hard...

Over their previous years together, she'd gotten used to the way her man dressed himself; denim long-sleeved shirts with denim pants. He had a couple of darker and lighter shirt and pant combinations, but they'd remained consistent for all the years they'd spent together at the refugee center. The only notable differences were seasonal: a heavier, lined denim outer jacket in winter, and a lighter one in the spring and fall ... and always a hat.

On hearing the water shut off, she went back inside and helped dry him before he wandered out naked and looked down at his children, asleep in their crib. In the reflected light of the bathroom, she saw his eyes soften and smiled at how much longing she saw in them. Then he turned to her and hugged her tightly – almost *too* tightly – and her breath caught in her throat.

She sensed it in him. The job wasn't done yet. It wasn't done, and he'd be leaving again ... and probably soon.

Instead of getting fully dressed, he got his shorts on and helped her slip her robes off before walking with her to the bed.

Looking down, he motioned her in first, letting her take the middle spot, then got in beside her on the edge of the bed.

When he snuggled up to her, he kissed her lightly and tenderly fondled her breast. She smiled and nodded, before he scrunched down lower and placed himself in the perfect position to get a nourishing and relaxing snack from her before falling asleep.

He rested a hand on her hip and caressed her slowly, but she knew he was tired, so she brought his hand up to her lips and kissed his palm before giving it a tiny lick and putting it back. She settled in next to him and listened while his breathing slowed, and his suckling finally relaxed to the point that her nipple fell from his lips.

She ran her hands through his hair, finally noticing it was much shorter than usual, and tried to ignore the implications it announced – Donald was back in combat mode, and the war was not over just yet.

She let out a sigh, then snuggled with her man.

When *Déjà* rolled over in her sleep and hugged her back, she wrapped her arm over hers and held her close. She wanted to remember every moment the three of them had left together, never noticing when she finally fell asleep herself.

### ***Sunday, October 2, Midnight, The Center, The Client Wing***

Nascha was dozing in the chair she'd moved as close as possible to the left side of Fred's bed. Her hand was resting on his stomach, and her head was on a pillow she'd placed by his torso...

## Picking up the Pieces

She'd been anxiously waiting to see Fred after they'd brought him into the Center, but they'd kept her away – promising she'd get to see him “soon” but not right at the moment. She was to wait in the wing's snack room.

She chafed at being kept away, but the fact that she'd seen him in passing had been a tremendous relief to her at the time. It was only after she'd had a chance to think about it that she didn't remember seeing too much of a body outline in the blanket that covered him. In fact, it'd seemed to narrow somewhere around his knees. She'd tried not to panic – he was alive, after all – but she really wanted to see him so she could touch him, feel him, and listen to his heartbeat. She wanted to grab hold of him and never let him go again.

Ling had finally allowed her in after warning her not to wake him or his roommate. She promised she would be quiet, but let out a gasp when she saw his sheet was pulled up and his right leg was missing from the knee down. Ling immediately pulled her out of the room and led her back to the snack room to talk to her about it. Once there, Ling had gotten a bottle of water for her from the dispensing machine and waited while she opened it and had a drink before explaining the situation to her.

Fred was currently out – unconsciousness being desirable in his current condition. She'd been told that his missing leg was only one complication, but a minor one. The leg could be repaired – at least that's what she'd *thought* she'd heard. Then Ling mentioned that at least it wasn't as bad as the other man, Hernandez.

In his case, in addition to his broken arms, he'd had both legs broken in several locations, and they'd been set very poorly. She'd said it would be easier to simply cut off his legs and start over again ... which was when she'd lost it.

While Nascha was sitting there crying, Ling had moved over next to her and hugged her – her comfort somehow relieving her of the worst of her fears. Then she'd told her that Fred had other masters to report to, and their bringing him home to her *first* was probably going to raise some issues with them. He would probably need to report to his masters and put up with their primitive medical practices until he was able to return to the safety of the Center and begin a *proper* Healing. In this, he was fortunate. Most likely, the other one, Hernandez, would face the same fate – but may have to suffer the *full* consequences of the native medical institutions.

Once she'd gotten herself under control, Ling had guided her back to the room, where she'd said something unintelligible to the guard posted outside before bringing her into the dimly lit space. While she crept up to Fred's uninjured left side, Ling pulled a chair over to his bed and placed it behind her, gently touching her shoulder to get her

attention that it was there. She sat there for a moment, before quietly dragging it closer to where she could reach out and touch him, with the admonishment that she was not to disturb him otherwise.

Before Ling had left her alone, she'd been told that if either of the men showed any signs of distress, she was to open the door and tell the guard, so he could alert the staff. Then the door had softly closed behind her, and she turned her gaze upon her husband ... finally resting her right hand over the growing baby they'd started together so many months ago.

### *1 A.M., The Center, Asad and Nurani's Room*

Nurani stirred restlessly while Asad was snoring quietly on the other side of the bed. The worry nagging at her had not been relieved at his assurances that none of the areas outside the caves had been damaged by the actions of the *non-Americans*...

Nurani had greeted the women and girls from the valley, but had been told by her friend Barsala that two of them were missing. Little Roshina had been killed by one of their captors – presumably because she'd become pregnant and whiny – and the other had been taken from the cave that evening to serve Faridun in his hut.

With the help of Laisee, Xue, and Asad, she'd herded the women into the dining area and made sure they'd gotten something to eat and drink before the Lady Ling had escorted the group down the same corridor she and Asad resided in. Nurani had shown them the room she and Asad shared, which now had a poster on the door with their pictures and names on it in both English and Arabicized Naskh. She wasn't sure if any of the women could read it, she herself did not, but the pictures would be obvious. She'd also pointed out the two huge guards that stood outside a room near the beginning of the corridor, and explained that two women with newborn babies were staying in there.

One of the women had fearfully whispered that the guards were there to keep them captive, but Lady Laisee explained they were there to *protect* the women and their babies. Then she'd pointed out the other two guards on either end of the corridor who would remain there for their safety – not that they should need it, but mostly to help them if they had a problem.

After that, they were stopped outside a room where they could see piles of clothing that were exactly alike. Each woman was given a loose flannel top and bottom set to change into until they could get them new clothing in the morning.

Ling and Laisee had already informed Nurani the women would be assigned two to a room, with one each of the four pregnant children



## Picking up the Pieces

paired up with one of the women. That way there would be a more responsible adult in charge of a child, and presumably able to apply her maturity to any situation that might crop up overnight.

Before turning them loose, Laisee and Nurani had spoken to them as a group about the toilets, and asked if anyone required instruction in how to use them. Several of the women had laughed and explained they'd already been taught on the way there, but Nurani had made the point that there was soap by each sink, and they were to wash themselves thoroughly after using the toilet; reminding them they weren't going into the bushes with a water jug any longer.

The *bonus* part of that discussion was when she'd casually mentioned each room also had a warm shower and soft towels to dry themselves with, before putting their new sleeping clothes on. Once the excitement settled, they were taken down the corridor and assigned temporary roommates, with just a few of the women requesting different partners for each other ... not everyone from the "volunteer housekeeping staff" having bonded while in captivity.

It was when they were finally alone that Asad had sworn that the man – Donald – had made *every* effort not to harm anyone. Then he'd also said that if what he and the woman named Sai had spoken to each other about was true, they'd collapsed the inside of the tunnel and caves pretty thoroughly. In either case, her older sister, Orzala, had been left behind outside the caves to suffer Faridun's wrath after losing his supplies and prisoners to the "earthquake" that had damaged the mountain stronghold...

The snoring didn't really bother her any longer. She'd missed it last night, and was surprised at how much better she felt now that he was here with her again – even if he was sleeping like a rock. She finally got up to use the toilet, then splashed some water on her face, before going back and sitting at the table in the dim light of the room.

She knew nearly all of the women who'd been retrieved.

Of the girls, she knew Ambrin and Bibi, having seen them before, while she had vague memories of Diwa and Lawanga. Perhaps she'd seen them when they were a little younger? Four were under the age of fourteen, and two of them were under the age of thirteen. They were just too young to be having babies outside of marriage.

She suddenly hunched her shoulders, as she'd not told *any* of the newcomers of her and Asad's little "accident" in that regard. Not that it really mattered. If they returned to the village, the village leaders would kill them *all*. Their own *parents* would gladly kill them for dishonoring their families – despite it not being their fault for being captured and raped. At least here they would find safety. The Lady Laisee had even told her the babies might be removed before they grew

too big to become a real person. She didn't really understand any of that, but knew that both she and Asad wanted their child.

She closed her eyes and supposed it was a discussion for another time, then gave her head a tiny shake and looked at the dimly lit clock on the dresser. It was late, and she was tired. The women would be up in a few hours – disorientated, fearful, and hungry. *Hungry* – they could do. For the *rest*, she would have to rely on the ... the *non-Americans*.

***October 2, 3:10 A.M. (EST), Sleepless in Maryland***

Operations Specialist Dwight Abernathy wasn't necessarily a light sleeper, but the last bit of information passed on to him a few hours ago had left him in a bit of turmoil. At least the timing involved had promised him a little down time until he needed to be back in the shop, so he'd come home to shower and hit the sack – not that it had done him any good...

Just six hours ago, their communications interception of the CIA's *one* human asset on the ground had reported the partial collapse of the mountain near the suspected enemy encampment. That message had been short, concise, then ended abruptly – most likely by the death of the asset. At least it had included that, of the “two dozen eggs on the shelf, only one remained unbroken” – meaning that only *one* of the prisoners in the area was known to be alive. *Hopefully*, the earthquake had covered their recovery. Either that, or they'd been lost in the collapse.

He'd heard all the remote chatter about the hours of fairly constant low earth movement in Northern Afghanistan, and had been hoping for a fait accompli that would remove the possibility of a nuclear accident from occurring *anywhere* in the world – *especially* the United States. Instead, about three hours earlier, he'd learned that the “special” order had somehow been delayed in transit, but the “shopper” intended to go back and pick it up once it finally arrived.

After no little consideration, he'd sent out a request to alert him of any group of twenty or so female Pashto speakers popping up anywhere in Afghanistan or Pakistan. On a hunch, having a very limited understanding of that *particular* group of contractors involved, he'd also extended it to include anywhere within the United States.

He knew it probably wouldn't amount to anything, but you just never knew...

He tried to close his eyes, but the ceiling always seemed to draw his attention. On it, he could see the light coming in from the streetlight on the opposite corner, and sometimes, if a car's windshield were in a particular spot, the late night dog walkers would leave a shadow on

## Picking up the Pieces

both it and the wall as they passed his apartment. He'd often wondered what it would be like to have a pet but his job of the last thirty years had kept him on his toes – sometimes spending *days* at Fort Meade while dealing with one crisis after another.

If only those assholes over at the DIA had agreed to deal with that “special” group *honestly*, then maybe all this bullshit could have been *avoided*. From the recordings he'd listened to, he'd known *immediately* what they were up to, and so did the CIA ... and maybe even the FBI, although the FBI wouldn't really give a shit about the foreign issues involved, but would *definitely* be concerned about any *nuclear* issues that cropped up.

Dwight stretched and let out a sigh, before finally giving up and slipping out of bed. He stopped by the window to gaze out at the night sky, before heading to the bathroom. As he sat there, he considered again the price of that rather irregular Top Secret/Sensitive Compartmented Information clearance that had granted him, or alternatively, *condemned* him, to a life of stress. It could still go either way, and at the moment, it was extremely stressful. Still, he tried hard to divorce himself from that tiny group as much as possible.

In the last six years, this had only been the *second* issue that had popped up that actually needed him to include his direct input. He knew of no one else at Fort Meade who was in the loop on this, and been very surprised to learn that one of his counterparts in another agency had been working with an *Israeli* asset off the books that had given them a chance to try and put a *dampener* on things before they got messy.

As he was washing his hands, he looked at himself in the bathroom mirror and considered that maybe he was finally close enough to retirement age and could perhaps bow out gracefully?

It would certainly mean his *overall* stress levels should crash, and that was always a *good* thing, wasn't it? He chuckled to himself and wandered back to the bedroom, only pausing to look out the window again. While he'd been absent, two SUV's had parked outside, and he could see a small group of men standing there – armed and armored – and several of them were looking up at his window.

Shaking his head sadly, he walked over to his dresser and drew open the second drawer. Reaching inside, he dug under the drawer liner and pulled out the little credit card sleeve he'd been given but had never carried before. He remembered being told not to say anything to *anyone* but he'd also been given the allowance to tell others – in *his* chain of authority – the very *minimum* amount of information concerning any *non-alien* issues that might crop up. Pulling the thin device out of its sleeve, he armed it before slipping it back in and putting it into one of his pajama pockets.

He had enough time to be sitting in his robe in the living room and having a drink of scotch, when his door was suddenly kicked in, and six armed men entered the room. He spent a moment wondering if his counterpart in the CIA was facing the same problem when it suddenly occurred to him that he didn't really know if any aliens were involved or not.

**3:30 A.M. (EST), Washington, D.C., The Embassy**

Cornelius yawned widely and checked the clock.

He'd deliberately taken this watch because he knew a ship was going out from the Center in a few hours, and he'd probably already be off duty and in bed before it left. With any luck at all, it would complete whatever mischief it was up to and be back before he went back on duty again. He was contemplating the peaceful end of his watch when a *personal* locator alert flashed on the main monitor and a name showed up next to it.

*"\*Dwight Abernathy? Abernathy... Abernathy... Ah! THAT guy,\*"* he muttered, then set up tracking to see if he was on the move.

It was an unusual thing to have happen, and usually only by accident – except for that one time with Wilber Milton. That incident had them misplacing Milton for nearly a month when someone recognized the card for what it was and destroyed it only seconds after it'd been triggered. Not only did they now *look* like credit cards, they even *worked* like credit cards, the trigger mechanism being smaller and flipping from one side of the card edge to the other before it even left the sleeve. You could still detect it, but you'd have to be looking at it before it triggered on release.

In this case, the card had not been destroyed, and it looked like Dwight was on the move somewhere in Maryland. He pulled up his home address on Sycamore Ridge in Laurel and thought maybe he was headed back to his office, but the beacon was heading South on the Baltimore-Washington Parkway. He was just jotting down those notes when another beacon went off.

*"\*Timothy Fredricks? What is going ON tonight?\*"*

He looked up Timothy's workplace and living addresses, then watched as Fredricks' beacon showed him moving away from his Potomac Avenue address in Alexandria and heading North. Instead of heading West on 495, the beacon turned East and got as far as 295 where it turned North again.

He checked the other beacon and saw they were both approaching that delicate area known as Joint Base Anacostia-Bolling, which was when he suddenly realized his dreams of heading to bed were crashing

## Picking up the Pieces

in front of his eyes. He quickly wrote it up and triggered messages to the two Earthling liaisons currently in Arizona, followed by the Captain of the garrison serving the Center there. Then he sent an alert to the head of Embassy security that it might be prudent to warm up the shields surrounding the building – just in case.

As he slouched back in his seat, he watched the two beacons converge at a specific location before they both went silent at the same time. Either someone had smashed them, or they entered a *very* well shielded facility of some sort. Given the known residents at that base, it was likely the latter.

On the *upside*, he considered that at least he wouldn't be up by himself for much longer, which was confirmed only moments later when two security men joined him in the monitoring center – one of them bringing enough snacks for everyone.

### ***October 2, 5:30 A.M. (MST), The Annex, The Motor Pool***

Donald was surprised to see a bunch of people hanging out in the motor pool to see him off. He was even *more* surprised to find Sai waiting for him in the *Kraken's Child*. Before he got much further than the last row of seats, he heard the forward toilet flush and turned just in time to see John come out of it.

"You washed your *hands*, right?"

"I don't normally *pee* on myself, but yes, I washed my hands," John assured him, then came forward to shake his hand. "I heard you had a little *trip* planned, and I thought – hey, it's gotta be smoother than the *last* one."

Donald shook his head, then turned to Sai.

"And I suppose *you* had nothing else to do as well?"

"Don't look at *me*, Donnie. This is *Ling's* fault," she said, then stifled a yawn before continuing. "Wilber got an alert from Washington that triggered an *immediate* defense posture at the Embassy, so she woke everyone up. At least *you* still got to sleep in."

He was still thinking of a sharp retort when the rear compartment door slid open, and he turned to see Xue enter the forward cabin. The expression on his face seemed to amuse her, as she'd broken out in a warm smile.

"I *always* wash my hands," she said cheerfully. Aetius followed her out and was already wearing a ship's suit.

Donald was wondering when this had become a party again, when he heard footsteps tromping up the airlock before Wilber stuck his head in through the doorway.

“Good morning, Don. Thought I’d stop by and give you the *bad* news.” Wilber came in and grabbed the adjacent rear seat before rotating it to the side and flopping down on it.

Donald groaned aloud and repositioned the other seat as Wilber had done before collapsing onto it like a deflated sex doll. He hoped this mini-briefing would be done before the sun came up – *if* the mini-mission was even still a go.

**7:45 A.M. (EST), Wilmington Place SE, Washington D.C.**

Dot usually liked to sleep in on Sundays, but the surprise call from her office had woken her up. She managed to drag her tired ass out of bed and stagger into the small kitchen to start a pot of coffee before fumbling her way back to, first the toilet, and then the shower. She’d finally become mostly awake by the time her shower was almost done, but it wasn’t until she was wrapped in a towel and drying her hair that she even considered what *new* disaster might be waiting for her at work.

They hadn’t told her over the phone, of course. That would be too easy to brush off if it didn’t appear to be all that important. Likewise, the phones in this area of Washington were almost certainly tapped by any one of *several* agencies she could name, and probably a few of the ones she couldn’t even pronounce.

She hung her damp towels, then slid open her closet doors. Fresh socks, fresh underwear – she momentarily considered going braless, but decided against it – and perhaps casual *civilian* clothes for a relaxing Sunday at work, just to rub it in the gate guard’s face for once. After all, it was *Sunday*, wasn’t it?

She selected a casual pantsuit, and finished dressing, before going back to the kitchen and getting her cup of morning coffee. She’d considered giving up the pot in favor of instant coffee and a hotpot, but hadn’t found a version of freeze-dried coffee she could tolerate. As the first swallow meandered down and began the final awakening process, she took the vacuum travel mug out of the dish drainer and filled it before screwing on the lid and setting it on the breakfast counter.

She headed back to the bedroom and secured the windows, checked the windows in the bathroom, then circled around the living room and made sure all the windows were secured in there as well. After one last drink from her cup, she poured out the rest and turned off the pot, before pouring out the rest of the pot as well, and setting them both in the sink. While she was doing *that*, she considered once again that she should *really* learn another recipe for making coffee but it was like all her other cooking efforts – she only knew *one* way to

## Picking up the Pieces

make something, and that was it. Perhaps that explained why she'd failed Home Economics back in the day, but that was over two decades ago.

Seeing the kitchen was as good as it was going to get, she went back to the bedroom and straightened up the bed – finally digging the short lump out from under her sheets and putting “Bob” back in her nightstand.

That was something *else* she'd considered developing at one time, but realized she had no talent for *that* either, which is why she was stuck with “Bob” – her “Battery-Operated-Boyfriend.” At least all *he* wanted from her was a couple of fresh batteries once a week.

With everything ready, she pulled out her keys and unlocked the filing cabinet so she could slide open the bottom drawer. Reaching down, she pulled out the small gun safe in the back of it. Her Glock 17C – “Daisy” – was nestled within and remained snoozing peacefully when she drew her out and rammed the 17-round magazine up her butt. She really liked Daisy and felt truly sorry she'd started putting off range days lately, as that seemed to be the *only* time Daisy got to come out and play anymore. At least, she still got to keep company with her in the office, and didn't require much attention at all – just a light oiling once a week.

She packed Daisy into her shoulder holster – *another* change from what was expected from a woman at the Agency – and slipped on her jacket. After a last look around, she locked the filing cabinet, then walked into the living room and grabbed her travel mug before setting the security alarm and scooting out of her apartment.

It looked like a fine morning, and she would've preferred going on a long drive, but her office was just a mile away – hence the apartment complex she'd chosen. She'd missed breakfast, but there was a Dunkin Donuts in the next building over from her office, and she knew they opened up at six a.m. – even on Sundays.

With a disgusted sigh, Counterintelligence Agent Dorothy “Dot” Gale walked out to the parking lot and drove the few blocks to get to 295 North before looping through the half-cloverleaf onto westbound Malcolm X Avenue and entering through the gates on MacDill Boulevard. Her office was just another couple of blocks north of there, and parking should be easy on a Sunday.

### ***06:30 (MST), The Kraken's Child, On the Way***

Sai sat in the navigator's position and spared random glances at Donald. He seemed to be taking things rather well so far...

Wilber's update had them wondering if the trip would even be worthwhile. After only a minute's consideration, Donald had

concluded that since they had no idea of the mindset of *any* of the agencies involved, getting the nuclear device out of Afghanistan was still the *first* priority. As for the Healing Center, Aineias already had that under control.

It turned out that, in addition to the *non*-treaty beam weapon in the hut, there was also a shield projector buried in the center of the complex that would shelter the Center from anything short of a nuclear blast above thirty kilotons. They'd been surprised Radatel had authorized it, but were told Lili had *insisted*. Besides, it'd come out of petty cash, so it wasn't a biggie.

Obviously, the *biggest* concern for Wilber was another repeat of that business with either Howard Pack or Thomas Johnston. Johnston was dead, of course, but Pack, along with Handlin Andrews, had been cashiered from the service for their unauthorized murder attempt against Embassy staff of a friendly alien government. Wilber had immediately put feelers out for Pack and Andrews to see what they were up to and said that he'd send updates through Laisee and Sai when they became available.

In the meantime, the Embassy was in a defensive posture, and a *very* few select personnel within the current administration had been notified that two of their NDA'd contact associates had apparently been relocated without a warrant. Since one of them was with the CIA and the other was NSA, Wilber was pretty sure it was because of the business in Afghanistan, and probably related to the failure of discussions during the meeting he and Laisee had attended.

Knowing *now* what they'd been after made it even more important to recover it quickly – if Donald could even *find* it. It would be extremely unfortunate if the delivery had been delayed for more than a day or so, or even diverted. They were sure that Faridun wouldn't want to let that prize slip away, but then again, he didn't have the drugs to pay for it, so it might just go back on the market. There were any *number* of organizations who would like to get their hands on a nuclear device of *any* kind, and this one was already available.

Surprisingly, one of Donald's *first* concerns had been the welfare of the missing CIA and NSA personnel. According to Wilber, they'd joined the party through the usual means – stumbling across information they weren't supposed to know, then coerced into signing the NDA with very few other options.

For them, it was a double-edged sword. They essentially still worked for their government, but their actions could be construed as traitorous to their agencies – depending on who would be willing to stick their necks out for them. While Mr. Peanut was in office, it had been a good deal. With Mr. Shrubbery manning the desk, their only



## Picking up the Pieces

other recourse would be to give it up and let the *other* agencies follow them down the rabbit hole to a non-existent reality courtesy of the Embassy counter-intelligence team.

It *should* be like Donald had told Wilber – a matter of what they were willing to give up in exchange for letting the Embassy and staff do what they could to help out when they could, but only on their *own* terms. Those terms *specifically* excluded interfering with other governments and countries in other than *humanitarian* ways.

The Healer Cluster was the carrot that very few in the American government even knew about. Obviously, it would not remain a secret forever, but so far, there'd been no huge influx of press or needy government families looking for instant cures for whatever ailed them.

It was cruel in a sense, but overpopulation, lack of housing, food, education, and jobs were *greater* priorities to deal with instead of just Healing the sick.

What good was Healing the sick when there was no infrastructure investment to help *keep* them well and socially productive?

It was better to work on backing *away* from constant conflict and instead focus on pursuing efforts to *help* each other, rather than going in and covertly tearing down other governments for the sole purpose of maintaining self-serving “beneficial” control by corrupt politicians, or profit margins for big businesses. It always *sounded* good – right up until “they” got more than “them” and then it all fell apart again...

Sai pondered sending out a feeler to Laisee, but decided against it. It hadn't been that long yet. She checked the displays for external traffic again, but saw that Donald was on top of it, so she decided to take a break.

“Going back to pee and get something to drink. You want anything?”

He let it sit for a few seconds, then said, “Yeah... World peace ... and some apple juice, please.”

She shook her head, then got up to go back and take care of business, passing Xue, who'd been sitting behind her all this time.

Xue had been dancing around Donald's mind for the last half hour while trying to read his feelings. For some reason, he seemed to be rather numb at the moment. It almost felt like he'd switched himself off, but the minute corrections he'd occasionally make to their course told her otherwise. The man was a walking contradiction to her.

By one definition, he was an incredibly dangerous loose piece on the board, while by another, an extremely concerned and sensitive man whose intentions were to help, rather than hinder progress.

She'd seen him in action. He seemed to come alive when he was on point and actually achieving positive results. Even when faced with difficulties, he'd remained focused on completing the mission – even to the point of accepting her suggestions when they offered a different but acceptable substitute to what he'd planned.

Of course, the fact that they'd made his task easier had been the *obvious* reason.

Or was it? She'd known many men – and *women*, too – whose plans could have been improved, but had instead pushed blindly ahead, then had to deal with the consequences. That, of course, had made her think of Elder Kita, but then her circumstances had been somewhat *unusual* at the time. Or were they?

Rather than dwell on the past, Xue extended to Afghanistan from where they currently were. She'd known that Jaiying had been sending Healing to the women over there with the help of her little cousin and her mother but she couldn't *imagine* how she'd exerted enough energy to take down that child murderer in such an obviously clever and innocent way. What she'd read from Laisee – since Jaiying had an *incredibly* tight block – was that the child had arranged to trip him, thus putting him into the position of falling against a rock wall. The only reason she'd done *that* was to mask the fact that she'd then *snapped his neck* on the way to the ground. The little girl was *amazing*!

After a few minutes of poking around in the target area, Xue finally pulled back and relaxed. Since they had at least another two hours to go and really nothing else to do, she decided to catch up on some of the sleep she'd missed earlier this morning.

### **8:30 A.M. (EST), Joint Base Anacostia-Bolling, DIA Headquarters**

After settling in at her office, Agent Gale read the rather thin evidence provided by communications intercepts before dropping those reports on her desk in disgust. She didn't see any real connection to any ongoing mission plans the senior DIA planners were working on. She'd been told it involved Afghanistan somehow, but not been “read in” on the *details* of it.

That was typical. Investigating “suspicious” intercepts, then told to make a judgment call on them without having sufficient background on the issue to make that call – not that anyone had bothered to tell her which *specific* problem it was, and what those plans might entail.

The only thing even *remotely* garnering her attention was the September 28 recording of a very secret meeting with an undisclosed shadowy organization that was somehow associated with technology transfers to the American government in exchange for – if she'd *read* it

## Picking up the Pieces

correctly – the establishment of an Embassy located somewhere within Washington, D.C.

Exactly *whose* Embassy it was and exactly *where* it was situated had not been included – and apparently there were no official records of such.

As for the recording, it had *tentatively* revealed the suspected existence of American army prisoners being held in a location the attendees had absolutely *refused* to disclose unless guarantees of a “fatality-free” recovery was assured. It sounded rather “touchy-feely” to her, but the conversation from the low-level agency types had given her the impression they were *also* working in a void – just like she currently was.

It was very frustrating. The names of the agency attendees were known to her, but the only person identified on the other side was a detached Homeland Security agent posted as liaison to the unnamed Embassy. For the others, all she’d heard was “Senior This” and “Lady That”, which left her only option being sending feelers out to identify and hopefully *locate* a man named Wilber Milton and see if he could shed some light on what in the hell was going on.

As for Abernathy and Fredricks...

Her first interrogation was scheduled for nine a.m. and she hoped to hell it didn’t devolve into a pissing contest over interagency bullshit. She’d already been through that a couple of times, which had required senior intervention from elements of *both* agencies to resolve. It was always awkward and *never* career-enhancing. Looking at the clock, she stood up and straightened her jacket. Pausing only to grab her clipboard and information sheets on the two detainees, she strode out to visit the holding cells.

What a lousy early start to the workweek...

### ***October 2, 18:30 (AFT), Korengal Valley, Picking Up the Pieces***

In a rare show of kindness, Faridun had left Orzala alone while she was grieving over the loss of her companions. She’d still been secured within his hut, but he’d done nothing more than bring her food and water, and the occasional update from his men as they’d slowly cleared the rubble away from the tunnel entrance and started working their way inside.

She’d been hopeful, as were he and his men but the explosions just before dawn had not only announced the cessation of the earth’s movements, but also the destruction of several rooms along the tunnel walls. The weapons and ammunition were a given. The flash of light heralding the explosion had taken out the weapons cache, and destroyed the adjacent supplies of food. Even now, some of his men

were canvassing the villages along the sides of the valley for extra supplies – sometimes at gunpoint.

He'd have to watch that. Indiscriminate use of ammunition would have to be avoided until they were able to restock. There was a small supply on the other side of the mountain ridge, but the tunnel was cut off somewhere past the new room and it didn't look like it was going to be cleared for a while.

The men had also lost their secure sleeping quarters, it having collapsed, and the entrance to it effectively sealed.

Of particular sadness for Orzala and the villagers was the collapse of the women's quarters. As they'd cleared the rubble, hope was held out for survivors, but the smell of death pervaded the tunnel the closer they got to the collapsed space. Likewise for the Americans, but nobody cared about them.

One good bit of news was finding Mateen, Perzo, and Darwesh. They were alive and well, but trapped in the new room by rubble that had rolled in front of the door. None of them could remember much, other than becoming dizzy and then passing out. Their general conjecture was that at some point they'd regained enough of their senses to realize they were trapped inside the tunnel and had somehow made it into the new room to wait it out.

What no one but Faridun was concerned about were the very few bags of heroin that had been pushed out of the storage room, leaving the majority of it crushed beneath piles of rock, or dusted across the tunnel floor for several yards in both directions.

He'd had his men carefully recovering as much of it as possible, but aside from the few bags that were still intact, the remaining stock would have to be reprocessed from the contamination of the tunnel.

He'd heard some of the men grumble about the pointlessness of it, saying they could always get more heroin. What they *didn't* know was that their leader had made a deal that involved the entire stock on hand, and the package it was paying for had already been shipped.

Fortunately, he'd received a coded message saying there'd been a delay in transit. If it was delayed long enough, then he might be able to leverage his options and *still* meet the seller's price, but it would be close.

Of course, his *other* option – the one Orzala had bitterly muttered to him earlier – was still available to him.

It was risky but doable. But if he or his men were ever caught, it would burn him with the organization, and put a price on his head that would be too irresistible to ignore.

## Picking up the Pieces

Faridun smelled the odors of cooking, and headed back to his hut to gather Orzala for the evening meal. He would allow her time to relieve herself and wash before parceling out a tiny portion of food for her. Maybe later he'd try to raise his own spirits by making use of her himself. That thought immediately conjured up difficulties with his men, but he wasn't against sharing, once he'd had his turn.

### ***October 2, 9:00 A.M. (MST), The Annex, Missing Some Sleep***

Wilber had been staring at the monitor blankly, but was suddenly startled back to alertness when someone touched his shoulder.

"My Wilber, I have brought you your special blend," Shu whispered seductively, and set his coffee down in a tiny clear spot on his desk.

He slowly rotated his chair until he could stretch both arms around his bond-mate and hug her to him, nestling his head between her breasts, and getting a purr of anticipation from her in return. Unfortunately, play was almost the *last* thing on his mind at the moment, but he had sense enough to ask about the delivery.

"How is the mother? And was it a boy or a girl?" he murmured into her warm cleavage.

She and Mary had both returned to the Annex and crashed sometime after the Embassy had called in the alert and before he'd planted his butt down to start making inquiries. He knew she couldn't have gotten enough sleep, but she was a Healer and had hidden resources to tap for such situations.

"Liluye is just fine and she had a little girl. They named her Onawa. It means 'Wide Awake.' Her eyes were open almost from the moment she came out," she said, then caught the unvoiced question on his surface thoughts. "The mother's name means Hawk Singing."

He thought about that, then considered the length of the labor she'd had to endure.

"I bet she was singing last *night*," he muttered, then pulled away to look up into her eyes.

"For *hours*, my love! To relieve the pain, she finally gave in and *nursed* from me, and then things speeded up. She delivered less than an hour later." She smiled down at him, and hugged him to her again. "My Wilber, will you not rest now?"

"Shu, as much as I would like to rest, I see that I may have some answers to my questions," he said, having glanced at his monitor before she'd tucked him back against her.

She let out a soft sigh before separating from him, then shared a sad expression as she waved a soft goodbye that left him sitting there

alone. Moments later, he heard their bedroom door open and close, but he didn't mind. She really needed her sleep.

Turning back to his computer, he opened the first of ten messages and started checking if there were any positive responses – aside from offers of “hot dates in your area” and “stiff erections or your money back.”

### ***11 A.M. (EST), Joint Base Anacostia-Bolling, Hitting the Wall***

Dot tossed her clipboard onto her desk and slipped off her jacket before plopping down in her chair...

Her interview with Dwight Abernathy had been a *bust*. It hadn't been a *complete* bust – he'd freely given up his name, rank, and the fact that he worked for the NSA – but after that, it had been a constant tap-dance to avoid smacking solidly up against that bullshit “TS/SCI” wall that seemed to surround almost *everything* the man was associated with.

From the research notes provided to her, she'd known that Dwight was a career NSA Operations Specialist, and had been so for almost four *decades*. From what her operators had dug up, she'd learned that he'd even turned down a significantly better-paying job in the Pentagon – something he'd surprisingly admitted to, but had qualified it by saying, “I don't like uniforms.”

He seemed willing to discuss public knowledge of secret events, but not in any more detail than had been published in the news.

At his age, sixty-two, she suspected he'd seen quite a lot – both within and outside the agency – but he appeared to have grasped the philosophical concept that “sometimes shit happens.” In his case, it also appeared he understood the concept of “don't cry over spilt milk.”

Going out on a limb, she'd finally taken the risky option of mentioning the *real* reason he'd been snagged – the ongoing issue in Afghanistan – to which he'd calmly asked, “Which one?”

Personally, she didn't have a *clue* as to what in the hell was going on in Afghanistan that her agency was getting so flustered about, and although she'd tried very hard to avoid it, her expression seemed to have given her away.

Seeming to take it as a *teaching* opportunity, Dwight had begun reciting publicly known issues in Afghanistan – undoubtedly as reported in the media – and giving her a breakdown of the situation over there from America's first involvement, right up until last week.

Then he'd stopped, almost as if he were waiting for her to add something to the conversation.

## Picking up the Pieces

She'd stared at him while pondering her position before actually considering bringing up the subject of the September 28 meeting, but then he'd glanced at the clock, and said, "I'm sorry. I believe our session is over for now. Time for you to go and visit Timmy."

Checking herself, she'd noted the hour and glumly gathered her things to leave, while trying very hard not to react negatively to the kind smile he'd been sharing with her as she left for her next interrogation.

When she'd first entered his holding room, CIA Officer Timothy Fredricks had declined to address her. He'd remained distant to her, even after she'd read aloud the limited amount of information about him that was on the sheet in front of her. Instead, he'd chosen to remain sitting calmly in his chair and looking past her – directly over her shoulder at the camera located behind the one-way window. Over the next fifty-five minutes, Dot had broached the same questions she'd plagued Dwight with, but without the slighted change of expression on the man's face.

When her time was up and she'd gathered herself to leave, he finally did make *one* comment to her, saying, "After I'm gone, somebody go feed my cat."

She'd stared at him for a moment, then left the room, only to find one of her assistants waiting for her outside the door. He'd handed her a folder containing an update on Fredricks, then shook his head sadly before turning and walking away...

Now sitting in her office, Dot reviewed the information and notes she'd taken with Dwight before reading through the information sheet on Fredricks again. Other than his rank, nothing in her paperwork indicated exactly what he did for the agency, other than he was employed by the CIA and had been for an undisclosed number of years. Before that, he'd been educated at a West Coast university and brought an MBA to the party, along with a degree in *Philosophy*, of all things.

Finally opening the folder containing *updated* information about Fredricks, she found there'd been a few revisions to his profile. Her staff had been digging further into Fredricks, and subsequently found *nothing* of what he'd done prior to joining the CIA – or that he'd even *joined* the CIA to begin with. Likewise, records of his apartment address, credit cards, and even his driver's license and car registration seemed to have disappeared. Essentially, it would now appear Fredricks had officially *ceased to exist* within thirty minutes of him being picked up by the DIA!

This told her two things – *one*, that someone had been watching Fredricks and knew he'd been snatched, and *two*, the CIA had

*immediately* considered him a burned asset and was busy sanitizing his existence. She leaned hard on her elbows and dropped her face to her hands while thinking about these new circumstances.

While Dwight had appeared to consider this to be a mere Sunday diversion before reporting to work tomorrow morning, Fredricks had remained distant, even somewhat *detached*, from his situation. The more she thought about it, the more she believed someone had screwed up – *majorly* this time. From the comment Fredricks had finally made, it almost sounded like he expected the CIA to sanitize *him* as well.

On thinking about that, she made a note to check and see if the NSA and CIA had responded to the interrogation pickup notifications of their employees yet. Then she remembered she'd not seen a copy of the written orders to pick them up. She started flipping through her note sheets and didn't find a copy anywhere in there. Then she stood and checked underneath her desk to see if they might have fallen to the floor by accident.

Dot stood back up with a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach. Their parent agencies should have been *immediately* notified of their employees' detention. If not, there was the all too real possibility it had been over *nine hours* since the NSA and CIA should have been *formally* notified of Dwight and Fredricks' detainee status. She groaned at the sudden realization of what a *huge* interagency cluster-fuck *this* was shaping up to become.

Resigning herself to this suddenly career-tanking disaster, she sat down and dragged her phone over to make a few pointed inquiries. While it was ringing, she jotted down a note to have someone go over to "Timmy's" apartment and recover his cat before the Company got around to sanitizing *it*, too.

### ***October 2, 21:30 (AFT), Over Afghanistan, Cloaked and Waiting***

Donald had them in a holding position just twenty kilometers above the expected route a truck might take to deliver a heavy radiation source to the target area. Both the cloak and shields were up, and they were well outside of air traffic patterns for the area.

So far, his broadband radiation sensors hadn't picked up much of anything other than IR signatures of cooking fires, heated huts, and the occasional wildlife, which also included humans. He'd gotten nothing indicating any motorized transports crawling around below them until he'd shifted over a bit to include Nangalam – a small town in the area.

Once he had a few reference values to base them on, he set up alarms to trigger on IR signatures above wildlife but below actual fires,



## Picking up the Pieces

with the expectation that anything else moving above 15 miles per hour would probably be mechanical in nature and a potential target of opportunity. After that, he refocused on the target area and sat back to wait it out.

### *October 2, 12:50 P.M. (EST), Arlington, Virginia*

General Howard Mayfield, USAF (Retired), was sitting on a towel in the PAC locker room and feeling relaxed after his invigorating thousand-yard swim, or more accurately – *tired*.

It had taken him months to work up to it, teased along by that retired Navy Captain who worked in the office next to him. He'd watched that man for *weeks*, eventually convinced that he was part man and part dolphin before he'd finally admitted defeat, and simply *asked* for some helpful tips about swimming laps. That had ended with him being taken back to basics about working *with* the liquid medium instead of fighting it, and learning the basic sidestroke in the process.

Instead of a splashy and excessively aerobic crawl, he'd learned to glide gracefully through the water – thus saving his energy and extending his endurance. Forty laps didn't seem like that much of a chore now. It was exhausting, sure, but it no longer felt like he was on the verge of *dying*, and at his age, that was *always* a bonus.

He glanced at the clock in the locker room and realized Lorraine's was going to close in ten minutes. He was on the mezzanine in corridor 7, and Lorraine's was on the second floor in corridor 3. Even if he rushed and threw his clothes on damp, there was still no way he was going to get a quick bite to eat, so he relaxed and took his time while drying himself thoroughly.

Once ready, he signed out of the PAC and headed down the nearer corridor, deciding to visit his office before heading down to the basement. He knew he had plenty of time, as Dominic's was open 24/7 and made a *hell* of a Philly cheese-steak sandwich, to boot.

It wasn't that bad a gig here at the Puzzle Palace, but it had certainly taken him a while to find his way around...

He'd spent the first week following a carefully remembered path from the metro station to his office, learning the hard way that he needed to actually learn the path on his *own*. That was primarily because of the discussion he'd had with security personnel regarding his clipboard and the associated *map* he'd been sketching on it as he walked from place to place.

They'd very politely pointed out that corridor maps were located at specific junctions, and reminded him that a call to security was usually sufficient to find out where a specific office could be found –

which did *not* include him writing down office numbers and names on a clipboard...

Howard reached his office, always amazed that it had taken him no more than seven minutes to get there, and was greeted by the weekend staff. He un-successfully brushed off a folder pass on the way down the hall and tossed it onto his desk before pulling back his chair and sitting down. He fired up his computer with the intent of playing a few hands of FreeCell while waiting for the Sunday lunch crowd to thin out in the basement. While it was booting, the blue folder on his desk kept calling to him, so he reluctantly picked it up and casually browsed through the contents.

Pages one and two were routine updates on potential problem areas, and he knew his team was on top of them.

Page three was a signal intercept, which was an update of some sort, but wasn't exactly defined about what. He supposed the NSA and CIA were probably all over it and rushing over who would get the interpretation correct the first time.

He began reading page four but stopped halfway down the page, the name in the *center* of the page dredging up flashbacks that had haunted him for several months until he'd finally been able to find relief from them.

Howard slowly leaned back in his seat and took a shallow breath...

After the incident with Pack and Andrews back in '98, he'd had a rather unexpected "epiphany" and taken some time off for introspection. That had led to a *new* understanding of reality, which had required a more *extensive* review of his life's direction. Once he'd used his influence to shield his son from any freedom-limiting consequences, he'd put in his papers and retired from the Air Force, taking his pension and putting some effort into reestablishing a *normal* relationship with his wife of over thirty years.

Unfortunately, the life of a stay-at-home retired General became a little too much for her, especially with his frequent night terrors, and they'd separated for several months until he'd found support from an unexpected source. After their relationship stabilized once again, he'd been contacted by one of his acquaintances and eventually been offered a *new* job. It was similar to his old job, but in a much better location, and travel would be minimal.

He'd subsequently found himself working for the Under Secretary of Defense for Intelligence. Needless to say, the range of experience he brought to the table was much wider than expected, and, although the source of it could never be divulged, he'd been able to apply it with an enhanced perspective that made his intelligence interpretations and

## Picking up the Pieces

recommendations a valuable commodity to those he served. All that, and he was *double-dipping*, too!

And now ... *this*...

This was something he'd tried to ignore for the last several years, as the memory of the day he'd signed that innocent-looking piece of paper had left him full of confusion, fear, and finally ... acceptance of a *potential* fate.

He glanced at his computer monitor with the tempting login prompt winking at him, but pushed the power button until it shut itself down. He couldn't send any emails from here – certainly not with the *security* network they had installed. He looked at his phone, but realized he wasn't even sure if it would be prudent to use the phone from his *home*. That left him making a *personal* visit... Or perhaps purchasing a *burner* phone?

He let out a snort at the thought. He was a glorified intelligence analyst, not a *spy*, but then looked at the name once again.

A burner phone – just to call and see what's up. A *courtesy* call.

After all, the man had saved his marriage. He got up and left his office, heading to the North Entrance.

He checked his wallet on the way out, and swung by the concourse level in corridor 10 to get some cash from the ATM. He had no idea of how much it cost to throw away a phone nowadays.

### ***Monday, October 3, 01:30 (AFT), Afghanistan, Still Hanging Around***

Donald checked the seatback display timer again and confirmed it had been only four hours since they'd been waiting for the package to arrive...

He'd switched off with Sai for a while, then gone over a quick "refresher" orientation on the specifics of the *Kraken's Child* with Aetius – or *Seven*, as he'd insisted on referring to himself. He'd allowed it simply because it made the boy happy to be working in space once again, and on a *Galaxy*-class, to boot.

It'd turned out that Seven's initial service included a rotation in tanks, and he'd enjoyed it immensely, although the current lack of beamers had been a great disappointment to him. "Tank" had calmly explained that, while beamers had their place in combat, for most *practical* purposes, simply driving a tank *through* another ship was usually quicker, easier, and certainly more effective in disabling it to the point where they couldn't fight any longer.

When Seven commented that it would certainly be easier to destroy the enemy ship once it was disabled, Tank explained that the *better*

solution was to grant mercy to the enemy as a point of moral pride. That, of course, led them to delve into the methods of the Madman, and Tank explained the mission was not to *destroy* the enemy, but to make it overwhelmingly obvious that once the enemy had stopped *fighting*, they were no longer considered worthy of *killing*.

Seven had gone silent at that, then thanked him before taking a break in the bunkroom where John and Asad were already napping...

Xue glanced over at Sai, who was in the pilot's seat, then got up and sat next to Donald in the last row.

"You've *confused* the boy," she murmured, before letting out a sigh borne of indecision – which he misinterpreted.

"He's still young. It took me a *long* time to learn that lesson," he muttered. "Gods' grace it doesn't take *him* that long."

They sat in silence for a while until Xue rested her hand on his thigh and patted it gently.

"You confuse *me*, as well, Donald," she murmured. "You were *Kita's* project, and yet you failed to perform as she'd predicted."

He let that stew for a minute before letting out a sigh of his own.

"Grandmother was reactive at the last," he said faintly. "She should have passed the position to someone much earlier ... and much younger. Someone *other* than Ai." He shook his head slowly while thinking of her. "Ai was too sweet. Too ... *rigid* in her impressions of reality."

He turned his head and looked down at her.

"She lacked a certain amount of ... *introspection*," he murmured, which got a suppressed snort of derision from her.

"Until either *you* or one of your minions took even *that* away from her."

He let that lie, not wanting to admit his influence either way.

Instead of an admission, he reminded her of her position.

"Xue, the woman was too weak for the position, and *your* office was responsible for doing something about it. She was going to kill *Sai*," he whispered, while looking at the back of Sai's head two rows in front of him.

"So we learned ... after Sai refused to kill *you*," she murmured, then patted his hand this time. "Despite all that, you've managed to bring *peace* across all the known clusters, and *I*, at least, am grateful for *that*, Donald."

## Picking up the Pieces

They sat in silence for a while longer, seeing random detections in glances on the forward display above the seatbacks. Donald thought of the future and, knowing his was rather limited, still felt the need to point out the obvious.

“The peace will last only as long as everyone works together to keep it. Societal stability is *key*. Earth is a microcosm of the Commonwealth and the Hegemony, although perhaps a more *extreme* version of them. We have relative stability, and now Gagsa is working to bring a version of that stability to the Hegemony. The *Vanir*... They’ve been stable for tens of *thousands* of years, but were tradition-bound to a planet that was slowly mutating them. Now they’re in the process of looking for better accommodations.”

“Thanks to *you*, I understand.”

“Well ... my staff. Damned clever bunch of engineers and scientists. Surprised the hell out of *me*, anyway,” he admitted quietly.

The silence reengaged for a minute more until Xue’s curiosity got the better of her.

“Donald... What was it like when ... when you died,” she whispered.

He lifted his arms up and stretched, then tentatively brought one down just above her shoulder while resting the other one in his lap. He held it just off her body until she reached up and pulled it into contact with her, before he took a calming breath and let it out.

“I remember it being somewhat lonely ... and *disappointing*,” he finally said. “My expectations were to see spirit guides, and then attend a debriefing session before becoming recycled. You can imagine my surprise when I found myself out in the middle of a field and all alone – until *she* showed up.”

Xue waited for him to continue, but finally patted his leg with her free hand to prompt him.

“Jaiying,” he said, then paused for several seconds before going on. “She’d suffered some collateral damage from a bomb attack down on Vanaheim, and they’d popped her into stasis to keep her ... not *completely* dead. Clever application of the stasis device. Saved their leader’s daughter that way ... after we brought her back from being *dead* and all. Come to think of it, she was mostly fucked up from an *inside* plot against her warren. *More* collateral damage.”

Xue remained silent while she digested this new information.

With Donald sitting next to her, and with her now holding his hand, she was reading this directly from his memories with *exceptional* clarity for a change. During the process, she thought she’d seen an *impossible* image, and prompted him in that direction.

“Jaiying was there after she ... *almost* died? Did you happen to see anyone *else* while you were ... *indisposed*?”

He shrugged slightly, then thought back to it – the fading memories of it.

“Well ... this *guy* showed up. Said his name was ‘Destiny’ but I finally recognized him... I *think*,” he said, and waited three ticks before continuing. “I think... I’m *pretty* sure it was Aquintus Tiberious. I have a fuzzy recollection of a *woman* popping in, too, but I don’t recall talking to her all that much... *Ever*, really.”

Xue sat very still and stared at the seatback in front of her. This tenuous evidence of an existence past the current one was intriguing to her but it was just that – tenuous in the *extreme* and merely the ravings of a man whose head had been dislodged for the better part of a month or more. Still, his memories of Aquintus were the same as hers. She wondered if the woman looked like...

“You know, I do remember *one* little woman,” he suddenly said. “She was a real sweetheart, and I’m pretty sure she’s my *daughter* now. Destiny called her Faith, and I saw her features in my daughter when I looked at her for the first time. Of course, the inhabitant of my *son*’s body is rather obvious. He’s even got my father’s *frown*.”

She struggled hard to stifle a laugh at his spot-on assessment of the boy, but that didn’t deter Sai and she laughed out loud at his expense. While Xue’s attention was drawn to the back of the pilot’s seat, Donald carefully extracted his arm from around her shoulder and sat up straighter.

“What’s it gonna be, Xue? You gonna *kill* him or what?”

Sai had asked it lightly, but her forthrightness shocked both Xue and Donald. Xue finally patted his leg again, then stood to shift over and work herself into the navigator’s seat, where she could easily see and speak to Sai.

“You would not follow orders to kill Rondal Caldar. If ordered to kill *Donald*, would you do so *now*?” she asked her bluntly.

Sai’s delay seemed to indicate she was giving it some serious thought, something that wasn’t lost on him.

She finally let out a sigh, and said, “Probably not. He can be a *dick*, but he’s a *useful* dick. Besides, I’ve seen him in action. I figure it’s only a matter of time until he screws up again. Without a stasis box to pop him into? Ha! Mission accomplished.”

“I thank you for your heartfelt *support*, Lady Tal,” he muttered disgustedly.

## Picking up the Pieces

“Hey. I’ll let you *live* just as long as you take care of my daughters and *grandchildren*,” she retorted, a semi-serious overlay of truth lying behind it.

“*That*, I can do ... if these assholes ever show up with that damn *bomb*,” he said, then lurched to his feet and left the forward compartment.

Once he’d closed the door behind him, Xue turned to Sai and smiled.

“You love him, don’t you.” It was a statement, not a question, and Sai growled faintly before responding.

“He’s an unmitigated *ass* ... but he gets the *job* done,” she finally admitted. “And he’s *right*, you know. I was with him at the Fringe. He would not prosecute attacks against a retreating enemy or one that was damaged. He felt that treating the Drecks as helpless children not worthy of an *honorable* death was *demoralizing* to them. It took *eight years*, but ... who’s to say it didn’t make a difference?”

Her memories flashed back to some of those times, and she remembered when he’d even set off a distress beacon on an immobilized Drecks ship, then hung around long enough to detect the approaching picket vessel before transitioning out of the area.

“So he risked his ships and men to show *mercy* on the enemy?”

The question caused Sai to snap her head to the side to look at Xue’s expression. She couldn’t get a feeling from her, and thought she was probably blocking for this mini-interview. Just the same, the truth had to be told.

“We didn’t take too many losses of our own. Ronnie protected his men and ships, but taught some of the most incredibly *dangerous* combat techniques I’d ever experienced. You have *no* idea how surprised I was to learn the *Madman* was the one who’d saved my Maya, even if it was too late to save her daughters. Ronnie isn’t one of the *Gods*, Xue. Neither is he one of the *Demons*... Well ... not until Ai *curled* him, anyway.”

“And he threw *off* that curse, didn’t he?”

Sai glanced at her again and just shook her head. Then she looked back over her shoulder to see if they were still alone, before turning to look at the display in front of her again, but kept her voice low when she spoke.

“You’re a Cletus *Elder*, Xue. Donald is *human* now, so why don’t you just pry into his memories while he naps and pick and choose the ones you’ll use to convict and *execute* him! Just ... just make it quick and painless. The Commonwealth owes him *that* much, at least.”

Xue stared at her a moment longer, feeling the stress and fear radiating outwards, while Sai stared straight ahead at the display in front of her. She watched as she made a tiny position change that brought a fringe heat source into better resolution for a more accurate reading before adjusting it back again.

They didn't speak again, and Xue looked down at the deck for a moment before getting up and taking one of the rear seats to settle into for a while.

About a minute later, Donald came out shaking his hands of excess water while muttering something about a missing towel. He wiped his hands on a towel from under the kitchen sink before turning towards the refrigerator.

"Sai, you want anything to drink?"

*Sunday, October 2, 2:10 P.M. (MST), The Annex, The Residence*

Wilber's phone had rung about six times in the last two and a half hours, and always from the same unknown caller who never left a message. Without a caller ID, he continued to ignore it. He'd been thinking of turning it off completely, but there was a mission afoot, and didn't want to take a chance of losing a message from either of their two missing contacts.

The next time it rang, he finally got fed up and answered it – whispering loudly into the handset, "You're not supposed to *CALL* me here! Listen! The job is done, but there's *BLOOD EVERYWHERE!* You want it cleaned, that's *ANOTHER* 25-G's! You know where to send it. And don't call *again!*"

He hung up with a certain amount of satisfaction, only to be rewarded with another call from the same unlisted number just moments later. He picked up the handset and prepared to blast the caller, but was stopped by a single word.

"Wilber?"

He waited a second, then asked, "Who's calling?"

"Howard ... from California ... about six ... seven years ago."

"Mayfield?"

There was a delay while someone was making up their mind. Then...

"Look... DIA's got a query going out on you. Just thought you should know."

"That's ... very *helpful*, Howard..."



## Picking up the Pieces

Wilber paused, considering how far outside the security web Mayfield was currently sitting, even knowing he was close enough in the loop to be an effective resource. He decided to feel him out.

“Our *internal* guys reported that some of our friends may have traveled as far as the *origin* of that query ... our friends in friendly places. It was reported that their ... their *phones* stopped reporting when they entered the same location.”

“Well, that’s sounds like business as usual.”

“Howard. Thank you for calling. We really appreciate it...”

He paused for another moment, remembering the problems Mayfield had had to work through after feeling isolated while dealing with the whole “alien” issue by himself.

“You know, you might want to talk about this with Chuck. I believe he’ll be back from vacation tomorrow. Maybe tonight.”

Wilber waited while Howard digested that tidbit of knowledge about his boss, Charles Whitfield.

Charles worked directly for the current Under Secretary of Defense for Intelligence, Stephen Cambone. He knew it would be a big lump to swallow.

“I ... if I see him, I’ll mention it to him.”

“Good. We ... ahh, we’re trying to recover something for you guys that we wouldn’t *normally* be pursuing – you know the restrictions we’re under. We stumbled across it in passing, and figured it was something that we’d not like *anyone* to be playing with – particularly those not currently on good terms with the United States. The ... ahh, the Ambassador’s *superior* has allowed this as a matter of good faith – more of a *karma*-balancing action than a trade for anything.”

“A freebie?”

“Exactly...” Wilber paused again, then considered the *other* little tidbit he might plant a seed for.

“Ahh, while we were out shopping, we picked up a couple of your lost lambs. One of them belongs to us. Actually, he’s one of *yours*, but he’s the spouse of a legal resident of ours. Anyway, they’re both pretty fucked up, and we’d very much like to fix them, but without too much curiosity as to the *means* we apply – or how they made it back from where you lost them.”

It was Wilber’s turn to wait while Mayfield paused to consider this request.

“Williams and Hernandez?”

“Ha! You guys are *good*, Howard. Listen, we don’t have any friends in that curious agency. If you or Chuck could *recommend* someone as trustworthy, we would certainly appreciate it. It would probably save us a whole lot of headaches in the future.”

*“I’ll talk to Chuck and mention that ... if I see him.”*

“Good enough. Thanks for calling, Howard. Please give my regards to Audrey.”

Wilber waited, but the line clicked a moment later, and he terminated the call on his end before leaning back in his chair and considering this *new* information.

If the *DIA* was asking about him, then they probably *did* pick up Abernathy and Fredricks. The Embassy geeks reported Fredricks had already been scrubbed, which was a *shame*, since he’d been the one working John Smith. He keyed in a request for the Embassy geeks to input a rumor into the CIA network that the *DIA* might have bagged Fredricks without a warrant. It might save his career or it might not. The CIA was notorious for keeping their toys in their *own* sand box, but breaking them rather than letting someone *else* play with them.

Quite frankly, he could not imagine how much pressure the previous President had had to apply just to get Fredricks *approved* for special access privileges with the Embassy that bypassed his normal management tree. He put in another request to have a meeting scheduled between Dwayne and their main CIA contact – probably for next week.

It might be too late for Fredricks, but they’d still like to have a live active contact – rather than having the Embassy geek squad sifting through all the bandwidth passing in and out of Langley while trying to make sense of it all in real time.

Abernathy should be all right. He was a seasoned pro, and a very cool operator. The few times he’d met him, there didn’t seem to be *anything* that could ruffle the man’s composure. No doubt, he’d simply go back to work and catch up with whatever he’d missed once the *DIA* cut him loose. He sent out another request to have the NSA notified that Abernathy had possibly been “accidently” picked up by the *DIA* in regard to activities he was currently supporting with authorized intelligence contractors. It wasn’t much, but it might help shake him loose.

He looked at his watch, almost three p.m., which made it two-thirty a.m. – *tomorrow* – in Afghanistan. He didn’t bother to dwell on their progress, already knowing that it would probably be hours longer until they had anything to report. He raised his arms over his head and stretched – then noticed the smell coming from his armpits.

## Picking up the Pieces

It didn't make any *sense*. He seldom exercised, and yet his body odor would indicate otherwise. After logging off his computer, he got up and started pulling off his shirt on the way to the bedroom.

What he needed was a nice, hot shower. A willing bed partner afterwards would just be a *bonus*.

### ***October 2, 7 P.M. (EST), Anacostia-Bolling, Going Somewhere***

Agent Gale threw down her clipboard and considered this rather inglorious end to an otherwise moderately successful career...

Both the NSA and the CIA had somehow received *outside* intelligence that two of their operatives had been picked up by the DIA for interrogation. Representatives from each agency had showed up just an hour ago with instructions to recover their men and any recordings that had been made of any interrogations that had taken place. It probably would have been better if the DIA had *already* notified them, but it'd turned out that *that* particular person didn't *work* on Sundays.

As a *bonus*, agents from Homeland Security had accompanied them with claims that the DIA had inadvertently interrupted an *active* intelligence mission, and both men were *critical* to its completion. Somehow, that last part didn't seem feasible to Dot, particularly since she wasn't aware that DHS was involved with national security issues at that particular level. She'd accepted their documentation without comment, though, and reviewed it carefully before kicking it up to her boss's *subordinate* – who'd then punted it up to their *boss*.

On a *Sunday*.

During *his vacation*.

*Out of town*.

Her *final* instructions had arrived just fifteen minutes ago from the Director of the DIA.

Apparently, he'd had his *ass* chewed by the Under Secretary of Defense for Intelligence for allowing *his* agents to interfere with an ongoing *contractor*-supported operation that – *so far* – had recovered injured American soldiers and an unspecified number of non-combatants, presumably returning them to a place of safety.

Left unsaid was the *rest* of the “ongoing” portion of the operation, but she had a pretty good idea *that* was what the fuss was all about, and why they'd been picked up in the *first* place.

It was a typical fuck-up. Yet *another* case of the left hand's thumb not knowing what the right hand's pinkie was doing, and getting all *paranoid* about it before jumping in with both feet without *talking*

about it first. Unfortunately, she'd been pushed right into the middle of it, and she *still* had no idea what was really going down...

She glanced up at the two huge men standing by her door – DHS agents, apparently. They neither smiled at her nor frowned. They just stood there with blank expressions on their faces. She let out a sigh, then looked down at the top sheet on her clipboard before removing it and sorting through the stack underneath. She methodically read each page, selecting which pile it would be put into. At the end of five minutes, she'd ended up with two piles – one of which contained only two sheets, and the other holding the rest of them. She handed one stack to each of the men, who then looked at them very thoroughly before murmuring to each other.

After making their own selections, they finally handed one stack back to her and pointed to the paper shredder next to her desk.

With a knowing nod, she slipped them into the very expensive “chip” shredder and let it run until it shut itself off. She even opened the door and pulled out the waste bin to show them the sheets were now tiny chunks no bigger than an eighth of an inch in any dimension. She noted they seemed content to hold on to the other two sheets – the ones with her *transportation* orders printed on them, along with her *signature*.

Not that she'd really had an option. It was either sign them, or sit out the rest of her career in a more uncomfortable location. They hadn't actually come out and *threatened* her with prison – and she really couldn't see why she'd been hung out as a scapegoat for this mess to *begin* with – but they'd alluded that things might be better for her after she'd taken a little “trip of discovery” and completed a series of interviews for them. She'd really had no idea that the USD(I) could influence things to *this* degree – certainly not all the way down at *her* level.

She opened her drawers and slowly pulled out a few things – gently placing them in plain sight on her desk so it didn't spook her “new best friends” with any surprises. Apparently, it all met with their approval, and she was allowed to place them in the same clear plastic bag that held “Daisy” and zip it shut before handing it back to them. Then they nodded their heads and opened the door for her. The unspoken order that it was time to get off her butt and leave with them was implicit.

When they finally made it to the parking lot, she was surprised to see three SUV's waiting for her. Actually, there was one for her, one for Abernathy, and one for Fredricks. As she got closer, both prior detainees looked up from the briefings they were reading and smiled at her.

## Picking up the Pieces

She saw them turn to each other, then point to the papers in their hands before nodding at each other. Finally, Abernathy turned away and joined the NSA crowd, while Fredricks' attention was drawn to something going on behind her.

She stopped and turned, surprised at seeing one of her staff walk out holding a cat carrier with a paw waving from the carrier door. She looked back and saw Timothy beaming.

He was now *totally* animated – not at being released, but by seeing his cat safe and sound. He came forward to get her just as the carrier reached Dot's position.

"You done *good*, Dorothy," he said, while the cat pawed at his fingers through the carrier's door. "I'll put in a good word for you. Keep an open mind, and maybe you can help us out some time."

After that, he took the carrier and walked away, heading to his team's SUV while talking to his cat and bringing her up to date about his ordeal.

She slowly continued to the last SUV and paused while one of the men held the door open for her.

"Just ... where are you taking me?"

"Some place safe," one of the men said.

"Protective custody," the other one said.

She looked at the back seat of the SUV and noted there was a black object sitting on the seat back. It looked silky and was the approximate size and shape of a person's head. She closed her eyes and considered it was only fair.

With a sad shake of her head, she bent down and slid to the middle of the back seat before belting herself in. She hoped they didn't have far to go.

She kept her eyes closed while her two escorts slipped in on either side of her. Then she heard the engine start as the driver made ready to leave. She was wondering when they would get around to bagging her, when she heard someone sitting next to her pressing the buttons on a cell phone.

"We've recovered the missing packages, and picked up a sample for testing ... Yes, Sir. ... Probably in a day ... or maybe two."

She heard papers shuffling and being passed in front of her.

"At the Embassy, Sir. ... Yes, Sir. ... Ahh, if they pass the sample, we'll bring it over for final approval. ... Thank you, Sir. ... Good day, Sir."

Dot kept her eyes closed when the vehicle pulled out of the driveway and headed towards the main gate.

***Monday, October 3, 06:45 (AFT), Still Just Hanging Around***

“Donald, it’s getting light outside,” Sai murmured. “Time to take us up.”

He looked over at her and snorted in disgust. She was right, of course. He did another traffic scan before boosting them up to fifty kilometers. In this part of the world, going from sixty-five thousand to one-hundred sixty-four thousand feet was probably overkill, but why take chances?

He set his detection scanners to alert them for any traffic – which was doubtful at this altitude – and stretched in place.

They’d detected no radiation sources – *none at all* – and he was *less* than pleased about it.

“Sai ... would it be possible for you and Xue to locate Faridun and pick his brains for the *current* delivery schedule?”

She thought of saying something snarky, but remembered what Wilber had mentioned about the meeting he’d had with both John and Donald concerning what their hosts might be tempted to do if they *didn’t* recover the weapon. Instead of a caustic reply, she got up and headed back to discuss it with Xue in the bunkroom.

Once she’d left, Seven took the opportunity to grab the navigator’s position and settled in to observe. Donald wondered if he would launch another barrage of questions at him, but the young man seemed content to enjoy the front row seat at the console for the time being.

***Sunday, October 2, 9 P.M. (EST), Somewhere in Washington, D.C.***

Agent Gale sat quietly in the room they’d placed her in just a little over an hour ago – according to her watch, anyway. She wasn’t quite sure exactly *where* she was since they’d finally gotten around to putting the hood over her head once they’d entered the DuPont Circle. She’d lost count of the number of times they’d driven around it in the dark, but they’d eventually exited and continued with a few more turns until the road began winding. Then they’d slowed and driven into an underground parking structure of some sort, after which they’d politely escorted her to the room she’d been left in and pulled off her hood.

It wasn’t a *bad* room. Although bereft of comfortable amenities, there was an attached toilet – which appeared to actually be private – and the two chairs next to the single table were comfortable. For the

## Picking up the Pieces

sake of protocol, she'd taken the one facing the door – not that she was in any position to do anything about her current situation.

~~~

*“How is our guest, my Lady?”* Ambassador Horatius asked of his Senior Healer.

*“She appears strong of spirit, my Lord Ambassador, but I fear she has missed the evening meal, and her hunger may produce a strain on her mindfulness,”* she reported while avoiding a glance at his ample girth.

*“The Earthling.... We are sure he will not come this evening?”* he continued, already thinking this might be an excuse to order out for two all beef patties with all the associated amenities – plus French fries.

*“He is currently involved with supporting the assignment Lady Caldarous has been charged with, my Lord. We can make our guest comfortable until he can arrive to conduct her interview,”* she assured him, then listened silently when he let out a heartfelt sigh of resignation that they were stuck *pet*-sitting for the Emperor's daughter, all the while stifling the snort that threatened to break her composure...

She'd been here for two years, and was tired of Domitius' *willful* disobedience to her dietary guidelines, making his wives and other Healer's tasks more *onerous* – let alone the *stress* he placed upon them when it was *their* turn on the bottom...

*“My Lord, I will have the kitchen prepare a meal commensurate with her current dietary needs, and have it delivered to her adjacent quarters,”* she said, then bowed her way out of his presence for the evening.

### ***Monday, October 3, 08:10 (AFT), Some Better News***

Bazgar's overnight teams finally had some *better* news for Faridun this morning.

While two teams were nearly finished with blocking off the stench of the collapsed prisoner quarters, Faridun's persistent focus on the drug cache had Bazgar working a third crew throughout the night to dig out the drug storeroom and recover whatever they could from the collapse.

So far, it looked like they might have found nearly a third of the original stash buried intact under the rubble. There was a lot of loose powder towards the rear of the cave pocket, but it appeared that the rift, or whatever had actually happened, had only torn away the back half of the room when the mountain had given way two nights ago.

As he approached Faridun's hut, Bazgar hoped this would appease his leader. If it was good enough, perhaps he would share the last woman with the *rest* of the men. With that thought in mind, he boldly stepped up and tapped lightly on the side of the door.

**08:20 (AFT), *Still Just Hanging Around...***

Sai visited the rear facilities after leaving the bunkroom. Xue was still in there and resting after their last hour spent poking around and deciphering what was on Faridun's mind at any given moment. John was still sacked out in the top bunk, and Sai considered that Donald would probably like a break once he heard the *latest* gossip from groundside.

She left the facilities and walked up quietly after hearing the sound of music coming from the console monitors. For some reason, it sounded rather melancholy to her senses, and she remembered hearing it coming from Laisee's bedroom at the Center. She noticed Seven quivering slightly in his seat and stopped to watch, not knowing what was going on, but terribly curious about it just the same.

The melody played out slowly before finally stopping, at which point Seven's head dropped and his hand came up to wipe his face.

She gave it a few seconds before quietly moving forward a bit more to confirm her suspicions – Donald had made the young man *cry*. She was about to say something, when Donald leaned over and patted Seven on the shoulder comfortingly before speaking to him gently.

"So you see, Aetius, it isn't just a simple matter of *forcing* compliance among the Earthlings. They must be won over at the very *soul* of their beings. We know and understand this ourselves. Very few Kantites would willfully be in conflict with our society. Your observations of Earth show you a populace in *chaos* ... and yet they have created beauty such as *this*. This *one* song, played with the artist's heart and soul, can bring *powerful* emotions forward from even the *strongest* warrior. Within the Commonwealth, I know of *many* artists who invoke feelings of gladness, sorrow, or tragedy within the human heart, but the *Earthlings*... They are so young that they are gifted with the freedom to express themselves from their very *souls*. We don't see that among the older Clusters ... not so much. Even Lady Caldarous is affected by such – and she plays the *same* Earth instrument, although not with the same *passion*."

Sai stood quietly behind them and wondered if this had been a deliberate attack to undermine the man's confidence.

"So... So, the Earthlings are... They are *all* like this?"

The question seemed rather naïve to Sai, but Donald pursued it.



## Picking up the Pieces

“Not all of them. No. You’ve heard the music in the transport van when you go shopping. Most of it is music intended merely to entertain – to lift the *spirits*, inspire *dancing*, or perhaps *sexual* encounters. You may have watched the video programs with the young Princesses. Music used in such a way to help tell the story by setting an overall *mood* – sometimes being bright and cheerful to let the audience know things are going well, or becoming dark and moody to warn of the advance of dark forces against the characters. It is still a *young* civilization, lad, and this is just one example from a very small *group* of them – *relatively*.”

Donald finally noticed Sai standing there, so he patted Seven’s shoulder a few more times, before pronouncing his final thoughts on the matter.

“Granted, they’re a pain in the ass to *deal* with, but just look on it as *job* security. Speaking of which ... *hello*, Lady Tal. Have you Ladies discovered anything *new* about the plans of our evil terrorist below?”

Donald had asked that to her face, but immediately turned back to the console monitor to scan it for alerts – of which there were none.

He maintained his focus on the display while she settled into the left hand seat behind the navigator’s position – pointedly ignoring Seven’s efforts to remove traces of tears from his face.

“Faridun’s spirits have been *lifted*. You missed half of the drug room on the way out. It couldn’t be helped, Tank. I wouldn’t have tried to do even *that* much.”

“Well ... hindsight and all,” he muttered. “Shoulda let you play with the shield and simply yank the whole damn *room* out and bury it somewhere else in the mountain. Cleaner and more effective. Lesson learned. What else?”

She paused after catching his feelings of personal failure over the incident, before they quickly faded away. He’d made the call, but it didn’t look like he was going to dwell on the failure of it.

Like he’d said – lesson learned.

“They’ve recovered between about a third to one half of the drug supply intact,” she said, then qualified it. “That’s *hearsay*. He hasn’t yet seen it *personally*, but I think his men would know better than to lie to him.”

Donald slowly nodded his head, considering half of the drug supply would probably *not* meet the selling price of the device in question. They needed another asset they could sell.

“What about that *last* girl? She still around? Could he use her as part of the payment – like in trade?”

Sai was about to say something, but Xue silently interrupted her first.

*“He does not know Orzala is Nurani’s sister”*

*“What difference does it make?”* Sai asked.

*“I would see what he considers for her fate”* Xue shot back, then went silent.

“His memories show her sharing his hut ever since the women’s quarters collapsed. She was distraught over the loss of her friends,” Sai told him.

Donald stared at the monitor while thinking about that.

“Sharing his hut” reflected a completely different connotation from “dragged to his hut” in preparation for yet another rape. The impressions picked up when *he* was still picking brains had affected the way he interpreted events.

It should be the same for *everyone*, shouldn’t it?

“Sai, when you say ‘sharing his hut’ – do you mean Faridun simply let her stay there for her *own* comfort and wellbeing, or was he still using her as usual?”

Sai paused while she and Xue had a quick chat about it in mindspeak before relating a more accurate report.

“The impression we got was that Faridun seemed to express *concern* for the woman. His memories of her reflect a fondness for his physical relationship with her, but they’re also tinged with caring for her feelings of loss and despair.”

Donald chewed his lips while considering this *new* element in the equation and how best to exploit it.

“He hasn’t shared her with anyone *else* since the earthquake?”

Sai’s delay was slight.

“Not that we’ve discovered. No.”

“Have you tapped into the *girl* yet? Is there anything about her we can take advantage of – like using her *against* him?”

“I... Let me go back and confer with Xue, Tank,” she said, then got up and headed to the bunkroom again.

***Sunday, October 2, 11 P.M. (EST), Somewhere in Washington, D.C.***

In retrospect, Dot thought that, *overall*, this had turned out to be a relatively comfortable holding cell...

## Picking up the Pieces

She'd been left pretty much alone in what turned out to be the *outer* room until someone had shown up sometime before ten p.m. with a dinner tray of food for her. That someone had been a young woman accompanied by two other young women who'd then set about checking the bathroom before coming out and walking up to a blank wall. They'd conferred in a soft, lilting language for a moment, before one of them gasped in understanding, then placed her hand against the wall, which then smoothly slid to the side to reveal a door.

Once opened, the door led to the previously hidden bedroom where she'd found some familiar items of clothing – obviously from her *own* apartment – laid out across the bed, along with her standard travel bag sitting on the floor next to it.

At first, this discovery had triggered a righteous indignation within her, but the fact that these women obviously didn't speak English – as evidenced by their ignoring every question she'd asked them – had dampened her vitriol, and she'd finally accepted it as a fact. After all, this was only tit for tat, wasn't it?

She'd watched as the women arranged her meal on the small desk along one of the bedroom walls, and was then surprised to find yet *another* door granted entry to a full bath. The woman who opened that door had gestured her over, and once she'd come to the entrance, the woman pointed to towels hanging on wall bars, and the combination tub and shower. She'd also pointed out various soaps and bath tools before stepping around her and backing out of the room while facing her and bowing all the way.

After they'd left, and apparently locked her in, she'd inspected the room *thoroughly* – going through the small armoire and discovering a few more items of her clothing, checking the drawers and finding a few changes of her underwear, then finding two pairs of her more comfortable shoes in the bottom drawer of the armoire.

They'd even brought along her small travel bag, with her toothbrush, toothpaste, hairbrush, and comb. After eating and then deciding to bathe, she'd dried herself using one of the surprisingly luxurious bath towels before putting on her one pair of pajamas and slipping under the covers to see if she could get some rest – which just didn't seem to want to come...

Dot stared at the ceiling and wondered what was in store for her. She rolled her head to the left and saw the illuminated numbers on the alarm clock over on the desk – *way* too far away from the bed to simply reach out and slap it off in the morning.

She rolled her head to the right and looked at the bed lamp sitting there on the nightstand. Its switch had been unusual, in that it went from high to low, but was never really off. That is, the bed lamp went

high, low, and off. But there was a valance lamp around the base of the platform bed that glowed softly with a dim red light.

Well, at least she wouldn't be waking up and *tripping* over anything in the dark.

She let out a sigh and was thankful she hadn't kept pets. Fredricks had a cat, and she'd ordered it picked up before the CIA arranged for it to disappear – along with Fredricks. She was grateful he'd apparently been accepted back into the fold – at least it'd *looked* that way from his interaction with Abernathy outside the DIA offices.

That thought caused her to reflect on them both. Abernathy had been *completely* transparent – up until she'd asked questions that violated his security protocols. Fredricks had stayed absolutely *silent* – up until he'd asked her to have someone feed his cat. And Abernathy had called him “Timmy” didn't he? And they seemed to be sharing confidences while standing outside of headquarters, didn't they?

She decided to abandon that track for a later time. Aside from being *way* too depressing, the hour was late and she didn't appear to be going anywhere soon.

She rolled her head and listened to the crackles in her neck from having held in her tension for the last several hours, then raised her hands to grab the muscles at the back of her neck and began pulling them, trying to get the tension to release, but with only marginal success. She brought her hands back down and brushed them across her covered nipples – triggering a tingling reaction she found inappropriate for the situation.

Upon reflection, she decided it wasn't all *that* inappropriate, and reached down to explore the recreational facilities situated between her legs. Her efforts were somewhat hampered by her pajamas, so she got up and slipped out of them before sliding back under the sheets.

At this point, she didn't care if they had a camera on her or not, but she wasn't going to give anyone a *nude* show while she got down to business.

Ten minutes later, she'd had a *moderately* successful climax, but it had been missing something, and she let out a sigh of frustration.

Just out of curiosity, she rolled over to the right and slid open the top nightstand drawer – finding the book she'd been reading, with its bookmark still in place.

Taking a chance, she slid open the *bottom* nightstand drawer and found Bob waiting faithfully for her – along with *two* packages of fresh batteries, and a new pint of her favorite sex lube – no doubt courtesy of her jailers. She pulled out Bob and the lube and, with a silently

## Picking up the Pieces

mouthed, “Thank you,” to the ceiling, popped open the lube before getting down to some *serious* stress relief therapy.

~~~

The Senior smiled to herself, then rolled to cuddle the warm body lying next to her; worry about their temporary guest being relieved for the time being.

The Earthling had *finally* found what she’d needed to relax so she might gain the benefit of a peaceful slumber. If the other Earthling was delayed further, she considered a more “hands-on” session of therapy might be welcomed by the woman. With that thought in mind, she slipped her hand down and cradled the mound of the woman lying next to her, which was already moistening in anticipation of more play.

### ***Sunday, October 2, 11 P.M. (MST), The Annex, The Residence***

Wilber terminated the call, grateful that his NSA contact was back on the job. The update he’d just received wasn’t going to be all that helpful to Don, but at this point, having *any* information was better than *no* information. After printing out his notes, he logged off his computer and shut down his outside network connection before going to the bedroom to talk to Shu about contacting Sai directly.

### ***Monday, October 3, 11:50 (AFT), Afghanistan, Waiting it Out***

John was still sitting in the navigator’s position and keeping an attentive eye on the sensor readings – just like Seven had taught him...

He’d come forward about an hour ago after Sai Tal had sent Don back to rest. Still seated at the navigator’s position, Seven had heard him enter, then taken it upon himself to introduce him to the technical capabilities of the vehicle they were in.

He’d also added quiet embellishments to its unbelievably *long* tenure as the basic attack unit of an interstellar peace armada; if by peace, you meant having the means to maintain order and structure against *other* interstellar peace armadas. Having some little awareness of that otherwise rather *obvious* concept, John was totally on board with it, and having the time of his life in the process.

After asking what he could do to help, Seven taught him the basics of sensor monitoring, and how to interpret the readings based on the settings – which did little to help him as the settings were all in a foreign language. Sitting in the pilot’s seat, Sai Tal had spoken something to Seven, which had gotten a look of completely transparent surprise on the man’s face. After he’d nodded nervously, she’d keyed in a few commands on her side of the console, and a brief

flicker later, the console and monitor displays all converted into English. She'd then said something to Seven, which had elicited a bit of nervous laughter before he'd started checking out the new display readings in front of him.

It had taken Seven a few minutes to flip through the settings, repeating the readings for John and refreshing his *own* English in the process, before he moved out of the way and stood by for the next ten minutes while John manned the console...

Now, an hour later, John felt rather *proud* of that relatively minor accomplishment – especially after he'd noted the glazed look in Sai Tal's eyes that had seemed to drag on for several seconds. He knew she'd been up for a long time and was wondering if she'd let Seven fill in for her until Don got up from his nap, when she blinked and shook her head a little. He saw her perform a quick scan of the displays and the console readouts before stretching in place and sitting back – letting a disgusted sigh escape from her parted lips in the process.

~~~

Sai thanked Laisee for the update she'd just shared with her and Xue. As relayed by Shu, and then Laisee, what Wilber had told them wasn't particularly helpful at the moment but he'd suggested they turn John loose on the problem until Donald got a chance to rest a bit longer. She glanced over at John and considered if she should mention it to him. He seemed to be enjoying himself while sitting in the navigator's seat and keeping an attentive eye on the sensor readings like Seven had taught him an hour earlier...

She hadn't been surprised when Xue had left the rear compartment to give Donald some privacy. As the arbiter of his life, it doubtless made it awkward for them to be in the same *room* together, let alone on the same *planet*. Thinking back on it now, she wished she'd never asked aloud if Xue intended to kill Donald or not. It wasn't fair to Xue, and it *certainly* wasn't fair to Donald...

*“Let Donald sleep. He will be more creative when he has had some rest”*

Sai didn't flinch at Xue's suggestion, but had one of her own.

*“John?”*

The seconds stretched as Xue, sitting behind her, extended through the person in question to contemplate his motives.

*“Wilber has accepted him. Donald trusts him. He has the means?”*

Sai couldn't actually remember if they had anything on board he could work with.

## Picking up the Pieces

“John, did Wilber give you any data tabs? Maybe a map of some sort to bring with you?” she finally asked him.

“He loaned me a laptop. Said not to leave it behind anywhere. He mentioned there were some map programs on it,” he suggested, wondering where she was headed with this.

She gave out a silent sigh before jumping in.

“Afghanistan ... Pakistan ... China ... Russia, K-y-r-g-y-z-stan ... K-a-z-a-k-h-stan,” she both said and spelled, hoping the English text she’d read from Laisee’s mind was accurate. “The bomb is on the way, but it left a little late.”

“Ah ... just how late is a *little* late?”

“It was reported on the road in K-a-z-a-k-h-stan two days ago ... somewhere between K-o-k-s-h-e-t-a-u and S-h-c-h-u-c-h-i-n-s-k ... maybe,” she spelled aloud.

He’d been watching her face as she’d said this with her eyes closed, and nodding as if she was reading it from a piece of paper in her head.

“Did they say about what time two days ago? Daytime? Nighttime? Kazakhstan time? American time? Which American time zone?”

Before she could respond, Xue directed him to the basic question.

“John, Wilber suggests you might have the means to estimate the current location of the bomb in transit. We understand the ambiguity of the time references, and we also appreciate the route in question is a variable. Likewise the mere suggestion that the vehicle transporting the bomb was reported accurately. What we are asking is your best estimate of both the route and the possible time frames involved to deliver the bomb within range of Faridun’s location based on what was just reported by Wilber.”

It was John’s turn to sag back and let out a sigh of disgust. This was *exactly* the kind of thing that had driven him to frustration in the past – not knowing sufficient details about a situation in order to make an *accurate* prediction of the results. Still, it might prove a better use of his time than looking for radioactive hot spots, which, according to the *latest* news, might be a few days off at best.

“I’ll see what I can do,” he said gamely, and wasn’t surprised when Seven tapped him on the shoulder to relieve him at the console.

### ***14:50 (AFT), Up and About Again***

John looked up from the laptop and turned towards the rear compartment. He’d heard some mechanical sounds just a moment ago, then remembered they indicated the rear toilet had probably just

been placed into operation. Since Sai and Seven were at the console, and Xue was napping on the other side of the aisle opposite him, it was a good guess Don had gotten up and needed to pee or something.

He'd already looked down at the display in front of him and started going over his notes again, when the rear compartment door slid open and the man in question ambled out, looking refreshed and ready to rumble. He watched as Don raided the refrigerator to liberate a juice box and a piece of fruit before heading forward to stand between the navigator and pilot's positions.

"You get enough rest?" Sai asked him.

"I felt a great disturbance in the *Force*, young Padawan," he intoned seriously, before letting out a snort and relaxing. "But yeah. Caught some zee's. What's going on?"

Seven's mind locked at the unfamiliar English slang, but he glanced over at Sai and saw the disgusted frown she was sharing with the display in front of her. Apparently, she'd been exposed to Donald's obscure sense of humor at some point in the past.

"Message from Wilber. Updated delivery schedule. Got John working out the details," she summarized thinly, while flipping her left thumb up and pointing it over her shoulder, but otherwise ignoring him.

"Did we *miss* it?"

"Go check with *John*."

She otherwise continued to ignore him, and got a shrug from Seven when he glanced at him, so he turned and descended upon John with several questions on his lips. John beat him to it before he could ask.

"Sometime in the next ten hours, the truck carrying the bomb should be on *this* road in Pakistan – somewhere between Gilgit and Booni," he said, then rotated the laptop around so Don could see the projected route between those two cities. "*Or* it could be between Gilgit and Mingora – depending on if they want to enter Afghanistan right across from Asadabad or not. That southern route is about three hours longer, so it's a bit of a toss-up."

Don sat down with him and looked over his notes – seeing the time frames involved, and having John run through the projected paths after they diverged at Gilgit in Pakistan.

On the Afghanistan side of the border, they needed to drive from Asadabad westward to their drop-off point in the Korengal Valley. The Drosh-Jalalabad Road in Afghanistan passed through Asadabad on its way north to Arandu, which was right on the Afghanistan-Pakistan



## Picking up the Pieces

border. From the size of the images, Arandu didn't look that populated, other than farmlands surrounding the immediate area. *Most* importantly, it didn't have a big customs station like what was situated on the border near Torkham, located southeast of Asadabad.

Between the two, there were a few places someone could sneak a truck across, but it involved a lot of back roads and risky river crossings on what looked like poorly tended bridges. John's alternate guess told him they might come across the Kunar-Bajaur Link Road just east of Bajaur in Pakistan.

It'd be a suck transit – *lots* of switchbacks up and down on *both* sides of the ridge, but once they crossed it, it was an easy route into Asadabad with little official oversight. Unfortunately, the southern route from Gilgit wandered through more populated areas than the northern approach.

Donald could easily imagine driving through town as a simple delivery vehicle making pick-ups and drop-offs, depending on how they'd packed the truck. That's what *he* would do, anyway.

Still, John's southern route put them into some seriously congested population areas that upped the chance at exposure – and there was a simpler route.

He looked up at the console, then processed the time when Wilber had first messaged the Ladies until right now and decided they needed to make a move.

"Sai – time to reposition ourselves," he called out. "I want you to center up over Asadabad and work your way north to Arandu. Then I want you to follow the road from there until you reach Booni over in Pakistan."

"You *do* realize that I have *no* idea where those places are, don't you?" she called back.

"That's why John is bringing his laptop up there to guide you," he retorted, then turned to John.

"John, I think if they take the northern route, they're gonna skip Arandu and head south at Mirkhani to take the N45 all the way down to Bajaur before taking the Kunar-Bajaur Link Road west on the Pakistani side into Afghanistan. Like you say, it's a bit longer but less populated, and with probably less attention to travelers."

John stared at him before looking down at the laptop, but saw where a problem might occur on N45 going south.

"That will add more hours to the trip. They've been talking about a tunnel at the Lawarai Pass for *decades* now, but they only got started on it last *month!*" he argued.

“But they’ve still got the *original* road? That’s even better if we can catch them on the side of a hill. *Terrible* accident. Truck starts to slide, everyone bails, and we just yank that sucker apart and scurry away with the important bits.” Don paused before adding, “And if we can’t bag em’ *there*, that messy switchback between Asadabad and Bajaur is still available and probably less traveled.”

John stared at him as if he was nuts, but remembered what Wilber had told him about Don. Essentially, he *was* nuts – but he got the *job* done. He took a breath and slowly let it out before grabbing the laptop and going forward to advise Sai on the new target route. Hopefully, they’d get lucky. Hopefully, the batteries in the *laptop* would last long enough.

***Monday, October 3, 9 A.M. (EST), The Kantite Embassy***

Howard Mayfield parked in one of the underground spaces and was escorted into the Embassy proper by one of the extremely polite gentlemen who towered over him by a good five inches. He was brought to a comfortably appointed room and then left there, shortly being met by a smiling black man who held out his hand in greeting.

“General Mayfield? I’m Agent Dwayne Sparks from DHS and I am absolutely *delighted* to meet you, Sir. Wilber sends his regards, but unfortunately, he’s tied up back at the Center until ... well, until things work themselves out. Won’t you please join us, Sir?”

Howard paused only slightly, then accepted Dwayne’s greetings politely. Glancing around, he was surprised to see what looked like a dark complexioned older woman sitting in one of several comfortable chairs. Dwayne was obviously black, but he couldn’t pin down the ethnic background of the woman sitting there, who then smiled up at him and stood to meet him.

“General Howard, may I introduce Lady Spring Blossom, who is visiting us from–”

“All the way from Arizona, Howard,” Spring Blossom interrupted him. “Wilber tells me you are a most trustworthy individual, and we would have your impressions on the trustworthiness of a young woman whom we found to be situated in the middle of an *unfortunate* set of circumstances. Won’t you please join me here, Howard?”

She gestured to the seat next to her, and he nodded his head politely, already having an idea of just *what* she was, if not exactly *who* she was.

He became sure of it the moment she took one of his hands and held it between the two of hers before sitting next to him and smiling up at him.

## Picking up the Pieces

"I want to thank you for discovering those men who tried to kill my son and his guests a few years ago, Howard. I'm told they'd also captured Wilber, but you rescued *him* as well. You have performed a great *service* on our behalf."

The references narrowed it down for him, along with her facial features. He'd seen a security image of Ron Cal, and could see some of his features in her face.

"That's true, Howard. Rondal was my son. He went on to achieve a great many things for *all* of us – Earth included – but unfortunately, met his end ... by *accident*, if one might believe it."

"I am sorry for your loss, Lady Spring Blossom. I never met Ron Cal – Rondal – in person, but I'm told he was a brave and loyal defender of ... of everyone," he ended lamely.

"Yes. Particularly children and small animals," she said wistfully, while shaking her head slightly. "He *did* finally provide me with two grandchildren, though. They are currently at the Center in Arizona. We were returning his body for internment when the birth mother went into labor. I now have a grandson *and* a granddaughter."

She closed her eyes and smiled at the mental image of them in her mind's eye, while Howard considered which way this visit was going to go. His thoughts were interrupted when Dwayne stepped over, placed two small crystal goblets on the coffee table in front of them, then poured a small measure of a sweet smelling liquor into each one.

"Thank you, Dwayne," she said, then opened her eyes while smiling up at him before turning back to their guest. "Howard, please share a bit of ambrosia with me before we discuss the details of the situation with Miss Gale. Wilber tells me we currently have no contacts within her organization, and we feel that doing so might have prevented that unfortunate mix up which happened just a little while ago."

### ***Monday, October 3, 21:00 (PKT), A Slight Change of Plans***

"Please, Xue. Just convince them that heading south is a *better* idea," Donald pressed her...

It had taken them six hours to locate a moving radiation source they'd picked up traveling west from Booni. That placed their target about four hours from the Afghanistan border. Now that it was identified, Donald had fine-tuned the sensor and tracking systems to focus on that *one* radiation signature – thus eliminating any more false positives from the surprising number of *medical* centers located in supposedly rural Pakistan.

Currently, they were about 65 kilometers to the turning point at Mirkhani.

If the truck turned west, then they were less than an hour to the border with little clear space to operate. If they went *south*, the road would take them over a pass with enough switchbacks to justify any *reasonable* sort of accident Donald could contrive...

"It is out of their *way*, Donald. I do not see how they would accept that suggestion," she said.

Donald sat and fumed helplessly. This all would have been so much simpler if he still had his *brain* intact, but the Ladies were shooting him down left and right.

"Okay. How about we start spreading rumors the border is *closed* at Arandu? Or maybe the government is sitting at the border because they heard a rumor of an illegal *transport*?" At this point Donald was clutching at straws, and John was truly sorry for helping to tear them asunder.

"Don, most likely the terrorists would have *already* bribed any government officials doing border inspections. Maybe if their *contact* person could convince them the Arandu crossing has gone sour?" he suggested.

"Huh?" Don's stupefied response was immediately understood.

"They're moving something *really* valuable, Don. They got six men in the truck – two up front and four in the back – and they gotta be keeping touch with their checkpoints along the way. Even if we could *locate* their checkpoints, I only know English and Hebrew, and Xue knows Pashto. Except for the area we're over right *now*, not that many people in Pakistan know Pashto. It's a very tiny percentage."

Donald slouched back in the pilot's seat and stared at the display helplessly. He couldn't get Xue to lend a hand, and they had no way to locate John's supposed "checkpoint" advisors. That meant falling back to basics and trying to keep it from getting out of hand.

"Okay, then what we need is a *reasonable* excuse for them to choose the southern route on their own. I'm thinkin' a blocked road of some sort," he said.

"You aren't planning on tearing up a Pakistani *highway*, are you?" Sai asked him dubiously.

"No, but there's gotta be *someplace* we can block it so they'll have to turn around and try some other way."

Donald shifted position and started searching the road going southwest out of Mirkhani – keeping well above the flight paths of the surprising number of airports situated along the Chitral-Dir Road. He finally found a reasonably good spot about six kilometers south of

## Picking up the Pieces

Mirkhani where the road took a couple of dips before climbing over two hills that appeared to be littered with a large number of huge boulders.

"There it is," he said. "We watch them approach, then throw a little *earthquake* in the way. When they get within two kilometers of it, we nudge a few boulders and roll them onto the road. As long as they're the *only* ones moving tonight, they should stop and turn around. Maybe they'll stop for the night, but they might just head down the *other* road and try to push on all the way before morning."

"And then you plan to attack them on the road somewhere *else*?" Sai couldn't resist the jab at him.

"What I *plan* is to get them to abandon the truck before it rolls down a *hill* – thus ripping itself *apart* and letting us go in there and take out the *bomb*. *Ideally*, it happens tonight, and we're covered by darkness."

"These guys are *terrorists*, Donald!" she said in frustration. "Why don't we just *grab* them and take what we *want*? *Plausible deniability*? Are you *still* worried Lili is gonna *spank* you?"

Donald sagged back and triggered the sensor tracker to bring them back over the top of the truck. For the moment, it seemed to have stopped just south of the Chitral Airport.

"John, they haven't stopped for the *night*, have they?" he asked, while John zoomed in with the opticals and picked out the truck from the lights surrounding the area it was parked in.

"Looks like a gas station. Maybe they're filling up?"

"Uh-huh. Too bad there's so many *lights* down there. We could drop a sleepy gas round and wait for them all to drop. Then reach out with the shield and steal the truck at our... Oh... *wait*..."

Donald's sudden silence triggered a chill down Sai's spine.

She'd heard that sort of thing from him before.

"Sai ... you got that secondary shield to form a *half* bubble, right? You could maybe configure an *upside* down cup over something to keep the air from getting through for a little while? ... Sai?"

"What's your *new* plan, Donald?" she asked with a frown.

"Depends," he said, then turned to John. "John, can you yank the *hot* load out of that bomb, or do we have to grab the whole thing? I mean, can you take *enough* of it apart in say – two hours – then put it back together *without* the hot load inside? You know – make a *dud* out of it?"

*\*He is truly insane, isn't he?\** Xue pressed.

*\*You're just NOW noticing that?\** Sai retorted.

"I *suppose* so," John supposed. "It's not like Faridun can afford a *real* bomb anymore."

Donald struggled to keep from laughing while the new plan ramped up in his mind.

"Okay, team. *New Plan*. Plan *E* ... or maybe *F*. We stop the truck on the road at a place of our choosing, then drop a couple of gas rounds close by. Sai configures an upside down force cup over the entire truck, and we let the gas do its thing. Once everyone is knocked out, John and I go in and operate on the bomb." He looked around at them with a big smile on his face, but caught the frown from Sai for his trouble, before explaining the finishing steps.

"Look, if we can pull out the *hot* load, we button it back up and let them continue. If *not*, we yank out the *whole* bomb and dispose of it somewhere *else*."

The silence was deafening until Seven ventured a comment from the seat behind Donald.

"Tank ... that sounds like a rather *elegant* solution."

"Why, *thank* you, young man. I actually *prefer* elegant solutions. They're so much better than my usual *ham-fisted* efforts."

***Monday, October 3, 11 A.M. (EST), The Kantite Embassy***

After finishing the breakfast delivered earlier that morning, Agent Gale had been left alone in her rather comfortable prison cell. No television was present, but her hosts had kindly provided today's copies of both the Washington Post and the Washington Times – two rags representing generally *opposing* views.

No doubt, they'd chosen them because of the unread copies she'd left behind in her apartment.

As for *actual* news, it was a crapshoot as to which one to believe, unless there were ample witnesses to a reported event – but even then, there were always two sides to a given story.

It was approaching eleven a.m., and she'd just started on the Post's crossword puzzle when a knock came at her door.

She wasn't hungry, but the thought suddenly occurred if they intended to fatten her up before roasting her alive. The door opened to reveal two *huge* men in their blatantly *non*-uniformed visages escorting one of the women who'd visited her yesterday.

## Picking up the Pieces

“Miss Gale? You have visitors this morning. Please come with me,” she asked politely, as if the presence of the two men standing beside her offered her an alternative.

Dorothy shrugged, then slid into the pair of slippers they’d provided her before standing and following them out the door.

~~~

“We only ask that you answer her questions *truthfully*, Howard,” Spring Blossom told him. “*Within* the current boundaries of your NDA, please.”

Spring Blossom smiled at him, already reading an undercurrent of dread should he blunder at this simple task. Dwayne cleared his throat and raised one finger to grab his attention.

“General, the fact that several intelligence agencies are already on board with this rather unusual program is not widely known, but the resident Senior has reported Agent Gale’s suspicions in that regard,” Dwayne suggested quietly. “Our visitors have provided us with several benefits over the decades, not the least of which is granting us Protectorate status within the Commonwealth against aggressor species. Agent Milton shared with me some quite *painful* memories of one such incident involving recovery and removal of a failed alien incursion at the Arizona facility.”

Mayfield thought back to the incident he’d been dragged into with Peck and Andrews, but had never heard of any related ground activities. He’d heard there was some *aircraft* accident nearly a year later, but he’d still been involved with keeping his son, Thomas, off the military’s radar after that first incident. Then he’d retired and tried to forget it all.

“Of course, it was all kept *very* quiet, Howard,” Spring Blossom said calmly. “My son dealt with it, and Wilber worked with him to help clean it up. As it turns out, that *particular* aggressor species has seen the benefit of living with us *peacefully* ... once Rondal orchestrated a *change* in their leadership. Even now, they have extended the courtesy of an Ambassador to the court of my Husband.”

Mayfield’s head was starting to spin with the new information dribbling out from these two. It seemed no matter *how* much he wanted to position himself away from this situation, he was stuck dealing with it. Even his immediate superior, Charles, didn’t seem aware of the situation as a whole, just that there was a helpful private agency who thought the United States was worthy of quiet support, just as long as *they* were left alone.

“We just need your impression of her level of *trustworthiness*, General,” Dwayne assured him. “If Agent Gale can be relied upon to be

discreet about our existence, then access to her would be helpful to avoid unfortunate incidents like that which took place two nights ago.”

“We do not intend to *suborn* the intelligence community, Howard,” Spring Blossom assured him. “We would just like assurances we have the means to provide information to those most in *need* ... upon *occasion*.”

Howard looked at her while giving it careful consideration. He’d given Wilber a heads-up that someone in the DIA was looking for him, which had precipitated his visit today. Now hearing movement behind the door, it appeared he was going to meet the woman in question in just a moment. He nodded his head – hopefully conveying the acceptance of his fate, before turning to face the door.

~~~

Agent Gale’s party of four stopped at a closed double door where they remained standing while the woman who’d escorted her appeared to be taking a quick nap.

*“Lady Spring Blossom, I have brought the Earthling”* Lady Huiling pressed into the room.

### ***In the Room...***

*“Wonderful! We look forward to meeting her. She is well?”*

*“Healthy. Less intimidated than curious. Concerned about her future”*

*“As are we all. Please come in, my Lady”* Spring Blossom allowed, then stood to provide a united group facing the door.

~~~

Dorothy watched when the woman opened her eyes and pointed to the door, indicating it was to be opened. Both men stepped forward, and with one on each side of the double door, grabbed knobs in the middle and slid them open to the sides. Once opened, the woman looped her arm around Dorothy’s and led her into the room to stand in front of a woman and two men.

*“My Lady, may I present Dorothy Gale,”* Lady Huiling announced in Standard. *“Do you wish me to remain?”*

Instead of answering her directly, Spring Blossom said, *“Thank you, Lady Huiling. Is the young woman comfortable? She has been fed?”*

*“She has had the morning meal. Her next meal is scheduled for the top of the day. You and your guests are welcome to join her – or us, of course,”* Lady Huiling offered.



## Picking up the Pieces

*“\*I think we would like to speak with her in private for a while. May I reach out to you when we are finished?\**”

*“\*Certainly, my Lady,\**” Lady Huiling said, then bowed formally before backing away three steps, then turning, leaving Dorothy standing there alone.

Out of all of that conversation, the only thing Dorothy understood was her name uttered in that lilting accent of theirs – *whatever* it was – and now she was left alone with three strangers, one of whom she almost recognized.

“Miss Dorothy Gale? Agent Gale? I’m Agent Dwayne Sparks, DHS,” Dwayne greeted her politely. “I believe you might have some questions about recent events...”

### ***Monday, October 3, 00:00 (PKT), Pakistan, Finally Catching a Break***

“I gotta hand it to you, Donnie. I *never* thought that would’ve worked as well as it did,” Sai admitted.

“Yeah, well we’re not done *yet*,” Donald said, then turned to John. “You got that suit figured out yet?”

“Almost ready,” John reported. “Did Seven find the–” He stopped when Seven came forward carrying a small box of tools and set it down in front of him. “Are these Metric, English or what?”

“You’ll be *surprised* at the fine selection of tools I keep on hand,” Don muttered, then turned back to Sai with a reminder of what else needed to be done. “Now, after you drop us off, go up and keep an eye on the road for late night travelers. If anyone comes along, do like I told you, and–”

“I know ... push *another* boulder into the road to keep them away from the scene of the crime,” she said airily, almost as if she was still miffed at not going along for the ground assault herself.

“Xue, are they *really* asleep?” Donald asked once again, but got a frown for his trouble from the sleepy Senior.

“They will be *dead* soon if you don’t get down there and turn off that *engine!*” she snapped at him.

Donald turned and watched as Seven came back, dressed in his covert combat armor carrying a small box of portable work lights.

He was about to say something, when Seven said, “Hey, why should *you* guys have all the fun?”

Donald gave it less than a moment’s consideration, then nodded gamely before stepping back to adjust the secondary shield’s parameters slightly...

After another delay while the truck crew had apparently stopped to eat after fueling, they'd followed the truck for the last three hours while it'd trundled along towards Mirkhani at a sedate thirty kilometers per hour, finally making the *southwest* turn towards Arandu just as John had originally predicted. Then, with Sai manning the shields and Donald piloting, they'd dropped down within a hundred feet of the ground to allow Sai an easier time of grabbing and shifting a few boulders big enough to stop even the *biggest* truck possible.

Under cover of darkness, and with the ship cloaked and shields tight, Sai had watched as the truck slowed while approaching the blocked portion of the road. Her inverted shield cup already pre-configured, she'd waited until Donald launched a couple of sleepy gas rounds towards the rear of the stopped vehicle, then dropped the shield down over the top of it.

It was transparent in the darkness, and the headlights had shown two men stepping out to investigate the boulders before dropping to the ground asleep. Moments later, Xue confirmed the four men in the rear of the truck also seemed to be out. Now it was just a matter of getting down there and stealing the bomb...

Donald ran through the list in his head again, then nodded once before softening the shield and letting it *slowly* fade away. He took his time, having once caused damage by farting around with shield settings in a rambunctious manner while still in atmosphere. Once it was finally gone, he gave Sai the nod to drop.

### ***Outside on the Ground...***

"You got me, Sai?" Don called from his ships suit collar com.

*"Loud and clear, Donnie."*

"All right, guys. Let's go check out the bodies in the truck first," he said, then hefted a prepared sleepy gas round in his hand, just in case.

They approached the idling vehicle, with Seven on one side and Donald on the other. John was coming up behind them, carrying the tool case and work lights. As they approached the back of the truck, Donald keyed his collar to bring up his face shield before triggering the gas round and flipping it under the cover of the truck bed; fully expecting to hear someone scrambling as they avoided a potential grenade. He gave it ten seconds before gingerly lifting up the edge of it and flashing a light inside.

No one was moving, and no one was wearing a gas mask, so the odds were good they were all asleep. He momentarily thought of

## Picking up the Pieces

stripping them naked and leaving them by the side of the road, but that kinda voided the whole “sneak in and sneak out” scenario, so he cast it aside for the moment. Instead, he went forward and joined with Seven to check out the two bodies lying on the ground at the front of the truck.

“They seem to be out, Tank,” Seven reported, but that didn’t stop him from securing their hands behind their backs and locking their feet together.

Seeing that Seven was on the job, Donald went to the driver’s side and reached in to turn off the engine before going back to join John at the rear of the truck.

“Uhh... Don, I don’t see a bomb in here anywhere,” John muttered.

“Sai, you still got a radiation signature on this thing?” Donald called out.

*“Not two meters from where you’re standing,”* she called back.

“Huh...”

Donald squatted down and shined a light under the truck, seeing the usual accessories associated with the motor vehicle in question – wheels, axle, drive shaft, differential, fuel tank...

“John, how many fuel tanks are normal in a truck like this?”

“It’s usually up front by the cab,” he said, then shined a light on the boxy tank behind the driver’s door.

“Seven! It’s time to move some bodies!” Donald called out, so Seven came back to lend a hand.

While John and Seven were relocating the sleeping men, Donald swept under the truck from front to back – checking for connections to the second fuel tank under the bed of the truck.

It appeared to be functional, with a filler cap that smelled of diesel when you opened it, but the lines to the engine only went so far before they stopped. As tightly as it was mounted to the bed, there was no way to see a gap between the tank and the bed.

“In *here*, Tank!” Seven called out, so he climbed up into the back of the truck bed where Seven had started pulling out packages that covered a bed liner made out of loose boards.

It wasn’t very subtle, but to the casual eye, it looked like the truck was simply carrying typical stuff until you dug down far enough and found several assault weapons buried under wraps. Now lending a hand, Donald helped Seven and John as they emptied the back of the truck and cleared off the naked bed to reveal a concealed panel on top.

“Let’s not rush to *open* this thing,” John said quietly, before he lay down next to it and checked the edges with a flashlight.

He appeared to have a healthy dose of paranoia – something *Donald* certainly appreciated. It was also something Xue could help with.

“Sai! Is Xue still awake? We need her expertise in looking beyond the obvious. John has questions about what he’s examining,” Donald called up to her. “Please have her deal with John directly.”

Donald stepped away from the truck, drawing Seven out of the truck bed to give John plenty of room to work. He wasn’t afraid for their lives – if the bomb went off, they’d never know it – but he wanted John to have every opportunity for success. Catching the worry lines on Seven’s face, he began rattling off nonsense to distract him while they walked away from the truck.

“It’d be better if we had a *Combat-Healer* down here with us, but Sai’s our lookout so we’re on our own. Lady Xue is a Senior with a *lot* of power, but she’s not accustomed to stuff like this. John’s our go-to guy with Earthling bombs, so we’ll let him do his thing,” he quietly assured him before squatting down while casting his eyes around the area.

They’d given John an area of privacy to work in and stopped several meters away from the truck. Donald brought up his face shield for a few seconds and checked the timer display.

They’d been farting around for nearly half an hour now, and time was of the essence tonight. If John couldn’t deal with the bomb, the only other practical recourse was to steal the entire truck and launch it towards the sun. Maybe bagging these guys and dropping them into the middle of the Mossad’s courtyard might help John’s future, but it might also open up *another* can of worms for him – not that the current situation wasn’t already ripe in that regard.

It was another ten minutes later when John called out, “Got it!” and they joined him at the back of the truck where he was setting up some of the work lights.

“Sorry for the delay, but I just wanted to make sure it was safe,” he admitted. “Should’ve figured they wouldn’t booby trap it since it’s been bouncing all the way from Russia.”

Donald nodded and said, “Hey ... you never know,” then looked down at the opened hatch. “So, can we yank it out of there, or is it booby-trapped in place?”

John’s eyes bugged for a moment, but then relaxed. The bomb was small, about thirty centimeters in diameter and maybe a little over a meter in length. It would be *incredibly* heavy for its size, but was

## Picking up the Pieces

nestled in a narrow box lined with excelsior. From what Xue had relayed to him, the bomb was just resting there, and there were no other connections or devices inside the box.

"Xue thinks it's free to move. We could just pull it out and take it with us. You still want me to try and make a – a *dud* out of it?"

It almost sounded like John was reluctant to mess with it.

"John, are you familiar with this *particular* model?" Donald asked him pointedly, and saw a shadowed look in his eyes. There were several seconds of silence while John looked at the device before turning back to Don.

"I've seen *similar* devices, but I don't think this is one of the ones that blows things up," he said. "I think this is one of the *dirty* ones."

Donald stared at him and wondered what he was talking about. A dirty bomb was just a bunch of nuclear material wrapped around an explosive core of some sort. If you were lazy enough and had enough material, you could make one out of an empty *beer keg*. Radioactive scrap material wasn't that hard to get hold of, either. Dirty bombs were an effective *terrorism* weapon, but hardly worth the effort if you wanted to bring down hell fire on the enemy. He climbed up onto the truck bed and added his light to the bomb. After a few minutes, he decided that it just didn't look right to him.

"That sucker was supposed to be in the ten to fifteen *kiloton* range, but it looks a little *light* to me... Let's call the *experts*," he finally said. "Get the numbers off of it, and we'll ask someone back home to look it up for us."

Donald backed away to let John fart with it.

"It's not a *real* bomb?" Seven quietly asked him from the edge of the tailgate.

Donald glanced at John, hunched over the box, then turned to look down at Seven before speaking softly.

"Doesn't look like one to me. It's not *nearly* big enough, and the packing isn't scrunched down far enough to indicate there's anything in there heavy enough to produce a big explosion."

Seven looked at the truck bed and watched when John reached in and carefully maneuvered the bomb in its box. If John was able to do *that* one-handed, then yes, the bomb was exceptionally light, but it wasn't *impossible*, was it? Donald saw his look of skepticism, and suppressed a snort, already knowing where Seven's head was at.

"This is an *Earthling* device, Seven. I've got a ten-centimeter anti-matter cannon round that will vaporize everything within a six-

kilometer *sphere*. This just looks like ... it looks like a *fake*, actually. Or yeah, maybe a dirty bomb.” He turned to look at John, who’d just sat up in the glare of the work lights.

“Don... This thing doesn’t have numbers on it. Not in *Cyrillic*, anyway,” he said. “I’m starting to think it’s not *Russian*, either.”

Donald crossed his arms and leaned against one of the ribs of the truck cover while pondering the *ridiculous* situation they were in.

They had a bomb that *wasn’t* a bomb – not a *real* bomb, anyway. It might be a *dirty* bomb, but then, what would be the *point*? A little *contamination*, a little *nuisance* clean up, and then it’s back to normal – depending on the *isotope* involved...

“Hey Sai, we got an *isotope* analyzer on board?”

“*What are you on about NOW, Donald?*” she shot back.

“Just wondering about the quality of the radioactive elements inside that bomb,” he said, then had another thought.

“John, how *heavy* is that thing? Can you pick it up?”

John looked at him, then back at the box. Instead of lifting the bomb, he grabbed the lift holes in the side of the box and gingerly lifted it out of the storage pocket to slip it onto the bed of the truck. Seeing the relative ease with which that was accomplished, Donald motioned Seven over and had him grab one end of the box, while he took the other. He wanted to check something out.

“Let’s walk this away from the truck and put it down,” he said, then led them back up the road for several meters before squatting to set it down.

“Sai, fix on me and tell me how far away I am from the radiation source.”

“*You’re about eighteen ... maybe twenty meters from it.*”

Donald looked at Seven and shook his head slowly.

“Sai, fix on Seven and tell me how far *he* is from the radiation source.”

“*He’s right next to you, Don. You’re both maybe twenty meters from it. John is right on top of it.*”

They both turned back to the truck, where they saw John looking down at his feet. The light he held was pointed downwards, and he appeared to be frozen in place.

“Aww, *crap*,” Donald muttered.

***Monday, October 3, 1:30 P.M. (MST), The Annex, Laisee's Suite***

Xue had just alerted Laisee that there was a problem on the ground in Pakistan, and she in turn alerted Wilber. Once that was done, she'd been pushed out of the loop while the persons on the ground in both locations did their very best to resolve the situation.

"It's all right, Mother," Jaiying told her. "Grandfather is dealing with it."

"They are sitting on a *bomb*, Jaiying! Sai, Xue, Donald, John, and Aetius are in danger every moment they are *there!*"

"Mother, people are in danger no matter *where* Grandfather is," Jaiying reminded her, getting an exasperated look back for her rude comment.

Rose took a softer tack and came over to hug Laisee's legs.

"It will be all right, Mama Laisee. Grandfather will protect them. He always does."

Jaiying came over and joined what became a group hug, while thinking that Grandfather always *tried* to protect everyone – just not always *successfully*.

***Monday, October 3, 3:30 P.M. (EST), The Kantite Embassy***

Dorothy had been returned to her holding cell, where she took pleasure in the luxury of the attached shower, followed by drying off with what appeared to be ultra fluffy, heated towels.

For being a prisoner, she certainly couldn't fault their *hospitality*...

Agent Sparks had been very polite, along with the older woman – an American Indian woman, if her name was any indication. Howard Mayfield ... *General* Howard Mayfield (Retired) had been somewhat distant.

Unlike the other two, she'd heard of Mayfield before – from *somewhere* – but couldn't remember in what capacity, until he'd mentioned working for the Under Secretary of Defense for Intelligence at the Pentagon.

Then Agent Sparks – *Dwayne* – had told her Wilber Milton had wanted to come and meet with her in person, but he was still busy cleaning up the mess she'd been involved with.

That had immediately put her on the defensive, in addition to causing a blush to run up her neck that brightened her cheeks. Having been brought to what was obviously a *foreign* Embassy of unknown origin, and now surrounded by DHS, USD(I), and ... and an American *Indian* representative of some sort, was beside the point.

In her mind, she'd been accused of interfering with intelligence operations of which she was *totally* unaware. The woman, Spring Blossom, who'd offered her a position beside her on the room's love seat, had broken the few seconds of silence that followed Dwayne's comment. After she'd joined her there, Mayfield had found a seat of his own. Then Dwayne had poured her a small snifter of a sweet smelling green liquor before refilling the one in front of the Indian woman.

As she'd gingerly picked up the goblet and savored the smell from it, the woman had taken up her own goblet and sipped from it lightly, almost *purring* from the sensation when it rolled across her tongue.

Dorothy had thrown caution to the wind and taken a sip ... and then another one ... and then found herself producing a quiet groan from the back of her nose that had startled her into silence. Spring Blossom had rested a hand on her thigh and patted it gently, causing her to relax unexpectedly.

After that, the conversation had begun to flow naturally.

What seemed to be of *key* importance to her inquisitors was her knowledge – or *lack* thereof – of the events that had caused Abernathy and Fredricks to be yanked into custody. She'd honestly related that, aside from the communications intercepts, she'd found no reason to pull them in, and it hadn't even been her call to begin with.

She'd been reluctant to comment about a meeting that seemed to be a key triggering factor, but did question aloud the underlying hidden agenda that her organization seemed to be concerned about. It had been Howard who'd supplied the missing element.

There was a loose nuke headed *somewhere* in Afghanistan. A nuclear device that both Abernathy's and Fredricks' agencies had been in the process of tracking and identifying – both its route and destination – when they'd been summarily *yanked* from their sleepless rest.

She'd been startled at that, then developed an inkling of what possible DIA contingency plans might be enacted for such an event. The look on her face hadn't gone unnoticed, and Howard confirmed they had elements of their *own* on the ground in Afghanistan who were attempting to recover the device before it got into the hands of the terrorists. He'd left unsaid any speculation of the DIA's *ultimate* solution to keeping the device as far away from the United States as possible...

Dorothy came out of the bathroom refreshed, and meandered over to the desk, where she sat to ponder the future – her *immediate* future, it would appear...



## Picking up the Pieces

Her unique situation had been explained to her in short, simple terms.

Through *no* fault of her own, she'd inadvertently been made the scapegoat of an overly insular intelligence organization that, like *most* of them, didn't play well with others – not even with their *own* team members, it would appear. In addition, her *organization* – not *her* – had nearly voided a contract that had benefitted the United States for a number of decades now. It was for that reason she was being considered for an additional burden to bear – one that was thankless but deemed important to the security of the United States, if not the entire world.

Afterwards, it had become somewhat vague as to how her *actual* duties would expand. Howard mentioned a continuing string of technological contributions to the country's industry, and Dwayne mentioned a somewhat shadowy supposition that the Earth as a *whole* could benefit from contributions such as she could provide – as much as she *personally* determined would be beneficial for her country's survival.

That had caused her to pause, after which she'd asked how would she *know* what was beneficial to her country?

Dwayne brought up the issue that Abernathy and Fredricks had stumbled over, and having determined a *worst*-case scenario, passed it along to their *third*-party contractor for resolution, rather than risk an unfortunate nuclear event traceable to the United States.

On that note, they'd broken for lunch and spent an enjoyable meal with a group of men and women who spoke very little English, but still seemed delighted to have their company. Afterwards, they'd returned to the study, for that was what she'd finally determined it should be called, and simply chatted about numerous topics of interest to each of them, finding some similarities and some differences, before eventually calling it an early day so she could have some time to think about what she wanted to do before dinner.

### ***Tuesday, October 4, 01:10 (PKT), Pakistan, A Change of Plans***

"This ... just ... *sucks*," Donald muttered in frustration, then backed away from the interior cutout that had been covered by the box containing the decoy bomb.

There really wasn't much to see, other than the small control panel, the wiring, the blinking lights, and – *oh yes* – what looked like some kind of *radio* receiver wired into *everything*.

"Don, I've never seen *anything* quite like this," John said, then leaned over a bit to shine his light around the apparatus buried in the bed of the truck. "I ... I can *still* try to–"

“Not a *chance*,” Donald quickly said, then climbed down off the back of the truck. “I’ve got resources back home, but I’m not about to risk them for something like *this*. Take pictures of everything you can, while I think about this for a few minutes.”

John watched Don trigger his collar com to check in with Sai, before turning and walking away from the truck. Then he pulled out his digital camera and turned back to the device, but just as a *precaution*, looked it over once again, then decided against using the flash – relying instead on the glare of the portable work lights to provide enough illumination for non-flash photography.

Donald wandered around to the front of the truck while still thinking of the package stuffed under the truck bed.

An improvised explosive device was *one* thing, but kludging one together out of a *nuclear weapon* raised the stakes in *soooo* many awkward ways. This hadn’t been a bunch of *terrorists* putting this thing together ... not unless they’d acquired a small staff of weapons specialists, or were being sponsored by one of the nuclear states.

He paused by the truck cab and folded his arms.

For all his best intentions, this had suddenly diverted away from a simple snatch-and-grab operation, and it kinda ticked him off. There were *way* too many questions, but not enough answers available. He leaned against the side of the truck and clamped his hands behind his neck to help relieve the stiffness that had developed over the last several minutes.

Seeing Seven out of the corner of his eye brought his attention to the row of bodies still lying on the ground.

Seven had all six men laid out side-by-side and secured head-to-foot next to one another in case they started waking up. They hadn’t been blindfolded because Donald didn’t expect them to be sticking around this long, but the more he thought about it, the more it seemed reasonable to bring all six of them back so that one of the intelligence agencies could ask them a few pointed questions. He let a grim smile cross his lips before heading back to speak with John again.

“John, when you get done here, I want you to take photos of the transport team – *head* shots. We’ll transmit them to the Embassy for dissemination within the intelligence community and see what pops up.”

John looked down at him in surprise.

“Do you *really* think a bunch of random transport guys would be on a watch list somewhere?”

## Picking up the Pieces

*“Think about it. That ‘bomb’ was a decoy placed over the real bomb. My gut’s telling me you’re sitting on a terrorist cell housecleaner. Maybe they’re from a rival drug cartel and want to eliminate the competition while getting paid for it in heroin, or maybe Faridun has fallen out of favor from above.”*

John glanced down at the truck bed for a moment, but slowly nodded his head before saying, “Or *maybe* ... maybe it was an *authorized* security operation to take out a terrorist cell? But – but using a *nuclear device*?”

They shared several seconds of silence between them before Donald finally broke it.

“I believe we’ve reached the end of our mission,” he muttered. “I’ll get Sai down here so we can get these guys aboard and strapped down in the back. Then we can clear the road and stick this truck someplace where it can’t cause any damage if it goes off.”

Donald abruptly turned and headed up front to speak with Seven, all while his quick conversation with Sai was echoing from the collar around John’s neck.

### ***Monday, October 3, 5 P.M. (EST), The Embassy Security Center***

Howard and Dwayne were down in the communications room of the Embassy and going over the mug shots that had been transmitted by Donald from orbit. He’d also sent along images of the reported “bomb” that contained no radiation sources within it.

However, the truck carrying the phony bomb was *hot* with radiation – mostly because it was carrying an estimated fifteen-kiloton bomb built into the body of the *truck*!

“Yes. *Definitely* distribute these to all the agencies and see if they get a hit on facial recognition. If we can identify them, maybe we can determine who they work for, and what their goal was,” Howard told the duty officer, then watched as those suggestions were acted upon without question.

“From what Don reported, I’d say their goal was to clean up a terrorist cell in the Korengal Valley,” Dwayne muttered, then caught the snort from Howard. “Hey, I can’t imagine them trying to extract that thing from the truck and shipping it to the US.”

“So, John didn’t want to try disarming it?”

Dwayne’s expression turned to confusion for a moment until remembering Howard didn’t have that particular language skill yet.

“Don wouldn’t let him. It didn’t appear to be stock, and they had no *real* idea of what would set it off. He mentioned something about a

radio receiver, which suggests remote detonation. Lady Xue didn't have that kind of experience, either, so Don's *best* solution was to put it away some place where it wouldn't cause any problems. He said he planted it a couple of hundred miles from the Kantite security base on the backside of the moon."

Howard stared at him while frozen in place, the unfolding reality of the situation being unreal at face value. Intellectually, he'd known this was one of the things that – *eventually* – he was expected to become complacent with ... which had apparently started *today*.

He sectioned off his astonishment and continued with a personal analysis of the situation.

"A receiver implies the target was local to Faridun's group ... or perhaps Faridun *himself*. Maybe even the transport crew *along* with Faridun and his group," he suggested. "Although I can't imagine those guys would be leaving their truck behind to walk out of that valley on foot."

"Which is why Donald is bringing them back for interrogation," Spring Blossom said from behind them.

Both men turned and were greeted by her smiling face.

"Lady Xue tells me they will arrive at the Embassy sometime after nightfall. I have sent our transport away, and we will transit back to the Center with Donald and his crew," she said, while sharing her smile with each of them.

Howard looked at her with concern, as her words suggested that *he* was going to be a party to the transit.

"Yes, Howard," she confirmed for him. "I believe Agent Gale will be more comfortable if a *familiar* face is there to support her. Your current position is nominally above her in the intelligence community, so we would like to rely upon you to help ease her fears about us. No doubt Wilber will be *delighted* to visit with you once again, as well."

Howard suffered a minor bout of brain lock when the logistics of it started worming its way through his mind.

"You may notify your superiors that you are pursuing an investigation under that special security protocol ... what was it called, Dwayne?"

"Top Secret/Sensitive Compartmented Information ... or TS/SCI for short," Dwayne supplied for her, then turned to Howard, and suggested, "You should call your wife to let her know you might be out of town for a day or two. Charles would also probably like to know about it."

## Picking up the Pieces

Howard nodded numbly before turning away to leave the room. Spring Blossom and Dwayne watched him go, with Dwayne remembering *his* first days on the job just a few years ago.

“He’ll get used to it,” he muttered, then turned to Spring Blossom to go over the latest plans with her in more detail.

### ***3:15 P.M. (MST), The Annex, The Center***

Captain Anastasius shared a lovely lunch with his bond-mate, then stayed to receive updates through Lady Wen as she’d been provided with them from Lady Xue and Lady Huiling, who was the most Senior Healer among the Ambassador’s staff.

This latest bit of news was most surprising – not that it was something unusual for Donald to be involved with but for the opportunity it provided to rotate Aetius through the Embassy’s security staff...

A few years ago, it had been Aineias’ suggestion that the garrison staff might be allowed to spend a portion of their time at the Embassy proper. Ling had considered the pros and cons of it and – in the case of the *un*-bonded partners – she’d allowed it as a matter of both training and staff enrichment. As one of the more *recent* additions to the garrison, Aetius had been stuck here for the better part of a year now, and he’d placed a request for an Embassy rotation when one became available. At the moment, he was currently in an *excellent* position to take advantage of the opportunity.

Aineias contacted Aetius’ lead to confirm the rotation then messaged the Embassy through Ling that a rotation was available if they had a man on staff who desired a three month vacation to the “wilds of Arizona” during the fall months on Earth.

In short order, the swap had been approved, and arrangements on the Embassy side were in the works. It was almost an afterthought when Aetius was notified through Lady Tal that he was being left at the Embassy for the next three months at his delayed request.

### ***20:15 (EST), Hovering Above Washington, D.C.***

“Why do you feel such *sadness*, Aetius?” Xue asked him...

She’d returned from the rear compartment after checking on the consignment of prisoners for the Kantite Embassy below them. What the Earthlings did to them was not her concern – only that they arrived alive and *mostly* intact. In that regard, she’d repaired a few poorly set broken bones of indeterminate age, and cured three of them of a variety of social diseases. She’d asked about the one with lymphoma, and Donald suggested that the longer he lived, the more useful he’d be to their interrogators. She’d simply shrugged, then

flashed the problem away. Not that anyone of them had noticed, since they'd all been blindfolded and gagged, not to mention still asleep before the ship had left the ground in Pakistan while dragging the modified IED behind them in its entirety...

"I was just starting to *enjoy* these little pleasure trips, my Lady," Seven admitted. "Working with Tank has been a truly *stimulating* experience."

Xue sat down next to him before resting her hand on his thigh; the contact allowing her to gain a better sense of his meaning, something that being on the Elder's Council had not *truly* prepared her for, even after all these centuries. It was probably due to their rather secluded lives.

"You do not feel a sense of *accomplishment* serving at the Center, Aetius? There are a wide range of tasks to keep you occupied, and your off-duty hours are not without enjoyment, this is true?" she asked, then listened silently while his thoughts flashed to several of his evening partners of late...

He was Kantite born, not of a particularly noble house, but could still natively Fire a Royal sword, and much more strongly than the quietest sword during their previous visit to Afghanistan.

She momentarily thought of Jovian, and how he'd felt both happy and embarrassed by the recognition of what he considered a *weakness* on his part...

Xue waited, but Aetius remained silent. Rather than prompting him physically, she dove in a little deeper and found his memories dancing over the women they'd brought back from Afghanistan. It would appear his interest had been intrigued by the fact that these women were all alone in the world, and had no one to protect and care for them.

She kept the smile from reaching her lips while pondering his motivations.

These were damaged women – *severely* in some cases – but he appeared to be truly desirous of doing something *non*-carnally personal to help ease their passage into this new chapter of their lives.

"Children and small animals," she murmured, then patted his thigh before standing up.

"Aetius, enjoy the break from dull Center duty for the next three months and use your time to *expand* your knowledge of the situation existing on Earth – and particularly how it might affect the Embassy and its staff. I would be interested in hearing your impressions upon your return to the Center."

## Picking up the Pieces

~~~

Donald stared at the evolving air traffic patterns below him while distilling the essence of that overheard conversation in his mind...

Xue was expecting to debrief Aetius when he returned to the Center – in *three months*. Farting around with terrorists was *one* thing, but having one of Lili's puppet masters hanging around for another *three months*...

"How soon will we arrive, Lord Cato?" Xue politely asked him, startling him out of his jumbled thoughts, while struggling not to jump out of his seat.

"Ahhh... Perhaps another fifteen minutes, my Lady," he said, then glanced at the timer on the console. "Twenty-thirty local time."

He watched her nod in his peripheral vision while she seemed to be contemplating something.

"That would be ... eight-thirty *p.m.*, Eastern Standard Time?" she asked quietly, which triggered a long blink in him as he digested this *new* tidbit.

"Yes, my Lady. That is correct. You seem to have adjusted to the Earthling time conventions," he admitted, but tensed when she laid a hand on his shoulder comfortingly.

"I was finding it somewhat *dreary* on Cletus, Donald. I thought to myself that members of the Council of Elders would find better purpose by stepping *outside* of our comfortable boundaries while taking the time to actually *visit* around the Commonwealth – especially since the Visions have left the Elder."

Donald did another long blink at Xue's blatant admission of the *actual* function of her office, more or less in public. Sai – blocked from seeing his face because of Xue's presence – snickered quietly in the navigator's position.

Xue easily read the silently repeating phrase from Donald's mind '*It's not my fault ... it's not my fault ... it's not my fault*' before she patted his shoulder again, then stepped away to sit down next to John this time.

~~~

John was sitting quietly in the seat behind Sai, and right up against the hull. He was still holding his camera, and totally *thrilled* that the batteries hadn't actually exploded in the vacuum on the surface of the moon. Not that they didn't *leak* a little bit, but that was a minor inconvenience compared to the pictures that were stored on the digital chip inside the camera...

When Don had mentioned finding someplace safe to stash the truck, he'd no idea of the *options* that were available to him. The two "around the world" transits took place at a relatively low altitude compared to really being in "outer" space!

Once Sai had cleared the boulders out of the way and landed, the men cut loose the sleeping prisoners and hauled them into the open back of the ship. Once there – and stripped down to what little underwear they had on – both Sai and Xue insured they were adequately strapped down, gagged, and blind-folded for the duration.

Now that Sai was available, Don had tasked her with looking *through* the phony bomb to confirm it was just an empty thirty-centimeter shell casing of some sort with no apparent active components inside, according to Sai. She'd had him verify it by pointing out the fasteners that held the thing together, and they'd opened it up – only finding traces of whatever it used to hold inside, either drugs or an explosive of some sort. The *important* thing was that it was currently benign and of unknown origin.

As for the *truck* – Sai had done her witchy thing again and confirmed that, *yes*; there was a *serious* chunk of radioactive material within some hidden casings under the truck bed that had wires going to it from the timing mechanism on the top. She'd also reported the radio-like device did indeed resemble a radio on the inside of it as well.

Once that had been established, Don ordered everyone into the ship, while he'd gotten in the truck and carefully driven it off the road onto a dusty spot and left it there. John had watched from the open back hatch when Don opened the fuel caps and tossed them inside the truck bed before trotting back to the ship and closing the hatch behind him.

He'd followed him forward, all the while hearing Don muttering to himself in that other language before they reached the forward seating area where Don dumped himself into the pilot's seat. He'd started a quick conversation with Sai Tal – again in that other language – while running some sort of calculations in a window on the front display. Once he seemed satisfied with the results, he'd announced, "Going up," and the ship had shifted slightly before rising flatly and rotating about its horizontal axis.

He could see from the camera display on the front screen that they'd stopped in mid-air, almost a hundred feet above the truck. Then Sai started working on what he now knew were the shield controls, and Don started giggling as he'd watched the truck get knocked around a bit until she'd obviously *sworn* something in that other language. Then the truck – and a large half-circle of ground *beneath* it – had floated into the air and settled in below them.



## Picking up the Pieces

Don had checked his calculation window again, then started them heading upward – still in a horizontal plane – while Sai scrambled to scan for traffic in all directions as they made a horizontal ascent to orbit. Once passing two-hundred thousand meters, Don had relaxed and told Sai to let the truck drop back a couple of thousand meters “just to be on the safe side” before they’d headed for the fading new moon...

“I’m sure your camera has survived, John,” Xue murmured helpfully, startling him out of his reverie.

“I – I’m okay with it. As long as the *chip* survived, it’ll be ... be...”

“Something I’m sure you will cherish from your trip to the special effects studio,” she supplied while patting his thigh lightly. “Donald told me *all* about it.”

He certainly couldn’t fault her for reminding him of the *cover* story – not after Don explained it to him as gently as he could...

In an incredibly short amount of time, they’d taken the truck, with its layer of Pakistani soil, around to the sunlit-side of the moon facing away from Earth, and planted it in the middle of a small crater for safekeeping. The reality of the situation had struck home when Don asked him to come outside with him and Seven to help take some reference shots of the truck – make, model, serial numbers, and such – so it might be traced back to its origin on Earth.

It had sounded almost funny, but when Don mentioned that Seven needed the exercise anyway, they’d laughed about it at Seven’s expense and prepared to step outside. While they were slipping into the ships suits stored in the forward compartment, Seven had gone aft and gotten his covert armor back on before joining them.

After feeling the gravity drop to Moon normal, Seven had gone outside first, followed by Don and John – both of them sharing the forward airlock. As a precaution, the back compartment had been sealed, and the two women had donned ships suits as well – giving John an eyeful during the change from regular clothes to the rather thin ships suits loosely draped around each of them. Once outside, the view had been stark and quite thrilling.

John had always dreamt of a chance like this. He’d read science fiction in his youth, and if Israel had had a *real* space program, he’d have been clamoring at the door to get into it.

As it was, the closest he’d ever gotten was watching when Ilan Ramon – the first ever Israeli astronaut – lost his life when he and the rest of the crew of Space Shuttle Columbia had burned up when the STS-107 mission experienced a “reentry accident” over southern Texas back in 2003.

Now that he was actually standing in a thin layer of dust – *on the Moon* – he'd said a silent prayer for Ilan's courage in taking the first Israeli steps towards exploration of space. Then Don had jolted him out of his thoughts when he'd patted his shoulder and pointed to the truck. They'd trudged over to it, then stepped onto the fifty-foot circle of dirt, with Donald asking him to advise Seven on where to find things like serial numbers and other identifying marks to photograph. Once the hood was opened, and the door jams examined for labels and tags, John stepped back, slipped his personal camera out of its case, and turned it on – hoping it would still work in a vacuum.

To his surprise and delight, an image had come up on the small display, and despite the harsh glare under the exposed landscape, he'd been able to shade his faintly glowing face shield enough to *almost* see what he was shooting. He'd continued to circle the truck and snap pictures until he was startled to see a shadow descend over his head, but when he'd turned to look, discovered it was only Don.

Don had pulled a leftover piece of clothing from the driver's compartment, and was using it to shield him from the bright sunlight. Nodding his thanks, he'd turned back to the task at hand and continued taking photographs of the truck – including its newly flattened tires and Seven's efforts to use his snooping probe to take detailed images of the engine compartment.

To top it all off, Don had asked how to use his camera, then had him and Seven stand to one side of the truck for a small group photograph. It was almost surreal. After that, they'd returned to the ship after Don had – *seriously* – taken that last piece of clothing and put it back *into* the cab of the truck, then closed the door. He could almost imagine him taking the *keys* out of the ignition and locking the door behind him...

John looked to the laptop tucked to his side. Earlier, the data from his camera had been transferred via a thin cable to the laptop, where it had been converted to a format the ship could transmit back to the Embassy. It was tempting to pull the chip out of his camera, but he didn't want to risk any damage by exposing it to any of the battery leakage. As it was, the ship contained no toilet paper, but he'd found a scrap of paper towel beneath the sink and mulched it to the point where he was able to remove the leaky batteries and replace them with the scrunched up paper.

The batteries themselves were wrapped in the remaining paper for safekeeping until they could be disposed of properly.

"You've had a *remarkable* trip, John, and it shouldn't be forgotten," Xue murmured, then rested the back of her fist on his thigh. "Seven gave me this after he changed out of his gear."

## Picking up the Pieces

When her hand opened, it revealed a small, irregular chunk of rock – a *real* moon rock – about the size of a marble.

“You should probably not mention this to Donald,” she whispered, then pointed to the camera case that was still clutched between his legs like an egg waiting to hatch. “You should put this in your camera case – with your *other* reminders.”

John flushed. Somehow, she'd known what he'd done while they were coming back to the ship ... probably while watching him on the external cameras.

He refrained from hunching his shoulders, but nodded his acceptance of her into his conspiracy before tucking his camera into his lap and opening the camera case to slip the rock on top of the pile of Moon dust inside.

He had no idea of how many laws he was violating, but what the *heck!* How many times does an opportunity like *this* occur?

“My understanding is, if a Moon rock was not *stolen* from the Americans, then it is not illegal,” she murmured, then patted his leg lightly. “However, I doubt they would consider the *origin* of such a thing in your custody to be reasonable.”

This conversation hadn't escaped Sai's notice, which resulted in a series of chuckles from her. Donald, however, took that as representative of her chiding and a personal affront. He was about to comment on it when the patterns below him cleared, and he announced, “Fasten your seat belts. We're *dropping*.”

Leaving them a scant five seconds to secure themselves, he launched them vertically towards the ground, the acceleration pushing them firmly into their seats.

### **8:30 P.M., (EST), At the Embassy**

Agent Gale wasn't at all surprised at having her personal set of luggage delivered to her comfy cell door. Then she was advised to pack for a short flight that would take her to her next interview. Not even the fact that she was told to take *all* of her personal belongings with her seemed to faze her, since it appeared that she'd passed the first part of the vetting process for ... someone or something.

~~~

“This is so much better than that crappy *brownstone* they started out with downtown,” Donald muttered to no one in particular while settling the ship onto the Embassy rooftop. He'd double-checked the strut load weight and insured it was locked to only one-quarter of the maximum roof loading before he actually made contact with it.

Unlike his previous visit, this time the back hatch would be dropped, and the prisoners carried out on stretchers – once another sleepy gas round was released inside the rear compartment to keep everyone complacent for a little while longer.

Once down, he contacted the Embassy security center and advised them to prepare six stretcher teams for recovery of the prisoners. Purely as a precaution, they were to remain inside behind closed doors until he'd vented the rear compartment of sleepy gas. Then he sent Seven back there with a prepared gas round, and had him close the rear access door before setting it off and letting it take effect.

Five minutes later, Donald turned the assault deck lighting to dim red and cracked the assault ramp open to let the space air out before carefully lowering the ramp in its short configuration – making it a short hike down, but a steep one. He kept checking the environmental monitor until he found it safe to move about, before alerting the security center to send out staff to pick up their packages.

Once recovered, they could begin loading the return passengers for the trip back to Arizona.

### *In the Embassy...*

Howard and Dwayne were escorting Agent Gale to the roof. Along the way, they crossed paths with six scantily dressed men who were tied to stretchers, gagged, blindfolded, and on their way to individual holding cells in the basement. The last security man in line carried a couple of clear lumpy trash bags that held what looked like clothing items.

"Looks like it was a successful mission, Agent Gale," Howard said in passing. "Those are the guys who were delivering a nuclear device to Faridun's terrorist group."

He'd gotten a few steps further when he noticed Dorothy had fallen behind, and turned to find she'd stopped to stare – open mouthed – at the parade of prone, hooded bodies being carried past them.

"T-They ... t-they got a *b-bomb*?" she stuttered.

"It was put away some place *safe*," Dwayne assured her, as he came back to guide her along. He reached out and gently grasped her closest elbow, but got a startled reaction from her before dropping his hand.

"Please come this way, Dorothy," he said politely, then gestured towards Howard, who was still several steps ahead of them.

She reluctantly began following Howard, then seemed to become more resolute as they continued. On the way to the rooftop, they were

## Picking up the Pieces

joined by another huge guard who was carrying what looked like a duffle bag – with a *sword* strapped to it.

*“\*Paulinus! I always THOUGHT you’d be bailing out the first chance you got!\*”* Dwayne greeted him cheerfully.

“Can’t get any leave to go home, so Arizona is the next best thing,” the man in question answered, totally surprising Dwayne with his facility in English.

“And you bothered to learn *English*, too! I’m *proud* of you,” Dwayne complemented him, before lowering his voice. “Were the Ladies so very *demanding* of you here?”

*“Variety*, Dwayne! Still can’t get my mother’s home cooking, and besides, I like *variety* in my meals!”

As the two men continued their familiar banter in English, Dorothy was struck at how easily he could have passed as a rude upper classman jock talking about his varied conquests.

She tried to avoid staring at him, but his stature and general affability began to intrigue her. She never noticed when Lady Spring Blossom joined the party behind her, completely missing the smile the Indian woman was directing at her back.

The party continued to the rooftop, where an ominously rectangular opening was glowing dimly in the evening air.

They could see piles of luggage stored to one side of the ramp, and then a tall man called out a greeting in that strange language of theirs. Paulinus left them standing at the bottom of the steep ramp while he trudged up it to greet the other man and exchange what looked like paperwork between the two of them. A couple of minutes of conversation ensued, after which Paulinus dropped his kit inside the dimly lit room and gestured for them to come aboard.

“Your bags will be brought in for you,” Dwayne assured them before he led Lady Spring Blossom up the steep ramp, followed by Howard leading Dorothy up behind them.

Once they were aboard, Aetius shook Dwayne’s hand in parting, then brought his own kit down the ramp before helping lift the remaining luggage up to Paulinus in preparation for departure.

~~~

*“\*Lord Cato? I am Paulinus Rufinius on temporary assignment to the garrison in Arizona,\*”* Paulinus greeted Donald in the front compartment. He handed over his paperwork, and Donald, following protocol, quickly reviewed it, then handed it to Dwayne before turning back and offering his own greeting.

*“Welcome aboard, Paulinus. I understand only too well being faced with a dull and joyless assignment. May your stay at the garrison be full of interesting events,”* he said, but stopped to consider how close that was to a curse in some cultures. *“Ahh, rather ... let us say that we hope you find your stay to be fulfilling of your need for a change of pace that provides a positive enrichment of your being,”* he offered, but saw that it still grazed over the head of the relatively young man in front of him.

He gestured to the right rear seat and waited for the next passenger to come forward.

“Lord Donald Cato, may I present General Howard Mayfield, Retired,” Dwayne said formally. “Wilber Milton had suffered an indignity from rogue elements of our host a few years ago, and Howard was key in resolving those issues.”

Donald smiled and held out his hand, pleased that Howard took it readily.

“Howard, you’d performed a most *helpful* service during a time of unfortunate crisis between our two cultures, and I want to *personally* thank you for your efforts. Wilber has been an able liaison between our peoples, and I understand your timely intervention prevented an unfortunate treaty violation from a misguided element that – *hopefully*, has been rendered neutral?”

“Andrews and Pack? They’re no longer in service with our government, and their activities continue to be monitored,” Howard confirmed, and saw a grim smile of satisfaction on Donald’s lips in return.

“Please accept our thanks for coming with us this evening, Howard. I understand our next guest had asked for a *personal* interview with Wilber,” Donald said quietly, then glanced around Howard to see Dorothy standing nervously behind him. “I’m sure your comforting presence will help assuage her fears while she determines where her future lies. Please ... have a seat.”

Donald gestured to the remaining open double seat in the rear, and Dorothy reluctantly stepped forward to take Howard’s place.

“Lord Donald Cato, may I present Agent Dorothy Gale of the Defense Intelligence Agency,” Dwayne continued. “She’d expressed an interest in meeting Wilber, and since you were already on the way, we thought we’d catch a ride back to Arizona with you.”

“Dorothy...,” he said slowly, while tilting his head slightly. “I believe that is derived from the *Greek*, meaning ... ‘God’s *Gift*’ ... or perhaps, ‘Gift of God.’ ” He paused and tilted his head in the other direction for

## Picking up the Pieces

a moment, then shook it slightly. "I beg your pardon, Agent Gale. Welcome aboard," he continued, and held out his hand.

Dorothy took it with a bemused expression on her face, and was surprised at the gentleness of his grip – then startled when he raised her hand up and touched the back of it to the center of his forehead. He held it there for just a moment, then brought it down before releasing it and gesturing to the open seat next to Howard.

As she was fumbling to settle into her seat, she finally noticed Lady Spring Blossom approach Cato and receive a kiss on her cheek in greeting, followed by a quick burst of that foreign language. They shared a few laughing comments before parting, and the suddenly smiling man left the forward compartment and headed aft – sliding the partition door closed behind him.

~~~

"Fucking *spooks* in *combat boots*," Donald muttered on the way to the assault deck.

He saw that Sai was almost done securing the luggage with some of the cargo webbing they'd retained on board. Poking his head into the weapons room, he confirmed the fake bomb was still in its packing box and lashed in place to the deck, not that it would do much damage to the room unless they started bouncing around a *lot* more than usual but he still spent the time to check all the fastenings because ... you never know...

~~~

Dorothy had taken the open aisle seat next to Howard but remained silent while looking all around the forward cabin of ... *whatever* they were in.

She'd noted the thickness of the steep ramp leading up to the back room, then the very *solid* feeling of the metal deck when they'd been led forward to their current location. At the time, all she'd really noticed were the three rows of seats, a large black window across the entire front of ... *whatever* it was, and a few more people idly chatting in the forward seats.

She watched an older woman get up, then walk past her, smiling at her in passing, before she went into a small compartment and closed the door. Its purpose became obvious when she opened the door a few minutes later and turned back to flush the toilet that had been hidden by her body. Then she stepped over behind her and the sound of running water could be heard. Dorothy *really* wanted to stand up and poke around a bit, but was afraid ... afraid of being nosy, afraid of being a nuisance, but *most* of all, afraid of offending these people who appeared to hold her life in their hands.

Her apprehensions were put on hold when the woman stopped by her seat and smiled down at her.

"While we're waiting for departure clearance, do you need to use the facilities? The toilet," she quickly added. "We also have some drinks in the refrigerator if you're thirsty?"

"I-I..."

"I beg your pardon. My name is Xue," she introduced herself, then reached down to touch her shoulder. "And you are Dorothy Gale."

For some reason, Dorothy didn't feel *nearly* as nervous, and calmly watched when Xue glanced to the rear of the compartment.

"Isn't that *just* like a man?" she asked her teasingly. "A *casual* introduction, a *quick* flirtation ... then he just *leaves* you here without even offering you the courtesy of a *refreshment* ... or the means to *eliminate* it afterwards."

Xue let out a wistful sigh, then smiled down at her again – all the while reading her body and sensing it's needs.

"Come with me, child, and let's see what he's left us to drink!" she suggested cheerfully, then gently pulled her hand to get her up and moving towards the refrigerator.

Once there, they went down the available selections; cartons of apple juice, orange juice, and canned ginger ale. Dorothy selected a ginger ale, and after popping the top, took a *deep* swallow of it – her impatience being rewarded with a resounding *belch*, which caused the rest of the compartment to fall into silence for a few seconds until a quiet chuckling started from the seats near the front.

"Don't mind them, dear," Xue told her, before they heard the rustle of bodies standing up and heading their way.

The guard who came aboard with them waited until Dwayne had made a selection, two cartons, then selected a can of ginger ale for himself ... although he was *much* more circumspect in his rate of consumption. Dorothy saw Dwayne hand a carton to his seat companion, and was surprised to see Spring Blossom take his hand and raise it to her forehead in appreciation of his service to her.

~~~

After a quick check of the ship's timer in the weapons room, approaching nine-thirty p.m. local, Donald nodded in satisfaction, then stepped into the passageway and called out to Sai.

"Sai, any *preliminary* information on our transport crew?"



## Picking up the Pieces

The look she spared him was *less* than appreciative.

“Got a *fire* pest up your ass, Donnie? Let them *work* on it a while! You can’t squeeze *milk* from a dead *valaet!*” she snapped, not even considering what expression she’d blundered through, or if it was an expression at all.

He let out a sigh and leaned against the passageway wall.

“I’m *worried*, Sai. This just doesn’t *feel* right. Six guys to deliver a *fake* bomb, all the while transporting a *hot shot* built into the bed of the *delivery vehicle*? It just doesn’t make any *sense* to me,” he admitted, then slid all the way to the deck and sat there with his knees tucked up.

“Gimme your hand, Donnie,” she said, so he absently reached out his hand without realizing what she intended.

Sai used the skin-to-skin contact to plunge into his mind and start poking around to see what was bothering him. It didn’t take long to determine he was worried about committing a treaty violation – either currently, or in the very near future. She joined him on the deck and started making pointed statements about his concerns.

“You’re worried about the *men* ... not who they are, but where they’re *really* from,” she stated, and watched as he stared at the wall before nodding his head.

“You’re worried that we’ve interrupted an *authorized* sanction in progress, but you’re more concerned with *who* authorized it, rather than the means that were being used to carry it out,” she continued, and watched as he reluctantly nodded his head again.

She let him wallow in self-pity for about a minute while rummaging through the rest of his reasonings – including his motivations, which were *blatantly* obvious ... *preserve life!*

That included Fred and his companion, the women and girls they’d recovered, the members of Faridun’s terrorist group, not to mention the surrounding *villages*, and even those assholes delivering a nuclear device whose *exact* purpose remained frustratingly *illusive* at the moment.

“Sai ... we were alerted by our *inside* contacts that a nuclear weapon was on the move – reported *terminal* destination the continental United States,” he finally muttered. “We were not bound by either duty or treaty to *interfere* with that weapon, but our contacts had a justifiable concern that it would reach our hosts and cause *severe* loss of life in the process. Wilber also confirmed that our hosts – certain *elements* of them – might have been tempted to intercept that weapon while it was safely on the *other* side of the world using *any*

means possible – *including* a nuclear option of their *own*. That's not something a sane society would *ever* consider doing."

"Donnie ... who said these guys were sane?" she asked quietly. "You've said it yourself – six thousand voices, but *none* of them talking to each other. What do you *expect* from them?"

He turned and looked directly at her for a moment.

"I expect a *lot*, Sai, but I don't expect the *impossible*," he muttered, then turned back to the wall. "I want my planet to survive to Class 3, but ... but I don't know how else to help it without *interfering* with it."

He stared down between his knees at the deck in abject futility while they sat in silence for another minute until Sai brought up the obvious.

"You know, Earth is *already* a Protectorate. Maybe you can convince Laisee to make it a ... *Governed Territory*?"

He looked up at her in dulled surprise before the thought of it spasmed his torso just a bit. He finally smiled, then broke into chuckles before struggling to his feet and helping her up off the deck.

"Right. Well. Those are all *weighty* issues best left to the decision of the *Crown* – or his *Representative*," he said lightly. "All we can do is observe and report. We'll let the *Earthlings* interview the transport crew – *after* the Seniors have a crack at them." He paused for another moment, then nodded once again. "We can turn our results over to a handful of Howard's intelligence contacts and let *them* deal with it."

He started to head forward, but she reached out and touched his arm.

"Do you think they'll want to take a *closer* look at that bomb?"

He stared at her for several seconds – the touch on his arm allowing her to listen to his processes. In this instance – given the *circumstances* – in his mind it pointed to a pretty fixed solution.

"We have photos. They're smart and should be able to work it out. We're gonna turn over everything we know, and then ... then I'm thinking an *extra* trip – with *official* observers – to watch the destruction of the nuclear device."

He paused in thought for a moment more. "Come to think of it, my smallest load should be *much* more impressive than that tiny 20-kiloton bomb anyway," he muttered thoughtfully, before turning and heading forward to prepare for flight.

He thought of something else just as he reached the passageway door. Sai didn't know what it was, but the satisfied rush flowing out of

## Picking up the Pieces

him indicated he wasn't done screwing with the twisted plans of these stupid Earthlings.

~~~

"Come, Dorothy. Let me show you the ... the *rest* room, I believe you call it," Xue suggested, and turned her towards the rear, just as the door slid open to reveal Lord Cato and another woman.

*"\*Taking her to visit the facilities, Donald. I would appreciate it if you waited until AFTER we return before you start bouncing us around once again,\*"* she chided him gently, but immediately saw his smile and the half-bow of his head before both he and Sai cleared the door to let them through.

Sai followed Donald to the console and took her seat at the navigation station, while he sat down in the pilot's seat and began firing up the converters.

"Please start a traffic scan, Sai," he asked her, then contacted the Embassy security center.

*"\*Security Center, Kraken's Child awaiting departure clearance. If you guys have any clue as to what schedules these insane aircraft are trying to keep this evening, I'd appreciate some foreknowledge of it,\*"* he called out.

*"\*Kraken's Child, clearance granted at your discretion. Report leaving immediate area upon departure. We have NO idea what the Earthlings are up to. For some obscure reason, the airline schedules appear to be shifting to conform to their new season.\*"*

*"\*Thank you, and ... how are the new guests?\*"* he asked out of curiosity.

*"\*They appear to be sleeping. The Senior awaits their recovery with anticipation so she may learn a few more languages. Hopefully, her results will be of use to you and to our hosts.\*"*

Donald thought of the edgy situation he'd placed them all in, and decided to try to limit the fallout for the time being.

*"\*Security Center, please advise the Embassy staff that all recovered information is held pending release by the Crown's direct representative at the Healing Center ... Lady Laisee Caldarous,\*"* he sent.

*"\*Understood, Kraken's Child. We hear and obey.\*"*

After the coms went silent, Sai turned to look at him curiously.

*"\*You think things might get out of hand if the hosts learn too much, too soon?\*"* she asked him.

*“\*Insane, hairless apes, Sai,\*”* he muttered. *“\*UNENLIGHTENED insane, hairless apes.\*”*

~~~

Dorothy was just washing after using the toilet, when the floor shuddered slightly and she momentarily lost her balance.

“Feels like Donald is getting ready to leave,” Xue said unnecessarily. “Let’s go sit down.”

Dorothy followed Xue forward and sat down next to Howard, while Xue continued to the next row and sat next to another man she’d not been introduced to yet.

“Ladies and gentlemen, *please* keep your hands and feet *inside* the ride at all times until we come to a *complete* stop ... eventually,” Lord Cato announced from up front.

There began a series of clunks from below, followed by various mechanical sounds of machinery, air handlers – and a weird sense of vertigo when the ship began to rise.

She felt an impression of motion ... a rotation on the *vertical* plane of some sort, even though down remained down inside the cabin, right until Lord Cato said, “Annnnd ... *here* we go.”

Dorothy was squished back in her seat for about a minute before the pressure eased, with down *sort* of remaining down, but leaving her with the *distinct* impression she was still traveling *upwards*.

She heard him mumble something up front, then caught his muttered “Sorry,” after which down became *positively* down, and up was *definitely* above her head once again.

Now that things had *somewhat* stabilized, she started paying attention to her surroundings again. Across the aisle from her, the guard appeared to be dozing in his seat.

Directly in front of her, she could hear quiet murmurings between Xue and the stranger she was sitting next to, and also the occasional comments between Spring Blossom and Dwayne, who were sitting kitty-corner from her.

She was still wondering just how they were traveling when she caught the shifting view from the entire front window, and watched as tiny dots of light began creeping up from the bottom of it.

It didn’t make much sense at first, until she realized that they were *very* high in the air and had been pointing upwards at some point, but were now leveling out – *despite* what her physical senses were telling her.

## Picking up the Pieces

“Dorothy, what you are seeing are the lights of the cities lying along our path to Arizona,” Xue said from in front of her. “We should be in Arizona in ... Donald, how soon will we arrive?”

“With cloaking and a *mostly* dark moon ... maybe a little under an hour,” he muttered. “I’m tired, and I need a shower and a nap. And I’ve been thinking of...” He paused to make a minor shift in his flight path.

“Damn garbage,” he grumbled. “I’m thinking of delivering a bomb to Faridun ... that *fake* one we picked up in Pakistan. Fill it full of lead, swap it for the drugs, burn the drugs, and ... how about we just pick up Faridun and turn him in?”

“I would advise that you wait until *after* you’ve had a chance to rest before we discuss any further intrusions into Afghanistan, Donald. We’ve yet to determine the extent of your possible treaty violations... *Our* possible treaty violations,” she amended reluctantly.

“Thank you, my Lady,” he said, then focused on his driving, while Dorothy sat there trying to digest all that she’d just heard.

*‘Treaty violations? FURTHER intrusions into Afghanistan? Lord Cato ... Donald ... had been involved with the activities Abernathy and Fredricks were picked up for?’* With these thoughts running through her mind, Dorothy glanced to her left, but found that Howard had shut his eyes and apparently seemed content to wait until they’d landed in...

*‘Arizona? In less than an HOUR?’*

Xue felt Dorothy’s confusion, but quickly decided that enough conversation had taken place for the time being. Once they were safely on the ground would be soon enough, before delving further into the mysteries Agent Gale had inadvertently been made a part of.

She smiled to herself, then leaned over and rested her head against John’s shoulder before shifting her left hand over to his thigh to share the feeling of comfort she was radiating.

A thought from him startled her, and she considered her situation before smiling inwardly at what might soon become a rather *welcome* diversion after they arrived. She certainly hoped John was *up* to it.

### ***8:15 P.M. (MST), Arizona, In the Motor Pool***

Donald scanned his console before beginning the shutdown process, all the while tickled at arriving a bit earlier than expected.

The shortcut he’d taken had involved the destruction of a derelict satellite, but he was sure no one would notice it’d gone missing ... not for a while, anyway.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, *thank* you for flying Kraken Airlines. *Please* check your personal belongings *before* leaving the ship,” he called out, while balancing the internal and external air pressures before cracking both the forward airlock, and the rear assault hatch.

He could see several of the garrison staff standing by from an inset window on the forward screen, where they appeared to be ready to help the passengers disembark. A few of them were even standing next to small cargo dollies in case of unexpected amounts of luggage. He smiled at the thought of it before seeing the support staff making ready to service the ship. He triggered the hatch over the refueling port, then remembered the ship was still space black, so he changed it to the jungle theme once again before closing out his console controls.

“Sai, I’m heading back to the Center. You can turn the ship over to the staff when you’re ready. Then I’d suggest you get some sleep,” he said, before standing up to stretch.

“What’s the big *hurry*, Donnie?” she teased him, thinking of the two women waiting for him.

“Lot on my mind. Wilber’s gonna have updates for us – *hopefully* before morning. We find out who’s behind the truck bomb, we find out how badly I’m in trouble.”

“You mean how badly *we’re* in trouble, don’t you?”

He glanced over and saw Xue still snuggled against John’s shoulder, then lowered his voice.

“No. If we need a scapegoat, I’m the logical choice,” he murmured, then looked around the cabin, which was starting to populate with milling bodies. “I’m gonna go see my kids.”

So saying, he slipped past her down the aisle and headed for the forward airlock – leaving her shaking her head in wonder.

### ***In the Residence***

Wilber watched from his office window as the trail of people slowly wandered from the motor pool over to the Center.

For some reason it made him think of last winter, when the short walk would involve significant amounts of rain and foul weather gear to try and keep oneself dry. When the last stragglers entered the Center, he went back to his computer and opened up a CAD image of the site map while contemplating a few improvements – starting with a covered walkway from the motor pool to the Center.

He opened up a document file and started making notes:

1. Add a covered walkway, M/P to Center.

## Picking up the Pieces

2. Better utilize existing underground tunnels?
3. Install service elevators to supplement ramps/ladders in M/P, Center, and Residence? Useful for bulk items?

He leaned back and considered these rather trivial improvements, then considered a few others.

4. Covered parking area for guests. Put solar panels on roof to simulate energy conservation?

What was that Mary had said the other night? Put in a tennis court and stick an underground pool beneath it? Sure, why not...

5. Underground pool – heated.
6. Tennis court above pool – sun shaded.

His memories suddenly flashed to the *one* time he'd stayed at a resort and lain by the pool to ogle all the hot women from behind his sun glasses. Before he could really get into it, his phone rang with a caller ID from a special number.

"Milton," he said, then listened to the short message, all the while smiling as the news was somewhat *refreshing* for a change.

He listened further, then hung up, before turning to his computer in anticipation of the email headed his way ... quickly announced by a cheerful bing from the speakers.

He opened it and read down the list that had been provided by a *very* helpful DEA acquaintance of his from when he was still active in ICE back in Washington state. He'd never approached the man about joining the party, but he was an open book of information under *certain* circumstances, and *this* circumstance appeared to have been particularly *ripe*.

He clicked print, then waited for the twelve pages of exerts to finish printing while shaking his head slowly. It'd been less than six hours since the photos had been distributed by the Embassy, and they were already getting results. Shu had reported some of Donald's reservations via Sai, Xue, and Laisee, but if it was *accurate*, this promised to let him off the hook – depending on if it *was* accurate, and how he acted on the news.

*That* thought ground him to a halt when he considered the possible outcomes of this news. Donald wasn't particularly foolish, but there were still lives at stake, and he was a *stickler* about not letting a job go unfinished. He let out a disgusted sigh, already having an idea of what would happen next. *Worst* case scenario – Donald would fuck it all up. *Best* case scenario – he goes back in, picks up Nurani's sister, then gets her safely out of harm's way, which would presumably *still* be

headed in Faridun's direction once the Cartels figured out they'd misplaced their truck bomb.

*In the Center*

Laisee returned in time to latch on to Jaiying before she'd had a chance to leave her room.

"Let Donald return to his bond-mates and children, my girl," she said, then squatted down beside her frustrated offspring to give her a loving hug.

"We can wait until tomorrow morning, Jaiying," Rose assured her, as she walked over and added her arms to the hug.

"Donald is going to leave us again ... maybe tomorrow morning," Jaiying mumbled, then pushed away from her mother to look up at her. "You know what he's like."

"That is not yet *certain*, but if he *does*, he will be *very* careful," she said.

"Yeah. And maybe he'll get Auntie Nurani's big sister and bring her *home*," Rose suggested cheerfully, which caused Laisee's eyes to open in surprise as she digested this *latest* association of family with her child and niece...

Jaiying and Rose had been spending a lot of time with the recovered women and children, lending yet another pair of voices who could speak Pashto to the fearful refugees.

It'd been both a startling and welcome surprise for the newcomers, but had shocked Laisee when she'd first heard it in person. From Jaiying, she sort of expected it. With Rose, not so much. In any case, the newcomers were relieved by the cheerful nature of the girls, and a few of them – the older ones – were astonished at their maturity...

"You know, I've been thinking that a movie player and monitor might be a welcome addition to our suite," Laisee suggested, knowing it was something the girls had been talking about between themselves for the last week now.

"That would be very nice, Mama Laisee, but ... but then our guards would have to stay *outside* and not be able to share the movies *with* us," Rose pointed out, knowing the guards did not station themselves within *any* of the guest suites – other than the public area of Wilber Milton's residence.

Laisee frowned while reflecting on this unexpected counter-argument. Was Rose, and probably Jaiying, suggesting that the guardsmen be allowed to violate the *privacy* of their suite during their



## Picking up the Pieces

watch? Or were they suggesting garrison staff be allowed to have movie-watching equipment within their *own* residences?

“It would be very educational for the garrison to have access to a network like Uncle Wilber,” Jaiying suggested. “Then they could learn all about the differences between the Earthlings, directly *from* the Earthlings. I found it very useful, Mother.”

Laisee closed her eyes, already anticipating this *new* conundrum, and it’s possible consequences. She’d seen Jaiying and Rose hunched over Wilber’s computer watching random videos of stupid Earthlings doing stupid things. Not the *cat* videos, though. Those were *legitimately* entertaining...

“I will ask Ling to take it under advisement,” she finally offered, then sensed, but did not hear, the echo of tiny giggles from both of them.

~~~

As directed by Lady Caldarous, Dwayne left Howard and Dorothy in one of the VIP suites before heading back to the guest wing to take a welcomed shower. On the way back, he wondered if Spring Blossom would be joining him later this evening. He passed Xue, returning to her own VIP suite, and wished her a pleasant evening – catching a smile from her that promised she had something other than just sleeping planned.

Xue stopped in the hallway outside her suite to speak with one of her Cletus security staffers for a moment, then issued him new orders for the evening. He bowed per protocol, then keyed his com device to relay these new orders to his counterparts who were off duty.

### *Heading to John’s Room...*

Xue had spent a few minutes speaking with John in the outer hallway before leaving him there, thinking of the offer before him. As she’d returned to her suite, John began wandering back to his guest quarters while still deciding what to do.

On the one hand, it had been a very long mission. However, the prospect of sleeping alone was not as big an attraction as he might have expected. He continued to the guest wing and meandered down the hallway ... seeing two guards outside of Don’s room, along with two guards stationed at either end of the hallway to protect and assist the residents. As he passed by it, the photographs on Asad and Nurani’s door made him smile...

In his blind rush to get at Faridun, he’d blundered *horribly*, and yet those two kids had still ended up being sweethearts about his thoughtless interference with their lives. At least, *Asad* seemed not to

hold any grudges against him. And here, he'd been in Afghanistan and not made an effort to do any fatal damage to Faridun – not *directly*, anyway.

Overall, the disruption of Faridun's drug operation would have a minimal effect on the trafficking trade to Israel. Most of Afghanistan's poppy trade was filtering through the northern breakaway provinces of Russia into their previous landlord. Israel's consumption was meager in comparison – aside from the death of his sister.

Maybe ... just maybe the *only* reason Faridun had been sending drugs to Israel was because of him? Faridun discovered he'd become a Mossad agent, didn't he? Learning that would have *obviously* revealed his sister's drug dependence, wouldn't it? As for the *Americans*; Faridun's hatred of them was reason enough to divert heroin exports *directly* to America, rather than take the easy path north along with everyone else's crops.

He stopped outside his door and looked at the knob blindly. It took him a moment to realize he'd arrived, before reaching out and opening it, it having never been locked, and entering to shed his clothes in a heap before heading to the shower.

He'd been asked if he'd like to spend the evening with Lady Xue, and could find no Earthly reason for ignoring her request. Besides, it couldn't *possibly* be as frightening as the last time he'd spent under Kiki's control...

### ***In Howard and Dorothy's Suite...***

In his bedroom, Howard found a clean change of clothes in his size, a toothbrush, electric shaver, soap, shampoo – suitable for what little hair he had left – and eventually luxuriated in an unusually stimulating shower for much longer than he'd expected. Drying off afterwards, he opened bathroom cabinets until discovering a robe in his size – actually a *variety* of sizes – and donned it before heading to the central lounge portion of the suite.

Strangely enough, for all the amenities available, the one that was *noticeably* lacking was a television set. He was about to abort back to his bedroom when he noticed the small table in the corner of the room holding a variety of beverages upon it. He approached with a smile and noted that, along with a selection of common spirits, there was also a bottle of that amazing green liquor he'd enjoyed back at the Embassy. Without a second thought, he cracked the seal and poured himself a half-finger of it – heeding the warning from Dwayne as to the seriousness of its effect on the human body.

He spent several moments smelling the mixture of delicious, fragrances before bringing the glass down to his lips, and savoring the

## Picking up the Pieces

fantastic feeling as it worked its way down his throat, *oh*, so smoothly, and settled into a warm puddle at the bottom of his stomach.

*Screw* everything else! All the technological bullshit these people were supposedly donating for the betterment of mankind on Earth was *shit*. Import this stuff by the *barrelful*, and it would just about *guarantee* world peace! He quietly groaned in pleasure, and was about to take another tiny sip, when he was interrupted.

“Can you fix me one of those?” a tiny voice asked from behind him.

He turned to see Dorothy standing by her bedroom door and dressed pretty much the same as he was – except her robe was smaller, and her slippers fit better. He smiled to see her there, then turned back and poured her a drink, as well. When he handed it to her, she tossed it back, then held it out for a refill.

“Hey! Slow *down* there, girl,” he said, and took the glass away from her. “Dwayne warned us, remember? This is a *sippin’* liquor, not a *chuggin’* liquor.”

He’d parroted the line Dwayne had told them, not knowing Dwayne had merely repeated what Donald had told him in a past life. She nodded her head unevenly so he reluctantly poured a tiny bit more into her glass ... pausing until she’d taken a breath and let it fall out of her lungs with an accepting sigh of resignation, before handing it back to her.

“It’s just that ... this whole *thing* ... that *ship* ... those *prisoners* ... we’re in *Arizona* when we just left D.C. a little...” She stopped to shrug vaguely, then took a tiny sip from her glass. “Did you see the *size* of that building! And *this* place ... the hallway ... all the doors...” She stopped again, then put down her glass when she started to shiver.

He took another sip himself, but put his glass down before opening his arms to her. She looked at him warily, but at least she knew *he* was human. She *hoped* he was, anyway, when she went in for the hug, despite her sudden reservations.

They stood like that until her shivers started tapering off. Whether it was the hug, or the ambrosia finally kicking in, she backed away awkwardly and picked up her glass to take another tiny sip from it. Howard grabbed his glass – and the bottle – and headed over to the corner couch arrangement to plop himself down at one end of it, before refreshing his glass and leaning forward to deposit the bottle on the coffee table in front of him.

She followed him over, and, deliberating between one of two comfy swivel rockers facing the sofa, threw caution to the wind and sat down on the sofa about a foot away from him – just in case the *shivers* came back, she told herself. She leaned forward awkwardly to top off her

glass, trusting the good General to carry her to her bed *when* – not *if* – she drank herself into a stupor.

She took another sip and forced herself not to groan in pleasure as the liquor trickled down her throat with nary a complaint from her tender tissues; eventually feeling it join the warm pool in her stomach that threatened to send her into a welcome fog of blissful sleep. She wouldn't enjoy the *hangover* in the morning, but right now she just needed a little help getting over this whole ... situation.

She found herself remembering Donald Cato's words back on the ship about Howard's "comforting" presence being helpful for her nerves. Howard was certainly *old* enough to be her father, and his hug had helped calm her down. On top of that, he seemed to be part of the "in crowd" already. That thought piqued her interest, and she decided to put on her DIA hat for a while and see what she could learn. She sipped her drink again, then slid a little closer to him, leaning sideways far enough to rest her head against his shoulder, before quietly asking, "Howard ... how are *you* connected to all of this?"

He smiled, knowing this had been coming. He also knew what Dwayne had already known, and what Xue had suspected. Once *Agent* Gale came to the forefront, her natural curiosity would prevent her from backing away from the scary parts of the situation, if for no other reason than finding out just what in the hell was *actually* going on. He took another sip of his drink before laying out the actual truth for her as he knew it – exactly as he'd been *permitted* to do so.

"Back in '98, an unauthorized Air Force security operation had gotten out of hand, and ended up threatening the lives of the Ambassador pro Tem and his traveling companions," he recited. "As you heard on the ship, it also resulted in Wilber Milton being kidnapped by elements of our own government..."

He paused at the irony of it. Abernathy and Fredricks had suffered the same indignity, but at least Dorothy wouldn't suffer the same *fate* as Andrews and Pack. Worst case for her was what Dwayne had muttered to him privately, "Fixing it in *post*" – whatever dire process *that* implied.

"I was yanked out of bed by a bunch of NSA spooks and spent the next seventy-two hours searching for a Wilber Milton – someone I'd never even *heard* of before..."

### *At Xue's Suite...*

Xue answered the quiet knock on her door, and opened it to the welcome sight of John Smith standing there – freshly showered, and in clean clothes. She graced him with a dazzling smile, which made his heart flutter and brought a blush to his face. Reaching out to him, she

## Picking up the Pieces

took his hand and drew him into the room, he never noticing the door closing silently behind him.

"Wow," he said quietly, as he glanced around the sitting room. "You've got a great suite. Quiet, too. I can hear the chatter from behind the other doors in my hallway. At least the *walls* seem to be sound proof."

She laughed quietly at his observation, then added one of her own.

"At last ... a moment of *respite*, John. Thank you for coming," she said, as she drew him towards the corner sofa arrangement.

He took in the rather lavish accoutrements and silently wondered how much *more* of a Lady that Lady Xue was compared to Lady Maya ... or Lord *Cato*, for that matter. She let out a tiny titter as she directed him to a position on the sofa.

"I'm afraid Lord Cato prefers a *simpler* life, John. All *this*..." she paused, gesturing to the room at large, "...is not what he is used to. Although, now with *two* wives and two children, perhaps he might see the wisdom of changing his quarters?" She joined him on the sofa and relaxed into the cushions beside him.

He smiled at her comment, but froze. He'd heard comments like that from her before, but thought she'd just been more aware of things than he was. Now it was starting to feel a little...

Xue reached over and rested her hand on his thigh, sending a calming flow that eased his concerns.

"You are aware of what we *are*, John. Truly, it is a habit I should curb. For me and my sisters, it has been a way of life for ... *much* longer than you might imagine," she murmured, then patted his leg lightly. "Perhaps you would prefer to change your--"

"No! Please, I... This is all new to me, and ... and I don't really understand what it all *means* yet," he blurted out. "I would *really* like to, Xue ... *Lady* Xue. I've already gone through Lady Laisee's initiation when ... when I cut my hand, and ... and I--" He stopped when she raised her hand, then leaned in and kissed him chastely on the lips.

When she did so, she read him deeply and found the references he was referring to.

She was hard pressed to keep from laughing aloud, but reached out to grasp his shoulders while her body shook with silent laughter until she pulled away from his lips – sharing a smile indicating she was still glad to have him stay with her if he was still willing.

She looked down at his hands, but instead of grabbing the left one, asked, "Which hand did you cut, John?"

He held his left hand up, and she took it between her palms before closing her eyes and searching out the miniscule traces of Laisee's Healing. She had a hard time finding it – such was *Liling's* teachings, one might presume.

“Laisee did *excellent* work. It is part of what we *are*, John,” she said, then pulled his hand to her breast. “It is how we maintain our society against the *chaos* you see here on Earth – as we saw over in Afghanistan.”

He looked at her, then suddenly nodded his head in understanding.

“It's like Jaiying said. The Healers are how you keep your people from going crazy. Or ... or something ... like ... that...” He trailed off at the warm, almost *hungry* look in her eyes. He momentarily wondered how long it'd been since she'd...

“John, my sisters and I are very good together, but we *still* miss the touch of a man... *I* still miss the touch of a man ... the *smell* of him ... the *feel* of him on my skin ... of him *inside* my body...”

Her voice had softened as her lips got closer to his, and he suddenly found his mouth being probed by a woman whose passion was focused *entirely* on him. He momentarily feared this would be a repeat of Kiki's nighttime assault, but she gently pushed away and stood up in front of him while shedding her clothes in a heap around her legs. She reached out one hand, and he took it before struggling to his feet before her.

“John, we have *two* rooms,” she murmured, then closed her naked body up against his. “If we make a mess out of *one* of them, we may still find rest in the *other*.” She hugged him to her, and he rested his chin atop her head.

His decision was clear, and he really didn't care *which* room they chose. He pulled away slightly, just far enough to give her room to step out of the clothes at her feet, before leading her to the room on the right. He momentarily thought her luggage might be in the room on the left, but she wasn't wearing any clothes now, so it didn't really seem to matter. Opening the bedroom door, he found the queen size bed to be *more* than adequate for their needs, and quickly piled his clothes on the small table by the closet.

She led him, not to the bed, but to the door at the back of the room, sliding it open to reveal a full bath – tub included – which also included a toilet behind a pocket door for privacy. The toilet even had its own tiny sink. She headed for the bathroom's main sink and opened up the medicine cabinet to pull out two toothbrushes – handing one to him, before opening up a travel tube of toothpaste. She squirted some on her own brush, then passed it over to him.

## Picking up the Pieces

Taking his cue, he applied some paste, then capped the tube before beginning the business of routine dental maintenance. Once she was done, she stepped into the toilet room – immodestly leaving the door open while she peed. Afterwards, she ran warm water in the sink and wetted a washcloth to wipe herself with, before stepping out and looking up at him expectantly.

Knowing what was at stake, he gamely sat down on the toilet – he wasn't about to mess it up *now* – and peed ... surprised at how much urine he'd produced in just the walk over from his room.

Afterwards, he stood up, but she was already there – on her knees – with a warm, soapy washcloth, and she began performing routine maintenance on *him*. By the time he was rinsed, he'd already started to rise, and she quickly dried him and led him to the bed by his conveniently placed handle.

She did something to a control fixed into the headboard, and the room lights dimmed to a faint glow. He could see the smile on her face, even in the dim light of the room, and slowly joined her on the bed ... hoping he would not disappoint.

Xue caught that fragment of worry from him but declined to mention she'd had nearly ten *millennia* to perfect the Healer skills necessary to keep a man at his peak until *she* was done with him. They kissed for a while and enjoyed gentle foreplay until finally joining together. Before giving in to the moment, she wondered if he'd eaten enough to last the whole night but by that time it was too late, and they became *fully* engaged until either *she* was satisfied, or he collapsed in *exhaustion* ... or *hunger* ... or simply *died*.

### ***Tuesday, October 4, 12:05 A.M., In the Residence***

Wilber lay back in satiated exhaustion, his giggling bond-mate still twitching from the last word he'd shared with her almost twenty minutes ago. He turned his head to watch as the twitching continued until Shu's breathing increased before she suddenly locked in an orgasmic clench that would have hurt his penis if it'd still been inside her; a painful lesson he'd *already* learned ... *twice*. Thirty seconds later, she let out a great blowing breath and a *very* satisfied groan, before sagging back in a sweaty heap.

"Thank you, my Wilber," she barely whispered, then asked a little louder, "Do you want to play *again*?"

Wilber didn't have the breath to laugh, but instead started giggling in place at that ludicrous suggestion.

They'd done that once *before* – over in the *Center* – and found themselves waking up nearly a *day later*. If Mary hadn't come looking for them, they might have *stayed* zonked out for another day or two.

"I think we've *both* had enough, my love," he assured her, then rolled over and planted his lips to hers, receiving a teasing probe from her tongue, which he subsequently trapped inside his mouth while nursing on it for a few minutes.

He was rethinking her earlier question, when the reality of the *later* phone call he'd received popped up unbidden in his consciousness. He broke away after teasing her clitoris into a quick climax – she *always* came quickly after an hour or two of play – then staggered out of bed to bring her a warm wet washcloth and a towel. He paused to look down at her sweaty beauty, and revised that to a warm *tub* of water, a washcloth, and a towel.

"Be right back, my love," he promised, then headed to the bathroom.

While her "husband" was gone – she liked to think of him as her husband rather than a mere bond-mate – she took advantage of her sexually relaxed state, and stretched out her senses to feel what was going on around the Center.

From Wilber, she felt his satisfaction at having shared an exciting and loving physical interaction with her, but there was something else in the back of his mind that was starting to come forward.

Kayla, Mary, and Danny were finally settling down – *Danny* was, anyway – while Kayla and Mary continued with their play for a while longer.

Reaching out further, her senses tripped across Lady Xue's impassioned peak – just one of *several* it felt like – and observed without comment as the man below her, John, was being ridden by the extremely skilled Senior above him.

She felt the sleeping mind of Déjà, along with her husband and wife, and the babies resting quietly in their ... no, little Ronnie was beginning to fuss, and Maya was already awakening.

The usual level of chaos in the guest wing was somewhat subdued this evening. Perhaps the fact that Donald had returned somehow dampened their visitors' spirits in some manner?

Spring Blossom and Dwayne were sound asleep, not even a *fragment* of a dream afflicting either one of them.

The children, Jaiying and Rose, had been awake earlier – she'd felt them both about an hour ago when they'd tracked her arousal pattern after Wilber had spoken one of their trigger words.

Now they were asleep ... *perhaps*. It was always hard to tell with those two.



## Picking up the Pieces

Of interest was finding Laisee still awake. Sai was next to her and relaxing after their play, but Laisee was concerned about Donald's mission for some reason. She was thinking that...

Shu was startled out of her mind-trip by Wilber, who was starting to wipe her down with a warm washcloth. She smiled up at her lover, and raised her arms to pull him into a loving kiss, holding him there until she made up her mind and let him go.

"My Wilber, Lady Laisee is awake and concerned about Donald. I could ask if this was a good time for you to discuss with her your phone call? Sai is also awake."

Wilber leaned back in surprise. Shu's skills had been improving over the years, but now she was feeling what was going on inside the mind of the Emperor's *daughter*? Before he could say anything, she said, "My Wilber, Sai has told Laisee of Donald's concerns. She tells of his worry about the motivations behind the men left at the Embassy. Your phone call earlier *addressed* those issues, this is true?"

This was getting *surreal*. Now it sounded like Shu was channeling *Lili*!

"Wilber ... *focus*, please. You know we continue to grow in skills and talents. If this is a good time, then you may go and share your information with Laisee and Sai so they may have better facts to offer Donald when he awakens."

She watched him, and felt his mind start shuffling the pluses and minuses of what she'd suggested as he continued wiping her sweaty body – multitasking while washing all of her nooks and crannies until he asked her to roll over for him. He spread a dry towel beside her and helped her shift into position but when he started working on her back, it was enough to distract her improved senses to the point she lost the deft touch she'd been experiencing. Still, it was an improvement in her techniques, and the path to it had been *quite* exhilarating – just as Jaiying had predicted.

He finished with her back, then used a second towel to dry her. When he was done, he came to a decision and ran with it.

"If Laisee is still awake, I can get cleaned up and go over to present it to her – if it's not too late for her. I don't think there's too much to it yet, but it might make them feel better for it," he said, and Shu smiled, then closed her eyes.

"It is done, my Wilber. She cannot sleep, even after playing with Sai," she said, then tilted her head a bit and smiled up at him before grabbing his penis. "Perhaps you might offer to help her find sleep afterwards? I would be interested in observing your skills with her from *here*, my lover."

He nearly gaped at her forwardness, but broke into a smile. If *anything*, he'd rather stay here and risk losing a day or two with his "wife" – preferring the term wife to a mere bond-mate. He bent down and kissed her *thoroughly*, now thinking he should have said no, but she pushed him away with an adamant command to "Shower!" to get him moving before it was too late. Besides, Laisee was waiting for him.

### **2:20 A.M., In the Center**

Wilber had started back to the house, but stopped at the kitchen to raid the pantry. He was *starving!*

After his shower, he'd gathered his notes, and taken them over to share with Laisee and Sai...

On the first issue, so far, the intelligence community had come up empty, but his DEA contact filled in the blanks ... all *six* of them. He'd even broken them down as to origin, and tentatively identified them as one Russian national, one Pakistani national and two nationals each from Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan – all from three *different* drug cartels.

As he'd been warned, the identifications were still tentative, and they'd need hands on confirmation to be sure, but they'd added names to the faces, and Wilber had been able to scribble Viktor Sokolov, Shaweer Dhanial, Sukhrab Karimov and his brother, Ruslan, and finally Azarkhsh Yusupov and Hamasa Yusufi under the sleeping mug shots Donald had transmitted to him.

Those had been re-uploaded to the Embassy for dissemination to the rest of the intelligence community, and he'd left it at that.

The *actual* motivations behind the truck bomb were still in question. The Cartels were involved with moving and dealing drugs, and Faridun was a supplier. It seemed like the two went together. Unless Faridun was cheating someone, or taking away someone else's business, it wouldn't seem to be the case, as his total volume was rather low in comparison to the rest of Afghanistan.

The *later* phone call involved something much more serious.

On the first trip over, Donald had plowed through an entire *mountain* without leaving a trace ... other than a crushed pile of rubble, some collapsed tunnels, and a couple of blood and feces-tainted rooms. It had been a simple in and out – noisy and messy – but no one suspected anything other than an act of God.

However, that business in *Pakistan* had been quite different.

Someone driving from Mirkhani towards Arandu early the next morning noticed the pattern of boulders surrounding the highway outside of Mirkhani had changed somewhat. They'd slowed to take a

## Picking up the Pieces

better look, and were struck by the large shallow depression in the dirt off to one side of the road – with tire tracks leading right up to the *edge* of it.

Naturally, this had been reported upon arrival at Arandu, and presumably overheard by individuals waiting for the truck to complete its journey. News of it had then somehow wiggled its way up the information chain until it hit a data network and became widespread.

Conspiracy theorists were already hard at work explaining it by either paranormal or alien activities. At least they'd gotten it *half* right.

Wilber hadn't missed the blush gracing Sai's cheeks when he'd reached that part of the narrative. She'd admitted missing the truck on the first few tries, and in her rush to grab it and leave, she'd opened up the shield, and bitten off a bit more than she should have.

Putting it back was somewhat problematical at the moment – that chunk of dirt currently resting on the *backside* of the moon – but he'd suggested what Ronnie had done in a similar situation ... go grab a chunk of water from somewhere, and make it rain. Of course, it was a little too late for that *now*.

Afterwards, Sai had broken out the ambrosia and they'd settled back to relax and offer idle conjecture as to their *next* steps. Waking up Donald seemed pointless. He was good when he got going, but there came a time when the man *really* needed some sleep.

Laisee had quietly shared her sensing Donald sleeping right through a crying baby not an hour beforehand. They'd all laughed at that, before Sai made apologies and slipped off to join the children in their room, leaving Laisee alone with him in the sitting room.

It wasn't much longer when Laisee had taken him to her room, where they shared a quick clean-up, then engaged in play for the next hour. Afterwards, they shared their thanks for a mutually pleasurable interlude, before she sent him back to his bond-mate with a smile on *both* their faces...

Wilber stared at the hot pot and considered making some hot chocolate. Shu preferred the smell of hot chocolate on his breath, *much* more so than coffee, but it was late and he really needed to get some sleep. Donald *would*, no doubt, wake up early and be over as soon as possible to learn the latest findings from their inquiries.

He started to turn away, then stopped and turned back – grabbing a packet of hot cocoa with marshmallows and dumping it into a mug. He filled it from the hot pot, then topped off the hot pot before sticking a plastic spoon into the mug and stirring it. It *was*, after all, hot chocolate, and comparable to hot milk. It should work pretty much the same, and it tasted *way* better anyway.

**7:30 A.M. (MST), *The Residence, A Quiet Morning***

Aside from his late night, Wilber was up and reading the overnights during breakfast this Tuesday morning. So far, everything at the Center was running smoothly. The dining room was still running overlapped shifts to accommodate the Korengal refugees, but other than that, the overall level of chaos had been kept to a minimum.

Shu had let him know the women appeared to have become more accepting of their current situation starting sometime last night. She alluded that it might have something to do with the return of Donald, but he couldn't see it himself, not unless they were *afraid* of him for some reason. Since there was no other reason to account for it, he would let the Ladies monitor the situation and have them deal with whatever came of it when required.

He was leaning back and sipping his special blend of coffee – the one Shu pretended to tolerate – when his cell phone rattled on the kitchen table, and he picked it up to read the display. Seeing the caller ID, he rolled his eyes and lurched out of his seat, accepting the call the moment he entered his office.

***In Laisee's Suite...***

Sai yawned, then rolled over to discover she was all alone.

Not *quite* alone, as she heard the shower running in the bathroom. Presumably, it was Jaiying or Rose, or possibly both of them. She lay back and stretched in place before extending out her senses to feel what was going on around her.

Everything seemed to be rather peaceful for the moment.

The refugees were wandering between their quarters and the dining room, Spring Blossom and Dwayne were sharing a shower together, and Donald ... Donald was being observed by Déjà and Maya – almost as if they were dividing him up for breakfast.

“Good. I hope he had a comfortable night,” she murmured to herself.

Her night had been all right, starting with the play she and Laisee shared last night. Afterwards, Shu had noticed Laisee was up, so she'd offered to send Wilber over with the latest news, after which she'd gone to stay with the girls while Laisee took advantage of Wilber's gullibility and put him to good use. She'd stayed awake until Laisee's first climax, then settled in to get a good night's sleep, something she'd been lacking of late.

She thought of lazing away the day, but changed her mind. Eventually, Donnie would be up, and she was *sure* he had plans for

## Picking up the Pieces

more mischief. She reluctantly dragged herself out of bed and headed to the shower, hoping the girls hadn't used up all the towels.

### ***In the Babies' Room...***

*Donald was having a wonderful dream in which he was floating in a soft cloud as a warm breeze brushed over his naked body.*

*The sensations intensified when warm tingles engulfed his loins, and a wet firmness engulfed his penis. He remained relaxed while his mind supplied the memories of prior pleasures for his weary soul's nourishment. While that concept drifted across his semi-consciousness, a warm, soft mass was felt against his lips, and he automatically opened his mouth to taste it, suddenly finding warm, dripping nourishment trickling across his tongue.*

*Nature took its course, and he began to suckle at the bounty offered, letting his body rejoice at the sweet offering flowing down his throat.*

*He would have easily fallen sound asleep, save for the tension building in his groin, then the sudden peak that unleashed it all, and he fell into a state of post-orgasmic bliss while the unfettered release of his body sagged him further into the cloud. His sigh was one of calm and peaceful relaxation, coupled with the restorative flow that was working its way through his digestive system and keeping him satisfyingly satiated...*

*"I think he will sleep a little longer, Déjà"* Maya pressed softly.

*"He was delicious, big sister. Thank you for letting me have him"*

Maya did not mind at all. She had enjoyed similar pleasures with Ronnie over the years, but despite her recent genetic conversion into a more 'human' human, Déjà really *did* appreciate the nutrient value of fresh semen. Maya remained beside him, ensuring he kept nursing from her until he reached complete satiation.

### ***In Xue's Suite...***

Xue and John shared the post-climatic bliss of a slowly induced encounter while snuggling under the blankets together in the room they'd started out in...

John had been quite pleasantly surprised at his body's reaction to Xue's sensuality the previous evening and enjoyed himself *thoroughly*, both in giving her pleasure and receiving it from her in return.

Xue was simply amazing in her ability to control his level of excitement, so much so, that he'd lasted *much* longer with her than he'd ever done with *any* woman, and the second time around had been even better. Their quiet play this morning had simply been the delayed dessert to their late evening meal – both figuratively and

literally, as they'd gotten up earlier to void and wash before slipping back into bed to continue where they'd left off last night...

Now Xue lay on her side, with John snuggled up to her back and bottom. She was feeling his responses, and sorely tempted to inspire him to greater heights once again, but was also somewhat apprehensive that he might become attached to her. He was, after all, only an Earthling, and Earthlings developed a *proprietary* sense of association with their sexual partners, didn't they?

She released a silent sigh, then felt his arm reach around her torso until his hand found her breast. She smiled at the wall, already feeling the firmness building between her naked buttocks, where John was nestled to her even *more* tightly now. She made a selfish decision, then threw caution to the wind by instructing her body to release *extra* lubrication so that John's efforts to penetrate her, as he was preparing to do right at that moment, would be pleasantly successful. She reached up and clutched his hand to her breast, already feeling him scissoring her nipple between his fingers as he maneuvered himself into position to enter her from behind. Just to make sure he got the *right* hole, this time, she arched her bottom to bring her moistened target within easier range.

### **8:30 A.M., *In Howard and Dorothy's Suite***

Howard ended the call on his burner phone, then stretched out on the queen-sized bed in relief. He rolled his head to look around the dimly lit room, and let his eyes dwell on the clock on the nightstand, confirming the two-hour time difference between him and where Audrey was currently getting her hair done. The sound of her voice had been most welcome to his ears, and he was glad he'd remained a gentleman when Dorothy had become somewhat amorous before collapsing in his arms in a drunken stupor last night.

There was one thing he was *definitely* sure of now. *Screw* everything else, and import ambrosia by the *truck* load. His worry of waking up with a tremendous hangover had been premature, and he was convinced the world would benefit *significantly* on that alone.

He almost hated to get up, but it was already four hours behind his regular schedule, and his hunger was reminding him it was late.

Time to boldly face the day and see what was happening in the world.

~~~

*Dorothy was dreaming of being in the arms of a man. An older man. A man who was friendly, confident, and someone who reminded her of her father. Her dream slowly evolved into a sensuous tone, and she*

## Picking up the Pieces

*found herself wondering what it would be like to let herself be taken by this...*

Agent Gale suddenly sat up in the dim light of her room – the blanket and sheet stuck around the binding friction of the bathrobe she was still wearing, trying to hold her down. She looked around, then panicked when she saw the clock on the nightstand telling her she was late for work.

She made a move to stand, but froze, not really remembering exactly *how* she'd gotten to bed ... or exactly where the bed *was*, for that matter. By a cruel twist of timing, the memories of last night suddenly came crashing into her brain, and she remembered *everything* – from her panic attack mediated by Howard, right up to the drunken advances she'd made to him. She closed her eyes and felt the heat rise in her cheeks. Oh, how *could* she? How could *he*...

She stopped in mid-panic when she realized she was still dressed in her robe, then wiggled her toes to feel the bed sheets move under her naked toenails. Looking around, she found herself in the middle of a pile of pillows, but there was no other evidence of a man's presence having shared the bed with her. Despite that tentative deduction, she reached a hand down between her legs and felt around a bit, before bringing it back up and giving it the smell test. With a relieved roll of her eyes, she fell back on the bed with a smile planted on her face.

Her virtue was *still* intact! More or less, anyway.

It suddenly dawned on her that she felt *rested* – confirming the hours involved with another glance at the nightstand. In addition to *that*, instead of a pounding headache, she felt just *fine*.

She decided that – all things considered – she'd survived the trip, the night, and now the morning beckoned. As she swung her legs out of bed, she remembered something about a dining room, and an open pantry policy, so she dropped her bathrobe and scurried into the bathroom. She was determined to enjoy whatever happened next – right after she'd showered and eaten.

### ***In the Babies' Room***

Rather than getting his desired shower last night, Donald had been diverted by Maya and Déjà, and shared time with the both of them – between feedings – but he'd obviously needed some *serious* rest, and they'd finally granted it to him. It had been easy, too, as Maya had simply had him suckle from her while she used her milk to manipulate his body into falling into a painless and worry-free slumber. He'd been out for the better part of ten hours now, and they'd decided to keep him in bed for a little while longer – at least until his bladder finally decided that enough was enough...

Only an hour later, his bladder alarm went off, and he rolled vertically and wobbled in place at the edge of the bed while looking around and seeing a room devoid of bond-mates and infants. He cautiously stood on his feet, then staggered to the toilet, where he sat and delivered a satisfyingly loud and prodigious volume of urine to the waste system that would eventually work its way through the plumbing and end up warming the septic tank this ... *morning*? He leaned sideways to gander up at the door jam and saw the overhead glow from the skylight. Morning it was ... probably ... maybe.

Finishing up, he flushed and wandered out far enough to check the time, eight-thirty, and determined that he just wasn't hungry enough for it to be nighttime. Besides, it was dark at eight-thirty at night.

He made a thoughtful decision – hastened by the smell under his armpits – and returned to run the shower. Void the body, wash the body, put on clean clothes, then track down his family, who were probably having breakfast right about now.

A suitable plan laid out, he stepped naked into the shower and began his day.

***October 4, 11 A.M., (EST), Fort Meade, Maryland, Back to Work***

"Thanks for calling, Timmy. Give my love to Sasha," Dwight said, before terminating the call.

Agent Abernathy leaned back in his office chair and sighed. Tim had Sasha, but he had *nobody*. Maybe Tim was right. Maybe he should get a cat, too? Tim said it really wasn't all that complicated.

Dogs need to be walked multiple times a day – even outside in the *rain*.

Cats just needed routine maintenance of their cat box.

A dog's diet needed to be closely supervised, while a cat could live for a week off a dry feeder and a watering kit.

Dogs were affectionate – sometimes *excessively* so – and *super* protective. Dogs also loved you *unconditionally* and put up with *whatever* shit you threw at them.

On the *other* hand...

Cats were simply there. If they wanted something from you, they'd let you know. In addition, they expect *you* to protect *them*. In addition to *that*, they *might* let you live with them – but they wanted to see *your* resume, first.

He chuckled at the thought of it before looking down at the notes on his desk with a sigh.



## Picking up the Pieces

Wilber's "subcontractors" had pulled off a disappearing act with a terrorist nuclear weapon, and gotten it out of harm's way – *way* out of harm's way, according to Timmy but it wasn't something that could be discussed at length over the phone. The only disconcerting problem was the *evidence* they'd left behind, which was something he'd told Wilber about last night...

He'd known little about Wilber's 'subcontractors' before that incident back in '98 when Wilber had dropped off the grid for a month. It had taken Timothy nearly a month of legwork to start pointing fingers, but it had been *his* signals analysis that had caused General Mayfield to be roused out of bed and put on the trail of the missing Wilber. He'd felt bad about it at the time, but DARPA's Director of Foreign Technology had overstepped his bounds, and in the process of doing so, threatened to cut off a pipeline sending technological goodies to Earth by way of the United States, which was not something the *previous* administration had been willing to risk. Nor was the threat of losing *Protectorate* status.

General Mayfield had spent very little time narrowing down the source of the missing Wilber, but in the process, had gotten caught up in the same conspiracy the *rest* of the few select members of it had to suffer through. At least Mayfield had escaped the *worst* of it ... up until *now*...

Dwight looked down at the NRO satellite photos of where the missing truck had supposedly been snatched and shook his head slowly. The circle appeared to be razor sharp, about fifty feet in diameter, and shaped like a shallow bowl down to a couple of feet or so. The tire tracks leading up to it were clear, as were the other tire and foot tracks from the looky-loos who'd stopped at the edge of the depression. It was curious that no one had been tempted to venture *into* the shallow pit. Maybe they thought it was a sink hole?

He added "sink hole" to his list of possible excuses, then turned his attention to the boulders located in the area.

Some of these he could clearly see had been moved – there were marks on the ground like dragging or rolling near them – but, although he knew *why* they'd moved, coming up with a reasonable explanation of *how* they'd moved, was the problem. The damn things must weigh *tons*.

He sat back again and tried to remember why that continued to tease his mind. When it didn't come to him, he turned to his computer and threw it at the search engine. Several seconds later, a screen responded with a 'Death Valley Moving Rocks' search results page. He leaned in to read the article, but found it to be unrelated. For one thing, the rocks in Death Valley were on a dry lake bed. For another, most of the rocks were much smaller than the boulders in question –

none of them exceeding much more than about six hundred pounds or so. He read further, and found that even scientists were baffled as to why they moved, which indicated that this was a dead end. Well, if nothing else, the big issue was still the *hole* in the ground, and for *some* people, the missing *truck*.

So far, the news had spread amongst the conspiracy folks but their intel didn't show anyone taking note of it – not in a “pack up the vans and let's bring out the Geiger counters” kind of notice, anyway. He supposed they should be grateful for that. Then he started brainstorming ideas of how to confuse the issue on the ground ... maybe drop something on it, or get someone in there to mess it up before anyone *really* started to analyze it too closely. If not, Wilber might have to send his subcontractors back over to deal with it – something that might be frowned upon on *both* sides of the treaty.

He was in the middle of jotting down notes, when a messenger brought him a thick package of security folders, and got his signature for the receipt of it. He almost dreaded opening it, and waited until the door closed before breaking the seal and pulling out the first folder. Sitting back, opened the cover to see the first page below it.

Well ... *this* was new. In fact, wasn't he still supposed to be in *custody*?

***October 4, 9:30 A.M. (MST), Arizona, Dining Family Style***

Donald had come out of the shower to find that his mother had returned, along with his children. They greeted each other, before she told him where to find his brides.

He slipped through the pantry door, only to find staff already in there, sweating over the stove and ovens.

Instead of leaving meekly, he strode over to the most likely candidate and inquired of the availability of pancakes, bacon, and fruit. With a silent bow, the woman handed him a clipboard and a stylus before pointing to the selections available. Then she was drawn away by the clatter of dishes over by the dishwasher.

“Good morning, Lord Cato,” Ling said from behind him, causing him to pause his review of the menu and turn to greet her.

“My Lady Wen, you look *lovely* this morning,” he declared, tacking on a smile that was truly felt by her.

“I must commend your staff for their attention to detail,” he added, showing her the extensive list of items presented to him.

“We have *many* new guests to feed thanks to *you*,” she reminded him pointedly, but softened it when she added, “And I want to

## Picking up the Pieces

*personally* thank you for bringing them into our care, Lord Cato. They've already suffered enough."

She'd said this with a bow, and he half-bowed his head in recognition of her thanks before looking down at the menu again.

"You wouldn't happen to know what *these* items are, would you?"

He pointed to a short selection of squiggling lines that were cross-referenced to numbers in Standard, and her laughter came out as a quiet titter.

"Our guests had certain dietary requests, and we are trying to accommodate them," she explained while pointing to the menu. "Unfortunately, very few of them can actually *read* the words of their own language, but no matter. Asad and Nurani have provided us with the appropriate translations, and taught our guests to select by number. Very early this morning, they both went with us to go shopping for what little of the food stuffs they'd requested. Fortunately, many of the women were familiar with preparing powdered grains, so it was just a matter of experimenting with the ovens. Now that we know the proper formulas, we are able to prepare what they request."

He smiled at that, having been exposed to beginning bakers back when he was bringing refugees in from the Blight and retraining them for a new life. Teaching new languages, farming, and animal husbandry were one thing, but home economics was *everyone's* favorite class – *especially* when it came to sampling the results of the cooking classes.

The kitchen lead came back and stood by expectantly, so he checked off four items and handed the menu back to her. With a glance and a nod, she turned and started issuing orders for his meal.

"You may join your family, Donald," Ling prompted him, and gestured to the dining room door. "Someone will bring your breakfast in to you."

"Thank you, Ling." He paused, then grasped her hand and bowed, bringing it to his forehead before lowering it and wandering out to the dining area.

~~~

The dining room was not full. Of the forty-four seats available, less than half of them were occupied by members of Asad and Nurani's charges. Asad was actually sitting at one table, and Nurani sat with another group at a different table – both of them speaking to their breakfast companions, and trying to help them adapt to their new living conditions. They occupied a total of four of the square tables,

seating four individuals at each one. A few of the rest were occupied by guardsmen on meal breaks, or others just snacking while keeping an eye on things. Two smaller tables on either side of the kitchen door held staff who were taking a welcome break from the kitchen.

Donald came out and saw his family on the far side of the room.

They'd staked out the circular table, and left a few spots open for him. As he walked around the room, he passed Howard and Dorothy, where they sat across from each other at one of the square tables.

Since they seemed to be engrossed in conversation, he walked by in silence, only his smile and nod offering them recognition of their existence. He was about five feet from the round table before being assaulted by two diminutive attackers.

"Uncle *Donald!*" Jaiying cried out, as she latched onto one leg.

"Uncle *Donald!*" Rose added to the drama, when she latched onto his other leg.

### ***In the Residence***

"My Wilber, Donald has just come to breakfast," Shu quietly reported while standing behind him in his office and working the tense trapezius in his neck.

"Breakfast *here*, or over in—"

"In the Center, my love," she murmured, then lowered her thumbs to dig in a bit deeper to work on his splenius.

Wilber nodded his head in rhythm with her efforts, and was hard pressed not to moan in pleasure while she worked on him. He did let his *eyelids* sag in grateful sympathy, though...

The phone call from Dwight a few minutes ago had been informative, but not exactly cheerful while his follow-up encrypted e-mail fleshed out his verbal bullet points nicely – not that it would be particularly helpful for the *immediate* issues...

He finally let out the groan he'd been holding and rolled his head around on his neck – ending with reaching up to hold Shu's hands away from him so he could slowly rotate his chair around to face her.

He reached out and hugged her to him, not having a *clue* as to how he'd survived the first twenty-five years on this job without her by his side. Nestling himself against her breasts, he took a deep breath and let it out, slowly, cherishing the loving relationship they'd continued to share for the last five years.

"Bad news, my Wilber?"

## Picking up the Pieces

He chuckled between her breasts, feeling her nipples beginning to pucker from the jiggling movement of his face, before pulling away to gaze up into her eyes.

“No more than usual, my love. New information that needs to be included in whatever decisions Donald makes.”

“You mean ... Xue and *Laisee*?”

He held her gaze for several seconds before they both began chuckling at the absurdity of Donald letting *anyone* stop him once he got a plan in mind.

“Then let us hope Xue and Laisee will *approve* of his plan, my Wilber,” she said, then hugged him to her once again while thinking of something else. “You will *wait* to deliver this new information?”

He enjoyed her warm embrace while reflecting on her question. They’d already eaten earlier, while Donald was just now sitting down to a late breakfast. It would really be in poor taste to *ruin* that breakfast ... not right *away*...

“I believe I *will* wait a while before disturbing his digestion,” he mumbled into her cleavage, then felt her breath catch in her throat.

She released him and took hold of his hands, drawing him to his feet.

“Come with me, my Wilber. I’m sure there is *something* we can do while you are waiting,” she offered sensuously, while leading him out of his office and into their bedroom.

### ***In the Center***

‘*Shu is delaying Wilber*’ Jaiying shared with Rose, so they both let go of Donald’s legs and each took hold of one of his hands to guide him to the chair between Maya and Déjà.

### ***October 4, 12:20, P.M., (EST), Fort Meade, Maryland***

Dwight had forgone lunch while dwelling on the papers at his desk. His earlier verbal head’s up to Wilber had been brief, but some details left out of the encrypted email he’d sent him were still somewhat confusing to him. It wouldn’t have been so bad, except he’d pieced all the shreds together himself, but he *still* wasn’t happy about it...

Ayub Afridi, ex-Pakistani drug lord turned politician, seemed to be either *the* instigator or one *of* the instigators behind the truck bomb being delivered to Faridun, and for the life of him, he couldn’t imagine how or why the fingers kept pointing to him. How do you even write that on your resume? “Occupation – Drug Smuggler, Politician, Sender of Nuclear Surprise Packages.”

Of course, considering how the CIA had contributed to his efforts was probably a helpful stepping stone to his success. Delivering weapons supplied by the CIA to the Mujahideen had been relatively easy, since he was basically using the same channels to move opium from his Afghan-grown poppies, to drug laboratories back in Pakistan.

He'd somehow leveraged that success into winning a seat on the 1990 National Assembly in Pakistan. Alas, by 1995, the CIA had had a change of heart and they'd arranged for him to be picked up and arrested in Pakistan on drug trafficking charges in Belgium but that was probably a misinterpretation by him, as he wasn't aware of any CIA staffers who actually *had* hearts. Well, except maybe Timmy.

After three and a half years in a U.S. prison, along with a trivial fifty-thousand dollar fine, they'd sent Afridi back to Pakistan, where he was tried once again on the *same* charge, earning a *seven-year* sentence this time.

Apparently, Pakistan has a different interpretation of what constitutes "seven years" and released him a few weeks into his seven-year sentence. *Unofficial* speculation seemed to point to the September 11 attacks as the reason for his release, but perhaps that was just a coincidence?

Once again free to do as he pleased, Afridi appeared to go right back into business, and ended up in trouble once again just earlier this year. This time he was facing another round of trials, starting with a court order for the forfeiture of his assets.

Well, if anything, that should be challenging, since most drug lords didn't keep all their pennies in one pot...

Dwight slumped back in his chair as he continued scanning through the intelligence update.

Afridi had been reclusive since the latest allegations had come to light, and Dwight thought it doubtful he would make his November court date. Maybe he'd head back to his poppy fields in Afghanistan, or perhaps go couch surfing among his peers in Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, or maybe even Russia. Wherever he went, money meant power, and power – and powerful *friends* – could buy you *anything* ... *including* surplus nuclear weapons, it would appear.

Dwight jotted down a few more notes on this, and stuck them with the others, thus finishing up the first folder's worth.

Sliding that pile to the side, he opened a folder containing 8x10 color photos supplied by Wilber's friends in Washington.

The lighting was harsh, but details of the truck were recorded in sharp focus, as were the manufacturer's labels and serial numbers.

## Picking up the Pieces

The truck, a Ural-4320, looked to be of fairly recent vintage, maybe even less than ten years old, and it was the cargo/troop carrier version. It was a shame they'd built a bomb into it, but then again, the cost of the bomb was significantly more than the value of the truck, so it probably never even came up. It was probably the right choice for drug smuggling, as the off-road, 6x6 had a high ground clearance that made it easier to build a smuggling bed into it. It wouldn't keep it from getting stopped for drug inspections, but that's why you bribed customs officials.

The serial numbers had been recorded, and he knew they were probably trying to track it down but something like that often ended up on the black market, and not always after years of official military service. He couldn't figure out why Wilber's subcontractors had flattened all the *tires*, though, and it continued to confuse him while flipping through the photos – right up until he saw a wide shot of two men standing beside each other, with the truck in the background.

The suits they were wearing didn't need any explanation, because the starkness of the background – with its even gray tones and somewhat sharply shadowed ground formations – spelled it out for him. The tires hadn't been flattened on purpose. They'd had the air *ripped out of them* because they were in a *hard vacuum*.

He dropped the photo on his desk, closed his eyes, then groaned before rubbing them. Then he methodically laid out each photo, then selected those presenting no *obviously* off-world evidence, and put them in a separate pile from the others. The *others* – those showing circumstantial evidence of alien intervention – he would keep under lock and key until he determined they were no longer useful. Then they'd share a one-time visit with Mister Shredder over in the corner of his office.

Starting with the stack of keepers, he opened his notebook and started examining the images for content, and, more importantly, anomalies. As he went along, he added his observations of the truck's general condition, save for the tires, then reached a photo that had captured the serial number on one of the tires. He jotted that down, along with the manufacturer and model number, then continued. By the time he was done, his list had grown to six pages of tiny tidbits of knowledge that may or may not be worthy of more investigation, but the fact that it was done, left him with a feeling of accomplishment. Then he set those aside and turned to the *other* stack.

Thankfully, this one was short – just half a dozen photos whose only sin was showing too much of the background.

Flipping to a new page, he started on these photos, and, one-by-one, added his observations while taking care *not* to mention the background displayed on the photo.

Finally, he was left with the one, dual-portrait of the space-suited men standing next to each other. One of them was dressed in what looked like blackened armor, and his helmet obscured his face to the point that you couldn't see any defining features. The other one ... he wasn't quite sure, and stopped to pull out his magnifying glass.

It'd been given to him as a joke on his birthday over ten years ago. Apparently, someone had noted his arms were getting too short, and decided to make an object lesson of him for refusing to give in to the inevitable. He wiped the lens with his handkerchief – yet another sign of his ancient descent – and focused on the face of the man behind the transparent blue helmet.

He seemed somewhat familiar, but he couldn't quite place him until he pulled out his tiny pocket flashlight and shined it on the image at an angle. The shape of his nose ... the ridge of his brow ... that tiny dimple in his chin...

Dwight sat back in surprise, then leaned in again just to make sure. He gave it another minute of scrutiny before bringing up some passport photos that confirmed his suspicions.

Yes... It would appear that Momma Pasternak's little boy had been a *long* way from home.

"Christ! Timmy will certainly want to hear about *this*," he muttered quietly.

Almost as if he'd been listening, Dwight's cell phone buzzed, and the caller ID displayed a picture of Sasha on the tiny screen.

***October 4, 11:45 A.M. (MST), The Annex, The Center's Dining Room***

Nascha stood by the dining room door and looked across the room at the round table at the other end. He was there, surrounded by his family and friends, and she really wanted to go over and speak to him but didn't want to disturb the gathering...

She'd been overjoyed when Fred had woken up a few minutes ago and seen the light in his eyes when he found her there with him.

Then – in the middle of carefully hugging the breath out of him – she'd remembered her instructions, and briefly separated from him to open the door and alert the guard. A few minutes later, Ling had arrived and conducted a quick evaluation of Fred's general condition, at the end of which his stomach growled, and all three of them shared a quiet laugh.

Then Ling had sent her to the dining room to get a tray of food for him – one pancake, one piece of toast, one cup of milk from one of the "special" vacuum containers, and – at *Fred's* insistence – at least two



## Picking up the Pieces

strips of bacon ... or maybe sausage. Absolutely *no* coffee was permitted, but he might be allowed hot chocolate later on.

Now, looking around the room, she spied the serving setup by the kitchen doors, and thought she could see all the items on the list sitting there.

Still, she was torn between going over and speaking to the man, or loading up a tray and taking it back to Fred. The little girl standing beside her holding a vacuum container and an empty, plastic-lidded foam cup helped her to decide.

“Hello, Nascha. Pour this for Fred and get what else you need before you go over and say hello to Donald,” Jaiying told her, causing her to nearly jump out of her shoes.

“I-I...” she stammered, then followed Jaiying’s arm with her eyes when she lifted the cup towards the stack of plates and trays on the serving table.

Two generations of Caucasian gene contamination had left Nascha with a generally lighter skin tone for a Native American, so the blush rising on her cheeks was somewhat more prominent – not as much as *Mary’s*, but still quite pretty. Jaiying held up the thermos and let her take it out of her hand before they walked to the serving tables and started setting up Fred’s first real meal since he’d arrived.

~~~

Laisee was watching the interaction between her daughter and Nascha from across the room. Nascha seemed both conflicted and happy, leaning more towards happiness as she selected a few items for her breakfast plate. Then she felt a burst of joy as the fresh memory of Fred’s request for a crisped meat breakfast product struck her, and she smiled as the reason for Nascha’s happiness fell into place.

She reached out and confirmed it with Ling only moments later, then shared a quick conversation about his subsequent treatment schedule. Unfortunately, the *ultimate* repatriation of Fred back into his military unit was still in question, as was that of Anthony Hernandez.

It was something Howard would be involved with, which caused her to turn her attention to Dorothy and Howard, who were still seated at the table in the middle of the room.

No matter. Both Fred and Anthony were out of harm’s way, and there was nothing left but the picky details of how to provide them the most appropriate treatment coincident with maintaining the conditions of the current treaty.

~~~

Dorothy leaned back in her chair and relaxed. The brunch was both tasty and filling, and her brunch companion had been polite, if not outright charming...

When they'd met in the sitting room earlier, she'd felt a certain awkwardness at first seeing him. Not because anything had happened between them, but she'd known that he *could* have let it happen, but hadn't. Howard had been a true gentleman about the whole thing, which apparently extended to making sure her slippers were off before tucking her into bed last night.

She'd been grateful he'd not asked her how she'd slept, but instead commented on how nice it was to not wake up with a hangover. That was an observation she could relate to, and admitted her own surprise at waking refreshed and pain-free. After that, it had been polite small talk, until following an escort to the dining room and finding themselves a seat among over a dozen women who didn't seem to speak any English at all.

From her experiences with Middle Eastern intercepts, she could pick out the odd word or two but it had taken a comment from the young man sitting among them for her to learn they were from one of the fourteen ethnic groups in Afghanistan. Almost as if on cue, Howard had quietly confirmed it only moments later, then added that Williams and Hernandez had also been recovered during the same operation. Then he'd clammed up, ignoring her repeated questions, while tilting his head and darting his eyes to the round table over by the outer wall.

She'd turned and seen Dwayne sitting over there, and also the woman named Xue and the man called Donald. They seemed to be sharing a family gathering, and Donald appeared to be sharing his attentions with a woman on either side of him. Turning back to Howard, she'd been about to say something, but he'd held his hand horizontally just a few inches above his plate and patted the air, while murmuring, "Later."

They continued the rest of their meal in relative quiet, while subdued laughter occasionally arose from the round table.

She would have dearly loved to understand what they were saying, but it was in yet *another* language she'd never heard before ... not until she'd been aboard that ship.

~~~

Howard watched in restrained amusement as the woman across from him packed away her meal like it was her last one on Earth. Depending on her success during Wilber's interview, maybe it would be. He checked his watch, took off two hours, and found it was

## Picking up the Pieces

approaching noon, then glanced over at the round table and started counting the noses left behind.

The children had left a little while ago, after one of them brought that Indian woman over to speak with Donald for a few minutes. Then she'd taken her breakfast tray "to go" and left the dining room. A few minutes later, the women who'd been seated on either side of Donald had taken their leave; one of them lifting her breast slightly and shaking her head as if in resignation. That left Xue, Donald, Dwayne, and John, along with a younger woman who seemed to command a bit more authority over the others.

While sipping his coffee, he was contemplating their next steps, then moved back a bit when one of the staff came by with a cart to take their empty plates. He passed on a refill, as did Dorothy, and they stared at each other after the staff left with the cart – both of them wondering what happens next. Just a few seconds later, a familiar face came into the dining room and made a beeline to the round table, not pausing along the way, but offering a slight wave and smile to Howard as he passed by.

Howard took a breath, then let it out in resignation, causing Dorothy to stare at him in confusion.

"Showtime," he muttered, then drank the last of his coffee, before setting the cup down and wiping his lips with his napkin. He straightened himself and waited patiently, knowing Wilber wasn't there simply to chat.

### ***October 4, 2:10 P.M., (EST), Langley, Virginia***

CIA Officer Timothy Fredricks was reaching the end of his checklist and just needed to make one call.

While waiting for it to reach the quarter-hour mark, he looked down at the names on the paper again, and shook his head.

He was glad he wasn't out in the field any longer because this was becoming a cluster-fuck of *immense* proportions. At least that *other* little problem had been resolved for the moment. He checked the script he'd written, then rehearsed his lines again; intending to speak them straight through before Dwight could get a word in. Then he checked the clock and took several breaths before making the call.

"*Always* with the answering machine? I got your package. Thanks for everything. Hey, I knew you were curious, and I wanted to let you to know the bosses' nephew is up for a promotion. Unfortunately, he'll have to wait until he comes back from his *vacation*. I heard he took his *secretary* with him this time, so there's no telling *how* soon that promotion might take place. Gimme a call when you get a chance, or drop me a line, m'kay? Bye!"

Timothy sat back and let out a satisfied chuckle. *That* should wet the old fart's curiosity, along with getting him back for calling him "Timmy" all the time!

He checked the text of his message once again, then encrypted it before emailing it to Dwight. Afterwards, he considered again the possibility of a *second* nuclear device finding its way from Russia to Afghanistan, but decided it was minimal. Those damn things were expensive, and it was unlikely they'd throw *more* money down the toilet.

Besides, now that Faridun had *bolted*, they wouldn't know where to *deliver* it, would they?

***October, 4, 1 P.M. (MST), The Annex, Motor Pool Conference Room***

As a group, the remaining occupants of the round table, now supplemented by Dorothy and Howard, had followed Wilber over to the motor pool for a private meeting. Wilber had even provided a few handouts, and for John, a locally printed copy of an emailed photograph of him and Aetius taken on the moon, courtesy of the Embassy geek squad, who'd taken his camera for recovery of the data.

On the face of it, it had been a clean operation. The transport team were all known drug couriers, and, although they usually stayed within their *own* territories, for some reason they'd joined together to deliver a fake bomb to hide the fact that a *real* nuclear device had been built into the bed of the truck. Wilber related that the analysts admitted confusion for the suspiciously joint effort, but Wilber's take included the supposition that *everyone* was watching each other's back on this one.

Whether they were ensuring delivery of the device, or just making sure it wasn't dropped off in any of their *own* territories, seemed to be Wilber's reasonable explanation for the allocation of manpower, and it was plausible – up to a point. Once the truck was delivered, who would actually set it off, and when?

The truck was a used, Russian military 6x6. It could easily travel over rough terrain, but the narrow access on the roads in the Korengal Valley brought that into question. There was certainly no way for the truck to make it up as far as the cave complex, let alone anyone managing to get the bomb out of the truck to begin with.

The situation seemed to pivot on motivation – either personal or political.

Personally, if Faridun had pissed someone off, then taking him out in a very public way could easily be achieved by a truck bomb – or *any* bomb for that matter, or even a bullet. The Taliban was feeding drugs

## Picking up the Pieces

into the pipeline, and using the money from the sales to pay for weapons and other terrorist activities. The fact that Faridun had targeted his finished products *specifically* to the United States and Israel might have been enough motivation. Not playing by the rules – in this case, the established smuggling routes – might have irked some northern businessmen.

However, whacking an errant terrorist with a *nuclear* device seemed rather excessive on *all* levels.

For one thing, the bomb would take out everyone within *miles* of ground zero. For another, it could impact the entire infrastructure supporting the drug pipeline to begin with, not the *least* of which, was the relatively tiny enterprise that started and ended in the Korengal Valley. According to prevailing winds, a ground burst could cause fallout as far as Mirkhani in Pakistan. Maybe even as far as Drosh, while everyone in the valley would probably die from the fireball or radiation. Given the lack of medical facilities, radiation deaths *alone* would truly earn it the title, the *Valley of Death*.

It made no sense to take out a minor drug supplier this way, and it wouldn't seem to matter anyway. In comparison, even though the volume of Tajikistan's drug interdictions had been going down significantly – presumably because of better enforcement – the fact of the matter was that Afghan production had increased *tremendously*. That meant even *more* drugs were getting through.

It certainly didn't help any that drugs were a *huge* portion of even Tajikistan's GDP, approaching almost fifty-percent by some economics researchers.

The only conclusion on Wilber's part was either an effort to get the United States to respond in a significantly *exaggerated* fashion, or falsely accuse them of using one of their *own* bombs to bring public condemnation down upon them. The fact that the Korengal Valley was in an isolated location and of little overall consequence to the *total* Afghan poppy production seemed to point in the latter direction. If anyone was *really* out for Faridun, then that would just be a bonus.

Speculation as to whether this was an opportunistic event was brought up by Howard. Did Faridun *truly* order a nuclear device to go? This was confirmed by Xue, who'd asserted it was something he was *specifically* waiting for and what the drugs were in payment of.

Dorothy had bravely offered her supposition that, given such extenuating circumstances, she could see that "some" elements within the security establishment might be tempted to eliminate the threat at the source – *regardless* of the political fallout.

Especially if it could be made to look like a *self-inflicted* wound.

Donald then countered with, yes, being a sneaky bastard allowed you to get away with *lots* of things – case in point, the recovered men and women. Unfortunately, in *his* experience, you usually got away with *small* explosions, but not so much the big *radioactive* ones. And in *either* case, plausible deniability was *crucial*.

It was at that point when Wilber had brought up the issue of the hole in the ground in Pakistan, and what they could do to mediate it.

Donald was still going down a ridiculous list of suggestions, when Wilber's phone rang. He glanced at the caller ID, then held up his hand. After a brief, one-sided conversation, Wilber called for a break and ran off to his office – leaving everyone looking at each other blankly.

Laisee then stepped in and asked Donald to continue with his potential remedial actions but after a few more minutes, she finally called for a formal break, if for no other reason than to give everyone a break from laughing.

### ***In the Residence***

Wilber fired up his computer and made sure the internet connection was up. Once he was logged in, he started his email application, and waited for the new message from Dwight. Decryption took less than two minutes, and he looked it over quickly before sending it to the printer. Then he stopped to pee before bringing it back to the motor pool.

### ***In the Motor Pool Conference Room***

Donald was extolling the virtues of routine orbital debris maintenance when Wilber finally made it back.

"Guys, you are *not* gonna believe this," he said when entering, then closed the door behind him before walking over and sitting down.

He pulled out a printed sheet of the message bordered with the typical security banner, then cleared his throat before bringing them up to date.

"Our man at the NSA got a message from his counter-part at the CIA. It seems that not everyone is happy with the way Faridun is running his little terrorist cell," he said, then glanced down at the paper in front of him.

"Faridun has a man in his group who's been keeping the higher-ups appraised about his performance, and criticizing it over the last several months. Speculation is that he's looking to take over, but he's not brave enough to take Faridun down himself. He'd rather report Faridun's poor track record, and let someone *else* do the dirty work –

## Picking up the Pieces

meanwhile showing his own loyalty to the organization and hoping to be rewarded with the leadership.”

The ensuing silence was finally broken by a guffaw from Donald drawing everyone’s attention, before it switched to John when he started explaining Donald’s reaction.

“You can’t run a terrorist cell from a position of weakness. It’s either all, or nothing. *Backstabbing* your way to the top is *not* the way to go. If you manage to do *that*, then someone *above* you will figure it out, and eliminate you before you do it again. Whoever it is would have been better off either leaving the group entirely or killing Faridun outright instead of working against him in secret.”

“John’s right,” Donald added. “They have to trust each other, because they have to *rely* on each other. If you’re working against your leader, then you’re not trustworthy. Any idea of who that is?”

Wilber looked down at the page and picked out a name.

“Someone named ... Ba-z-gar? Not sure how it’s pronounced.”

He was about to say something else, when Xue raised her hand.

“Bazgar was the man who confronted Faridun when he was shouting for his men to enter the tunnels. I believe he was higher under Faridun. They spoke when Faridun was angry. Bazgar had feelings of frustration, but he spoke calmly,” she said, speaking this with her eyes closed as she drew those impressions from her memory.

Donald rippled the fingers of one hand on the tabletop a few times, then stopped.

“So this Bazgar found some reason to be pissed at Faridun? Didn’t like the division of spoils? Didn’t like the way the boss was doing business? Maybe he didn’t like his college education? Still can’t see a reason for them sending a *bomb* to take everyone out, though.”

Everyone was looking at each other, but Dorothy finally raised her hand, and Wilber gestured to her.

“Ahh... If *one* man in the group is untrustworthy, that might possibly be interpreted as *endemic* to that group, wouldn’t it?” she suggested. “I mean, these *are* terrorists, so their thought processes are rather skewed to begin with. If Faridun is breeding tattletales, then cleaning out the nest might be the *best* option. After all, it’s only a small group.”

“Whoa...” Dwayne muttered. “Two birds with one bomb? Bomb takes out one bad egg, then cleans out the *rest* of the chicken coop? On top of that, with the *nuclear* element involved, it introduces an *international* political crisis. Did the *US* dump a nuke on them? Are

they gonna do it *again*? It would sure as hell divert attention away from *drug trafficking* – not that anyone’s seriously concerned about it.”

“What? Why not?” Laisee asked in surprise.

“Like Wilber said, drug trafficking in Tajikistan *alone* accounts for nearly half of their gross domestic product. The same goes for *most* of the breakaway countries over there. Millions of addicts in Russia, Eastern and Western Europe, not to mention the United States. Anywhere the money is, drugs get shipped in for whomever can afford them.” Dwayne shot Wilber a look as if to say, ‘*And you didn’t think I’d read the reports.*’

“So, what happens now that we’ve parked that bomb somewhere else? They gonna send *another* one to Faridun?” Donald asked the group.

“*That* will be a little difficult,” Wilber muttered. “To use Dwayne’s colorful analogy, Faridun’s flown the *coop*, so to speak. He’s on the road, and *probably* looking for that bomb. *Someone* – probably Bazgar – reported the payment was a bit light. *Meanwhile*, Faridun took a few men, and presumably went to meet the truck somewhere. If they want him, they’ll have to track him down. Him and his girlfriend.”

“Huh?”

***Wednesday, October 5, 02:00 (AFT), Looking Towards the Future***

Bazgar looked longingly at Faridun’s hut, but reluctantly turned away. The spies he’d sent with his leader had yet to report back with any news of either the truck, or the hoped-for elimination of Faridun.

It was too bad about the girl, but there were more where she came from.

In the meantime, he would remain the loyal lackey and keep some of the men working on clearing the tunnel. Already they were feeling faint breezes coming through the rubble from the western entrance. Others were gathering supplies to be stashed outside the tunnels until they could carve out new rooms.

At least the room where Mateen, Perzo, and Darwesh had been found was still intact, not that they’d risk putting anything in there until they were *sure* the mountain was stable once again.

After checking the sentries one more time, he headed back to his own hut. It wouldn’t do to let security fall apart now that their insane leader was out shopping for his “surprise package” for the Americans. He shook his head as he walked along, having *finally* learned of Faridun’s insane plan just before he’d taken the girl, two men, and one of their pickups – the *reliable* one – to go and meet the delivery.



## Picking up the Pieces

He certainly hoped their senior leadership responded favorably to his loyal support for the cause. Wasting drug money on buying expensive toys was *foolish*. They needed guns, ammunition, and RPG's – *not nuclear weapons!*

### *Waiting for a Truck...*

Hask and Darwesh remained huddled together in the abandoned hut they'd occupied just west of Samir Kot.

Why they couldn't have stayed at the camp was a question they'd been afraid to broach with Bazgar. Their leader's second had been in a foul mood ever since the earthquake, and they'd originally thought it a *good* idea to go out with Faridun and meet the delivery before it reached their camp. *Now ... not so much.*

Faridun had someone nicer to huddle with, but at least he'd not made use of her – not in their presence, anyway. She cooked for all three of them, and tended to their needs, but just that. She seemed to have gained status with Faridun after the loss of all her friends. Perhaps *that* was why Bazgar had been so bitchy?

Hask was nominally on watch. That meant he was barely awake while leaning against the wall whose window held a view of the road below them. Presumably, the sound of a truck would catch his attention and he would raise his blanket-wrapped head high enough to glance out the empty window.

The last day and a half they'd seen nothing but a few pickup trucks, and that one bedraggled bus trundling it's bumpy way from Nangalam to Asadabad. What Faridun expected them to do if the *right* truck came along was understood.

How he'd know which truck was the *right* truck was still in question.

All he knew was that it would have three wheels on each side and be big enough to carry a heavy load. Once intercepted, they'd transfer the package into the smaller pickup truck and haul it back to their base. How they'd get that heavy load up into the cave was a separate issue.

~~~

Orzala remained curled in a tight ball; her body draped by Faridun's as he huddled next to her to stay warm. At least they weren't sleeping on the steel bed of the pickup truck stashed out of sight behind the hut. She listened to the sounds of the night, hearing either Hask or Darwesh snoring, and the slight sound of Faridun's breath as it blew across her hair. Lying there, she considered the new situation she found herself in...

She'd overheard Faridun explaining the plan to Bazgar, including the part where she'd be offered to sweeten the pot. As the slave trade was very active in the region, and girls like her were cheap – just for the price of the taking – she could not imagine anyone taking her even in *partial* trade. More than likely, they'd kill Faridun, keep the bomb, then use her before throwing her away. If she was lucky, they might even let her live.

That would at least be *something*. She already knew she could not return home. Her parents would disown her, just as they'd done her little sister, and her brother would make every effort to *kill* her, just as he would her little sister...

For a moment, she wondered what life would have been like if Faridun had *not* been a terrorist – just a scholar who'd wandered into the valley and taken a liking to her. He'd certainly treated her better than any of the *other* men in his group. She curled herself a little tighter and felt him snuggle around her more firmly. Why did things have to be like this? Why couldn't people just live and be happy?

***Tuesday, October 4, 3:30 P.M. (MST), In the Motor Pool***

The party had broken up to let Xue meet with Jaiying back at the Center, so they could take a crack at tracking down Faridun and Orzala. After receiving a *new* shopping list from Donald, Wilber and Laisee had taken Howard and Dorothy for a walk so he could finally conduct her "formal" interview – although it pretty much looked like a done deal if she didn't go crazy afterwards.

Meanwhile, Donald had stayed behind with John, Sai, and Dwayne to work out schemes of how to turn reality into fiction on a lonely road in Pakistan. As Dwayne seemed content to take notes, Don and Sai argued over the many possible ways of basically dragging their heels across a shallow pit to hide the fact that it'd been created by unknown means.

John was stymied as to why they'd included him in this discussion, and had remained silent while waiting for them to come to a conclusion. While they continued to pursue a plausible solution, he continued to stare down at the photograph of him and Aetius on the surface of the moon, and finally closed his eyes while reliving the *impossibility* of the experience...

He'd had an opportunity that no other countrymen of his had *ever* been offered. For years, a trip to the moon had been a distant dream of his while growing up, but subsequently *squashed* on that dark day back in 2003.

Now ... now it had been a simple trip to stick something dangerous out of the way until they could figure out what to do with it.

## Picking up the Pieces

He opened his eyes and stared at the photo again, focusing on how tall Aetius had been standing in his armor next to him, with him standing there in that ... that *really* thin ships suit. As he looked at the background, he paid attention to all the little details while refreshing the reality of it in his mind.

Then he noticed a tiny anomaly in the image – the shadow of a hand off to one side of them both.

Don had been standing with his back to the sun, and no one else had been outside. Where did that extra hand come from?

He took a much closer look, and just barely noticed a tiny copyright emblem in the lower right hand corner of the image, followed by something called ‘KC Effects’? He sat back, then flipped the picture over, seeing instructions for getting reprints within two weeks upon prepayment of ten dollars each (free shipping!)

“Huh?” he murmured.

“John, you got something you want to add?” Don asked him, which brought his attention back to the meeting.

“Huh?” he repeated stupidly.

“About dropping satellite debris around the pit. Make it look like the shockwave from a falling satellite caused a pressure wave that flattened the ground,” Don said again. “That satellite I bumped into? We torch bits of it, then scatter it around the area for corroborative detail, and call it a day.”

John stared at him for a full ten seconds before flipping the picture over again while looking at it in a new light.

“You know, sometimes it’s hard for independent movie studios to find backing from financiers,” he said, diverting the conversation *completely* off track. “I mean, some motion pictures take *years* to find a backer before they get a chance to get shot and become hits. I would imagine creating a cheesy special effect that goes *viral* might be a selling point if someone could write a script that made use of it – even if no one ever picked it up.”

He held up the photo and showed it to them, then pointed out the extra hand shadow.

“I mean, reality is what we *make* it, isn’t it? Corroborative detail and all? That pit in the dirt becomes the teaser for a *movie* script. Look – the UFO guys go squirrely over it, then someone comes forward with a *horrible* plot that he wasted *thousands* of dollars setting up the teaser for to begin with.”

He dropped the photo on the table and spread his hands slightly.

There was silence in the room for several seconds until Donald slumped back in his chair. If he understood the word “viral” in its proper context, this might do the trick. An evil grin came to his face.

“By the *Gods*... John, that is *brilliantly* twisted,” he muttered, then turned to Dwayne. “Dwayne, the Embassy counter-intel guys have access to set up something like that, right? Plus, we’ll need to arrange for circumstantial evidence of some special effects group going over to Pakistan and surreptitiously farting around south of Mirkhani to make it look like that’s what happened...” He paused, nodding and brainstorming it further in his head. “They’ll need eye witnesses of some strangers, trucks ... whatever else might defuse the crazies. If the *Demon* were still alive...” He broke off at a glare from Sai.

“Maybe... Perhaps Lady Xue could be convinced to help out in this regard,” she suggested stiffly, and he ducked his head and zipped his lips with a thumb and forefinger.

“Trucks. Equipment of some sort. Witnesses,” Dwayne muttered, then looked up from his notes to see the silent standoff between Donald and Sai. “And I’ll flesh this out before I update Wilber and send it to the Embassy.” So saying, he closed his notebook and nodded his goodbyes before leaving them behind.

Donald shared an innocent smile with John, while Sai let out a snort, then got up and stormed out of the room, to John’s complete confusion.

“She’s got such a *sweet* disposition, John. It’s a shame she insists on *hiding* it all the time,” he muttered, then tapped the table several times before standing and slowly following her out.

John sat there alone for a minute while wondering what in the hell had just happened. They’d seemed to have jumped all over his suggestion, so that sounded like a *good* thing, right? And as long as he wasn’t *directly* involved, he couldn’t screw it up, so...

He left that thought and turned back to the photo.

It looked like a simple special effects shot, where his head had been added to a stock photo of some random science fiction background – nothing more, nothing less. Even the truck looked different than what he remembered. The mirrors were *definitely* different for sure. His friends back home would probably tease him about it if he ever showed it to them.

He let out a snort, then gathered himself to head back to the Center.

A nice warm shower would be welcome at this point. Maybe a nap before dinner.

## Picking up the Pieces

On the way back, he wondered if Xue would desire his company again this evening, then considered himself lucky she'd accepted his company last night. Either way, it was up to her, and either way, he'd be content with her decision.

### *October 4, 7 P.M., (EST), Fort Meade, Wrapping Things Up*

Dwight felt pretty good about himself, because the situation had seemed to settle itself into a logical conclusion – provided you ignored a certain set of photographs that were locked in his safe. At least he was no longer worried about his country being lured into a political crisis over some loose cannons over at Anacostia–Bolling.

Well, not for a few more days anyway.

He was in the process of locking his desk, when his cell phone rang. He glanced at the clock and was about to ignore it, but the caller ID *immediately* canceled that thought. Shaking his head while leaning back in his chair, he wondered what *new* hell was about to be unleashed upon him, and if there was any justice in the world, it would include *Timmy* as well. He answered the call, then settled back to hear what Wilber had to say.

### *8 P.M., (EST), Dinner at Dominic's of New York*

Timothy had found a decent table in the basement of the Pentagon's 24-hour restaurant, and sat there sipping his water between munching on breadsticks. Dwight's call had surprised him, but since he'd offered to pay for dinner, it would make a nice break from fighting off Sasha over his French fries.

Hard to figure out how a cat had developed a taste for French fries in the first place, since to his knowledge, she'd never been a stray.

At least she shied away from a ketchup coating on them, but then developed a taste for mayonnaise, which explained the leaves of his salad occasionally ending up on the floor.

His NSA counterpart hadn't shared anything over the phone, other than an invitation for dinner at the Puzzle Palace. That alone told him circumstances had changed, and he'd needed a face-to-face to bring him into the game, but as always, only if he was willing.

Considering the logistics involved, he hoped traffic wouldn't be an issue on a weekday.

In his opinion, Dwight was an odd character...

Nearly two decades his senior, he'd first met him a little over twelve years ago while they were both investigating a series of potential security leaks originating from somewhere within the bureaucracy – Dwight on the inside of the government, and him tracing it back from

off-shore intercepts. That was still back when the CIA's public face never admitted to spying on domestic citizens.

They'd inadvertently crossed paths outside a brownstone in Washington, D.C. while zeroing in on the same subject who operated between there and someplace in Arizona. After following that subject and learning his schedule, they'd both been approached separately by two large gentlemen who'd handed them embossed invitations to join their target for lunch. As it turned out, that person had been Immigration Services Officer Wilber Milton, on detached duty from the INS, and the invitations had been for both lunch and an informal interview.

In the course of that interview, the woman who'd attended it with Wilber had somehow determined why they were there, then identified two possible sources *within* the government – something that *neither* of them had expected. After that leak had been effectively plugged, they'd both been invited back for another lunch and some interesting conversation.

Subsequently, *they* – each with permission of one of their organization's more *senior* management – had become the latest two insiders into the strangest “consulting” arrangement between the United States and some undefined organization.

It had taken them a few more years to determine what they'd *really* signed up for – which had shaken him to his core, while Dwight just seemed to roll with the punches. Now they both accepted it as a matter of course, and the burden hadn't really been all that heavy – up until *now*...

~~~

Dwight smiled his way through Dominic's while searching for his dining companion. He'd never really understood Timmy's stoic demeanor. Certainly, his *own* time in the field hadn't always been pleasant, but perhaps Timmy's had been fraught with one emotional crisis after another?

Knowing the CIA's shadowy record, it was a wonder that most of them weren't under psychiatric care for any *number* of issues.

As he approached the rear seating area, he saw Timmy's - *Timothy's*, he remembered reluctantly, blank face as he addressed the small tray of breadsticks in front of him. He slowed as he approached, watching Tim's methodical consumption of bread and water. It was always the same; take a tiny bite, chew four times, then sip the water.

The young man needed to lighten up and *enjoy* life. He thought of the animation he'd seen on Tim's face when he'd walked past with

## Picking up the Pieces

Sasha batting at him from inside the cage he was carrying. In addition to his pet, what he *really* needed to do was supplement that level of engagement with *people*.

He walked up to the table and stopped, saying, “Good evening, Timothy.” Without a word, Tim gestured to the seat opposite him and waited for him to sit.

Dwight opened with, “I’m told the Philly Cheese Steak is to die for.”

“We all have to die from something,” was Tim’s monotone response, followed by the slightest of smiles as he began the careful dismantling of the barriers surrounding his personal space.

Dwight took note and appreciated his effort. Sometimes it took several minutes for Tim to relax enough to become even *marginally* sociable. He often wondered how he managed social interactions with co-workers, let alone those assets he managed in the field. He also suspected that he actually *rehearsed* those messages he’d occasionally leave him.

“Our friend with that outlandish job called,” Dwight continued. “Said they could maybe use a little help with that thing they left behind outside of Mirkhani. Out of *all* the things he could come up with, this is a new one on *me*.”

They waited while the waitress came over, took their orders and left, before Tim evidenced the tiniest bit of curiosity.

“What? They need a *bigger shovel*?”

Dwight refrained from laughing out loud, but his body still shook at this relatively expansive expression of sarcasm from Tim.

“Rumor has it that somebody had that thing created just to drum up interest in a *movie* plot. Whether anyone actually *backs* it isn’t important. What is needed is finding the ‘special effects’ team involved and see how many potential witnesses can lay claim to catching them in the act. Or, you know, looking suspicious as they drove through town.”

Tim stared at him while translating that scenario in his mind. The “air quotes” Dwight had thrown around “special effects” would indicate that a currently *non-existent* team was being postulated as being responsible for the hole in the ground. Finding witnesses to something which had already happened – even knowing that there *were* no witnesses available – sounded like a typical disinformation gig. He shared a tight smile at the prospect of treading on familiar ground for a change.

“I’m sure a little bit of searching would probably find the culprits ... or at least evidence of their passing,” he said, then leaned back and

folded his arms across his chest. “Surely *somebody* would have noticed strange goings on in the middle of the night.”

“Surely,” Dwight echoed, then felt his phone buzzing against his chest. “Excuse me a moment. Just let me take a peek at—”

Dwight stopped speaking when he saw the caller ID, then turned the phone towards Tim to show him the classic image of a bubble-headed, big-eyed, green alien on it. Tim rolled his eyes while Dwight took the call.

“Funny you should call. I’m in the middle of dinner with a friend,” Dwight muttered quietly, then glanced at Tim while nodding his head slowly. “A ... a *what?* I ... I’ll ask him.”

Dwight hit mute on his phone, then looked up to present this improbable new request.

“Tim, would you happen to know where they could find *another* 6x6 in country? You know ... to replace the *other* one?”

Tim stared at him while churning it in his head. They’d already removed *one* Ural, but now they needed *another* one? He took several more seconds while balancing the probabilities, of which only a few seemed reasonable. He was teetering among them, until it suddenly became clear to him. Oh ... *that’s* why they needed it.

He put on his game face, and asked, “With or without air in the tires?”

### ***October 4, 6:25 P.M. (MST), Another Piece of the Puzzle***

Wilber disconnected his call and slouched back in his chair. Officer Fredricks was an expert at disinformation, and using Dwight to ask it of him had served two purposes.

The first, was to elicit the request while in friendly company. The *second*, was to remind Tim that he was part of a *team*.

Dwight had always been easy to work with, while getting to know Tim had been *real* hard. Lili had voiced much the same observation about him, but accepted his honesty and understood Tim’s dedication to his country would *always* come first. If working with Wilber gave his country an edge, then that was a plus. Sticking it to his country’s enemies was just a *bonus*.

In this case, the plus was taking a whack at a terrorist cell, and recovering American prisoners in the process was part of the bonus package. The other recoveries were a nice humanitarian gesture, but wouldn’t gain any plus points for the United States unless it could be made public. Unfortunately, that probably wouldn’t happen in the



## Picking up the Pieces

current political climate for at least another fifty years or more ... or unless the Taliban totally collapsed.

Wilber looked at the clock, then checked his calendar. It was nighttime now, but already approaching dawn tomorrow in Afghanistan. It would be nice if Tim's assets could produce a 6x6 within maybe twenty-four hours. Of course, the plan Don had come up with involved stealing one from *anywhere* in the region and simply hauling it at a low enough altitude so the tires remained intact until they could get it inside the Afghan border.

They'd wait and see what Tim could come up with before going with Don's "Plan B" option.

As for the other issue, the counter-intelligence group at the Embassy were no strangers to the fabrication of false data and images. In fact, once Wilber had passed on Don's original suggestion to use the internet to plant fake UFO sightings, the home team had gleefully chipped in and produced fake reports of sightings, fuzzy photos, and shaky videos of anything *but* real Commonwealth spacecraft. Setting up a cheesy special effects web site sponsored by "KC Effects" was inspired. Their home page offered "expert" special effects work with some absolutely *terrible* CGI examples. In fact, the doctored photo of John and Aetius had been their very first real product, albeit only for private consumption.

Wilber reached up and ran his fingers through his hair while thinking of the timeline involved. Faridun and his team were supposedly holed up somewhere not far from the valley. He had no idea of how long he would stick it out before cutting his losses and heading back to the caves to lick his wounds. Add to that the *remote* possibility of a second strike team headed his way made the timing a little tighter.

Well, it was out of his hands at the moment, so he shut down his computer and disconnected his router. It was time to eat and enjoy a relatively quiet evening while it lasted. Tomorrow morning, he would head out in one of the Center's vans and pick up that special order for Don.

### ***7 P.M. (MST), At the Center***

Donald left his shared quarters and wandered down the hallway, while barely acknowledging the guardsmen he passed along the way. He reached the end of the hallway and was about to stop at the small snack room, but three girls and two of the recovered women were in there and immediately stopped talking when he glanced inside. Instead of stopping, he merely nodded once, then continued on past it. They remained silent until they heard the hallway door open. Then he heard quietly muttered words until the door closed behind him.

He paused outside the door while considering his options. He could go and visit his grandchildren, but he might run into Sai. Since they'd parted on *less* than friendly terms that afternoon, the *last* thing he wanted was to stir things up once again. He hadn't seen Howard or Dorothy since the meeting, and assumed Laisee had latched onto them for a thorough debriefing of the Afghan mission; assuming she'd accepted Dorothy into the fold.

A sudden memory rose up in him. Her name was Dorothy *Gale*... Oh ... if *only* she were born in the right place, there was a *hilarious* line he could tease her with. Of course, if she *had* been born in the right place, then she was probably already *sick* of it. He tucked it away for an opportunistic moment, because you never know.

Still stuck where he was, he folded his arms and leaned against the wall. He should probably grab a bag of supplies and hump them over to the ship. After that last trip, he would be running low on juice and ginger ale. The juice was nice because the sugar content gave a quick energy boost, while the ginger ale helped the planet-bound with nausea.

The thought of that brought a twinge to his stomach. Dinner had been great, as his mother had watched the kids again. That way, he and his girls could enjoy the relative peace and quiet during a quick dinner, before heading back to share a less-than-quiet evening together.

That semi-quiet evening plan had turned into a disaster when Maya learned he was planning yet *another* Afghan intrusion to recover Nurani's older sister, Orzala, and the terrorist, Faridun – if he could *find* them. It'd only gotten worse when he'd told her the steps he planned to take. To say she'd been furious would have been kind. She'd told him if he wasn't the father of her God-children, his life would be forfeit.

That really surprised him. He wasn't aware that Maya was even knowledgeable about the concept. Perhaps she'd learned it from Mary? Maybe even Kayla, but Kayla and Danny seemed to spend less and less time at the Annex lately. There'd even been some days when Mary had been absent because she'd headed into town to spend a day or two with her spouses.

At least Dwayne and John still seemed happy with him. Wilber ... that was in question. He knew his constant skirting around the edges of the treaty was worrying Wilber, but he'd never expressed any truly negative comments about it. For himself, he really didn't want to screw things up. He wanted his planet to survive this most dangerous period of its existence, but the fact they'd barely even *started* on the process was troubling to him. It would almost be better to make them a

## Picking up the Pieces

Governed Territory and *forcibly* remove their means of self-destruction, but the loss of terrestrial lives – even as over-populated as they were – was still anathema to him.

It would almost be kinder to do what he'd thought of doing for the American Indians – terraform a planet for them, and provide free passage to it.

Do that maybe six-thousand times and it could *completely* end the chance of dealing with world wars ... *probably*. The downside was that, even then – even with a whole planet of their *own* – probably *nobody* would be interested in leaving their currently *crowded, noisy, unsanitary, poorly fed, poorly educated, and poorly managed* societies. He couldn't even *begin* to imagine what they'd do without access to reality TV...

Familiar voices in the hallway caught his attention, and he followed the sound as it wandered away from him. He caught up as the door to the great room was closing, and stopped outside to listen for a moment while holding it open just a tiny bit.

~~~

"We teach here, Dorothy," Xue told her. "The *Healers* here teach our techniques, I mean. I'm only here on ... you would call it an inspection tour to see that things are progressing satisfactorily."

Xue continued walking towards the center of the empty room, with Dorothy and Howard following along. This was all new to Dorothy, of course, but a lot of it was new to Howard as well.

The room was big – fully fifty feet in diameter – and Howard wondered if they just stood around for this "teaching" business, or if they brought in tables and chairs during class.

From recent experience, he was expecting her to answer his silent question, and wasn't disappointed.

"We have rooms to hold sit-down classes in, but the large room is useful for large gatherings. I'm told that sometimes physical training has taken place in here," Xue continued. "However, teaching Healing is best done in small settings. For example..."

Xue turned to Howard and flash-scanned him from head to toe.

"Howard, at some point in your life, you broke the *ring* metacarpal of your left hand," she said, then held up her left hand and pointed to the knuckle of her ring finger. "If a Healer had treated you, it would have been Healed *perfectly* and be the same length as before."

He raised both hands, then clenched them into fists in front of them. Instead of jutting out from his fist, the knuckle on his left ring

finger was a tiny bump in the middle of a shallow valley between his middle and small metacarpal. He vividly remembered the way it had happened, and stared down at it while voluntarily explaining it.

“Of *all* things, I broke it on a first *aid* box,” he admitted, then let out a snort of self-derision.

“It could be *fixed*, Howard,” she offered. “We certainly have plenty of *time*.”

He looked up at her, then down at his hand again.

It had happened back in his early twenties, and it’d been like that ever since. He’d gotten used to it.

“Thank you for the offer, Xue, but it reminds me of my misspent youth. I think I’ll hang onto it,” he said, then tilted his head. “I might take you up on that if it starts complaining during changes in the weather, though.”

Xue nodded her head and smiled.

“I’m sure the Ladies here would *love* to have another training opportunity.”

While that was going on, Dorothy had been looking around the room and caught sight of the alcove. She stepped over to it, but couldn’t read the inscription on the plaque. The symbol above the urn – for that had to be what it was – she’d seen before, though.

Wilber’s ring had that symbol, as did Sai’s, and even Donald’s.

“Xue ... what does this say?”

Xue and Howard joined her, and Xue pointed to the alien words as she read them aloud.

“*\*Lord Rondal Caldar sai Caldarous se Earth ne Kantor, First Lord of the Commonwealth of Planets, and Brother of Radatel Caldarous se Kantor, Emperor of the Commonwealth of Planets,\**” she murmured, and turned back to see their blank expressions.

She dipped her head slightly, then repeated it in English, this time, including the dates inscribed underneath it.

“1784 to 2005. Those are Earth dates. He died very young for ... for who he was. He could have lived a fuller life, even after being born here on Earth,” she murmured, then turned back to them again. “Lady Spring Blossom was his mother. She was born here as well – within this very tribe, they tell me.”

Howard’s brain locked up at that comment, but Dorothy was more curious about something else.

## Picking up the Pieces

“Xue, why do some wear rings with that symbol on them?”

“The crest of House Caldarous? That was *Rondal’s* doing,” she explained. “He would become attached to people, and add them to the family. I’m told it was to insure they would be protected should their countrymen turn on them.”

“He was protecting his ... his *family*?” This revelation had kicked Howard out of standby, and he rejoined the conversation, now paying attention as Xue explained herself.

“Certainly. That has happened once or twice before, as you may recall. During your years 1998 and 1999? Both incidents traceable to your government to some degree. We were very disappointed at the time, but Liling was determined to see it through.”

“Lil ... Liling?” Dorothy was becoming intrigued by all this new information.

“Lady Liling is the Emperor’s First Wife. His second wife is deceased, while Third, Fourth and Fifth Wives remain healthy and productive. In fact, Fifth Wife has found temporary service as a babysitter for Rondal Caldar’s children by Lady Déjà,” she said, then chuckled quietly.

“Babysit... Spring Blossom is married to the *Emperor*?”

Xue thought to herself, *‘She certainly is fast, this new member of Wilber’s extended list of contacts.’*

~~~

Donald had been eavesdropping, but it seemed they were cutting it too close to home for him, so he decided to intercede. Besides, to his knowledge, Howard had never had “the initiation.”

As much as it might hurt, it was a sure fire way to convince someone of their sincerity.

He slipped into the room and walked over to them with a smile on his face, only giving a token nod to the urn before he turned to face them.

“Hello, Dorothy. Given the conversation you’ve been having, it sounds like you’ve met with Wilber and Laisee’s approval,” he said cheerfully. “Welcome to the party!”

“Yes... Well, it remains to be seen how useful I’ll be. I think my *boss* was pretty pissed about the whole thing,” she said.

“Nonsense! It’s just a matter of learning to *work* together,” he assured her. “Howard works for that subset of USD, and *they* seem to play well with others – more or less.”

He stopped and turned thoughtful for a moment before turning to Howard.

"You know, maybe you might suggest cross-training between your departments? I mean, swap some NSA assets with CIA assets for, you know, the cross-bonding experience. Wilber tells me those guys Dot picked up seem to work well together. Well, *Fredricks* seems to be a stuffed shirt, but he says Abernathy stays on the ball – when he's not being *kidnapped!*"

He'd said that last in jest, and shared a toothy smile with Dorothy to soften the slight. She still let the faintest tint of a blush grace her cheeks, though.

"Now I don't want *either* of you to fret about being involved with us," he continued. "We're just regular folks trying to do the right thing for twelve clusters worth of planets. My *last* boss, that Caldar guy, he roped in *another* eight clusters from some ex-enemies of his, so hopefully things will smooth out for a while."

As a military man, that remark had immediate connotations with Howard.

"You mean he ... conquered eight ... eight *clusters*?"

"Donald exaggerates, Howard," Xue interjected. "What he means is, Lord Caldar convinced a former enemy to assume control of the Hegemony and agree to cease hostilities with the Commonwealth."

"Oh, and it was a *good* thing, too," Donald joined in. "Before Ronnie got involved, the *only* reason the Drecks weren't harvesting Earthlings was because of *pollution*. You guys just don't *taste* that good!"

The silence in the room was deafening, and it remained so while Donald looked from the shocked faces of Dorothy and Howard, to the stern expression on the face of Xue.

"Too much information?" he asked meekly. "Sorry. I know it's a lot to take in. There's a *reason* the Earth is held as a Protectorate. We do it to protect your *lives*. In the Hegemony ... well, when the Drecks took over, things went to *shit*. Before I shipped out with him, Ronnie found the source of *all* our problems and made nice with *them*, too. It will make for fascinating reading once someone writes it all down."

They seemed to be coming back to life, so he figured it was about time for Howard's initiation.

He pulled out his small pocketknife and cupped it in his hand.

"So, Xue, I understand Howard missed his initiation. Would you care to demonstrate?"

## Picking up the Pieces

At her blank expression, he reached up and tapped his forehead, then thought *really* hard of an image of him cutting his palm, and her Healing it.

He knew she'd picked it up when she let out a frustrated sigh, and said, "Oh, very well."

He smiled, then pushed up his sleeves before unfolding his knife and showing it to them. It was small but *very* sharp.

He stared into Xue's eyes, and said, "Ladies and gentleman, I'm told that Rondal Caldar used rather *peculiar* methods for teaching new Healers, but they had the benefit of producing *excellent* results. Please observe, if you will."

He held up his left hand and grimaced at what he knew was coming. Then he spared a glance at Howard.

"No pussies now, Howard," he muttered, then looked down and sliced his thumb palm. "Shit! You'd think I'd get *used* to it by now. That *still* hurts!"

He flexed his fist so they could see the blood dribble out of his palm. Interestingly, Dorothy reached out with both hands and clamped them around his wrist to limit the bleeding – something Xue observed with interest.

"Thank you, Dot," he said quietly, then turned to Xue. "My Healer, I've done something *incredibly* stupid. Would you please Heal me?" He gave it a second or two, before adding, "Take your time."

She gave him a sharp glare, but suddenly picked up what he'd intended for them to see, which elicited another sigh from her.

"Gather around, children. Donald has foolishly injured himself for your gratification, so let's enjoy it while it lasts," she said in resignation, then reached out with one hand that was already glowing.

She stopped short of the cut to let them see what the wound was doing while she applied her Healing very slowly – purposely dragging it out, instead of simply flashing it fixed like she normally would. In the space of a minute, the seam closed, and the blood had penetrated back into the skin – save for what had already fallen to the floor.

"Ready for your turn, Howard?" Donald muttered, and caught the shocked expression on his face.

Dorothy's reaction was quite different, however.

"Can ... can *I* learn to do that?" she asked timidly.

"Oh, it gets even *better*," Donald promised her, then thought of the two patients over in the client wing.

“Xue, have you guys started on Fred and Anthony yet? I mean, Howard’s already here, and he can confirm the whole ‘before and after’ business for us, right?” he suggested, while looking at the shock in Howard’s eyes.

Xue stared at him, then shook her head slightly while considering it. She checked the clock on the wall, then reached out to ask Ling if she had any calcium tablets available.

Donald watched her face, then smiled when her mood changed for the positive. He knew that – *most* of all – Healers wanted to *Heal*. They couldn’t *help* it. If something needed to be fixed, they *always* made the effort to fix it. He’d been told what Lili had done that night when she’d terrorized Doctor Wells. He also knew Xue had fixed mismatched bone breaks, then asked about a lymphoma on their last trip out.

She was a Healer *first*. She just couldn’t *help* it.

“Ling will meet us in the client’s room,” she said with a reluctant sigh. “You will bring Healer’s milk from the pantry,” she added, thinking of the Earthlings’ reluctance to involve human breasts for their *usual* purpose of nourishment and comfort.

As a group, they headed for the client wing, with Donald swinging by the pantry to grab what she’d asked for.

### **7:30 P.M. (MST), *Time to Eat!***

Kiki just couldn’t remember when she’d been *this* hungry before, but then again, she’d never had this much *fun* with someone before. She looked down at him again, and decided *he* could probably use something to eat as well. She finished slipping on her clothes, then grabbed the empty tray to take it back for a refill.

On the way out the door, she glanced down at the nearly full trash can but figured it would be good for at least another day or two, so she headed down the hallway and passed the visitors coming to see those two nice boys who were sharing a room.

~~~

Donald was on his way to the client wing when he passed Kiki on the way to the pantry.

“Hello, Donald! I go *eat!* I *always* eat before I *play!* I *promised!*” she said cheerfully, as she whipped on by him with her empty tray in hand.

For himself, he just accepted it as routine for her, then momentarily thought of scheduling some time for all *three* of them to share Kiki. After another moment’s thought, he realized she was



## Picking up the Pieces

probably already booked solid with the garrison. In fact, it looked like she was stocking up for her *next* appointment.

He smiled at the simplicity of her life – eat, sleep, and fuck – and was grateful *his* girls weren't that demanding. In fact, demanding was probably the *last* thing on their minds right now. He continued down the hall and stopped outside the door with the guardsman standing next to it, then waited to be admitted.

### ***Wednesday, October 5, 07:35 (AFT), Afghanistan, Sunrise in the Hills***

"<Nothing? Neither of you heard or saw anything else last night?>"

Faridun asked them again, but neither Hask or Darwesh could give him any positive responses, other than the usual night sounds.

At their shaking heads, their leader turned away and wandered back to where Orzala was, preparing something warm for them all to drink. Their food would not last longer than another day or two before they had to obtain more. At least he'd kept some money aside for purchases. If nothing else, he could send one of his minions to refill the truck, then stop and pick up more food.

Darwesh took up his post again, wondering how much longer they would remain stuck out here on the edge of the road while their leader waited for a truck that most likely had lost its way. Meanwhile, Hask curled up in his blanket and tried to nap until the woman had something warm to offer him.

He realized how bad off they were when he would rather have something warm to eat than lie with her warm body.

With that dour thought in mind, he closed his eyes and contented himself with the relative warmth of daylight striking a small patch of the blanket he was under.

### ***Tuesday, October 4, 9 P.M. (MST), Arizona, At Days End***

Howard had dithered about calling Audrey so late, but was glad he did, as she'd been worried about him and needed to hear his assurances that he was all right. He'd still not told her where he was, other than it involved something related to his work, but assured her he was safely out of harm's way. After sharing his promise to call her during better hours, he declared his love once again, and they'd both hung up – sure that things were still well with them after all that strife they'd gone through over five years ago.

Now he was lounging in the sitting room and nursing a small glass of ambrosia from the table in the corner. Someone, no doubt housekeeping, had come in and changed out empty bottles for full ones; brought them clean glasses, restocked his bathroom, and made his bed. The same had probably happened in Dorothy's room as well.

He was actually quite enjoying himself for a change, the only thing missing being Audrey by his side. Of course, it wouldn't have been very wise to include her in the discussions they'd had with Donald and Xue in the great room. As for the injured *men*...

~~~

Dorothy stepped out of the bathtub and dried herself before slipping on a fresh, fluffy bathrobe.

She didn't know when housekeeping had hit, but they'd tidied everything, and even made her bed. Wandering out to her bedroom, she considered what to do with her time now? It was only nine o'clock, and if she were home, she'd either be on her computer, or watching something on TV. Here, there were no computers – save for Wilber's – and no TV – save for the one in Wilber's house. Take that back – she'd seen John with a laptop, but then he'd given it back to Wilber, so yeah, there were no loose communication leaks from the Center.

They hadn't even given her *phone* back yet – not that she really needed it. If anything, it kept her boss from bugging her for information *he* wasn't allowed this time.

Given the hour, she opted to flop down on the bed, her thoughts driven to the memories of what she'd seen and experienced that evening...

After that bloody demonstration by Donald, they'd followed Xue to what she'd called a "client room" and found the two missing servicemen stretched out on a pair of rather comfortable twin beds. Howard had conducted a short question and answer session to establish their identities, but declined to attempt a full debriefing of either of them. Something they'd both noticed was Anthony's arms and legs were bent into some *very* uncomfortable positions, while Fred's somewhat singular problem was his right leg – the bottom of which was missing from about his knee down.

For some reason, neither of the men seemed to be in any real pain. Then Xue pointed to the vacuum container Donald brought from the pantry and explained that it contained "Healers" milk. She'd declined to explain exactly what that meant, but both men swore it was good, wholesome, and helped ease their pain. She'd checked the contents of the container, then poured a small cup for each man and had them drink it. As they each did so, she stood by their side and held their hands; and by the time each one had finished, they'd both fallen asleep.

Then Fred's wife, Nascha was her name, was shooed out, while Anthony's injuries were going to be "examined" and Xue had gathered them around the sleeping man's bed.

## Picking up the Pieces

She'd stood there and started slowly, pointing out each damaged piece of bone as she traversed her hands up one arm and down another. Then she'd started on his legs, pointing out various poorly-set bones and explaining the amount of tension they would put on the musculature at each location. Once she'd finished that, she cast a hand *over*, not touching his torso, from his groin up to his head, and pointed out a few locations – cracked ribs and a chipped cervical vertebra – that needed to be dealt with. That finished with, she'd grabbed the one chair in the crowded room and sat by his right side.

Rubbing her hands together briskly, she'd pressed them on either side of his right hand, and then *her* hands, *his* hand, and his entire *arm* began to glow.

Howard started to back up, but Donald had been right behind him, steadying his nerve. Meanwhile, Dot watched – *entranced* – as Xue had pressed her palms together tightly, then heard the bones snap quietly when they separated at their previously broken points.

Xue had remained placidly calm as she explained *exactly* what she was doing, all the while sitting there with her eyes closed as she manipulated the skeletal structure within the hand of the man lying before her. She finished with his hand, then continued up to his shoulder – leaving a trail of snaps, crackles, and pops in her wake.

Once she'd finished the right arm, she'd pulled the wheeled bed away from the wall and switched around to the left side, all the while explaining that – yes, the bones were broken – but no – there was no need for supplements because all the pieces were still in place. Fred, on the other hand, would take longer, because his entire lower *leg* was missing, and he'd need to load up on calcium to create entirely *new* bone growth before she could grow him a new leg to go with it.

When she'd finished Anthony's left arm, she continued on to his left leg ... now seeming to be working much faster than before. She'd eventually moved back around to his right leg, but then looked at her appraisingly.

She'd asked, "Dorothy, were you *really* serious about learning how to do this?"

Dorothy remembered her feelings *vividly*. She'd been watching a miracle in action, and the angel in front of her had asked if she'd like to learn how to fix a broken body. She'd timidly smiled and nodded, so Xue stood up and gestured to the chair. Once seated, Xue stepped behind her, before grasping her arms and guiding them forward. Xue then guided the placement of her hands on Anthony's foot and told her to close her eyes. Then Xue had closed her hands over hers, and she'd suddenly seen in her mind's eye the *internal* structure of his foot in all its broken glory.

After several seconds of holding her breath, the enormity of what she was experiencing suddenly overrode her senses, and she'd stood up and tried to back away before bumping into Donald – who seemed to have expected it.

He'd reached around her waist, then reached out to pull her hands back to her waist – all the while whispering, "It's all right ... it's all right ... it's all right..." over and over to her.

Once her breathing was under control, Donald had let go of her, then patted her on the shoulder, saying, "Bet you never saw anything *like* that back home, did you?"

She'd just stood there, and quietly said, "No. Never saw anything like that in Kansas," to which she'd heard him begin to chuckle.

"Well, guess what, Dorothy. You're not in *Kansas* anymore," he muttered cheerfully, before breaking out in giggles.

The hated line had been unexpected, and both she and Howard had groaned appropriately, while Xue seemed mystified at their expression of disgust. It hadn't stopped Donald's gleeful chuckles, though, which actually took the shock value down quite a few notches for Dorothy.

After a short breather, she'd gamely stepped up and let Xue show her *exactly* what she was doing with Anthony's foot, after which she'd stepped back at Xue's request while the older woman flashed the Healing to the rest of his leg.

That had brought them up to half past eight, when Xue had allowed Nascha to return, giving her instructions to load Fred up with calcium tablets when he woke up in preparation for regrowing his leg...

Dorothy sat upright and looked at the clock. It was a quarter after nine, and she wondered if Howard was still up, and better yet, sitting in the outer room.

She made sure her robe was on tight before putting her slippers on and wandering out to see if he was there.

~~~

Howard stared down at his drink and contemplated having another. The scotch had been very good, but he'd rather avoid any unnecessary hangovers, so he'd switched to ambrosia half an hour ago.

Still sitting and remembering the evening's festivities, he clenched his left fist and looked at his broken knuckle. No, the knuckle was intact, but the bone behind it had been set poorly. He smiled at that, and at Dot's reaction to what Xue had done to her.

## Picking up the Pieces

He'd had a momentary urge to ask if *he* could see what she was seeing, but her jumping out of her seat like that had quickly changed his mind. What had *cemented* it was Xue's observation about doctors, and *Earth* doctors in general.

"Earthling doctors only *practice* medicine," she'd said. "The Healers of Cletus actually *Heal* the sick and injured."

He glanced at his hand again, then heard Dorothy's door open.

~~~

Dorothy looked into the room and, sure enough, Howard was sitting there with a half-full glass of green liquor in his hand.

She smiled in his direction, before working her way over to the table and pouring a glass for herself. Once ready, she sat down – not so close this time – and took a refreshing sip, before turning her gaze to him.

"Howard ... what do you think about what Xue showed us tonight?"

He sipped his drink as he stared into her eyes while trying to think of something non-committal.

"Well ... whatever it was, it seemed to *work*, right? I mean, she let you actually see what *she* was seeing, right?"

He couldn't actually believe what he was saying, but still, he'd seen it with his own eyes, and when he and Audrey had been in counseling, the woman who'd treated them had been the most *intuitive* individual he'd ever met.

"I ... I felt... Howard, I-I actually *felt* it when his bones started moving under his skin," she stammered. "One minute they were stiff, and the next they were loose ... disconnected from each other. She said she'd dissolved the calcium growth on both sides of the break so they could be fitted together perfectly before growing them back together."

He nodded slowly while sipping his drink again. That *had* been what Xue had said. Doubtless, an MRI sequence would show *exactly* what she'd described to them both. They continued to share the quiet evening until she thought of another issue.

"Howard ... Donald mentioned 'before and after.' He was talking about how the *government* would react to finding both Fred and Anthony alive and well, wasn't he."

She'd never phrased it as a question, which was one of the things he'd been struggling with ever since he'd learned that Williams and Hernandez were getting fixed with or *without* permission.

From a humanitarian perspective, it was a no-brainer. Williams and Hernandez were both broken. The people who could fix them, would do so. In the case of the Hernandez kid, it was already a done deal. The only problem was, that *those* people didn't officially exist.

"Well... On the *face* of it, they went MIA in Afghanistan," he began, while thinking it through on the basis of observable records. "As to what *really* happened to them..." His pause was slight while he narrowed down the options, "They were either *captured* – or they're AWOL from their posts. The fact that they will have sustained less damage than anyone can reasonably prove is *beside* the point. There are simply no corroborative details that prove they were even injured. I think the very *least* of their problems is being rescued by unofficial third-party contractors."

She looked at him in shock, then said, "Wow... That's kinda harsh."

He looked at her and nodded his head slowly.

"So ... how are we going to account for it?" she asked, then watched as he looked down at his glass before taking another sip from it.

His eyes closed, whether in thought, or just appreciation of the drink. When he opened them again, he stared straight at her.

"I haven't a fucking *clue*."

At least that was something they could *both* agree on.

### ***October 5, 17:30 (AFT), Afghanistan, End of Another Boring Day***

Hask heard engine noise and craned his head out the window to see what was coming. At least with the failing daylight, he could still see the vehicle approaching. It was another pick-up truck, this one with an open bed stacked with bags, and probably full of produce. It was a given that at least two men, if not more, would accompany their expected delivery, but this was yet another false alarm. He sagged back down after seeing only one person in it – the driver.

### ***Wednesday, October 5, 6 A.M. (MST), Arizona, An Early Start***

Wilber was up bright and early this Wednesday morning because he knew Don had been serious about coming up with a fake nuclear device to offer the terrorists. Fortunately, the only thing really missing was lead shot in sufficient volume to fill a portion of the empty canister they'd brought back from their foray in Pakistan, which was what prompted this morning's shopping trip...

It had taken him several minutes to assure Don that he really didn't need to fill the canister – just make it heavy enough to convince the terrorists it was real. Don had shown him the dimensions involved

## Picking up the Pieces

– an inside diameter of about twenty-six centimeters by close to one-hundred centimeters in depth – and the total volume had been cross-referenced to the weight of lead for that much space. It was a *lot*.

However, the amount really necessary was nowhere *near* the 700-800 pounds of lead he'd originally asked for. A reasonable bomb weight was closer to 200-250 pounds, and that would make it a two or three man job instead of requiring a winch to move the finished product...

Once he finished dressing, Wilber wandered out to grab a quick breakfast sandwich and a morning cup of coffee. He'd catch up on the overnights while he ate, then go pick up the shot from the local reloader supplier in town.

### ***6:45 A.M. (MST), In the Center***

Donald was up early this morning and stopped by the Center's kitchen to grab a snack. To his surprise, Ling had just left a vacuum container and greeted him in passing on the way to her office.

After seeing the kitchen morning staff just starting their shift, he opted to grab something off the shelf and settled for toasting his own bread and grabbing some fruit and a juice box.

He took his rather thin rations and found a mostly empty dining room – save for two guardsmen and Captain Anastasius, who were sitting over by the window. As soon as they saw him, they waved him over and he gladly joined them.

"Good morning, Captain Anastasius. How is the state of the garrison this morning?" He knew the moment he'd asked that it wasn't an appropriate question from a mere Spacer First, but Aineias simply ignored the propriety of it and smiled up at him.

"Quite well, Spacer Cato, except we seemed to have misplaced our recent transfer," he said. "You haven't, by any chance, happened across Paulinus Rufinius anywhere, have you?"

It took him a moment to recognize the name before it came to him.

"Oh ... that nice young man who was in search of variety, if I recall correctly," he said, then searched his memory, but couldn't remember seeing him since before he'd left the ship after their arrival.

"Didn't he show up for orientation?"

This caused Aineias to turn to one of his men with a question on his face, but the man looked a bit embarrassed.

"He was to receive orientation in the morning, so he was shown his cot in the duty rooms and brought over here for an evening meal," he

admitted. "His kit is still bundled, and we haven't seen him since last night."

There was silence between the four of them, before the other man ran down a checklist.

"None of the vans are missing. All of the other vehicles have been accounted for. As far as we know, he knows no one in the area, and it's doubtful he would have simply gone for a walk in the dark."

Donald leaned back and crossed his arms, leaving one hand up to prop his chin on while he ran through what little he'd overheard about the new man. Paulinus had wanted a little variety, but surely if he'd gone home with someone, he would have been woken up by now and reported in, wouldn't he?

"Has anyone asked around the housing area? Could anyone have invited him home for the night?" he asked, but got silent snorts from the two guardsmen while Aineias explained.

"Not before *Ling* approves him. Orientation comes after that, followed by a formal introduction to the garrison. Once properly introduced, any the garrison members may offer the use of an open berth, but otherwise he'd be placed in one of the duty rooms."

They were sitting there contemplating the mystery of the missing man, when the dining room door opened, and Kiki came rushing in. She headed straight to the serving tables – which were currently empty – then abruptly diverted to the kitchen doors and pushed her way through them.

Donald was always amazed at the amount of energy the little Kee exuded. She had no worries. She did no real work. It was always just eat, sleep, and...

"Ahhh... Did anyone mention to Paulinus that we have a *Kee* on staff?"

All three of them looked at each other, with one of them muttering under his breath. All four got up as a group, with Donald and Aineias heading to the kitchen, while the other two headed out the dining room door to intercept Kiki if she left by the pantry door.

Fortunately, Paulinus was still alive when they escorted a happily chatty Kiki back to her lair in the last client room in the wing.

At least she'd had the sense to bring *food* for him – several times a day, if the level of trash was any indication.

Ling was tracked down in Fred and Anthony's room and brought to the scene of the kidnapping – more or less.



## Picking up the Pieces

She examined Paulinus and declared him to be healthy – if *extremely* fatigued – then worked with Kiki by having her lick his palm while she followed the enzymes to his receptors and put in permanent blocks.

Surprisingly, no one yelled at Kiki. Doubtless, they were all grateful their man was still alive and well, but everyone seemed to have taken it completely at face value. Aineias simply instructed his men that a change in the orientation process would include an *immediate* pre-emptive “Kee-vaccination” of transferees and, depending on the circumstances, possibly even mere visitors to the Center.

Donald was impressed, seeing “fix the problem, not the blame” being applied so wisely.

Afterwards, a stretcher team was called, and Paulinus was wrapped warmly and taken back to his cot in the duty rooms to recover.

Kiki was patted on the head and told what a good girl she’d been to make sure her playmate was well-cared for and fed regularly. Then she was told that her regular clients were probably missing her.

With a cheerful smile and a giggle of anticipation, Kiki *almost* made it out of the room before Ling grabbed her and pointed to the overfull trashcan. She and Aineias left two guardsmen behind to make sure she cleaned the room before going out in search of new victims.

### ***October 5, 19:45 (AFT), Afghanistan, A Noise at Mid-Dusk...***

Hask wasn’t known for his intellectual profundity, but even *he* had doubts concerning Faridun’s plan to intercept the missing truck once it showed up ... if it *ever* showed up. There was no way for him to actually voice his thoughts, though. Not if he wanted to live.

He looked at the two boxes of munitions over in the corner and wondered once again if Faridun was serious about taking out the driver and simply stealing the truck. Surely he must know there would be more than *one* man along to defend it? Besides, attacking a truck with a bomb in it seemed like a terribly *stupid* thing to do.

He let out a sigh, then heard the rumble of an engine in the distance. Craning his head out the window, he could see headlights glaring through the late dusk coming towards them along the road.

As he watched them come closer, he reached out with his foot and nudged Darwesh awake.

“<Whaa?>”

“<Shhh! Listen!>” Hask focused on the distant sound that was steadily coming closer, while Darwesh fumbled with the captured night-vision goggles, courtesy of the American government.

It was a little crowded with both of them at the window, but they kept quiet as the truck went around a turn and became hidden from them for what they knew would be several seconds. Hask looked over at the little wired box on the floor and considered what might happen next...

Faridun's plan was simple. Identify the correct truck, then stop it.

Stopping it was easy. Stopping it *safely* was a bit tougher. As the road was down-slope from the hut, the most expedient thing would be to lie in wait above, and then attack it. Aside from the fall weather, the *real* downside was the possibility of being discovered.

For their purposes, once the correct truck was identified, they would alert Faridun, and he would wait with them in the relative safety of the hut until the truck reached a certain point in the road. Then it was up to proper timing when they let loose another gift from the Americans.

Claymore mines had been yet another item recovered from the American invasion, and two of them had been planted along the up-slope side of the road at the approximate window-height of a stake truck. If a truck came by with the right configuration, Faridun would fire off one or both mines and simply wait for the truck to stop on its own. Hask and Darwesh would deal with any survivors, while Faridun would move their pickup truck into position to transfer the package.

Neither Hask nor Darwesh had questioned the possibility of the driver losing control and steering it off the *downhill* side of the road.

When the headlights came around the corner, Hask looked away and watched the side of Darwesh's face to try and anticipate what he was seeing but due to the glare from the headlights, he knew the night vision at dusk would make it difficult to make out the details. Just as he'd thought that, Darwesh's hand came up and began a shadow dance around the front of the goggles, and Hask glanced behind him to see Faridun standing in the doorway and watching them.

"<Darwesh,>" Hask whispered, "<What do you see?>"

"<I see...>" Darwesh paused as he tried to get a better look. "<A stake truck with a cover. It has a driver and another man. No ... the other one is wearing a hijab ... I think it is a woman. Yes. She is waving her arms around and looking behind->"

He stopped talking at the same time the truck slowed to a stop at a wide spot several yards away from the killing field.

Both driver and passenger could be seen arguing, then *heard* after they both climbed out of the cab.

## Picking up the Pieces

After several more heated words were exchanged, the driver threw up his hands and walked to the back of the truck bed, the woman following along on the opposite side.

Her haranguing remained quite clear, even as far away as they were, and it regarded how slowly the driver was driving, and how late they were with their market delivery.

Faridun stepped up behind Darwesh and tapped him on the shoulder for the goggles. After donning them, he watched as the man and woman disappeared from view, only to see part of the tarp over the stakes being flipped up and several boxes being restacked and tied in place by the man, all the while being harangued by the woman.

"<What do you think? His sister or his wife?>" Faridun muttered sarcastically, then looked down at the wheel arrangement and saw that it was only a two-axle vehicle.

He knew this was not the three-axle military transport he was expecting, and let out a sigh before slipping off the goggles.

He handed them back to Darwesh and returned to the other room, this being yet another false alarm.

### *Wednesday, October 5, 9 A.M. (MST), Arizona, Almost Home*

Wilber's driver made the turn down the mile-long Annex drive, all the while suppressing his satisfaction at having visited an Earthling weapons dealer...

He and Wilber had arrived before the little hole-in-the-wall shop opened, but once it did, the variety of both explosive and manually-powered weapons was seriously educational. On top of that, they'd spoken with a local man who'd spent a considerable amount of time – for an *Earthling* – learning how to operate each one of them.

In fact, it'd been the most intelligent conversation he'd had concerning historically ancient armaments such as those, and although he'd never actually consider *relying* on toys such as them, he'd come away with a much better appreciation for those men under arms who'd served millennia before himself. Although he understood fencing was still a limited art form among the Earthlings, the one basic tool missing seemed to be swords of any style at all...

"Almost there, Wilber Milton," he said, noticing Wilber still seemed to be preoccupied at the moment. No doubt it was because of that very short phone call he'd received while still in town.

After they reached the door to the motor pool, Wilber left directions to get their purchases to the machine shop before he headed back to his office to read the latest encrypted email from Langley.

### ***In the Motor Pool***

“How’s your man doing, Vibianus?” Donald asked him.

He’d come over to visit the machine shop and check on his fake bomb, but thought to stop by and see how Paulinus was recovering, first. The quiet chuckles coming from Vibianus told him he knew *exactly* who he was asking about, and he turned away from the security monitor to smile up at Donald.

“He sleeps like the *dead* – or very nearly so. It was a good thing you thought to ask about Kiki or he’d *still* be under her spell.” He gestured to a chair, but Donald raised a hand to wave it off.

“Just came by to check on my new toy, and was wondering about him is all. I plan to work in the ship for a while so I’ll stop by before I open it up again.” He turned to go, but Vibianus called out to him.

“You just missed Wilber Milton. He came back with some supplies for your little project. They’re in the machine shop now, and I think Nonus is already in there.”

“Thanks. You guys take care of Paulinus, now,” Donald reminded him, then turned and headed out the door.

Vibianus watched him go, all the while thinking of the boastful comments circulated by the garrison gossip circle regarding their new duty-swap guy.

“Variety? He has no idea of how *lucky* he was,” he muttered wistfully, while thinking of the last few times he’d personally been under Kiki’s rather *limited* spell. He simply could not imagine being with Kiki without *any* controls in place. It must have been *glorious*!

### ***The Machine Shop***

Nonus looked up from the jig in front of him and saw Donald step over to watch him work.

“Morning, Lord Cato. Wilber Milton had these delivered just a few minutes ago. About a hundred and thirty kilograms or so,” he said while pointing to the stack of twelve, twenty-five pound bags of lead shot on the floor where Donald’s eyes shifted.

To him, it looked like not all of them would actually fit inside the empty cylinder – which was probably a good thing if he needed to pick it up and move it anywhere. He could probably *roll* it across a floor, but that would mess up the reproduction Russian paint job Wilber had researched and provided the graphics for.

He leaned in and took a closer look at it. The Cyrillic was sharp, with just enough added wear to make it look appropriately aged.

## Picking up the Pieces

"You do beautiful work, Nonus," he said, then pondered the derivative of his name – Ninth? He momentarily wondered if he had eight older siblings, but decided it was none of his business.

"Thank you, Sir," Nonus said, then turned to a disposable container on the workbench in front of him. It was about a gallon in size, almost like a large popcorn tub.

Donald watched as he carefully measured out about a quart of one liquid into the disposable container, then poured an equal measure of a second liquid in with it.

He mixed it with a wooden mixing stick from one of the local hardware stores while keeping track of the time on his watch.

"Earthling toys, Earthling fabrication techniques," Nonus muttered as he kept stirring the mix. "Since it's dud, we can just pour the weight inside and lock it in place with this mixture. It's called epoxy. Chemically hardens in about half an hour or so."

Donald looked at the cans it was poured from and nodded his head. It was a good idea. If someone actually took the time to take it apart, there would be no trace of alien intervention apparent.

The shot would make it suitably heavy, while the epoxy would stop it from rattling. All in all, an elegant solution.

Nonus stopped stirring and felt the side of the paper mixing container. Then he reached down and humped a bag of shot up and cut off one corner of it.

Donald stepped over and helped steady the cylinder as Nonus poured a small amount of epoxy into it before taking hold of the bag and pouring in some shot. It went back and forth like that until all of the mixed epoxy was used up, along with four bags of shot.

"That's gonna be heavy," Donald muttered to himself, but still got an amused snort from Nonus.

"We'll see how it goes," he said. "Better eight bags instead of all twelve. Wouldn't do to have it *fall* on anyone."

Donald could certainly agree with that, then brought up a tiny detail that might become important.

"Well, as long as it's balanced, then I suppose fewer bags would be better," he allowed, but missed the smile from Nonus as he watched this Earthling-Kantite hybrid critiquing his handiwork while standing right beside him.

They continued in quiet conversation while the next batch was mixed before pouring.

***In the Residence***

Wilber finished decrypting the message from Timothy and leaned back in his chair. A suitable truck had been found, and was currently being relocated to Asadabad for cosmetic enhancements to duplicate the missing truck as much as possible.

Estimated delivery date as early as two days.

It was a real 6X6 of a similar age and would receive a quick cosmetic makeover based on the photos Donald had brought back from Pakistan. That should mostly mean a comparable tarp would be tossed over the truck bed, and the whole thing would be splattered with dust and dirt. Once Donald's mission was a go, the truck would be driven to an isolated location and left there. Ideally, no one would stay behind to watch it before Donald came over and took it away.

Come to think of it, if Donald made the *same* type of grab they did in Pakistan, it could easily be disguised as another movie plot tease. He suddenly smirked at the possibility that the *next* dozen or so missions would involve leaving a scattering of shallow earthen bowls in remote locations of various countries all around the world – all in a vain attempt to elicit backers for a non-existent movie script.

He supposed it made as much sense as crop-circles.

Wilber leaned back and stifled a snort before his attention was drawn to the figure walking over from the direction of the motor pool. Donald was headed his way, and he just *happened* to have an update for him.

***1 P.M. (MST), In the Center***

"<No, Asad! I do not want you leaving me AGAIN!>" Nurani nearly shouted. At least she'd waited until they'd returned to their room...

They'd been having lunch in the dining room when Asad had gotten up to go and speak with Donald – the American who was having lunch with Agent Sparks and his lady friend over in the corner. They seemed to have had an animated conversation, then Asad and he had shaken hands before returning to her. It was on the way back to their room when he'd admitted he was going back with Donald to get her sister for her.

She knew what would be involved and how dangerous it would be for him. He was *safe* here. *They* were safe here. They didn't even know if her sister was still *alive*, and she was *furious* he was about to leave her again on some noble whim of his...

"<Asad! You cannot leave me alone again! We can stay *HERE*. They said->"

## Picking up the Pieces

*"<No... This I must do,>" he said calmly. "<It is the last time, but it needs to be done. I will bring your sister to you, and we will all live together until she can find peace with her life. You know what she did for you ... for us.>"*

He didn't like throwing it in her face, but Orzala had stepped up and actually *volunteered* to become a "housekeeper," if only to let her little sister stay out of harm's way until she could escape the valley. Orzala was strong like that, as was Barsala. Now Barsala was here and helping manage all the other women and children. If Orzala could be recovered, then the job would be complete.

Nurani stared at him, not quite believing this was the same man who'd promised to take care of her, love her, and raise their child with her. She was feeling despondent and alone, when a quiet knock came at the door.

She watched when Asad turned to open it, but reached out her hand and stopped him ... instead, taking shaky steps of her own to go over and open the door by a crack.

*"<Hello, Nurani,>" Laisee said calmly. "<I wonder if you would care to walk with me and Xue for a while. We plan to visit the patio and sit in the shade on those moving seats.>"*

Laisee nodded her head to Asad, who nodded back and smiled slightly, then turned her attention back to Nurani, who turned to look at Asad before making up her mind.

*"<Yes. I would like that very much,>" she said. "<Thank you for asking me.>"*

After a parting *glare* at him, Nurani turned and left the room.

### ***Misery Shared...***

Donald had been reluctant to brave the fury of his bond-mates, but his mother convinced him it would be foolish to ignore them any longer. He dreaded what they would say to him, and each step closer to their room left him feeling worse and worse.

He stopped in the snack room off the hallway and grabbed a ginger ale, hoping the reputed stomach-settling properties would apply in this instance. He wasn't at all surprised to see Asad wander in and head to the soda machine for a similar product.

"My bond-mates are not happy with my decision," Donald muttered, catching Asad by surprise, but without any apparent confusion on his face.

"Nurani is not pleased at what we plan to do," Asad admitted. "She left to walk in the concrete garden with Laisee and Xue."

Donald thought that through and nodded his head while watching as Asad selected a ginger ale for himself. It would appear he was facing a similar predicament at the moment.

"You know what our women are, right?" Donald asked him, and saw the slow nod after only a slight pause, but waited while Asad took a sip of his drink before he responded to his question.

"Nurani has spoken to them," he said quietly. "She ... she says they showed her ... things." He paused to reflect on that, then added, "They offered to *teach* her things."

Donald nodded his head, then threw in a smile.

"Our people teach themselves how to do *everything*," he said, but left out the specific connotation that it included bedroom techniques. Of course, if Nurani was taught any of *that*, then he'd find out anyway.

"She said that Laisee cut--"

Asad stopped when the memory of that conversation with Nurani brought back his fears, both at what Nurani had told him, and from all he'd experienced during their mission to recover the women.

He took another shaky sip of his ginger ale to help settle himself.

"It is a useful skill, Asad, best taught by women to *other* women," Donald told him. "Men ... we aren't really built to do that. Women are our *life*-givers. Men... All *we* seem to do is fuck things up."

They stared at each other for several seconds before Donald offered up an aluminum can toast in celebration.

"To our women ... whom we *could* live without, but it would be *far* worse than living with them," he offered, and Asad reluctantly clunked his can with his.

Afterwards, Donald looked up at the clock and noticed it was approaching two, then sipped his ginger ale again while contemplating the upcoming confrontation...

He'd hoped that, with the babies in the room, any shouting would be kept to a minimum. That hope died when Dwayne and his mother had wandered by a couple of minutes later with both of them pushing baby buggies in front of them. That meant there were no *limits* to what he would have to face, and he really wasn't looking forward to it...

"Well, the best laid plans and all," he muttered, then finished off the last of his soda in one gulp. "Once the truck becomes available, we'll meet with Xue sometime around ... maybe eight p.m. over in the motor pool on the night before. If what she's learned sounds good, plan on a six a.m. departure the following morning. I'll let you know."



## Picking up the Pieces

"I will try to get plenty of sleep, then," Asad murmured, then remembered he was currently alone. "I can nap until Nurani returns."

An unlikely couple, they both got up and performed a manly crunching of their empty soda cans before tossing them in the recycle bin and heading to their separate compartments – one for a nap, and one for a severe tongue-lashing ... if he was lucky.

On their way out the door, they waited as three women carrying bundles of clothing entered the snack room on their way to the laundry room in the rear of it, the sound of their giggles echoing down the hallway as they walked back to their quarters.

### ***2:15 P.M. (MST), At the Garrison Patio***

The sun wasn't terribly hot today; certainly not hot enough to burn the clouds from the sky. In fact, it was quite comfortable in the shade of the glider-rockers, and Nurani relaxed in the warm afternoon...

Her spirits had been lifted by the company of these two *non-American* women who'd taken her out of her stress-filled life for a moment and offered a proper sounding board for her to speak her mind.

They were in total agreement that men were foolish at best and needed *proper* management to become and *remain* successful. To that end, she'd reluctantly agreed that it was a *woman's* place to carefully guide her chosen man by whatever reasonable means were available so he could perform the duties assigned to him.

It had been gently pointed out that, of all the many possibilities available, one of them was *not* a heated argument. Likewise, she'd been told that whining only irritated the recipient to the point he eventually tuned you out. If reason could not be won, then most likely she would be facing some typical manly honor or pride that could not be reasoned with at *all*.

At that point, it was simply better to calmly voice your concerns, accept his stupidity for *exactly* what it was, then send him off with your love. That would help strengthen his resolve to achieve success and return home safely to you. Naturally, it was hard to do, but if a man *insisted* on being stupid, then stupid he would be – *regardless* of your concerns...

Laisee and Xue shared a glance across the patio, and Xue felt the time was right. They ignored Nurani while chatting about the mission between the two of them as pre-arranged.

"<Faridun will be in place for another two days at most,>" Xue said aloud. "<This would most likely be the last time Donald could easily take Orzala away from him and bring her here.>"

*"<Does he suspect the original truck was taken?>"* Laisee asked.

*"<It does not seem so. He still expects his bomb to arrive, but Donald destroyed much of the drugs. If they will accept her, he intends to sell Orzala to help make up the cost,>"* Xue said calmly, which is not how Nurani reacted.

*"<NO! He would NOT!>"* she burst out. *"<She is not WORTH->"* Nurani stopped just as soon as she realized what she was about to say, but Laisee, who was sitting right next to her, rested her hand on her arm and turned to look at her.

*"<Do you value your sister so little?>"* she asked her, which caused Nurani's head to snap in her direction as an embarrassed flush filled her cheeks.

*"<No, I... I... They don't v-value ... w-we are merely women to them,>"* she stuttered awkwardly. *"<We are ... we have no value to them. T-They take us and s-sell us. If we are ugly, then mostly we are safe ... unless they need housekeep->"*

She stopped again, remembering what Orzala had done for her, taking her place to protect her for as long as possible. She raised both hands and pressed them to her face to cover her eyes from their sight.

*"<Yes. You do not know what is really going on, Nurani, but Donald is trying to make things better,>"* Xue chided her gently. *"<We are truly not allowed to interfere, but he is determined to complete what he has started. That means recovering Orzala, and perhaps removing Faridun – although Faridun has displeased his masters, and they sent a bomb to destroy him and all those around him – including your sister.>"*

Nurani's head snapped up and she looked between them in panic. Laisee reached out and took one of her hands to rest it in her lap, all the while flooding it with a calming flow to help the young girl recover from her shock.

*"<Nurani, there is much you do not know, and much you need to understand,>"* Laisee told her. *"<Donald needs Asad's help, and Asad needs to bring your sister here to you. This they are going to do. How may we best help them with their tasks?>"*

### ***October 6, 02:30 (AFT), Afghanistan, Another Dull Night***

While Hask remained huddled in his blanket, Darwesh was struggling to stay awake. The night was quiet, but he remained hopeful Faridun would come to his senses in the morning and have them remove the explosives from the roadway before leading them back to their valley quarters.

This was a pointless task and they were getting nowhere.

*October 5, 3 P.M. (MST), Arizona, In the Center*

Nurani approached the small snack room at the head of their hallway, where she overheard the giggling of three women from the valley. They became silent when she entered, but watched as she selected a drink from the soda machine. When she selected a second one, the whispers began once again, only this time she could hear the name “Asad” being mentioned. She turned to face them and saw them looking up at her with smiles on their faces.

“<Nurani, Asad was very lonely this afternoon,>” Zakia teased her.

“<He and Donald shared lonely drinks while you were gone,>” Lalzari teased her.

“<I hear Donald is going back for your sister,>” Husay suggested, then waited expectantly for her answer.

She looked at each of their faces, not knowing how much they knew of the current situation, or if it should even be of their concern. Still, Barsala had said Orzala kept the women organized, and did her best to intervene with Faridun to see to their safety – if not their actual virginity. She looked down at the bulges in the firaq’s of both Lalzari and Husay, noting that it looked like they were approaching their seventh month of pregnancy.

A glance at Zakia told her she still had a way to go, but the reminder was enough to cause the young woman to run her hand across her belly. Nurani was almost tempted to do so across her own, but no one here knew she was pregnant. Not yet, anyway.

“<I ... yes. Donald is planning to bring Orzala back to us,>” she admitted, then looked down at the soda cans in her hand. “<And Asad ... he will go along to help.>”

“<No! You cannot let him GO, Nurani! He has to stay here and take care of YOU!>” Zakia told her, then lurched to her feet to walk around the table and hug her friend.

Nurani stiffened, but relaxed in Zakia’s embrace. The last time she’d seen Zakia was over six months ago, just the day before she’d been taken from her family and brought into the Taliban encampment as a “housekeeper” – not that anyone really *believed* that lie...

She’d heard the rumors that women were kept chained in the cave until they were needed to cook or clean for their new masters ... or perform other, more *personal*, services.

Such was the fate of all of them, and although the hated Taliban were the instigators of their misery, the even *more* hated Americans had come and made their lives even *more* miserable by stirring unrest among the Taliban, who often took it out on the villagers...

She hugged her friend, but gently pushed away, looking at her face beneath the new hijab, then looking down to see the swelling outline of her belly underneath her new firaq. Unlike back home, instead of a partug of loosely fitted linen for her waist and legs, the women were given American blue jeans to wear, and fitted with short leather boots lined with fake fur – “indoor slippers” they’d been called.

In the case of the *obviously* pregnant women, they’d been provided with trousers that had been cleverly fitted with expanding panels in the front to cover and support their bellies and back. At least they weren’t forced to wear the hated burka, which is what they knew the women of the Taliban were made to wear.

Zakia watched when her eyes glanced downward, then giggled at the dismay in Nurani’s expression.

*“<It is not all THAT bad, Nurani. The baby will be born here, and he will be safe, just as I will be safe,>”* she said. *“<The Americans have promised.>”*

*“<He? How do you...>”*

*“<Laisee told me. She says she knows,>”* she explained, then turned to the other two women. *“<Husay also has a boy, and Lalzari has a girl. They will come soon now. Perhaps before the new year?>”*

She turned back to Nurani and just caught the guilty expression on her face, along with the furtive movement of her hand across her own belly. She was about to ask her outright, but the panic on Nurani’s face kept her lips sealed, along with the pleading expression in her eyes. Instead, she leaned in and hugged her again, then barely whispered, *“<Asad?>”*

She leaned back and watched as Nurani offered her the very tiniest of nods in affirmation, before breaking out in a wide smile and setting about distracting the other two women.

*“<These wonderful washing and drying machines have made our lives so much easier, Nurani,>”* she said abruptly. *“<We have already washed our dirty clothes, and even now, they are drying in the hot air machine.>”*

She stopped to look up at the clock and saw they had several minutes left to go before they were done, then remembered what they’d just been talking about and decided a proper escape was necessary for her friend.

*“<You should take Asad his drink, Nurani. Otherwise it will become warm and not as good,>”* she declared, then gently turned her towards the door. *“<Keep him company, Nurani. Remind him you will be waiting for his return.>”*

## Picking up the Pieces

Nurani paused at that message, it being nearly identical to the one Laisee and Xue had spoken to her earlier. Then she turned back and waved a goodbye to them before leaving and heading to join Asad in their own room.

As she passed the room where Donald slept with his two women, she noticed the two guards outside the room were standing several feet away on either side of the door. They smiled at her as she approached, and she heard quiet giggling from behind the door when she passed it. She wondered what would be the cause of that, but the position of the guards and the expressions on their faces suddenly made everything *blatantly* clear to her.

As she made her way past the door, she felt her face flush at the realization that Donald and his companions were engaged in bed play. That flush continued as she made her way to her own door and knocked on it uncertainly before opening it and slipping inside.

She saw Asad resting on the bed, somewhat fitfully to her eyes, and she set the cans on the table before walking over to the bed and lying down beside him, then wrapped one arm around him and snuggled with him. Xue and Laisee had explained what could be done to send him on his way with a lighter heart, and she'd already decided to do as they'd suggested once he'd had a chance to rest. They would perhaps have one more day together before he left to recover her big sister, and he deserved her love, not her scorn. She closed her eyes and just lay there while listening to his breathing, until she, too, fell into a restless slumber.

### ***October 7, 5:45 A.M. (MST), In the Motor Pool Conference Room***

The extra day's delay was a welcome respite, but now it was showtime. The five a.m. gathering had been quietly stoic as Donald, Sai, and Xue refreshed the mission parameters and provided updates for the crew.

Upon completion, Donald looked around, then shrugged his shoulders before standing and leading them out the door. He carried with him the small green ammunition can Wilber had insisted he bring along should the need arise. Not bothering to open it, he stashed it in a locker in the weapons compartment before heading forward to take his place in the pilot's seat...

The *Kraken's Child* had already been serviced and placed in standby after they'd arrived from the Embassy, so all they'd need to do was have the fake bomb securely strapped to the assault deck. He and Sai had gone over the flight plan one last time with Wilber, who'd brought over the latest satellite photographs of their two target zones – the one with the truck, and the other one where Faridun was currently waiting to ambush them. Xue was along as a remote detector and

backup translator to Asad, while John said he had nothing better to do, so he'd decided to come along and lend a hand. Their last crewmember, Vibianus, had been approached the night before and *jumped* at the chance to go back out for more playtime.

For this mission in particular, it being an "exposed" covert operation, special body armor had been pulled from stores, and a set fitted to Donald, John, Vibianus, and Asad. It was much like a helmetless ships suit, but the woven fabric included a special jelly layer that hardened instantly on impact.

In effect, it was like wearing a full body suit of Kevlar underwear that had been infused with ceramic plates, except the plates were made out of jelly, so it remained mostly flexible unless it suffered an impact. Unfortunately, hands, feet, and head were expendable, but the armor should prevent death from anything up to an automatic rifle round fired point blank to the torso. Aside from all that, it fitted nicely underneath the unmarked uniforms they'd all donned halfway through the meeting. Ear buds completed the communication scheme, and John and Asad should become comfortable with them with a little practice.

Xue had reported the location of the explosives along a certain stretch of road, but they could simply stop before they got that close. He'd tried to corrupt her into remotely breaking the detonator wiring once they were close enough, but she'd declined.

The surprise would be if Faridun actually resorted to attacking them, or simply stopped them in route – perhaps by pretending to be an inspection station for that section of the road. If the latter were the case, then Asad, playing the part of the co-driver, could simply give up and let them take the bomb away without payment. Better yet, they might simply accept the drugs and Orzala as payment, then let them take the fake bomb and have done with it...

While Donald sat finishing launch preparations, he was thinking it would be *soooo* much easier if Xue could be convinced to diddle with the minds of Faridun and his men just a *little* bit...

"I will *not* do that, Donald," Xue said stiffly before sitting down behind where Sai was stationed at the navigator's position.

Even from the relative safety of the pilot's seat, Donald hunched his shoulders before turning his focus back to the mission...

Their eight p.m. briefing the night before had covered all the basics – right until they made contact with Faridun's forces. They would leave Arizona and hit orbital altitude before sunrise, then proceed Westward across the Pacific and duplicate the same approach as they'd done before, except this time they would go into a stationary

## Picking up the Pieces

orbit over the truck's position until local nightfall before dropping down to claim it. Wilber's contacts had reported it being left in an open field between Samir Kot and Watapur. The great joke on Faridun was that – at that *very* moment – it was sitting less than ten kilometers from where he was laying in wait for it.

Once the truck was acquired, the fake bomb would be transferred to it, then John would drive, while Asad would join him in the cab just in case a translator was needed. John had been provided with some cosmetic adjustments such that Faridun should not immediately recognize him unless he opened his mouth to speak.

That had been at the courtesy of the garrison staff and Xue's handiwork. Donald and Vibianus would be in the rear of the truck and hunkered down with the load – on the *opposite* side of where the road bombs had been placed. Xue would maintain surveillance from above and relay information through the coms in their ear buds, which Donald would then utilize to make decisions on the ground.

They had everything ready to go, and at the stroke of six a.m. the roof accordioned open, and the ship lifted silent and invisible into the predawn skies.

### ***October 7, 17:30 (AFT), Afghanistan, Gassed Up and Going Shopping***

Darwesh slowed as he reentered Asadabad proper...

After prying a pessimistic admission from Faridun that they were seriously low on supplies, their leader had acquiesced and produced a considerable amount of Afghani to send him shopping with.

The first order of business would be to refill the fuel tank of the truck, then buy as much inexpensive food as possible with the rest – ideally something that wouldn't quickly spoil so they could bring it back to their encampment. They'd unloaded the bags of drugs and put them in the room occupied by Faridun and the woman before he'd left to get more food. At least he'd gotten some *sleep* before being tasked with this onerous duty...

He continued along, thankful he'd gotten the gasoline first, as the round trip there and back had been sullied by an unexpected checkpoint both going and coming that added an extra half hour to the usual hour trip to the gas station at Asmar and back. Once again, he didn't understand why they couldn't justify a gasoline station *within* Asadabad itself, but that wasn't his biggest concern.

He didn't really like the relatively large city, as there were armed men in the streets, and he wasn't a local. By that alone, he might be stopped and questioned, but since the pickup truck was empty and he was intending to load it up with supplies before returning to Nangalam – or so he would *say* – then he really had little reason to fear.

He headed to a familiar shopping district and parked the truck to make his purchases. Hopefully, it would still be there when he returned.

***19:55 (AFT), In Stationary Orbit Over Afghanistan***

They'd made the journey without incident, and were currently cloaked and in a fixed location just 16 kilometers above the truck – *if*, in fact, it was the truck they were looking for. The heat signatures would seem to indicate the motor was currently running, and at least three individuals were situated in or near it, but it was hard to tell with the headlights confusing the issue.

Donald let out a disgusted sigh and looked over his shoulder at Xue.

"Xue, can you get *anything* from that area that might explain what the fuck is going on down there?"

She could feel the frustration radiating from him, which was a far cry from the relaxed and contented man whom she'd greeted just three hours earlier. At least Asad was still dwelling on the memory of the pleasant day and night Nurani had shared with him.

It hadn't been as exciting as what Déjà and Maya had done with Donald, but the effect had been similar – up until a few minutes ago.

Xue pursed her lips and concentrated on the area displayed in the infrared image in front of her, before extending out and poking around for any new information.

Sai was still doing traffic avoidance when she got a silent call.

"\*Sai, do you have a moment?\*" Laisee pressed at her. "\*Wilber has an update\*"

***20:00 (AFT), On the Road Again***

Darwesh was on the road headed back and making good time.

Traffic was almost non-existent, and the weather was good, with clear skies and a crescent moon to help guide his way. He'd just passed the main clump of buildings defining the center of Watapur when he noticed the headlights of a large truck parked in the middle of an empty field off to his right. It was hard to make out, and he slowed down to take a closer look.

***20:05 (AFT), Holding Orbit***

"She said to look *where*?" Donald asked in confusion. He knew Wilber had brought over a pile of notes and maps, but he'd never mentioned packing a bundle of *cash* to take with them.



## Picking up the Pieces

“She said it’s in the green box Wilber gave you,” Sai told him again. “Timothy called, and said the men on the ground might be holding out for a cash payment before delivery.”

“I felt they were waiting for something, Donald, but I did not understand the words,” Xue added helpfully, but caught the sudden angry flare radiating off him.

She listened silently as he flipped through the various possible scenarios before selecting the least revealing of them. A stores display opened on a window in front of him, and she watched as he nodded his head in satisfaction before transferring fire control to his position.

“Sai, I’m going to target sleepy gas rounds in a triad around the truck,” he said. “We knock ‘em out, move ‘em out of the way, then transfer the bomb to the truck and hit the road.”

“What about the men on the ground?” John asked.

Donald was silent for several seconds, which let Vibianus offer a suggestion.

“How about we tie them up and leave them in the field with the box of money? It would conclude the transaction while keeping them unaware of what happened to the truck and who took it.”

Xue watched as Donald quickly processed that while nodding his head at the display in front of him.

“Xue, please pinpoint the locations of bodies in the immediate area of the truck,” he asked. “I wouldn’t want to accidentally *hit* someone while trying to knock them out. Sai, what’s our local traffic situation – both aerial and surface?”

While Sai performed that search, Donald brought the ten-centimeter cannon online and enabled the automatic fire control program.

It took only seconds for it to determine they’d have to lose nearly 14 kilometers of altitude to insure a reasonable level of accuracy around the truck. It was a no-brainer for Donald, as it would certainly be counter-productive to damage the truck after all the trouble Timothy had gone through in *getting* it for them – in *addition* to not killing any of the locals.

“Donald, there are three bodies at the truck, with a fourth body moving towards the road. It appears to be headed to another vehicle in a stationary position by the road,” Xue reported, but felt a burst of momentary confusion from Donald.

“Pizza delivery in the middle of *nowhere*, and at *this* time of night?” he muttered. “Tell me if he leaves or stays by the road, Sai.”

“No air traffic. One vehicle west of us and heading east towards us – maybe ten minutes out,” she reported. “That one stationary vehicle is still... No, it’s moving now ... heading west.”

“Donald, the person joined with the vehicle and he is moving away ... west,” Xue confirmed.

“Thank you, Ladies. Everyone buckle up. Dropping in five... four...”

Donald gave them a few extra counts before nosing over and heading downward until his fire control computer was happy with their altitude. Then he held them stationary again, with the nose still pointed straight down, the artificial gravity making it oblivious to his crew.

“Sai, let me know when that west-bound contact clears the area. Xue, let me know if those bodies move around too much. I’m gonna drop those rounds within thirty feet of the truck.”

As soon as the departing vehicle left the target area by a couple of kilometers, Donald triggered the cannon, and three rounds left the barrel headed towards their targets. Two kilometers later, three solid thunks were heard by the local intruders. Ten seconds after that, Xue reported the mental activity on the ground had dwindled to the point where everyone was sleeping.

“Well... *That* wasn’t such a chore,” Donald murmured, before rotating the ship horizontally while dropping them down so the assault hatch was facing away from the road no more than twenty feet from the rear of the truck.

Once on the ground, they darkened the assault deck and dropped the hatch so they could make their way down for a cautious examination of the bodies. Once assured they were really out, John brought out cargo webbing from storage and spread it out on the ground next to where Donald and Vibianus were stacking the bodies. While that was going on, Xue had come out to do a cursory physical examination of them just to make sure they weren’t harmed.

“This one is sick, Donald,” she said, pointing down to one of the men.

“How long will it take to fix him?” he asked, but corrected himself. “Do we need to take him with us, or will the delay be sufficiently short enough to complete our mission here?”

She smiled up at him, recognizing he’d switched from mission-priority to *person*-priority on the fly.

“No longer than necessary for you and the others to move the bomb,” she said, then dismissed the logistics from her mind while

## Picking up the Pieces

bending down and stretching out glowing hands to effect a Healing on the man on the ground.

He watched for just a moment before turning back to help John and Vibianus transfer the bomb from the ship to the truck bed. It wasn't terribly easy, as the truck was already loaded with bags and boxes of material that had to be moved out of the way. None of it seemed to have a reason for being there to begin with, since they were effectively only renting it – or *buying* it, if they happened to lose it in the next few hours.

It was only after stepping back that Donald considered how much it resembled the photographs that were taken of the original truck's contents. It would seem that Wilber's man had gone the extra mile in faking the replacement delivery vehicle – sans nuclear device.

After he finished stacking the bags and boxes around the bomb crate with Vibianus, he jumped down and saw Asad talking with Xue while they were standing over the bodies. Then she turned and went back up the ramp into the ship. Once Xue was back inside, Donald triggered his com and spoke to Sai.

"We're gonna wrap it up here, and I want you to stay at least a hundred meters above us while we proceed to the ambush site." He paused while he thought that through for a moment more, then added, "You might want to pre-configure one of those upside-down shield cups to cover us with. You know, just in case Faridun goes all crazy and tries to take us out with a bomb of some sort."

"*Got you covered, Donnie,*" she said jovially, and he could almost hear Xue laughing in the background as he turned to look at what John was doing with the bodies.

John had brought out the ammunition can and was making small bundles of money and cramming them into various pockets on the unconscious men. It looked like a terrible lot of money, and Donald bent down and picked up a small handful of it.

"These are *all* hundreds?"

"Yep! Wilber didn't fart around," John muttered. "Must be upwards of fifty... maybe sixty-thousand here."

Donald looked over at the truck and shook his head slowly.

"For *that* piece of shit?" He paused once again, then contacted Xue.

"Xue, are you familiar with the two men Faridun brought with him?" he asked, then waited while Xue pieced it together for him.

"*They were both in the tunnel when you first set the gas off,*" she said, then added, "*They are Hask and Darwesh.*"

She waited, curious as to what he was thinking, but Sai needed to give him an update.

*"Donald, that second eastbound vehicle will be passing in about a minute."*

"Thank you, Sai."

He headed for the truck cab and turned off the headlights and motor so they should be overlooked by any passersby. As he stood behind the cab, he watched a set of headlights approach on the road from the west ... and continue smoothly past them to the east. He waited until the taillights were out of sight, before saying, "Sai, close the hatch and make ready to raise ship."

*"Will do."*

He was watching the hatch while it closed in the darkness when Asad came up beside him.

"Donald, I think there is a problem," he said, then pointed to the men on the ground.

"What? Did any of them *die*?"

"No. Xue told me what they ... what she said they were thinking, but she could not understand it," he said, then glanced over towards John, where he was still stuffing pockets and rifling through some of them.

"Uh-oh," John muttered, then stood up. "Don, we got *problems*."

That drew Donald's attention, and both he and Asad went over to join him.

"I don't think these are our guys. I don't speak Pashto, but I can recognize names, and these aren't from around this area of Afghanistan," John said, then handed three sets of identification papers and his small hand flash to Asad for his advice.

While Asad was flipping through the pages, Donald was curious as to what *else* was in John's hand, and reached down and tapped his arm before pointing to his hand.

The little box John showed him had a sliding switch, and a push-button on it.

"Aww, *crap*," Donald muttered, then looked back at the truck.

If these *weren't* Timothy's contract crew, then they were either opportunists or worse, and finding a remote detonator on them put them in the *worse* category. He walked back to the truck while pulling out his own hand flash to start checking it out from the bottom up.

## Picking up the Pieces

He'd squatted down to begin, but it didn't take but a moment for his first discovery.

"Found our guys," he said grimly, then keyed his com. "Xue, your presence is requested on the ground. We need your expert medical opinion."

"*She's on the way, Donald,*" Sai shot back.

They could hear the airlock open on the far side of the ship, then watched as Xue raced around to find them all squatting at the rear of the truck. Donald pointed under the truck, and she immediately dropped to the ground and reached out a glowing hand to make contact with each of the four bodies hidden beneath it. As she touched each one, they could hear her gasp of dismay, until she cried out, "*This one! Bring me this one!*"

Then she backed out, pulling on the arm of the man she thought could be saved, while Vibianus and John crawled under to help her.

The man had been shot, but not *quite* fatally. One round in the shoulder was easily found by the amount of blood that leaked out of it. Fortunately, it was through and through. The shot to his abdomen had *also* missed anything vitally important, but the bullet was still in there. The one to the head was a poorly placed killing shot that appeared to have bounced off a particularly thick skull, leaving a *spectacular* blood splotch in its wake.

Donald was surprised the man was still alive, as was Vibianus. John looked back at the rest of the men and saw a lot more damage had been inflicted at the time of their executions. To him, the conclusion was obvious.

"The others were shot with rifles. This guy was shot with a pistol – probably by the guy in charge of *those* assholes," he said, pointing to the pile of knocked out men. "We look around, we're bound to find their weapons."

Vibianus climbed into the back of the truck and did a quick search, while John went forward and checked the cab. Both of them let out a discovery shout at about the same time, and John came back with one rifle, while Vibianus found two more buried under bags along the side of the truck bed but they'd found no pistols.

A gasp from Asad got them to spin in his direction, but it wasn't from the papers he was checking. Xue was glowing from head to foot, as was her client. Donald was about to call for Sai to do another traffic alert, when she showed up at a run with a container of Healer's milk and handed it to Donald before squatting down behind Xue and adding her hands to her shoulders to begin channeling extra Healing energy to help the downed man.

Donald looked around, then sent Vibianus into the ship to grab a couple of blankets. Meanwhile, he set John and Asad on road duty to keep an eye out for passing vehicles. Vibianus returned in less than a minute and joined Donald in holding blankets out as light shields to keep what they were doing from being seen by anyone on the road.

At the end of nearly ten minutes, they heard coughing and gasping from Xue's client, followed by a strangled shout that dwindled into moans. The glow dimmed down when Sai let go and grabbed a blanket to spread on the ground. Then she arranged herself and opened the top of her jumper to provide fresh Healer's milk to the client – knowing it would be *much* more effective than what was in the vacuum container.

Since Sai was providing this service, Xue took the milk from Donald and opened it to sip from ... letting it refresh her strength. It had never occurred to him that Cletus Elders were just like everyone else – sometimes *exceeding* their limits to save a life, even at their own expense. She turned and gave him a sharp look – hard to see in the partial moonlight – but he half-bowed in respect, and she nodded her acceptance of it. Then she handed him what she'd recovered from the man's torso. He examined it briefly before finding a match for it in his memories.

"Looks like a 9mm. I would have expected a hollow-point, but it makes him that much luckier," he murmured, before pocketing the round. "When can we move him?"

Xue looked down at Sai while she was still nursing him, then watched as the man slumped in her arms. She immediately extended through him, but found that he'd just fallen asleep, as intended.

"Where do you want to leave him?" she asked, while watching Sai as she disentangled herself from him and got herself back together.

Instead of immediately answering her, Donald turned away to see John still watching one approach and Asad watching the other. That was the *least* of his concerns at the moment. At this point, the mission had been compromised.

There was a *third* player on the field, and they couldn't rely on *any* of the previous information they'd acquired. The man Xue had saved might provide some useful information when he woke up, but the three bozos over in the pile would provide even *better* information.

He walked over to where Asad had left their paperwork and started going through it, but as the minutes ticked by, he wasn't feeling any better about it. He didn't know if John had been right or not, but one name raised a *huge* red flag – the one written in *Cyrillic*. Wilber had said the drug lords were running a delivery syndicate that ran all the

## Picking up the Pieces

way to Russia. From what little he could deduce, these looked like they might be representatives of that syndicate who were probably *more* than a little pissed about him stealing their truck. They also appeared to be taking it out on these low-level entrepreneurs who were just getting paid to do a little favor for him. Now three men were *dead* because of him, and one more had almost died.

“Xue ... I need you to reach out. Reach out just as *far* as you can and see if you get a feeling from *anyone* that they’re waiting for this truck to move,” he asked her quietly, then turned to Sai. “Sai, when you’re ready, can you please take Xue inside with you and get high enough to do a *deep* infrared scan for heat sources? I’m thinking someone hiding in a blind, or maybe ... maybe under another truck? Someone hanging out in a house ... by the *outside* wall, maybe?”

“Sure, Donald,” she murmured, then looked down at the man still on the ground, which elicited a sigh from Donald, before he stepped over to him.

“Vibianus, can you help me get this guy webbed down in one of the bunks, please,” he asked while turning to him.

Without saying a word, Vibianus squatted down and simply scooped him up like a bridegroom on his honeymoon before carting him off, with Sai and Xue leading the way. Donald merely shook his head, then went over to talk to John and Asad.

“Guys, we’ve been compromised,” he led with. “I really should pull the plug on this mission, but I’d *still* like to get Orzala back to her sister. Otherwise, Nurani will have bitched at Asad for *nothing*.”

John let out a short laugh, and to his surprise, so did Asad.

“Donald, your goal was to get in and get out with no witnesses,” John said. “Do you have enough gas bombs left to take down Faridun and his team? Then we can just go in and get Orzala.”

“It would be better to return with Orzala,” Asad added. “She does not care so much for me, but she loves her little sister.”

Donald considered that, and as a plan, it wasn’t that bad a deal. There would still be the unexplained collapse of Faridun and his men, followed by the loss of Orzala, but it might possibly be explained by simply walking up unannounced, tossing in a gas round, and having them fall asleep while watching them standing there in front of them – if they didn’t shoot first. Or they could lob a few more rounds from above them, but they might not be as effective if they were indoors at the time. Of course, there was still the *other* team to worry about.

“We still have a missing bad guy team out there somewhere,” he finally said. “I don’t know about the *other* two guys, but one of them

was Russian – at least his *paperwork* says he's Russian. I've got Xue looking for them. She's trying to ... feel them out the way she does," he muttered, sparing a glance at Asad to see how he was taking things.

"One is Pakistani," Asad said. "She told me the words she heard in his head, and it was Pakistani ... mostly. She has a poor accent for it."

"It's hard to pick up a new language when you don't have someone to speak it with," Donald admitted, then thought of what John had found. "John, that looked like a remote detonator. Sliding safety or arming switch, with a push-button trigger. We didn't check the truck, and I don't know how long they've had to play with it. Certainly not long enough for that one guy to bleed all the way out."

John glanced at the truck, then thought back to the guys they'd brought back from Pakistan on the last trip.

"You know, those guys we picked up in Pakistan didn't have a detonator on them," he said. "That suggests they didn't know what they were carrying and intended to deliver it in person. Maybe this team was here all the time just waiting for the transfer to take place while they stayed safely out of the way?"

It was Donald's turn to ponder the issue.

Given that it was a simple, hand-held device, the detonator may not have reached the bomb from a safe distance. They *both* might have been suicide groups, or simply men who'd been declared expendable for what the syndicate considered a worthy cause.

It certainly didn't sound like *good* HR policy – especially if news of it got back to the rest of their staff.

"John, that's a good observation about the teams involved," Donald said. "I don't wanna be pushing that button anywhere around *either* truck, but maybe we can still pull it off."

He stood there, nodding his head for a moment longer, until Asad cleared his throat, then spoke.

"They expect the truck to drive away from *here* – correct? Cannot it be lifted and taken *west* of Faridun's location and arrive heading *east*? He certainly would not expect *that*, would he? And neither would any observers?" he offered, which triggered a smile from Donald and a chuckle from John.

"Let's go check out the truck," Donald said, then contacted Sai through the com. "Sai, we're switching to Plan B."

*"Plan B? Which one's that?"*

"I'm still making it up."



**20:45 (AFT), *An Impatient Terrorist***

“<Nothing yet?>” Hask asked him again...

Darwesh had returned almost twenty minutes ago, all full of excitement, after sighting a three-axle truck in the middle of a field off the side of the road with men standing around it. The glare from the headlights had made it hard to be sure, but it looked like the kind of truck Faridun was waiting for. In addition to that, two of the men were holding automatic weapons when they'd climbed into the rear of the truck. He'd slithered his way back to the pickup truck and drove away sedately, lest they become suspicious at a speedy departure.

What he'd reported to Faridun was that three or more armed men were with a truck like the one he'd described and possibly making sure the load was still intact before pushing on to make a delivery. He'd made a point of explaining that the *only* reason he'd stopped was because he'd seen the headlights out in the field...

“<No. *Nothing yet*,>” he reluctantly announced. “<*I did not say it was on the road, Hask, just that it was idling in the middle of a field. The men were armed, too.*>”

“<Well, *if it comes our way, then we have the means to stop it*,>” Hask muttered. “<*It might be more dangerous if they stay in the back of the truck, but maybe Faridun will not use both charges at the same time.*>”

“<*That would be a good idea*,>” Darwesh agreed. “<*The side of the road is higher than the truck bed, so if they stop and get out, they'll be standing right where the little bomb plate is mounted.*>”

Faridun stood in the doorway behind them and listened to their idle chatter. This would be an excellent night to return to the valley in triumph. A fresh load of food for his men, along with a bomb to give to the Americans. The best part was they didn't need to smuggle it to any particular target. He just wanted the American's to feel the same loss he'd felt when they'd randomly killed the elder of his family.

He turned Darwesh's thoughtful words over in his mind, and considered that perhaps a promotion might be in order – if that damn truck ever showed up! He backed away quietly and sat down next to where Orzala was huddled under a blanket.

Things could have been so much better if not for the Americans – those arrogant pigs!

**21:10 (AFT), *Plan B Begins to Take Shape***

Donald was finally convinced the truck had not been booby-trapped. It had taken a while, during which all four men had crawled over, under, and dug into the panels wherever they could, to see if

anything stood out as exceptional. The only really exceptional thing about it was the wear and tear on the frame. It looked like it'd seen some hard work in its lifetime. At least the engine looked pretty clean. John had even pulled the dipstick and seen that the oil was still somewhat translucent instead of black. That was a sign of regular maintenance. Given the odometer reading, that probably contributed greatly to its longevity.

"Xue, what did you get from Lady Huiling at the Embassy?" Donald called up to the ship.

*"As you suspected, the other men did not know the bomb was embedded into the truck body," she reported. "They knew the bomb in the box was a fake, and they were to trade it for the drugs. They did not know they were to be sacrificed."*

"Were they upset about it?"

*"She did not ask them. She just pulled it from them," she said.*

"Thank you, Xue."

*"I also did not detect anything unusual in the body of this truck, Donald," she added helpfully.*

"I thank you for checking, my Lady," he said, then called Sai. "Sai, how's the ground and air traffic situation?"

*"Nothing in the air, and nothing on the ground. Heat sources in local domiciles, but nothing to indicate anyone paying particular attention to you. Maybe they were elsewhere and were waiting for that one vehicle that stopped on the road and then left?"*

"Yeah... Maybe," he muttered. "All right. Please drop back down and pick us up. We'll load the fresh batch in the back, and tie the expired ones on top of them so they stay nice and cozy."

He smiled at what must be going through both of their minds at that comment, but didn't care. Those bastards had killed people in his employ, and if it made them uncomfortable to sleep with the dead, then sobeit...

Plan B had finally been fleshed out in his mind. They would bodily take the truck – plus a suitable chunk of ground beneath it – and transport it west of Faridun's current position. Then they'd set it down in a vacant area so they could mount up and drive eastward to a location where Faridun could see it coming. And *then* ... then they'd stop about a hundred meters away, dismount from the truck, and simply walk away. If *that* wasn't enough to pique Faridun's curiosity, then he and Vibianus hiking around to come up behind them with a couple of gas rounds, would have to do.

## Picking up the Pieces

On the face of it, the truck would be there, the fake bomb would be there, and with any luck at all, Faridun's group would approach it and take possession of it. If the *badder* bad guys showed up and took them out, then it wasn't his problem.

Ideally, he and Vibianus would waltz in, grab Orzala, then simply whisk her away with nobody being the wiser. Having Asad with them should convince her it was safe, so hopefully she'd come along quietly. If they *didn't* take the bait, then gassing all of them was the fallback plan. Either way, there would be no loose ends.

Speaking of which...

"Xue, can you please get word to Wilber that the local ground crew here was compromised and took losses? Tell him we've recovered a live one, and request instructions. You know, drop him off someplace, or bring him back with us for repatriation later. We'll send details via the Embassy in a bit."

*"I will contact Laisee to so inform him,"* she said.

"Thank you, Xue."

Donald made sure the truck was buttoned up and the keys still in the ignition before having his crew drag the remaining bodies out from underneath it. There was still a lot of prep work to do before they made their move on Faridun's little group, and he wanted to be done with all this foolishness as quickly as possible.

### ***October 6, 1:30 P.M., (EST), Langley, Less Than Positive News***

Timothy Fredricks hung up his phone and turned to his computer in expectation of an encrypted email from the Embassy that wasn't long in coming.

Once it arrived, he pulled his network connection before plugging in his very own security dongle and turning it loose on the email attachment he'd saved to his desktop. It immediately opened a new working folder on his desktop, and he watched his hard disk light blink cheerfully while it worked.

He waited a full minute while the dongle crunched the attachment and spit out file after file before finally letting out a non-speaker-based beep from his computer. Then he popped it out and put it back in his pocket before delving into the newly created folder to see what he'd received.

Pictures. *Lots* and *lots* of pictures.

Mug shots, photos of identification papers, and some bloody images of dead bodies ... one of which he recognized. His eyes closed at this reminder of the dark side of espionage.

He knew what his contacts were involved with – mostly just transportation and logistics – but it *didn't* involve wet work. He cast some hope that Wilber's group hadn't just upped the stakes in that regard, then shook it off before beginning a detailed review of the photographed documents. Unfortunately, the more he read, the more confused he became. Some of these guys were *obviously* from out of town, and had no reason to be there. He finished looking at the photos, then opened up the tersely written text file.

The first thing he noticed was that it hadn't been written by Wilber – the words and pacing were all wrong. The author had been *much* closer to the event – probably summarizing it first hand before transmitting it to Wilber, or perhaps directly to the Embassy. The conclusions presented made a whole lot of sense, and he felt a brief note of gladness when he read the request for disposition of a survivor.

As his name implied, "Luck" was *definitely* on Bakhtawar's side when his assassin had failed to kill him with three shots.

He didn't hesitate, and immediately wrote, then encrypted a note to request that all live bodies be returned to the Embassy where he could gain access to them locally. He *especially* wanted to have a chat with the out-of-towners about why they'd felt it necessary to kill his contacts.

### ***23:45 (AFT), Afghanistan, Almost in Place***

John drove slowly into the turn and then stopped, all the while revving the engine as if it had slipped out of gear. They were just out of sight of Faridun's location, and this is where Donald and Vibianus would leave them to circle around behind the hut that held four heat signatures inside.

"Don, we're here. Stay out of sight," he said into his com, then waited until he saw movement in his mirror when the two men in the rear exited and headed up the uphill side of the truck...

After further thought, Don had revised the plan to include faking a mechanical failure that would allow two of them to break away early, while John and Asad would continue just short of the ambush site before leaving the truck and seeking comfort in a sheltered spot above the road – providing Don's observations during the overflight were accurate...

John put it back in gear and headed forward, deliberately chattering the clutch and making it sound like there was a problem with the truck. They continued like that and cleared the turn, until Sai called down from the ship.

*"Stop there, John. Movement in the hut."*

## Picking up the Pieces

John drifted to the side and came to an abrupt halt before revving the engine and grinding the gears ineffectually in an effort to show they were truly stuck. He made a show of waving his hands, with Asad doing his part by waving his hands and cursing at him from his seat beside him. Then he crunched the gearbox a few more times before stalling the engine. Ducking down just a bit, he disconnected the wire he'd previously identified so that when the engine cranked, it would refuse to start. Then he got out and opened the hood to take a look at the engine compartment, all the while Asad berated him for being a stupid driver. They continued like that, then finally looked around as if to see if there was someplace else to stay until morning.

Asad pointed to the uphill side of the road, while John pointed to the downhill side. As prearranged, Asad yelled at him, while John played the subdued recalcitrant minion by throwing up his hands in disgust, then swinging by the cab of the truck before heading up the hill where Asad was pointing. Asad grabbed a bag from the cab before following along. They trudged upwards for ten or twelve feet until they found the flat and relatively sheltered spot Donald had identified from the air when they'd overflowed the area earlier.

It was big enough to drop the ship on and close enough to recover their remaining passenger. It was also out of direct sight from the occupied hut and the roadway immediately below them. John gathered some twigs, while Asad formed a small fire circle to make the night more welcoming.

~~~

"<What are they doing?>" Hask asked him.

Darwesh had watched the truck come out of the blind curve after having sent noises of mechanical failure echoing into the night. Then it stalled nearly a hundred meters away to the west of them. As he followed them through the night vision goggles, he'd watched as the little man had harangued the driver mercilessly until they'd come to a resolution and decided to spend the rest of the night in a somewhat sheltered spot on the upper side of the road.

"<It looks like they're going to stay uphill from the truck. I ... I see light. Someone's lighting a fire. That's how they're going to keep warm,>" he mumbled, then considered how much better off those guys were at even *having* a fire at night...

Faridun had allowed a small fire to cook and make tea, but no fires for heat were permitted – too much smoke to give away their position. The more he considered it, it made no sense. They could pretend to be the legal residents of the abandoned hut and treat it accordingly. He was beginning to think that all of their leader's vaunted college education had left him stupid in the ways of living. It certainly made

more sense for them to hide in plain sight and simply play the role of residents, rather than terrified squatters...

"<Is it the truck?>" he heard Faridun ask from behind him.

Darwesh didn't jump. He'd expected Faridun to say something eventually, and turned around and handed him the goggles.

"<It looks like the truck, but it's coming from the wrong direction. I ... I suppose I could go over and ask if they need some help?>" he suggested, thinking it would give him an excuse to warm up by walking around for a bit and possibly spending some time next to a warm fire.

Faridun stepped up to the window and took a long look at the truck. It was certainly big enough, but had developed a mechanical problem – or so it would appear – and it was coming from the *wrong* direction.

He stopped himself from shaking his head at the absurdity of it. It was almost midnight, and a truck fitting the description of the one Darwesh had seen east of them had approached from the west and then stalled ... and at a tantalizing close distance. Was it the *right* truck? Was it a *tease*? There were two men currently out of view, and... He watched a man rise up from the shelter of the rocks and look down at the truck.

The man just stood there, looking down at the truck with his hands stuffed into his jacket pockets. Was he watching for anyone trying to *steal* it? Steal a *broken* truck? Or perhaps the *contents*?

He continued watching, zooming the magnification in as close as he could, then saw the man turn back towards the light and make what he assumed was a rude gesture, before turning back to the truck and making a duplicate gesture down towards it. A moment later, he saw the man turn and head back to the warmth of the fire.

***Saturday, October 8, 00:05 (AFT), Moving Pieces on the Board***

"Got one man on the move towards the truck, Donald," Sai reported.

"Thank you, Sai."

Donald called to his separated crew, saying, "John, Asad ... you guys stay hunkered down and out of sight. We're halfway to their back door."

"Will do," John sent back for both of them.

Donald turned to look at Vibianus, but shrugged in the faint moonlight. "Not entirely unexpected. That leaves two hostiles and the girl. I hope Xue can convince her to come with us."

## Picking up the Pieces

“We couldn’t really leave John alone without the language needed to explain himself,” Vibianus reminded him, but it was too dark to see the grimace on Donald’s face in acknowledgement of his own stupidity...

They had two Pashto speakers, but one was stuck on the ship, and Donald had been adamant that she *remained* aboard and safe.

Then Xue had pointed out that Asad and John would have to stay together anyway because John neither spoke nor understood Pashto himself.

The issue of Orzala had been resolved – *sort of* – when she’d told him she would simply speak to the girl through him. Of course, that would depend entirely on how well he could pronounce what she’d be telling him to say...

They continued their approach and dropped into complete silence while they crept towards the outcropping of a broken rock wall that semi-surrounded the hut and its few outbuildings, the smell of one of them pinpointing the local height of sanitary disposal.

Donald had been contemplating their next step when he was surprised to hear some welcome news for a change.

*“One person is moving towards the back of the hut. Two remain by the front side towards the truck,” Sai reported. “Xue says the girl needs to pee.”*

What a stroke of unbelievable *luck!*

~~~

John and Asad were talking quietly by the fire, both of them hoping Don and Vibianus could pull this off without a single misstep before anything else happened.

*“John, the man headed to the truck is diverting to your position,” Sai reported.*

“Thank you,” he said, then Asad reached out and grabbed his arm.

“You go. Go into the rocks. I will tell them you needed to defecate. Take the gun,” he said, then spared a glance at the AK-47 John had liberated from the cab of the truck before they’d climbed up to the outcropping where they’d started the fire.

John hesitated, but Asad added, “Go! If we are *both* gone, then he will be suspicious!”

John nodded and grabbed the rifle before heading to the shelter of the rocks. He would observe from the shadows while keeping out of sight of the observers in the hut.

**00:25 (AFT), A Smelly Situation**

Donald moved behind the outhouse, while Vibianus kept an eye on the hut. Muffled voices could be heard in the hut, which were followed by the sound of a door being pushed open. The open door revealed a woman being held by her arm, and angry male and female voices were heard while they argued in the doorway.

Finally, the woman was let go to relieve herself, while a man followed her to the outhouse and closed the door behind her.

Vibianus watched as he spoke to the women through the door, then did something to it before heading back to the hut. This time the door to the hut remained open while the man stood inside with his back to it. It looked like his attention was somewhere else, but he'd left the door open to hear the woman when she called to be let out.

*"He locked her in the latrine, but he's standing just inside the hut with the door open,"* Vibianus reported very quietly, then saw Donald turn towards his position and wave his hand in acknowledgement.

Donald cradled his rifle in his arms while sagging back against the stone of the outhouse and rolling his eyes. Great. Now they'd probably need some sort of distraction to get the man to move further into the hut so he could extract the woman. He looked down at the pouch clipped to his belt and considered simply tossing in a gas round to knock out the men in the hut. That would leave John and Asad to deal with the loner headed their way. He was about to suggest doing that when he heard a shout from the direction of the campfire.

~~~

John was hidden in the shadows with the sights of his rifle centered on the man who'd just stepped up and confronted Asad.

Asad had played his part perfectly – acting startled and shouting that he wasn't armed and to please not kill him. At least, that's the impression he'd gotten from the expression on his face and the stress in his words.

~~~

*"<What are you doing out here! Where is the other man!>"* Darwesh shouted again.

He was gratified the skinny little man remained cringing on his knees, then looked around, but didn't see anyone other than the one man and the campfire.

*"<Where is the other man?>"* he asked again, but with a little less stress in his voice.



## Picking up the Pieces

*"<He goes to the rocks. He – he needed to defecate. His stomach... This whole TRIP has been a nightmare,>" Asad offered fearfully. "<We are the only two left,>" he added, attempting to churn out a story to keep the intruder distracted.*

*"<What other men? What happened to the other men?>" Darwesh asked, and Asad was only too happy to tell him.*

*"<We started out with six. Then Sukhrab and Ruslan became sick after we left Booni, and they stayed in Chitral. We stopped to refuel and eat before leaving Chitral, but Azarkhsh and Hamasa became sick after we crossed the border at Arandu. We left them in Asadabad, and we've been struggling on this road ever since,>" he explained gamely, then lowered one hand and pointed to a short pile of sticks on the ground and gestured to the fire.*

Darwesh lowered his rifle and pointed the barrel at the pile of sticks, giving tacit permission for him to feed the fire. He was already cold, and the skinny man looked like he could use more heat himself. Once Asad had added to the flame, he approached and squatted down to enjoy the heat as well.

*"<Who are you?>" he asked, and Asad took a breath, hoping he didn't know the real man's name.*

*"<I am Shaweer,>" he said. "<And right now I'd like to be back home in Aybak.>"*

*"<Where's that?>" Darwesh asked him, not that he was really curious. He just wanted a chance to warm up for a while.*

*"<Over in Samangan Province, just south of A76.>" Asad knew Aybak. He'd spent many summers there on his uncle's farm.*

Darwesh nodded his head, having an idea of what brought a young man out of the farms to toil on the roads. There was still one man missing, though.

*"<Who is the other man?>"*

*"<Him? His name is Viktor. He speaks no Pashto. Ruslan said he was Russian, but... Ruslan got left behind.>"*

He didn't come out and say it, but implied that Ruslan was a Russian-speaking northerner from up above Afghanistan.

It also implied that he could not actually speak with John himself.

~~~

*"Go now, Donald," Sai said through the com, and he glanced at Vibianus, setting up for a doorway shot before scooting around to the front of the outhouse.*

He paused to glance at the doorway, before focusing on the slatted, locked door in front of him. Taking a shallow breath – this being an outhouse – he whispered loudly, “<Orzala. Please. Do. Not. Shout.>”

He waited while he listened to the sound of someone becoming even *more* still than before. He hoped he’d pronounced whatever Xue had told him to say properly, but then she sent him something else to say.

“<Orzala. Nurani. Send. Me. To. Get. You,>” he whispered urgently – he thought.

He waited for several seconds, before a burst of whispered words rushed out at him.

“*She says that Nurani is dead,*” Sai told him. “*Xue says to give her your ear bud. Wait! Tell her the next thing, then give her your ear bud when Xue tells you. Wait for Vibianus to show you when it is safe to move.*”

“Great. Just fucking great,” he mumbled, then listened carefully as Xue got back on and sent him another mouthful of gibberish to repeat.

“<Orzala. Take. The. Ear. Piece. From. The. Stupid. Man. Put. It. Into. Your. Ear,>” he repeated faithfully, then waited until the hidden woman stretched her fingers through a slot in the door.

“*Give it to her,*” Sai relayed.

He pried it out of his ear and handed it to Orzala, hoping she didn’t drop it into the cesspit she was sitting over. After a short gasp – and he wondered how she managed to survive *that* in the enclosed space – he heard rapid mutterings that became somewhat heated, before a sigh of resignation was released from the prisoner of the outhouse.

While he was waiting, Vibianus had drawn his attention and held his hand up for several seconds before motioning for him to open the door. Holding his breath, he flipped the latch up – thinking it wouldn’t have taken *that* much of an effort to actually break out of the outhouse if one was determined enough – and backed away to let this older version of Nurani creep out and slip around to the backside of the outhouse.

Once she cleared the door, Donald closed and latched it before joining her.

He placed one hand on her arm, getting a startled reaction from her, before pointing to Vibianus squatting in the shadows.

Once she saw him, they could both see his raised hand indicating they were not safe to move yet.

~~~

## Picking up the Pieces

Faridun had shifted to the back room intending to check on Orzala, when Hask began chuckling by the window, and he turned back and joined him.

*"<What do you find so amusing?>"*

*"<Darwesh. He is probably sitting by the fire and enjoying the heat,>"* Hask said. He didn't consider how weak it made Darwesh seem in their leader's eyes, but at least *he* was getting warm for a change.

*"<Wait. There is movement. Darwesh is standing and moving to the side, followed by the man.>"*

### ***00:43 (AFT), A Slight Change in Plans***

John had been kept apprised of the situation by Sai, who had an overhead view of the festivities. Now that Orzala had *almost* been recovered, it was almost time for them to come down and pick them up.

A distraction had been discussed, and John was about to play his part in it. He set aside the rifle, then spit on his hands before patting them in the dirt and rubbing them on one side of his face. He loosened his pants and let them hang on his hips, then pulled his shirt bottom halfway out and began moaning loudly before fumbling on his hands and knees while crawling out between the rocks.

*"<Shaweer...>"* he said faintly, then crawled a few more feet before collapsing on the ground.

Asad got up, then paused when Darwesh raised the barrel of his rifle at him.

*"<Viktor is sick. I TOLD him not to trust that vendor. Let me bring him back to the fire ... please.>"*

Darwesh looked between Asad and John, before finally nodding and walking over to the fallen man. He watched Asad struggle with him for a few seconds before slinging his rifle and pointing to John's feet. Then he squatted down and grabbed him under the armpits and waited for Asad to grab his feet. Once they were both ready, they lifted John up and carried him next to the fire before setting him down. Asad pointed to his bag, and Darwesh watched warily as he dug around inside it and pulled out a blanket. Instead of covering John with it, he rolled it into a makeshift pillow and propped up John's head slightly.

*"<What is he sick from? Is it catching?>"* Darwesh asked, which only got a laugh from Asad.

*"<Bad meat. I TOLD them. I told them ALL, but what does a lowly FARM BOY know about meat? It smelled bad BEFORE the vendor*

*cooked it, and then they saved some of it. Viktor ate the last of it before we hit Asadabad,>*” he explained while shaking his head.

“<It ... *they did not DIE, did they?*>” Darwesh was reconsidering what the man had meant earlier when he’d said the men had “left them.”

“<HA! *They truly WISHED for death, but no. They made us stop on the road while they emptied themselves in the bushes – frequently,>*” Asad explained, then shook his head in disgust.

“<Took us FOREVER to get this far,>” he continued. “<We were late before, but now we’re REALLY late, and only Sukhrab knew the name of the man we were delivering our package to. He took the papers with him when he left us,>” he muttered irritably, then looked over at John, before reaching down and tossing more sticks on the fire.

Darwesh was wondering if it could be possible *this* was the truck carrying the delivery for Faridun. The delivery was late, and Shaweer had stated they were late to begin with. The example of the sick Viktor would imply that whatever Viktor was suffering from was enough to leave the other four men behind. He wondered that the men would dare to eat tainted meat, but Faridun himself was an educated man, and yet not all that wise when it came to simple living. There was only one problem. The truck had come from the wrong direction.

“<You say you came from Asadabad? But I heard no trucks from Asadabad this night. Didn’t you come from Nangalam?>”

Asad looked up at him and shrugged.

“<It might have been. We were stuck in a field until a man came and helped us get it running again. Then he and Viktor talked while I stretched out in the back. I fell asleep, and Viktor finally woke me when he stopped at some town with a bunch of buildings in it.>” Asad stopped and closed his eyes as if he was remembering something.

“<It was supposed to be in a valley somewhere. Somewhere off this road. I made him turn around and head back to Asadabad. I know someone there who can tell me->” He stopped and looked at Darwesh with caution. “<Never mind. The stupid truck is broken again, and we’re stuck here. I will try to get a ride back to Asadabad in the morning,>” he said, then glanced away.

### ***01:04 (AFT), Yet Another Delay***

“What are John and Asad doing now?” Donald quietly asked Vibianus, totally missing the surprised expression on Orzala’s face...

They’d continued back the way they’d come, but Vibianus was now Donald’s contact with the others. That was something he should have

## Picking up the Pieces

anticipated – losing an ear piece in the field and carrying a spare. While his attention was focused on Vibianus, he glossed over the very quiet conversation Orzala was having with the Lady hovering overhead.

“Uh-oh... Donald, Sai says we have a vehicle coming from the east. *Rapidly*,” Vibianus told him. “The others have been alerted.”

“Have Xue extend to the vehicle and see if they might be unfriendly,” he told him, then concentrated on the current tactical situation. “Get us an arrival time, too.”

They were outside direct view of the clearing, but could just see Asad sitting on the ground, while John was laying on the ground playing sick. Darwesh, one of Faridun’s minions, was squatting down close to the fire and keeping cozy.

Donald wondered if the vehicle was coming after them, or after Faridun and his group. He started looking around the area to select defensive positions should things turn to shit.

~~~

Faridun looked out the window, but all he could see was the glow of the fire. Darwesh was nowhere to be seen.

He could either send Hask or go himself. He considered Hask for just a moment, then smirked. He would go himself – but not before bringing Orzala back into the hut so Hask could keep an eye on her.

He looked back through the other room and saw the outhouse door was still closed. He couldn’t tell if it was still locked from his position, but certainly she should have called to him by now. If nothing else, by now she should have been screaming at him for leaving her out in the cold for so long. He gritted his teeth, and with a mention to Hask to keep his eyes on the fire, turned and walked to the outhouse.

“<Orzala ... are you done yet,>” he called out to her, but got no answer. “<Are you all right? Did you fall in?>”

He laughed at his own joke, but still stood to the side as he unlatched the door and opened it slowly. His flashlight sent a dim glow into the tiny room, but all he saw was a wooden board with a hole in it – and no Orzala.

“<Shit!>” he muttered loudly, then looked at his surroundings for a clue as to where she’d taken off to.

Failing to discern her possible location, he stepped inside and shined the light directly into the hole because sometimes *ridiculous* things happen but all he saw were the dried remnants of many, many meals, with a few fresh ones piled atop them. He backed away while

shaking his head, then went back to the hut to grab the night vision goggles.

He and Hask were taking a walk in the moonlight, and he certainly hoped she'd appreciated his kindness to her after the death of all her friends, for those days were over the moment they found her. He brought Hask up to speed, and they both headed into the night – Hask heading towards the campfire, while Faridun donned the goggles and scanned the surrounding area for the missing Orzala along the way.

~~~

"Donald... Faridun and Hask are on the move," Vibianus told him, and this time they both heard a gasp from Orzala.

They turned to look at her before returning their attention to the campfire, but could still hear frantic muttering from the frightened woman as Xue worked remotely to calm her down.

"Donald, Sai says that vehicle is less than five minutes out."

"Terrific," he muttered, wondering how in the hell this night could get any *worse*.

"And they are *definitely* the ones who orchestrated the killings of the men in the back of the ship."

Donald snapped his head around to stare at Vibianus.

"Xue suggests that you consider taking sides with Faridun to deal with those intending to kill him..."

Vibianus paused while listening to Xue's further instructions. "Xue says she will allow you leeway to use lethal force if necessary – but she will also allow you to use the *Kraken's Child* as you normally would to instill fear into the Earthlings."

Before he could ask, Vibianus continued with, "Sai has explained it to her."

Donald crossed his arms, then cupped his chin on one fist. Now he had a pissed off terrorist coming to confront Asad and John – and he already *knew* John – along with a group of pissed off drug smugglers who would happily take *everyone* out.

"All right. Where is everyone *now*?" he asked.

"Hask and Faridun are halfway there. The car is two minutes out."

Donald made a snap decision and hoped for the best.

"All right. We'll gas the group here once Faridun and Hask arrive. Tell John and Asad to hold their breath when they see the smoke and

## Picking up the Pieces

run like crazy out of it,” he said, then opened his pouch to prepare both of the shells he carried.

Orzala was paying attention to what he was doing and became alarmed.

“<No! No! Please, no!>” she said, and reached out a hand to him.

He stopped what he was doing, but saw her expression change as she began muttering again, then looked up at his eyes before nodding her head and stepping away from him.

“Sai says that Xue–”

“Yeah. I got it,” he murmured, then finished prepping the shells.

He checked the drift from the fire’s smoke, then selected an upwind position from which to toss the shells. Leaving Vibianus and Orzala hidden in the rocks and bushes, he worked his way around and took up the position he’d scouted. It wasn’t an ideal position, but he could trigger and throw one shell that far. The second one would still be in his hand when the first one landed, but he’d have to take that chance.

He watched as the two men got closer.

He was getting ready to trigger the first shell when he heard the roar of an engine, followed by squealing tires when a vehicle slid to a stop on the road down below them. He watched from his hiding spot as Hask and Faridun diverted to see what was happening on the road.

### ***01:11 (AFT), A New Arrival***

Dilawar jumped out of the car and took up a position on the right side of the truck, while Pelabo took a position on the left. With weapons and flashlights out, they covered the vehicle outlined in the headlights of the car, while their leader, Wakman, stepped out and looked at it curiously. It shouldn’t have left the field already, and it *certainly* shouldn’t have been seen on the road from Nangalam earlier.

He pulled the handheld radio from his pocket and keyed the microphone while whistling into it, hearing a corresponding whistle from the back of the truck.

This was, indeed, their truck – or somebody had stolen one of their radios and tossed it into the back of this *particular* truck.

“<Check it out,>” he ordered tersely, and waited patiently while his men gathered at the tailgate, then sharply flipped up the tarp.

Pelabo and Dilawar shined their lights inside the truck bed but the only thing in there were the boxes and bags they’d originally found – with the exception of the rather *large* box that had gone missing in transit just a few days ago.

"<*Looks like somebody brought our box back,*>" Pelabo said, then turned back for further instructions.

"<*Check it out,*>" Wakman repeated, and Pelabo smiled before turning to climb up into the bed of the truck.

While he was doing that, Dilawar walked up to the cab and warily opened the door, but saw nothing of import. He stopped to grab a pry bar and take it back to his partner. Pelabo, having failed to pry the box open with his bare hands, took the pry bar and began taking the cover off the box. Once removed, he could see the missing fake bomb, and reached down to pat it familiarly.

Then he reached down with the pry bar and tapped it rather gingerly.

Then he reached down and tried to move it.

Then he slowly leaned away and stood there staring at it.

"<*This isn't the right dud,*>" he said softly, then turned back for further instructions. "<*It's solid. I-I can't move it at all.*>"

Wakman stood there in silence for a moment, then folded his arms across his chest. Backlit as he was, his men knew he was chewing the inside of his lip while contemplating this unexpected development. They became sure of it when his right hand came up and gripped the bottom of his chin, not seeing in the shadows that his fingers covered his lips, as was usual.

"<*That is most ... curious,*>" he finally muttered. "<*I don't quite know how to interpret this event.*>"

Wakman stood there and ran through his mind what he knew from when they'd examined the truck earlier. It was the same model, and it even had the same serial numbers – on *parts* of it. The two things *definitely* missing were the fake bomb – and the *real* one his organization had installed specifically to eliminate an obnoxious nuisance to their operations...

This upstart Faridun had pursued the single-minded goal of attacking the Americans who'd killed his father. *Any* Americans. That was understood. What Faridun *never* understood was that the drug trade was based on *selling* drugs to feed a customer's addiction. With people of Faridun's ilk, you sold the drugs, to make the money, to buy the weapons, to support terrorism. You *didn't* go around blowing people up so horrendously that extra pains would be taken to *remove* the problem once and for all.

It was bad enough the amount of money they paid on a monthly basis to keep the borders open for their unmolested drug convoys –



## Picking up the Pieces

only letting token shipments and runners be taken so the *major* shipments would pass through with flying colors. It was simply the cost of doing business, but one *major* fuckup could screw it up for *everyone*. Faridun's obsession with obtaining a nuclear device had been the proverbial last straw, and the syndicate leaders had gotten together to get him *just* what he'd asked for – but then it had gone *missing*.

The amount of finger-pointing had nearly gotten out of hand, as absolutely *no one* had any clue as to where the damn truck had gotten to. Not even the men *assigned* to it had been located, and their organization had fingers in a *lot* of pies around the world. Ideally, those men were dead, and if they *weren't* dead, they *would* be as soon as they showed their faces – such was the price of failure...

He let out a sigh. They had a truck back. They had a *bomb* back. Perhaps someone had caught wind of it and decided to remove the nuclear option and replace it with a *conventional* device? As long as Faridun was off the board, it really didn't *matter*, did it? They should have simply hired someone to *cap* the moron and be done with it. Perhaps that tattletale ... *Bazgar* was his name? It certainly wouldn't have been unheard of.

Personally, it just didn't seem reasonable to blow up the better part of a valley just to prove a point, but he wasn't interested in the worldwide political fallout others had determined could be mutually beneficial to everyone. He just wanted to sell drugs and make money. It was a tried and true method of enjoying life. Not that a lot of money made you *happy* – it just put off the misery on a *daily* basis.

~~~

John was watching Asad through nearly closed eyes, and saw that he was quivering. He couldn't blame him, as they both knew the men down below were the *same* ones who'd casually shot the four men who were originally waiting with the truck.

He was still waiting for word from Sai, but she'd not shared anything else yet.

~~~

Darwesh was torn between staying warm or leaving the fire and popping up to see what was going on, but became surprised when he caught sight of Hask and Faridun.

Then Faridun waved at him to stay put, while he and Hask wandered down to the road to take a look for themselves.

He wasn't positive, but looking back at Shaweer, he got the distinct impression the car below was not there for *anyone's* benefit.

*<“Darwesh ... I – I think we should put out the fire,>”* Asad told him very quietly, then glanced to the berm separating them from the roadway.

Darwesh’s feeling became solid rather quickly, and he bent forward to start scattering the twigs, while Asad took the blanket pillow from under John’s head and spread it over the fire pit. Several squatting stomps later, the fire was out, and John had somehow managed to roll away from it on his own.

Along with that discovery, Darwesh finally realized that Shaweer had called him by his *name* – something he’d never mentioned.

*“Tell him the men below are there to kill everyone,”* Sai sent to Asad, between maneuvering the *Kraken’s Child* into position over the area, and keeping track of everyone.

Still at a squat, Asad squared his shoulders and made his quiet pitch.

*<“You are Darwesh, a member of Faridun’s group. Hask is with you. He and Faridun should not be seen by those men on the road. They are here to kill you ... here to kill Faridun specifically. Faridun has made lots of enemies. Bazgar has been informing them of his behavior and plans to take over your group. He sent you and Hask out here to die with Faridun while he hides back at the–>”*

Asad’s quiet speech was broken by the sound of gunfire from the road. Darwesh paused for just a moment, then lurched up to join his leader.

Asad watched him go with just a touch of sadness in his heart. Darwesh was a nice guy – even for being a terrorist.

He got up and joined John as they scurried across the flat to the rocks and reached Vibianus ... and an absolutely *terrified* Orzala.

*<“Hello Orzala. Nurani misses you. She will be glad when you return with us. We are having a–>”*

The sound of automatic weapons drowned out his baby news, but couldn’t drown out the swearing they could hear while Donald worked his way back towards them.

“Well this just *sucks!*” he said loudly while pressing through the last layer of bushes to join his crew. “Vibianus – where’s Sai and the ship? Better yet, let me have your ear bud.”

He held out his hand, but it was Asad who’d pulled his out and handed it over. Donald thanked him with a nod, then noticed John rejoining the party after recovering his weapon.

## Picking up the Pieces

“Okay. You guys take cover off the flat and stay below the rocks,” Donald told them. “Vibianus and I are gonna take a look and see what we can do. John – keep an *eye* on them. Nurani will have my *ass* if he makes any passes at his girlfriend’s sister.” He grinned as he turned away, having seen the shock in Asad’s eyes at his flippant comment, while John started to chuckle.

Donald nodded to Vibianus, and they headed to the far right of the berm before taking cautious peeks over the top of it.

“Sai – anyone killed down there yet?” he called up.

“*Not yet, but not for lack of trying,*” she shot back. “*What would you like?*”

“How about an inverted cup over the truck and those guys so they can’t kill anyone, and Faridun can’t kill them?”

“*On it!*”

About a minute into the next set of volleys, a loud metallic *CRUNCH* was heard, followed by the telltale sounds of pellets bouncing off an energy shield. They waited while the Earthlings figured it out.

It took nearly five minutes.

“Maybe they finally ran out of ammunition,” Vibianus suggested.

“Oh, I donno. Maybe they liked the pretty little bubbles where the pellets hit the shield.”

They weren’t really bubbles. Just an expanding circle of light where the energy of the pellet dissipated while it was distributed over the total surface area of the shield. In this case, they could see the random flickers of light as the shots became wilder when they finally realized something was amiss.

“*Faridun and his men are retreating,*” Sai reported, and they both popped up to see them backing away across the field towards the hut.

“Maybe they’re going to offer the drugs they have to the men below?”

Donald turned and looked at Vibianus, not quite believing if he was serious or not. He was reassured when Vibianus smiled at him for falling for his joke.

“Right. Sai, can you throw another bubble around our pesky terrorists?”

“*Why? I thought you believed in catch and release?*” she shot back.

“Release him to *where?* I don’t think there’s *anyplace* he could hide where they couldn’t find him – on *Earth*, anyway.”

He smiled, imagining the *groan* she must be letting out at that comment.

*“You’ve soured her mood, Donald. She was having fun,”* Xue called down to him. *“She is configuring the shield.”*

Now that it was relatively safe, they both stood up and watched as Faridun and his men continued to run towards the hut, but bounced off an invisible wall. Almost on cue, all three of them let out a burst of gunfire, but all they got for their trouble was a pretty light show.

Donald shook his head, then mentally flipped a coin – choosing to deal with Faridun first.

“Let’s go talk to him and see what we can arrange,” he said, then took off across the field at a trot. It was getting late, and he hadn’t had anything eat in the last several hours.

### ***03:45 (AFT), Packing up to Leave***

Donald was finally beginning to relax after semi-successfully negotiating a reasonable termination of hostilities between the two factions. Actually, it was probably the *third* cup of Healer’s milk that was producing that helpful effect. He rinsed out the cup and wiped it off before storing it away. Turning around, he saw Vibianus coming forward from the assault deck.

“How’s our special guest enjoying his seat?” Donald asked him.

Vibianus turned and looked at his face, wondering again at the weird sense of humor this Earthling-Kantite mixture standing before him tended to express...

It was not typically normal to transport live prisoners in the same compartment with dead bodies. The killers of those killed he could understand, as they were becoming somewhat unhinged at being tied face-to-face with the men they’d killed. Faridun had not killed anyone today, yet he’d been given a seat in the rear and told to stay put or be tied in the middle of that pile of bodies.

Even now, the display monitor beside Donald was showing Faridun not moving from the place he’d been left at. Not that he could, as being gagged, hooded, and tied in place pretty much made that a non-issue...

“The ‘dead’ man seems compliant.”

“Good. I’m sure he’ll appreciate the hospitality of the Embassy much better once he gets there,” Donald muttered, then nodded once, before going forward to speak with Xue.

“My Lady, any further word from Wilber or the Embassy?”

## Picking up the Pieces

Xue looked up from her seat behind the navigator's position and considered his question – only one of *many* over the last hour or so.

“Donald, you continue to confuse me,” she finally muttered. “And now you expose *more* civilians to our presence than many in authority would feel comfortable with.”

He smiled down at her, then snorted quietly.

“Hey – insane, hairless apes. Who's gonna believe them? So, any further word from Wilber or the Embassy?” he gently pressed her again, and got a reluctant sigh from her in return.

“Wilber would remind you not to leave a mess that requires more than a mop and *bucket* to clean up,” she said, then tilted her head for a moment. “I believe this resembles more of a heavy dusting. The Embassy expresses a repeated interest in prying secrets from these new acquaintances of Faridun. I believe it is fueled by a desire for information from both Timothy and Dwight.”

“I'm sure the DEA would *also* like to take a crack at them,” he added unnecessarily.

“No doubt,” she agreed, then continued with, “You sent Hask and Darwesh back to their group with food and other supplies. Of what purpose was that?”

He was surprised she hadn't figured it out already, but explained himself anyway.

“They will return with rumors that Bazgar had marked them for death. Bazgar will lose support among the men for that. The food and supplies will help relieve the burden for their support from the local villages – for a short time, but it's better than nothing. They also got all the supplies that came with the rental truck as well.”

“But you are supporting *terrorists*, are you not?”

“Xue, I could either kill them or let them go. In the past, I would have *gladly*...” He paused and looked away for a moment. “I find that death without conflict no longer serves a useful purpose.”

She considered his words, then dug in to seek a better understanding of them before accepting his answer.

Then she brought up her last issue – for the moment.

“And Faridun?” she asked, peeking into his thoughts as he constructed his response to her.

“He will spend time with the Embassy, and some other agencies. Then I might suggest that he find useful employment doing something *helpful* for society ... somewhere *other* than on Earth.”

She'd already looked through him and understood Faridun had made too many enemies to live safely on Earth. Aside from that, removing him from the painful reminders of his loss might initiate a useful catharsis for his future emotional Healing.

"I will consider such in my report," she allowed.

She'd decided that Orzala's relationship with Faridun was effectively tabled for the time being, yet subject to revision – depending on where they both ended up, and how they *truly* felt about each other in a non-coercive environment.

She did a long blink while getting an update from the Embassy.

"Timothy has relayed that relatives will be at the original location of the truck in one hour. They will need to see the survivor as well, but not be able to take him until we finish his Healing."

Donald almost nodded absently, but considered that she was a Senior – no, an *Elder* – and the guy should *already* be up and walking by...

"You forget, Donald. These are mere *Earthlings* and require more patience to deal with the trauma of their injuries. The man was shot and left for dead. In his mind, he *knew* he was dying. I would bring him with us to insure his recovery." She paused to consider one of Donald's hidden goals. "Perhaps he would *also* like the opportunity to find societal service elsewhere."

Donald stared at her, not quite believing what he thought she was possibly suggesting.

With Faridun, it had been a simple decision to place him out of harm's way – making it literally *impossible* for any of his enemies to find him. As for their *survivor*...

Insanity didn't just grow out of a species after one lifetime.

The example of Atlantis was proof of that. It would require *centuries* of social reprogramming to change the normal conflict-based Earthling method of living to a Commonwealth-standardized version of *cooperative* living ... completely discounting that, when left to their *own* devices, the Kantites *themselves* were a rather poor example of such. Of course, with Wilder, they'd *totally* dropped the ball in that regard...

"Not something to dwell upon now, Donald," she prompted him. "The hour is late, and we have many stops to make."

He bowed appropriately before turning forward to the pilot's seat.

"Sai, traffic patterns please – both aerial and local surface."

## Picking up the Pieces

“On it,” she said, then bent to the task as he settled into the pilot’s seat and began firing up the systems. Like the lady said, they still had a long way to go, and many stops to make before dawn.

### *October 7, 9:35 P.M. (MST), Arizona, Waiting Impatiently*

The women had gathered in the motor pool to see if the stories would come true. Nurani had said Asad would be bringing Orzala back tonight, and they all wanted to be there to witness it. Both Barsala and Nurani were sitting together in the conference room with a few of their friends while some of the Americans – the *non*-Americans – had brought them bags of sweets and some of the bubbling flavored drinks they seemed to live on. Barsala was keeping an eye on the door when she noticed the couple standing outside and chatting with each other.

She noted the woman spared the occasional glance in their direction and mentioned it to Nurani – who seemed not to care.

~~~

Dorothy turned back and glanced up, seeing the rooftop doors were already accordioned open to await the arrival of the alien ship en route. A field of stars was present in the clear skies over the Annex.

“Howard... What do you *really* think about all this?” she quietly asked him, while vaguely waving a hand as she took in the sights of the dimly lit motor pool they were standing in.

Howard took a breath, then let it out slowly while considering his answer thoughtfully...

He’d never given much credence to the possibility of aliens coming to Earth – not to the point of actually exposing themselves to Earthlings in the *flesh*. Intellectually, he understood the reality of the extreme distances involved with space travel and the amount of time it would take to go from one place to another. He also knew that – realistically, *anything* was possible, but usually only became a reality when someone who didn’t know it couldn’t be done decided to make it happen.

Donald had mentioned that during one of their few conversations. That, and he’d spoken of some of the other humanoid species the Earth would have to learn to accept as fellow residents when the time came for their *full* membership into the Commonwealth. He remembered *that* discussion vividly.

On the view screen inside the little ship, he’d been shown several images of other Commonwealth members; the blue Balese, the now-departed gray Bornat, the rather stocky men and women of Wilder, the somewhat European-like people of Kantor, the almost Polynesian-featured people of Tyler, the Asian-featured people of Cletus ... and the

rather brutal looking race called the Drecks. Of those last, he'd been assured they were humans ... just really, really *big* humans, as could be seen in images of them in a mixed setting.

Donald had then paused while he seemed to be considering something. Then he'd shifted topics and spoken of Earth's current status within the Commonwealth, stating there was a very good reason the Earth was held as a Protectorate.

In the privacy of the ship, Donald had shown him a short video, making sure the sound was turned down low so it wasn't a distraction. The science fiction movie, for that's what it looked like, had both Drecks and smaller humans as actors. It had appeared to be a rather primitive dinner party, where, in typical Hollywood fashion, the smaller human women were the *entre* for the event. In his mind, the flaming swords pushed it more into the realm of a fantasy feature, but the space-suited figures negated that impression.

The special effects had been excellent, however, especially when the supporting cast were cut into pieces in a rather brutal way. To finish it off, the lead smaller human character had sliced his way through one of the dying entrees to reach the lead actress – the one who'd had her head sliced open just before he reached her. That's where Donald had paused it.

Howard had suddenly recognized that actress, having seen her at dinner with both Donald and his other spouse. The terror on her face looked very real, along with the blood flowing down her face and body. He turned to see Donald looking away while wiping his eyes, then snapped back to the screen with a totally *different* perception of the movie ... mostly that it wasn't fiction at all but a very *painful* reality.

When Donald had continued the playback, he'd quietly related the tale of how a truly alien species who were *fearful* of them had orchestrated the premature advancement of the Drecks. They'd wanted to create a moderating presence against the Commonwealth so it wouldn't become a nuisance to them in the future. In essence, they'd set the Drecks against the *rest* of humanity so they could rest easy in their private little area of space below them while humanity self-imploded for yet another five or ten millennia or so.

And now ... now that threat had not so much been eliminated, but rather assimilated *within* the context of a tentative Confederation of some sort. It was still a work in progress, while hostilities had ceased between all parties involved – for the time being, at least...

Howard cleared his head and came back to the present.

"I think... I believe it's in our best interest that we maintain a working relationship with them," he finally said. "There are significant



## Picking up the Pieces

advantages with continued association with them, not the least of which are scientific and medical advancements.”

She considered that herself, except for one annoying fact.

“Yes. As long as they don’t give us anything we can turn into a *weapon*,” she muttered, then caught the look he gave her, before slowly nodding his head in agreement.

“How is Audrey holding out?” she asked, and they pursued a lighter conversation until the hanger darkened further, and marker lights in the concrete floor lit up to show the arriving ship where to park.

“Attention please. Everyone stand clear of the landing area while the ship is in motion,” someone called out, and they both backed closer to the wall.

Just a minute later, a couple of bright landing lights shone down into the hanger, followed by the black bulk of the ship as it slowly settled on its landing struts. The rooftop doors started closing, and the hanger lights began to brighten.

Everyone moved forward expectantly, but they were held back by Lady Wen as she directed a stretcher team to the back of the ship where they stopped and waited for the assault hatch to drop.

“Christ. I thought no one got injured,” Howard muttered.

“No one *died*,” Wilber corrected him calmly, causing Dorothy to jump at his unexpected presence beside her. “Asad was in the wrong place at the wrong time and got his hand shot – along with a *shitload* of impact trauma to his chest,” he explained while the lights continued to brighten in the motor pool.

“Is ... he’s going to be all *right*, right?” Dorothy asked him shakily.

“Come now, Miss Gale. *You’ve* seen our Ladies at work,” he chided her. “I’m told he’s still sore but will make a full recovery. At least Xue got his *hand* put back together before Nurani could see it.”

Almost on cue, Nurani pushed her way between them and made a beeline to the back of the ship, where she’d seen other people leave by stretcher before.

~~~

Nurani waited impatiently while the hatch slowly lowered.

When it was low enough, she hopped onto it and rushed forward to the little room where people slept.

“<Nurani, what are you doing here?>” Xue asked her, then paused for a long blink while Nurani answered her.

"<Asad! Where is my Asad?>" she asked desperately, not recognizing the man who was stuffed into the middle bunk.

"<He is outside, looking for you. Go forward and leave by the front door,>" Xue told her, then pointed to the front compartment to direct her in the right direction.

~~~

"Whoa! Who was *that*? A *stowaway*?" Donald asked, regarding the flying figure of clothes, who'd just whooshed through the forward compartment and ran out the airlock.

"That was Nurani, looking for her Asad," Sai muttered. "Gods grace he was wearing that *body* armor or she'd be after your *head*."

"Gods grace Xue was able to make his *hand* look pretty or she would be after my head, you mean."

Sai paused to consider it for a moment, before agreeing with him.

"Yeah. That too."

She stopped to yawn, then rubbed her eyes, thankful Donnie had suggested prerecording their mission results on the trip back and storing them on data tabs for Wilber's review. That would give them leeway to hit the showers early and crawl into bed for a well-deserved rest.

"Who's taking Howie and Dot back to Washington tomorrow?" she asked. "Or are you gonna send them back on one of those flying death traps you call an airplane?"

He stopped what he was doing and considered it – for all of two seconds – remembering that Howard and Dorothy had one *more* task to complete before they made it home.

"Anybody home?" Wilber called from the airlock.

"*Just* who we wanted to see," Donald said cheerfully, then reached into his pocket to pull out and hand him the data tab with his mission report.

Sai immediately followed suit, then followed it with another yawn, which, in turn, infected Donald with a reasonable duplicate of it only moments later.

"You guys look tired," Wilber said quietly. "You know, you old folks really should hit the sack early tonight. Maybe take a hot shower, get to bed, then take tomorrow morning off. We can debrief over dinner. You know, *before* you take Howard and Dorothy for that trip around the moon on the way back to Washington?"

## Picking up the Pieces

"The *moon*?" Sai muttered. "Oh yeah. Have to try out that detonator John found." She turned to finish gathering up her things before heading back to the Center.

Wilber waited for her to go before turning back to watch Donald while he was packing up the last of his things.

"Was it bad?" he asked softly.

"Oh... No more than usual," Donald muttered. "Drug lords killed three out of the four men Fredricks sent to do my dirty work, but other than that, things went pretty smoothly. I think Xue's still pissed we let three of the killers go, but I explained that we had three of them already, and the leader of the group we grabbed later won't talk anyway."

"Catch and release?"

"Not really what I wanted to do, but it would have been worse if we'd taken them. Bloody vengeance comes to mind, and those assholes aren't against making examples out of innocent people. I gave them the truck to replace the one I stole from them. That, and whatever we recovered from the car Sai chopped in half with the shield before we disposed of it. Gave the money to Fredrick's survivor's group as family compensation. They're gonna hold on to some of it for the guy in the back."

Wilber had been nodding during this, but Donald could see there was something else on his mind. He waited several seconds before finally giving in, then asked, "Wilber... What's up?"

He was surprised when Wilber looked at the rear compartment door, then glanced over at the airlock.

Taking this as his cue, Donald went over and closed the airlock, then slid the compartment door shut to give them more privacy.

"Okay, Wilber. Tell me what you need."

"Donald... You didn't... There isn't the *remote* possibility you're missing one of your *special* hot loads, is there?"

Donald stared at him while trying to decipher what he meant. Then he went over and slid open the rear door before pausing to motion Wilber to follow him. He waited while Xue walked out the back with the stretcher team, then led Wilber to the weapons room, where he checked the hot load indicators and saw they were all out. Then he keyed in the access code to unlock the hot load containment panel and opened it to see that all but one of them were still in place.

"I used one of them before we got back here. Against the Vanir, I mean," he muttered, then closed and locked the panel before turning

to face Wilber. “Wilber, there isn’t a shiny new six-kilometer hole in the ground anywhere, is there?”

“A hole?”

“Yes. A hole. If one of these anti-matter rounds goes off, anything within six kilometers is vaporized – *annihilated*, actually. Ground level, it makes a perfect hole. Airborne, it makes a really loud bang when air rushes in to replace the missing air molecules. Underground, it makes a perfect empty sphere six-kilometers in diameter – until it collapses. Why do you ask?”

Wilber looked at his watch and shook his head somewhat sadly.

“Don, a little over hour ago, an earthquake struck Pakistan. Initial reports estimate that it reached close to 7.5 on the Richter scale.”

Donald froze for a few seconds while running scenarios of drug syndicates trafficking in stolen or black market nuclear weapons, but then dismissed them from consideration. Perhaps an *incredibly* lucky terrorist with a nuclear device could pull off something like that, but they’d need to dig *really* deep to mess with tectonic plates to get those kinds of results.

“Wilber, truthfully ... *honestly*, I didn’t do it,” he said. “I cannot think of a *single* reason for that happening, except that – well, you saw the earthquake maps we had to deal with. I made *every* effort to avoid messing with the existing faults by deliberately staying marginally sub-surface.”

He passed a few random numbers through his head, but the results were the same.

“I’d really have to engineer that kind of event, and I don’t think I could pull it off with just the nine loads I have on hand. Where did it take place – *specifically*?”

“Azad Kashmir,” Wilber told him. “That district is on the border of Afghanistan. The epicenter was twelve miles north of Muzaffarabad, Pakistan.”

“Muzaffarabad?” he muttered, then closed his eyes while searching his memory.

“That ... that’s like a hundred forty ... maybe a hundred fifty miles from Asadabad,” he said, then opened his eyes.

“Wasn’t us,” he continued while shaking his head in frustration. “We were on the *other* side of the boarder, Wilber, west of Asadabad, and never got below ground level this trip. Let me know more about it tomorrow, all right? I gotta get some sleep.”

## Picking up the Pieces

He pressed his hand on Wilber's shoulder before heading forward, muttering, "No good deed goes unpunished," or something very similar as he left the corridor.

Wilber watched him go without coming to a conclusion either way. Don was correct in that he still had the special loads he'd begun with, but the way he'd chewed through the Korengal Valley mountain ridge *could* have contributed to the earthquake, couldn't it? He leaned against the passageway while thinking about it, considering that even *mega-tonnage* nuclear weapons hadn't triggered earthquakes – not from his limited amount of research, anyway.

While he personally couldn't conceive of anything they could have done to cause such a disaster, he certainly hoped it was a matter much like Asad's hand being shot – simply a situation of being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

He reached up and ran his fingers thorough his hair, doing a bit of tension-release therapy to help dissipate his uneasy feelings about this whole earthquake issue. Then a noise alerted him to the cleaning crew coming aboard to clean up the blood and feces left behind by the load of dead and living bodies Don had hauled out of Afghanistan for eventual delivery to Fredricks. He decided to listen to Don's and Sai's mission reports and shelve the earthquake issue for the time being.

After all, even if it *had* been their fault, there wasn't much they could do about it now.

### ***10:00 A.M. (PKT), Arandu, On the Afghanistan-Pakistan Border***

Wakman struggled awake, only to find himself pinned underneath the body of Dilawar. On the other side of Dilawar, he could see a perfect view of blue skies marred by shadowed clouds dimming a rising sun through the broken driver's window. The truck's front window only offered the view of scrub brush acting like a screen in front of him. He remained still, following his training by mentally going over his body area-by-area – toes, feet, legs, hips, fingers, hands, arms, shoulders – followed by a careful evaluation of how his torso felt. So far, aside from the pressure of Dilawar's shoulder pressing into his stomach, he seemed to be in pretty good shape. He was certainly in better shape than Dilawar, whose left arm was bent funny, and whose neck was at a particularly awkward angle. That probably explained the blank stare in his eyes and his lack of breathing.

He began careful efforts to move his arms and legs, resulting in a flurry of painful twinges bordering on the irritating, more than devastating variety. Finally working his left arm free, he brought his left hand to his head, where he ran it over his face and found a bloody gash in his forehead. Reaching behind him, he carefully ran it over his neck – discovering that his neck appeared to be intact, but his left arm

*really* didn't want to bend in that direction at the moment. He put his arm back down and lay there while contemplating his situation...

Something had hit the truck and shoved it over into a ditch. *That* much he remembered ... he *thought*. They'd already crossed the bridge at Arandu, and had been proceeding past the checkpoint, when the suspension had given a heave. Then something had pushed them aside and into a ditch. As he thought back to it, the road wasn't really all that wide, and there wasn't any other traffic close to them – certainly not close enough not to see or hear them coming. In fact, they'd been passing between the ditch and a building of some sort...

He stopped his line of thinking and felt around where he was jammed up against the right side door, which was currently laying flat against the ground. His hand came up dusty, and further searching came up with crumbled rock. Another search came up with a broken brick. He carefully turned his head to the right, and established that the window, through some *miraculous* intervention, had remained intact – save for a spider web of cracks radiating out from where the bloody impact of his head had hit it. A fine coating of dust and dirt showed the trail of where his fingers had touched it.

He would have taken a deep breath and sighed if the pressure on his abdomen would have allowed it. At least he was in better shape than Dilawar. He was about to wonder about Pelabo when he heard a muffled groan from somewhere close by.

### ***10 P.M. (MST), The Annex, The Center***

John was still in the bathtub and enjoying a soak in warm water, while Xue had simply showered and left him there while bringing Laisee and Lili up to date.

Now Xue was lounging on the bed where she and John would be sharing the rest of this evening, while fingering the pendant around her neck that would decide Donald's ultimate fate...

She'd given Donald free reign to engage with lethal force, but the only ones who'd died were the original three victims they'd discovered after the fact. Later on, instead of engaging the new combatants, Donald had opted to separate them for a bit of questioning before coming to a decision about them in which he'd included her input. His solution had been, to say the *very* least, *unexpected*, but it helped further define his suitability for continued existence.

He had *not*, as predicted, gone on a killing spree in revenge for the fallen contractors who'd provided the truck for him. He had *not*, as predicted, terminated the lives of the men who'd taken part in the killings or had orchestrated it, nor had he killed the remaining terrorists then, or during their previous visit to the mountain.

## Picking up the Pieces

In point of fact, he could have collapsed that mountain and killed them *all* but said it would not make a difference unless there was a *fundamental* change in Earth's societies to make terrorism non-existent. Otherwise, he'd told her, new radicals would pop up from time to time to push their own religions or political agendas upon non-compliant entities to the point that the war on terrorism would continue indefinitely.

He'd told her that, by his *own* estimates, even his country of birth would be bogged down by foreign wars in an effort to deal with terrorism that just won't stop unless the conditions that allowed it to foster ceased to exist. He'd outlined such conditions; food, housing, health care, useful employment, and a viable educational system to bring each society the knowledge and mature enlightenment necessary to counter misery and hatred.

Then he'd laughed and mentioned the *one* country he could think of that didn't suffer from terrorism – North Korea – simply because the iron fist of government meant that everyone suffered more or less *equally* ... even the privileged elites, whose lives were lost for even the *slightest* hint of disloyalty.

She had to admit Liling had been correct. Donald had somehow thrown off the yoke of his father's geas and returned to the man he was when the Madman of the Fringe had rained somewhat benevolent terror upon the Drecks. Her silent pokes into Sai, Liling, Laisee, and Wilber all pointed to a man who cared deeply about his humanity, and how others should be treated. Even the deep-seated feelings of Ling Wen had been considered – that whole conflict she'd shared with Rondal having finally changed the aspect of her being to become the successful manager of the Center, along with finding a loving companion to share her life with.

As for Donald's devotion to Maya, she'd taken the time to consider all they'd put each other through – from him taking her memories to save her from suffering, to their eventual breakup because of Maya's naivety over the situation she'd suddenly found herself thrust into. They seemed to get along well enough *now*, however, and she'd read Maya's happiness at the situation she found herself in.

As for *Déjà*...

Donald had made a *real* woman out of *Déjà* – *somehow*. He'd been in the process of being genetically altered himself, but he'd *still* allowed his bed partner's hidden desires to come to fruition – *somehow*.

There was just no explanation for it, except for that very *frank* discussion Jaiying had shared with her over a cup of hot chocolate one morning. Not that she could verify it, as Jaiying's block was rock

solid as always, but it made a certain amount of sense when she'd explained that she, *herself*, had arranged to partake of her grandfather's genetic pattern, and Déjà had been an unexpected recipient of it as well. That part she'd previously verified with both Déjà and Sai when she'd questioned them individually about that miraculous event back in Vanir space.

It had seemed almost unbelievable, save for the fact that *everyone* who'd shared Donald's bed seemed to come away with a variety of unexpected gifts. Such had been Liling's intent when she'd ordered him "harvested" for testing of such, but without useful results...

She sipped her ambrosia and set the glass down next to the one she'd prepared for John, who took that moment to appear – wrapped in a towel and standing in the doorway of the bathroom, the sound of the tub draining in the background.

He walked past the closet and smiled at her from the foot of the bed.

"John, you aren't too *terribly* exhausted tonight, are you?" she murmured softly, then smiled as the towel dropped to the floor before he walked closer, only to pause and sip from his own glass of ambrosia before smiling down at her.

"My Lady, I am yours to command for as long as I might last," he promised her, and she flipped back the cover in an invitation for him to join her.

### ***11 P.M. (MST), Almost Time for Bed***

Wilber finished his summary report, then encrypted it before sending it to the Embassy, along with the compressed and encrypted contents of both data tabs. After that, he disconnected his system from the network and slouched back in his chair, sparing a glance at the half-cup of coffee Shu had brought him earlier but knew it'd already gone cold while he was distracted by the mission reports...

As expected, with the exception of the unfortunate men killed by the drug syndicate representatives, Donald had managed to minimize casualties on both sides of the mission.

As hoped for, only one of the immediate crew had been *slightly* injured – Asad – and his life had been saved by the covert body armor provided by the garrison.

His *hand*, not so much – but it was intact enough for Xue to fix it before they got back. The trauma to his *chest* was still achy, but the armor had kept the bullets from penetrating his skin while distributing the impact pressure across about a square foot of chest



## Picking up the Pieces

area. Xue had confirmed that after she'd gone in and straightened a few things out with his fingers. In about a day or so, Asad would no longer feel the twinges of pain he was currently experiencing.

Faridun and his team had been isolated and advised there was a hit out on him courtesy of Bazgar. Then it had been explained that the bomb he'd ordered had *specifically* been built into the delivery truck and as timed to explode once he'd taken possession of it. It was an eye-opener for Faridun, but Donald and John had been most persuasive. Wilber wondered if Xue had applied any additional influence, but decided it wasn't really important. Faridun would remain sequestered at the Embassy, basically being held in isolation until everyone was done with him. He still questioned Donald's suggestion of relocation, but that was out of his hands.

In Wilber's mind, letting Hask and Darwesh take the supplies back to their base was simply more convenient than what Donald had elaborated to Xue, but imagined Donald's mindset was *oftentimes* along those lines – minimal impact combined with succor to the enemy, while planting seeds of dissent among them. That was right up there with what he'd *originally* thought of doing before they'd left on their *first* mission.

Wilber wasn't so sure about the *final* solution regarding the drug syndicate team leader or his minions. Bargaining with them to call off the hit had been a non-starter. Even turning over the truck and the drugs with a promise to take Faridun out of the game wasn't enough. That's why the elaborate ruse of putting body armor under Faridun's clothing and letting Wakman shoot him at point blank range had been devised. Xue had been willing to provide a suitable bloody memory for that event, but again, it wasn't really important.

Once reaching an agreement allowing Faridun to be killed, it had seemed sufficient to inform Wakman that everyone had been *very* upset about the nuclear gift package, and a repeat of it would be disastrous to *everyone* involved. Wakman had admitted he agreed with that assessment, but was required to follow his leader's decision and execute it regardless – while in *his* mind, blowing up suppliers and potential customers was counterproductive.

Again, Xue may have applied some hidden influence in that regard, but Wilber knew Donald could bargain with the best of them – and back that up with sufficient penalties to make it worth their while to comply.

The separate issue of exposing themselves to the Earthlings was something Donald would have to face Laisee with himself. Actually, as mission commander, that should have fallen upon Sai, but she'd stayed in the ship while Donald was the man on the ground for this one. Still – the mission had been successful. Orzala was now resting

comfortably with her friends. Asad had returned safely – more or less – and, as a *bonus*, Faridun had been removed from the playing field.

On the *downside* – the terrorists were still in Afghanistan, the drug corridor was still active, and the “Valley of Death” would remain so – at least until everyone came to their senses and figured out how to disengage from the terrorists in areas where they had very little chance of making any practical headway against them.

Unfortunately, the *quickest* solution called for Donald’s basic fix for humanity; food, shelter, health care, education, and meaningful employment that sustains the family unit. Otherwise, someone *always* ends up complaining about stuff they have very little control over. Donald said it ended up pretty much the same no matter *where* you were – on Earth or somewhere else...

“My Wilber, will you not come to bed now?” Shu called softly from the office doorway.

He smiled and rotated his chair in her direction.

“Yes, my love,” he said. Wilber turned back just long enough to shut down his computer, then stood and pit-stopped in the bathroom on the way to joining her in the bedroom.

### ***11 A.M. (PKT), Arandu, On the Afghanistan-Pakistan Border***

Arandu was in shambles. At least it seemed that way from the lamentations of the women who were helping their men dig bodies out of the rubble.

Wakman was laying flat on his back, having discovered the reason he’d felt no pain in his feet or legs was that his spine appeared to have been severely twisted, if not broken, during the accident.

The fact that he was still alive and breathing, with his upper body suffering the minimal amount of aches and pains one would associate with an accident of that severity, gave every indication that he was in better shape than many, after such an accident – except that it hadn’t been an accident at all.

With help from a few of the villagers, Dilawar’s body had been removed by Pelabo. The extent of Wakman’s injury had only been discovered when they’d hauled him out and attempted to help him stand. Even with their help, he’d nearly fallen, and they’d finally planted him in a shady spot by the side of a stone wall that had only partially collapsed. From that rather limited vantage point, he had a view of men and women digging through the rubble and hauling out the bodies of loved ones – wives, husbands, children and such – and in an unusual epiphany of sorts, he set aside his anger at his personal

## Picking up the Pieces

situation and began to count himself lucky that he was still alive ... for the moment, anyway.

A little while later, that moment extended itself when someone came by and checked him over – gently probing him very carefully while touching and tapping at those areas of his lower body that had no feeling to them. Curiously, the man had used a marker to indicate those areas on his pants legs for later comparison; telling him that some back injuries could affect what he was experiencing, and oftentimes it was only a temporary condition, but that he should remain still until they were able to set up a field hospital of sorts. Then he'd left him there with a promise to return when he was able.

Pelabo had survived and – aside from aches and pains, and some pretty impressive bruises – appeared to have come out of it all right. After Wakman had been attended to by that first aid person, Pelabo had gone out to assess the extent of the damage and returned ten minutes later with a cup of dusty water for his boss. It used to be muddy, but he'd strained it through the cleanest part of his shirt before filling the cup.

*"<No way to contact the others,>" he reported. "<Phones are down.>"*

*"<To be expected. Is there anything we can salvage from the truck?>"*

Pelabo looked down at his boss and half-shrugged. The only thing they had were three guns, less a full clip of bullets for each, and the drugs the Americans had let them take with them in consideration for the loss of their car. Questions about the invisible wall that stopped their bullets had gone unanswered.

*"<The guns. The drugs. If we had another truck, we could probably pull it upright and drive it ... if the road were clear. I went as far as the edge of the village, and it doesn't look good ... rock slides, cracks in the road, more->"*

*"<Enough. From what I've been hearing, this is not local to the village,>"* Wakman muttered, then closed his eyes at the irony of it all...

He and his men had been sent to find their missing truck, only to run across what they'd *thought* was their truck sitting in an open field by the side of the road. The interrogation of those men had been unfruitful, only hearing the *ridiculous* story that they'd been contracted to produce a truck that had its license plate and numbers changed to match what they were told. They'd even been told what to stock in the back of the truck.

It had certainly *looked* like their truck, and on the face of it, the license plate and serial numbers seemed to be a dead giveaway that it really *was* their truck. They'd simply killed the men who'd *obviously*

hijacked it and killed the original transport team. Then his men had gone over it more thoroughly and dug down under the bags and boxes to discover the hidden bomb was *missing*.

Wakman himself had supervised the installation of the nuclear device, and immediately recognized the fact that the truck bed was completely intact from one side to the other. Now it wasn't just the crate with the *fake* bomb missing. The *real* one was gone as well, and with no hole to indicate where it should have been installed.

He'd left three men with the truck and told them to tidy up and wait for his return, or until someone else showed up they could interrogate. During his *own* interrogation, the American had informed him those men were in custody and would soon become guests of the American government. Rather than calling him a liar, Wakman remained silent.

The man had spoken through the little interpreter, the one called Asad. It had been frustrating at first, until he'd muttered something in Russian, and the American had picked up on it.

Then the conversation continued directly between the two of them, with the American's Russian accent sounding somewhat older, as if seldom used, or from an older generation.

The back and forth continued for several minutes, with neither side giving sway until the American had sweetened the deal with the truck and the drugs. Wakman had countered with the death of Faridun to close the books with his people. Then he and the American had shared a similar evaluation of the nuclear option that had been decided upon, with Wakman decrying the shortsightedness of it and the American stating that it was bad business for *everyone*, and very likely to cause even *more* pressure to come down on the drug trade.

In the end, the Americans had accepted the new terms, then gone to fetch Faridun. Thirty minutes later, Faridun had been dragged in front of the invisible wall, and the American had ordered the men to put their guns on the ground. Wakman had been presented with the honor. With a promise not to shoot at anyone *else*, the wall had been lifted, and he'd shot Faridun several times at point blank range.

Unfortunately, the *interpreter* had apparently not been made privy to the deal, as he'd lunged forward at the wrong time and taken several hits himself until the wall had slammed down again and stopped the mayhem.

Apologies had been offered on both sides. Then the wall had apparently been lifted once again, before the American tossed a small cylinder at their feet, and it closed again. Then the American had muttered his desire for them to, "Have a nice nap," before waving

## Picking up the Pieces

goodbye. The last he'd seen of them was him bending down to recover his dead. Then they'd woken up in the back of the truck, which had been parked off the road near an abandoned hut.

Now that he thought back on it, the little interpreter hadn't bled all that much – certainly not compared to Faridun. His hand had been shot and blood had sprayed over his front side from that alone, but Faridun had nearly *exploded* when hit by several rounds from his gun. No matter. He and his men could verify that the Faridun problem had been eliminated, and that – *somehow* – the Americans had learned of the nuclear plan, then bent over *backwards* to eliminate it from the playing field altogether.

They'd even been nice enough to give them the drugs Faridun had promised – whatever had been left after the cave-in at their hiding spot – then thrown in the truck as a replacement for the missing one they'd somehow mysteriously spirited away. It also looked like they'd transferred what was left of their personal belongings from the trunk of the car – it having been mostly destroyed by whatever had cut the car in half – then leaving behind what few things they'd found placed in the front seat of the truck after discovering their car kit had been spirited away during their nap...

A noise next to him caused him to open his eyes, and he found a little boy standing close to him and looking down at him. Then he realized that he wasn't looking at *him*, so much, as at the half cup of water he was holding between his arm and his body.

He was dirty and alone, then Wakman realized he looked a lot like his *own* little boy back in Kazakhstan. Sanzhar had gotten dirty like this on a few occasions, but a quick bath and a change of clothes was all it took to make him the pride of his father's heart. This little boy wouldn't be getting a bath anytime soon, nor would he get any clean clothes. More than likely, he was already missing his parents and would probably end up becoming an orphan.

He was in no position to deal with any of that, but the one thing he *could* do was to share his good fortune.

Wakman stretched across his body and carefully grabbed hold of the cup. Then he held it up slowly, but hung on to it as the boy reached out both hands for it.

"<Sit,>" he said, then rolled his head and eyes to the side closest to him.

"<Please sit,>" he repeated, and the boy squatted down next to him and finally sat on the ground.

He handed him the cup and watched in delight as the boy swallowed the dirty water with as much gusto as he could.

"<Pelabo, we will need a bigger pot of water to share with our new friend,>" he said aloud, and watched as the big man struggled to his feet to follow his boss's orders.

***October 8, 8:15 A.M. (MST), The Annex, The Center***

Donald was having the loveliest dream of being comforted by two women who'd wrapped themselves around both sides of him. Unfortunately, the heat of their bodies was becoming oppressive, but not so pressing as the need to get up and pee.

He struggled out of his dream and looked up to see the glow of the skylight above him indicating it was already morning. Turning his head to the side, he saw, not two women, but only one, who'd attached herself to him naked, and whose breasts were cushioning his right side and dripping milk all over him and the bedclothes as a consequence.

He heard a giggle from the foot of the bed, and raised his head far enough to see Déjà. She was sitting in one of the rockers while nursing one of his children. From the sound of the effort being made, it was probably little Ronnie hard at work. A slight gasp from her a moment later only confirmed it.

He slowly disentangled himself from Maya, while torn between sliding down and having some breakfast, or getting up to pee. He decided to slip away from her and exit from the left side of the bed, heading naked into the bathroom with his erect phallus bouncing with every step. The sound of his voiding was long, and his groans heartfelt. They were followed by the sound of the shower as he washed the sticky coating of *very* fresh milk from his body. After finishing, he dried himself and decided to wear a robe for a change. He knew Déjà would prefer a fresh meal this morning, but the sheets needed to be changed first, then Faith would probably need *her* share of milk soon.

He brushed his teeth before coming back and bending down to share a lingering kiss with Déjà, not even bothering to fend off her hand when she grabbed him and began tugging on him. Although it was very tempting, he finally pushed away gently, then bent further to kiss his son on his head before heading over to the dresser and searching for a fresh set of sheets.

"Donnie, don't you want to *play* with me?" Déjà murmured seductively, and he looked over his shoulder at her and smiled, then looked down at Maya lying there still asleep.

Decisions ... decisions...

He'd found a clean set of sheets, but considered the sheets were *already* messy with milk, so a little more wouldn't hurt.

## Picking up the Pieces

“See if you can get him to latch on to Maya while she’s laying there,” he quietly suggested, then watched as Déjà opened her mouth wide in surprise, before the twinkle entered her eyes in delight.

She stood up with his help, then stepped around next to Maya, bending down to kiss her on the cheek before whispering into her ear. After a few more kisses, Maya opened her sleepy eyes and turned to smile up at her. They had a silent conversation, with both of them giggling for a moment, before Maya slipped out of bed and used the toilet. She paused on the way back to reach inside his robe to tug on him a few times while sharing a quick kiss with him, before orientating herself sideways on the bed so it left room enough for all three of them to lay side by side, leaving enough space for Déjà and Donald to have some morning play beside her.

After she began nursing little Ronnie, she accepted the free hands of both Donald and Déjà when they reached out to caress her during their play.

They were certainly in no rush and took their time, with Donald not attempting anything more exhausting than simply enjoying the feel of Déjà’s warmth around him as he worked within her at a sedate pace. He reluctantly missed the bonus of the Gift, but still had *decades* of experience to fall back on, and he applied those skills by alternating the play, pulling out and using fingers and thumb, lips and tongue to bring Déjà to peaks while ignoring his own body’s desire for completion.

Meanwhile, Déjà had been teasing Maya’s body and gotten her to peak several times while lying next to them. After another successful result of Déjà’s efforts, he heard a wet smack from Maya’s upper body, then a rather loud burp coming from her mid-section where little Ronnie was currently laying across her.

Donald took a sleepy Ronnie from Maya’s arms and sat in the rocker for a while as he watched these two Healers apply their skills with each other. Then he heard a murmur from the crib, so he got up and looked down at little Faith, who suddenly opened her eyes and looked up at him with a smile on her face.

“*That’s my little girl,*” he murmured, then looked down at the sleeping face of his son while he made the quick decision to swap bundles.

He settled Ronnie at one end of the crib, before picking up Faith and cradling her in his arms, the odor wafting up from her alerting him to the contents of her diaper. He gathered the necessary supplies one-handed and began maintenance. As it was a rather *messy* diaper, he opted for a warm water wash, and stepped into the bathroom to run the water in the sink until it was nice and warm for her.

After cleaning and drying had been accomplished – all to the smiling face of his daughter – Donald brought her back to the bedroom and reassembled her on the foot of the bed with a fresh diaper, sleeper, and a clean blanket to wrap her in. Meanwhile, Maya had had the leeway to attach herself to Déjà's lady parts, which she'd then pursued with gusto, so Donald moved to sit in the rocker with Faith while splitting his time between watching the adults play on the bed, and looking down at the smiling face of his daughter.

"Little girl, you have *no* idea the joys coming to you when you grow up," he murmured, and she seemed to giggle just a tiny bit at that implied promise.

He continued to rock her, but eventually just spoke quietly to her; telling her of how much he'd always wanted to have his children by his side, and how happy he was with Maya and Déjà and her ... and even little Ronnie. At that she seemed to giggle a bit, and he bent down to plant a kiss on her forehead, before looking up at his wives on the bed again.

Déjà was laying on her back both relaxed and smiling, while Maya was laying with her head resting on one of her thighs. Déjà's eyes were closed when Maya lifted her head and looked in his direction, then patted a breast before pointing to the bundle in his arms.

He got up and stepped over, letting Maya take Faith from him. Then she lay on her side facing Déjà and settled with her Goddaughter laying between the two of them. After getting Faith latched on, she looked over her shoulder at him, then patted the bed behind her, grinning at him and nodding her head.

It was an unusual situation, but if the ladies were up for it, he was game as well. He crawled onto the bed, then lay down behind her and positioned himself to enter Maya from behind – pausing just long enough to make sure she was wet enough for easy penetration.

He should have known better, as she was drenched in lady lube and he easily slid into place and groaned in bliss as her hot wetness surrounded him once again.

"Be still, Donnie. Let *me* do it," she murmured, and he felt her begin to clench and release him, over and over.

He stayed still while she milked him repeatedly – enjoying himself, as she certainly seemed to enjoy it as well. Several minutes later, Déjà pulled Faith from Maya and began to nurse her, which let Maya roll onto her back, with her legs spread and her arms in the air.

"*Now*, Donnie! Do me *now*!" she cried softly, and he bent to the task with enthusiasm.



## Picking up the Pieces

After her second coming, he didn't hold back, and finally let loose with a whoosh that drained his body into his buxom bride and triggered an almost *complete* relaxation of his own. He held himself above her, but she pulled him down to lock lips with his until both of their breathing slowed to the point where they pulled apart far enough to smile into each other's eyes.

Déjà reached out and took turns pulling their heads in her direction to kiss them. Then she handed Faith to Maya, before diving down and separating them from each other – finally grabbing hold of his shrunken appendage and sucking it into her mouth.

After less than a minute of oral maintenance, she turned her attention to Maya's spread legs and duplicated her efforts in an attempt to get a head start on breakfast. Once satisfied, she rolled over on her back and Donald took the opportunity to share a loving kiss with the mother of his children.

After another tiny burp announced the end of breakfast for Faith, all three of them giggled at the rather unusual loving relationship they managed to maintain *despite* the living accessories needing maintenance and feeding along the way.

Donald had just gotten up when a knock was heard from the door, and Déjà called out, "Come in, Mother."

He was caught flatfooted and naked, not that he'd never been naked with Sai before, but it was Spring Blossom who entered the room and walked in on the residue of the morning session of lovemaking.

"Who is ready for breakfast?" she asked.

### *In the Dining Room*

It was after nine-thirty when Donald and the girls got themselves together enough to leave Spring Blossom alone with the babies for a while. Now they were enjoying a quiet breakfast with just the three of them ... and what looked like nineteen other women and children, plus a few guards.

As expected, Asad was sitting at a table with some of the women, while Orzala was sitting with Nurani and Barsala. From their body language, what little Donald could determine told him that it didn't appear Barsala and Orzala were too happy with Nurani at the moment. He really wanted to ask Asad about it, but he was sharing breakfast with his wives and that took priority.

Besides, the Afghanistan job was done, and all that was left was destroying the truck and returning Dorothy and Howard back to Washington, D.C. sometime later this evening.

He was sipping juice when Xue and John strode in, then watched them walk towards the table where he sat. He noted her arm was looped through John's, then wondered if they'd inadvertently become attached to each other, but brushed it off. John might have done so, but Xue was from Cletus. On top of that, she was an *Elder* of Cletus and stuck in a pretty sucky job for the rest of her life, which was a very *long* life. Well, at least she'd not been *shot* at as much as he had over the years.

Her eyes darted to his at that thought, and he remembered with a rush how open he was to her now – to *everyone*, probably. Then he wondered if everyone paid that much attention to him, or if it was just her, before she and John stopped when they reached their table.

“Good morning, Ladies. Good morning, Donald,” Xue murmured, while John merely nodded his head in greeting.

“Good morning, my Lady,” Donald said, then began to rise, but Xue waved him back down, his intent to honor the formalities apparently relaxed in this informal setting.

“Donald, Wilber reviewed your mission reports last night,” she said. “I did so as well, although he was not aware of it. I concur with your reasoning, and, as you understand Earthlings better than I, it was accepted at face value. I commend you on the success of your mission, Donald. No one died.”

“My Lady, with you and Lady Tal along it, was improbable that we would suffer such a catastrophic loss. My only regret is that issue with Faridun and Asad. I probably should have told him *before* letting Wakman kill Faridun. I'd forgotten Asad did not speak Russian.”

He paused for a moment, considering a question he'd not dared to ask her, but she answered it before he could ask, anyway.

“Sai explained that a suitable illusion would be appropriate to ensure Wakman and his men believed in Faridun's death. She mentioned what violations you'd been allowed under Elder Ai's rule, and I decided the situation warranted it.”

He stood and bowed formally this time.

“I thank you, my Lady,” he said. “In a previous life, I'd found that such illusions helped keep the loss of life to a minimum, while ensuring the appropriate message was received. My hope is the balance has been restored ... for the time being. I know Earthlings have no *real* understanding of their duty to society, but I remain hopeful.”

She stared at him while digging under his surface thoughts. It seemed he *truly* believed Earth was worth saving. She poked around a

## Picking up the Pieces

little more and was suddenly startled at some of the *connections* she began seeing in his mind. She was tempted to ask him about them, but preferred a non-biased opinion of them. Perhaps Wilber? Or maybe even Jaiying?

“Perhaps they will eventually mature, Donald. Class Four is such a *difficult* stage,” she murmured, then looked down at the remains of their breakfast. “John, I believe we should get something to eat before all of those patterned breads are gone.”

John looked at her, then down at the plate on the table.

“Waffles,” Donald whispered, and John nodded before directing Xue to the serving tables behind them.

As they walked away, Donald was struck at what a *nice* couple they made, which caused Xue to turn and smile at him for just a moment before turning back and looping her arm with John’s again.

### *Noon, (EST), Washington, D.C., The Embassy*

Fredricks and Abernathy were thinking of nothing in particular while they quietly enjoyed the meal provided by the Embassy staff. It was a curious mixture of native Earthling fare from the D.C. area, supplemented with imported Kantite delicacies. They’d found the presentation both pleasant and tasteful, and Dwight silently considered how similar in tastes the alien and Earthly palates seemed to be.

As that thought crossed his mind, Lady Huiling looked up and smiled at him. Of the two men in front of her, he seemed to be the more “worldly” between then. Timothy appeared to be more task-driven, compared to Dwight’s bland acceptance of everything that happened around him.

At first, she thought he’d suffered some emotional distress in his early life, but later determined that he seemed genuinely *happy* with his existence ... particularly now that his knowledge base and range of expertise in certain areas had been expanded.

Instead of suffering confusion or emotional distress at the discovery of aliens among them, Dwight had simply accepted it as a logical bit of a new reality he was grateful to be a part of.

“Is the meal to your satisfaction, gentlemen?” she asked quietly, in anticipation of learning what their thoughts *truly* revealed about them.

“It’s very good,” Timothy murmured. “The taste and texture is comparable to what I’ve had before.”

“I would have expected something more *exotic*, myself,” Dwight suggested cheerfully. “Alas, here in America we’ve gone away from

using *all* of our food animal's resources. We tend to shy away from internal organs that filter waste products, while focusing on muscle groups. I remember a meal prepared by a friend's wife with a recipe from her mother. Pig brains; deep fried and seasoned."

"Really? What was it like?"

He looked at her and considered again how much Lady Huiling resembled Sandy Kim's mother, but dropped that train of thought as irrelevant.

"It had a meaty taste, but the flavor wasn't as pronounced as pork roast or bacon. Of course, bacon is usually seasoned before it's packed. The most noticeable thing about it was the *texture* ... more like lumpy tofu than anything else I could describe. Have you had tofu, my Lady?"

"Oh yes. That bean curd protein product. It had a strange affect while digesting it, and I determined it was unsuitable for human consumption. Then I researched it, and found that *most* of it was genetically modified." She sounded somewhat saddened by that, but he didn't pursue it.

Timothy was ignoring their conversation while thinking back to this morning's interrogation session. He'd initially thought it would be awkward, but with two Seniors working in tandem, it had come across very smoothly. Lady Huiling had been inside the interrogation room with each prisoner, while he and Dwight remained outside watching on a monitor. Beside them had been Lady Jingfei, who'd silently passed their questions to Huiling, then received the translated answers back from her seamlessly.

It had promised to be awkward, and it was – up to a point. For one thing, none of the men spoke any English – not that it mattered in this setting, since Huiling spoke Pashto fluently. It also turned out she spoke Russian, Tajiki, Kyrgyz, Cantonese, and Mandarin.

In fact, the *only* ones who were probably pissed about the whole thing were the observers from the DEA who'd been forced to participate remotely via audio-only monitors.

Their issues had been focused on the drug trade, while Fredricks and Abernathy had mostly been concerned with the nuclear bomb that had taken priority during the *first* part of the interrogation.

Later this afternoon, the DEA would take the lead when Faridun would be pulled from protective custody and placed on the hot seat anonymously. It was expected that his drug information would be more informative.

On the plus side, he also spoke English.

***4 P.M., (EST), In a Holding Cell***

Faridun's escort had left him just inside the door before he'd closed and locked it behind him – giving him freedom to move around in what these people had laughingly called a “holding cell.” He stood just inside the closed door and looked around at his new home.

Americans...

They may be clueless about security, clueless about fighting terrorists, and clueless about taking care of those people whose “freedoms” they were so concerned about but when it came to *prisoners*, they made *every* effort to make sure their “human rights” were upheld to the maximum.

He gave a disgusted shake of his head, then slipped off his shoes before walking across the carpeted floor and taking a seat at the small desk where he'd left his book face down. He'd left it open to the page he'd been on when they'd come to pull him for his “interrogation” and was surprised they hadn't disturbed it during his absence.

A glance at the wall clock told him he had another two hours to wait until they fed him again. At eight o'clock, the lighting would dim by half, and he'd have to read at the table or on the bed by using the light at his bedside. At ten o'clock, the overhead light would go out, leaving only the footlights in the baseboards on either side of the two doors – the door to the attached bathroom, and the main door.

Of course, the attached bathroom had its *own* lighting and a fan.

He picked up his book, but his mood had been soured by the two wasted hours spent answering stupid questions fired at him by that Asian woman. Depending on the answers he'd given her, she'd displayed a mixture of both curiosity and contempt. Sometimes it didn't seem to matter if he answered or not – just the expression on her face showing her interest in, or her dissatisfaction with the silence between them. And it *really* hadn't helped when she'd reminded him of how his “old college mate” had helped them find him after all those years...

At least Barak hadn't been insufferable about it. He'd even spoken politely to him about the current situation he was in. On the face of it, the fact that bullets would not pass the invisible barrier to reach him seemed to verify his immediate claims of not coming there to kill him. No. That had been the goal of the men down by the truck on the road. They had come to kill him and whoever had stolen their original truck.

Then the American had explained – slowly and patiently – how the drug syndicate had been *less* than enthused with his insistence in obtaining a nuclear device to ship to the Americans – so much so that they'd managed to *find* one, but had built it into the truck body and

intended to eliminate him *and* his splinter group of terrorists because he'd gone off track regarding his vengeance plan against the Americans.

Nothing personal – it was only business. And just like a business, he'd been requested to come and talk to the men on the road about what he could do to lift the kill order on his head.

Then Barak had been led away by the American, while he'd been left alone to update Hask and Darwesh about the situation in Pashto.

They'd come back shortly, with Barak carrying a thick bundle under his arm. Then they'd been ordered to put down their weapons and back away from them. Barak had set the bundle down and backed away on their side, before a flicker was seen in the air between them. Then Barak had told him he would need to put on the under-armor before getting a chance to negotiate with the hit squad.

There was a delay involved while he'd argued with Hask and Darwesh, but he'd finally shucked his clothes to put on the under-armor. He'd stood there, and, at the suggestion of the American, had asked Hask to punch him in the stomach – quick and hard.

The result had been impressive, but he'd still been concerned with how it would react to a gunshot. In the end, he'd reluctantly agreed that, if no harm came to his men, he would meet with the men who were after him and see if a deal could be arranged. Then he'd dressed himself and relied on his men to insure the armor was completely hidden beneath his clothes.

Once free of the invisible wall, he'd walked off with Barak and the American, whose name was Donald. On the way, the little interpreter who'd escaped with Orzala's sister had passed him to go and speak with his men, only sparing him a nervous glance in passing.

Once they were out of sight, Donald had explained the rather dubious plan he'd had in mind – presenting the hit men with the opportunity to let him bargain for his life, with the probable result of him being shot one or more times in the stomach or chest.

After all – it was only business.

Their walk had stopped when that part had been explained. Barak had assured him that no one had died – *yet* – although it was important to make sure that he didn't take a round to the *head*.

Then they'd continued to go and meet with Wakman and his men, and, as he'd already suspected, he'd been offered up as a sacrificial victim to appease the warrant on his head. Donald had held him by one arm, and Barak had taken his other, while Wakman had taken careful aim at his midsection – as carefully supervised by the very tall

## Picking up the Pieces

and *armed* American watching over the proceedings from the top of the berm.

One of the last things he remembered was the little translator running up and screaming “<NO! NO! NO!>” before the first round hit his stomach. Then the second round hit his chest, and it reminded him of being kicked in the chest during a soccer match back in college, one that had landed hard enough to knock him off his feet. He vaguely remembered taking a few more rounds and hearing screaming, but it wasn’t coming from him.

After that, he’d woken up in the back of a big box and was being tended to by Orzala and some Asian woman.

The ache in his chest and stomach had been trivial, compared to the emotional impact of seeing the pile of bodies tied to the floor in front of him. It had given him some relief knowing that he wasn’t to be counted among them – at least not yet.

Then Barak had stepped in and told him the hit men were satisfied with his death – *and* the drugs – while his men were free to go back to the valley. He’d reminded him that they needed to spread the truth about Bazgar, and how he’d set him up with the drug syndicate. Then the Asian woman, Xue, had been called away to deal with the translator who’d tried to save his life, but had nearly gotten his hand shot off for his trouble.

That last had surprised him more than *anything* that had happened that evening. Not even Orzala willingly showing up in the stench of the box and seeing to his comfort could compare to that little man trying to come to his rescue.

It had given him much to think about, which he’d done for quite a while, as he’d sat there with a gag in his mouth, his head in a hood, tied in place, and left to sit in the stench of death while they transported him to a place where he would be questioned...

Faridun suddenly shook himself and looked around the room. He put the book down and went over to lie on the bed for a while. It promised to be a comfortable place to wait until they decided what to do with him.

Perhaps if he were more cooperative, they might even find a reason to keep him alive.

### ***21:45 (MST), Over the Moon...***

Donald held them steady nearly one-hundred sixty kilometers above the nuclearized truck. He’d oriented them vertically in anticipation of their first attempt failing, with the internal gravity adjusted accordingly.

"Well ... we're here," he muttered, then looked back at John. "I'll enable the pass-through, but I doubt the signal will reach that far."

"Donald, the guys ... *your* guys on the moon are clear, right?" Howard asked him.

"Oh yeah. Wilber passed the word through the Embassy before we left, and got confirmation they were clear. *No one* wants to be around for any stray radiation," he assured him.

"Shouldn't you put a filter over the front window or something?" Dorothy asked.

Both Sai and Donald turned to look at her, then Donald adjusted a control to zoom the image on the display screen in and out a few times before finally hearing a muttered, "Oh," from her.

"It will automatically blank when it gets too bright," he said. "The image processors will even it out so the final recordings should come out all right, though. Go ahead, John."

They all watched the display intently when John switched on the remote and pressed the button – with no affect whatsoever.

He pressed it several times, moving his arm up, down, and sideways as he did so, but the bomb didn't go off.

"Well... *That's* rather disappointing," Donald muttered. "I suppose *they* were on a suicide mission but *I'm* not."

He got up and went aft, coming back a few minutes later and sitting back down. There was a red light blinking on the console, with a duplicate in a small window on each side of the front display.

"Sai, fire up the weapons console, please. Calculate me a time to impact at this distance."

As she was doing this, Donald got up again and wandered back to the refrigerator.

"About ninety-three seconds, Don. Make it a minute and a half," she called out.

"Please execute, Sai."

They all heard a thump from below them, then saw a diminishing streak heading towards the target on the display. Sai was gradually enlarging it to zoom in on the impact zone when they heard the sound of a pop top being pulled, followed by the slurp of a soda, before Donald wandered forwards and stood in the aisle beside everyone.

"Please leave about ... ten kilometers of width on the display, Sai. That should be sufficient to make an impression," he muttered.



## Picking up the Pieces

They watched as the view zoomed to fill the display with the truck, then slowly backed off until it could barely be seen on the surface.

"Fifteen seconds... Ten seconds... Five.." Sai stopped when the screen suddenly blanked.

"Proximity fusing," Donald muttered. "It only needed to get close."

Ten seconds later, the screen came back, and Sai zoomed in slowly – letting them see the non-devastation caused by the tiny anti-matter round. Where the truck had been was now occupied by a rather regular hole in the ground. Donald handed his soda to Sai while settling into the pilot's seat.

"Let's get a closer look and take some radiation readings, shall we?" he murmured, then started them downward to take a good look at the damage.

In actuality, there was no damage. Just a very regular hole in the ground that looked a lot like someone had taken a giant ice cream scoop and removed a section of moon. There was no debris, no blast pattern, and no truck. The radiation sensors on the display registered nothing beyond background normal, except for some irregularities the closer they came to the hole.

"Okay. That was a bust," he mumbled, then keyed in a few settings and they were suddenly looking at the truck once again.

He adjusted something, and the recorded image quickly zoomed out, followed by it zooming back in. He stopped it and then advanced slowly, creeping along until they could see the trace of a shell falling away from them. Then it went to frame-by-frame until the display blanked, and he paused it at that point. After a few more adjustments, the image cleared so they could see a shining spherical wave front enlarging from a point a few hundred feet above the target. As the frames advanced again, the wave front expanded, reaching down and past the surface of the moon. It continued to expand until it encompassed two-thirds the width of the display before it blanked again. Donald made an adjustment or two, and the image came back to show the sphere gone, leaving a six-kilometer hole in the surface of the moon.

"There. A few adjustments in brightness and contrast, and you've got a rather tidy demonstration of a tiny anti-matter load in action."

There was silence as the impact affected the observers individually. Finally, Dorothy found the presence of mind to ask a question.

"You... Ahhh ... you said that was a small ... a *tiny* anti-matter load. How ... how big do they get?"

Donald looked to Sai, and nodded his head.

“That was a small projectile round,” she said, “10 centimeters – *specifically* designed for this ship. The *Kraken*, the ship my husband now commands, carries ten larger rounds in the loading bays. They aren’t projectiles. They feed a particle beam weapon. One load, one shot.”

She paused, wondering if she should continue, but saw Donald nod again.

“The particle beam can split a planet apart. The beam is forty ... maybe fifty kilometers in diameter. It extends *well* past the diameter of most inhabited planets ... maybe thirty to forty thousand kilometers,” she said, then paused again before adding, “The loads themselves are *extremely* dangerous. There were a few occasions when they had to be jettisoned, and then–” she stopped, not wanting to reveal the insanity of the aliens to these naïve Earthlings – not that it ever stopped Donald.

“I’m told they made a very pretty *star* out in someone’s asteroid field,” he said cheerfully. “A *couple* of them, if I remember correctly.”

He reached over, plucked his soda from Sai’s hand, and finished it with a small burp.

“Sai, can you please transfer that recording to a data tab for these nice people? They can get it converted to a USB drive after we arrive at the Embassy.” He looked at the timer in the upper corner of his display, and nodded. “I wonder what they’re having for midrats?”

### ***10 P.M. (MST), A Quiet Conversation in the Center***

Xue smiled and slowly shook her head, seeing the knowing nod from Jaiying when Sai reported the destruction of the bomb-laden truck on the backside of the moon.

“Donald has completed his task, and now travels to return our guests to the Embassy,” she said quietly.

“*Finally*,” Laisee muttered, then took another sip of her ambrosia.

They were sitting together in Laisee’s outer suite because Xue had wanted a meeting with her to discuss Donald’s future.

Xue had yet to tell her of her final decision, and Laisee was trying not to display anxiety about his impending doom. For one thing, it would certainly destroy Maya and perhaps even Déjà.

The children would most likely take great exception to it as well.

Xue settled back and sipped from her goblet, finally coming to a decision she’d find sufficiently difficult to explain until certain arrangements were in place back on Cletus and Kantor.

## Picking up the Pieces

“Laisee, I believe Donald no longer presents a threat to the stability of our society. He should be safe here ... so long as you have no problems keeping him in check. He *will*, of course, require proper supervision at all times. Do you think Maya is up to the task?”

Laisee looked surprised, then shared that look with a smiling Jaiying.

“I think, between the *two* of us – and Maya – we can keep Donald occupied for the next decade ... or perhaps two,” Laisee said, her relief being tempered by the implied threat of a relapse on his part.

“You are prepared to stay here that long? Won’t your father desire you to–”

“My father has found it reasonable that I should remain here to observe – perhaps even *replace* Ambassador Horatius should the need arise,” she interrupted her. “Of course, in that instance I would transfer to the Embassy, but then be in a better position to evaluate the Earth’s leaders and recommend possible directions towards which to guide them.”

Xue looked at her while considering this new information. She had found Lord Domitius lacking in ... well, just so many ways. His dietary behavior *alone* was appalling. Still, his Healers and Seniors had been placed only in an *advisory* capacity, so it was to be expected.

“Then I ask the Gods grace that they find favor with you as you execute the tasks in front of you,” she said, while ignoring the sudden flare from Jaiying’s surface thoughts at that particular word. “There are many tasks before the *both* of us, but I’m sure we will both work hard to become successful.”

She reached her hand up to the pendant on her neck, steeling herself against the potential it had to change the future for everyone. She finally lifted it over her head and handed it to Laisee.

“You should keep this safe, Laisee,” she murmured. “Should the need arise.”

Laisee took it from her and looked at it curiously. It was a small pendent, a cylinder of sorts, on a thin chain. Xue turned to look at Jaiying, then directed a burst of thought at her, causing her to gasp.

“Look *within*, Mother,” Jaiying whispered, then closed her eyes to focus on the hidden contents herself.

They spent the better part of a minute searching the sealed cylinder until Laisee looked up at Xue with a question in her eyes.

“It is a tiny sample of your father, child,” she said. “Donald... Donald is an *Earthling* now. As such, he is rather *harmless*. His body

still contains a few particles of Vanir origin that caused his rather unfortunate degradation, but after a while ... perhaps in a few years, perhaps in a decade or more, his body should have flushed itself to the point where this *might* reverse his condition. He will need *close* observation, of course, and you must exercise very *strict* control of such information. It would not do to bring the 'Demon of the Commonwealth' out of retirement without the Elder being forewarned."

"Lili would *never*—"

"I was not speaking of Liling, Laisee," Xue interrupted her, but left this new question open, as there was more work to accomplish on Cletus before any more changes took place. "Besides, it might take both of you a while to figure out the best way to reintroduce your father's genetic markers back into Donald."

"I'm pretty sure Uncle Petrus has reference samples on the *Kraken*," Jaiying offered helpfully, which drew both of their smiling attention.

"Just as I'm sure your contacts with various scientific resources could put you on the right path to accomplish such ... in perhaps a decade or longer," Xue suggested. "That is, if the situation seems *warranted*. I cannot imagine the 'Kraken's Child' being planet-bound with nothing else to keep himself occupied."

Xue's lips curled into a smirk at the thought of it.

They relaxed in this new non-threatening atmosphere of relief, the women with their ambrosia, and Jaiying with her juice box. Donald without a death sentence was perhaps a greater burden – there was no telling what *other* mischief he could get into – but it was certainly better than knowing his life remained hanging on a whim.

Laisee played back their conversation in her mind and picked on a missing tidbit of fact.

"Elder Xue, what are *your* plans now?"

Xue didn't really know what to say, as there were so many avenues that needed to be reviewed in order to gain insight as to the future of the Commonwealth.

She made a thoughtful decision, figuring it wouldn't take more than a year at most.

"I believe that Earth should be studied more thoroughly," she finally said. "Donald had some interesting concepts that life on Earth is a microcosm of the entire Commonwealth, with sub-races of humanity duplicated across the clusters of the known planets within the Commonwealth."

## Picking up the Pieces

"It's not so far fetched," Laisee said. "The researchers on the *Kraken* have *already* established the Vanir were transplanted from here, Earth, many millions of years ago."

"You could pass for Chinese, Elder Xue," Jaiying said. "I've researched a lot on Uncle Wilber's computer, and I see lots of familiar people from Earth's different countries. No one seems to know what is further out from here – besides the Vanir – but the Bornat went about ten-thousand hours, inward so it's *anybody's* guess what they'll find the closer they get to the center of the galaxy."

Xue smiled at Jaiying's cheerful enthusiasm. It might be nice to spend a year in study with these very young Seniors.

### **3:15 A.M., (EST), Coming Home**

Howard parked his car in the driveway and finally found a moment to relax.

At this time in the morning, the traffic from the Embassy to home had been almost non-existent, and he was *extremely* grateful to finally be back. He was also glad he'd have something to talk to Chuck about and show him on his computer, then slipped a hand into his pocket, and made *sure* the USB drive and security dongle were still in there. He exited the car and got his bag out of the trunk before locking it and heading up his walkway. He almost had his keys out when he heard the front door unlocking, and it opened to show Audrey standing there in her robe with a big smile on her face.

Her smile was contagious. Howard stepped into her welcoming embrace and closed the door behind him before devouring her lips with his.

It was *good* to be home!

### **Tuesday, September 5, 2015, Arizona, The Healer Center**

Donald and his wives sat on a bench in the mid-morning shade of the playground patio, while their children joined in play with the children of the garrison. This time, Ronnie had been playing with one of his playmates for quite a while before an argument developed between him and the younger boy.

It might have escalated if Faith hadn't stepped in and mediated the situation.

"And once *again*, the peacemaker has saved us from chaos," Donald muttered under his breath, feeling Maya lean into him on one side, with Déjà following suit on the other.

"He has a lot of his father in him," Déjà murmured, which triggered a silent snort from their husband.

"A lot of his *Grandfather*, you mean," he muttered. "I don't recall being *that* willful at his age."

"Donnie, you were in a household where you were not welcomed by the others," Maya reminded him. "Laisee has spoken of it. Out of the three children with you, only you and she got along."

He sat there musing over the youth he was in his past. It'd been bad, with his stepbrothers always putting him down and making his life miserable. At least Laisee had always been nice to him. Her, and most of the other Wives.

"You don't suppose... He isn't becoming *sexually* aware yet, is he?" he asked, then turned back to look at how he interacted with the children in this new light.

"I have been watching and listening," Maya assured him. "He is aware. How can he *not* be with all of us involved with each other? Jaiying has suggested she would be willing to *teach* him – with your *approval*, of course."

Jaiying again...

He let out a sigh, remembering the collusion perpetrated by his wives and stepsister/niece when Jaiying had reached her first teenage year. He *had* become her first – her first *male* partner, anyway – but not by *his* choice. Rather, he'd awoken to find himself on his back, with her being coached by Laisee and Maya while she rode him slowly – all the while grinning down at him in triumph.

In Earth years, she was sixteen now. Although not remaining celibate since then, she'd conducted limited liaisons within the various male and female garrison staff that had not breeched Kantite morality. As always, *Earthling* morality had not been worthy of consideration.

"I suppose... He would have to receive proper training before we send him off to academy, anyway," he finally decided, which brought a sharp gasp from Déjà.

Maya reached across Donald's stomach and patted her co-wife's hand lovingly.

"He is a Prince of House *Caldarous*, Déjà. He *must* fulfill his duty," she reminded her. "I know it will be difficult, but we will still have Faith with us while we teach her to become a Healer. Besides, it will be a few more years until he will leave."

"But I will *miss* him so."

"We *all* will, my girl," Donald reassured her. "But today we celebrate his and his sister's birthday, so be of light heart..." he paused for a

## Picking up the Pieces

moment, then asked, “Ahh, no ‘pixie dust’ this year, this is true?” Déjà let out a tiny gasp, while Maya chuckled by his other side...

Last year’s debacle in the Center’s dining room was *legend*. Déjà had been the one to make the innocent purchase of candy sprinkles for the cup cake decorating activity that day, which had left Ling in an absolute *tizzy* afterwards...

Fred and Cocheta strolled up, with Fred pushing a stroller containing a little girl who looked eager to join the party at the playground.

“Where’s your *better* half, Fred?” Donald asked him.

“Nascha’s still at work, while I, being a teacher at the end of summer vacation, have taken the opportunity to share the day with Bethany’s beautiful *Grandma*,” he said, then glanced down at Cocheta, which caused her to blush appropriately...

Cocheta had become a surprising success story for Ling and the rest of the staff. Her sessions had become intensive, especially after Fred had been recovered – less the lower half of one leg. The care and concern he and her daughter had shown each other helped break down her barriers, which then allowed Ling to take advantage of it and let her lead Cocheta back to a balanced existence.

Now “Grandma” was in a relationship with one of the garrison staff, a technician, and she’d been considering his offer of a formal bonding. She’d not rejected it outright, but still had a little ways to go before taking the leap. If nothing else, it would be similar to living with someone while you were making up your mind if you could really *tolerate* each other over the long haul – or in this case, in one-year intervals...

Cocheta squatted down to unlatch little Bethany, then held her hand as she walked her over to the shredded-rubber playground. Once there, she hefted her into one of the bucket swings and got her belted in, then stood aside and gave her a starting push before the little girl started pumping her legs like a pro. In no time at all, she was matching the other children swing-for-swing.

Now that her granddaughter was situated, Cocheta looked around and spotted grandson Tony playing on the monkey bars with some of the other children.

He, Ronnie, and Faith were the oldest of the small tribe of garrison children, with most of the others in the range of five to seven years.

“How is the *new* leg holding out, Fred?” Maya asked him teasingly.

He smiled down at her, then playfully pulled up his right pants leg to show her.

“It is absolutely *amazing* – now that I don’t have to wear that damn *prosthetic* any longer. I mean, the guys at Hanger Clinic were great, but this is so much better.”

It had been a difficult decision at the time. They could either regrow his leg, which would leave *no* explanation for him being whole and healthy after his legless rescue from the terrorists, or simply stabilize him before turning him over for traditional medical treatment. In the end, and after much consultation between Fred and his wife, Howard Mayfield recommended that he let the Center’s Healers repair as much damage as they could so the military hospitals would have an easy time of prepping him for a prosthetic. After his discharge, he could then return and continue with the regrowth solution offered by the Ladies, which is what he’d done.

After the Ladies had researched, and then prepared his stump for it, he’d spent six weeks in a military hospital in California while being fitted for an artificial leg. A year of hobbling around on one, just to seat the reality of his disability into the minds of authority, had allowed him and his wife time to come up with a game plan for their future – which culminated with Fred continuing his education to earn a teaching certificate he was now applying in town.

The “regrown” leg was – to the *public* – a remarkably fortunate happenstance that came about when a “compatible donor” leg had become available, subsequently letting Fred become a recipient for an experimental transplant operation. Naturally, the two-weeks of “rehabilitation” he’d spent at the Center had simply been the time necessary for him to regrow his existing leg, but it also provided training for the growing number of Healer-trainees. Afterwards, a cosmetic surgery scar had been applied at an appropriate location to obscure the fact that his leg was now contiguous from top to bottom. They’d even gone so far as to add superficial bone rings to the finished joint in case it was ever x-rayed.

Anthony Hernandez had had it *much* easier. After Elder Xue’s quick repairs almost a decade ago, the Ladies had reconditioned him over the span of a couple of weeks while going back and recreating simulated battle damage to his body – all under the guidance of Sai Tal and Lady Ling. Then he and Fred were transferred to a stateside facility for rehabilitation and reassignment. Unlike the *unreported* chunk of Fred’s missing foot that Faridun’s group had left behind at the ambush site, there were no missing limbs to account for, and his recovery had been easier to gloss over. In honor of their shared captivity, Fred and Nascha had named their firstborn Anthony...

“So ... is Laisee coming back for the birthday party?” Fred quietly asked Donald. He’d spared a glance at Cocheta before asking it, knowing his mother-in-law was still somewhat pissed at Laisee after



## Picking up the Pieces

catching her in a threesome with her daughter and son-in-law last month...

After she'd said she was taking the kids into town for a movie, Grandma had brought the kids in with her when she'd stopped by their quarters to pick up a change of clothing for Bethany. That was where she'd inadvertently walked in on them between acts of naked indulgence. Fred had turned a bright shade of pink and Nascha buried herself under the blankets, while Laisee had politely offered to call Jaiying to come and take care of the children so Cocheta could join them in play.

Afterwards, they'd maintained a polite stiffness for the first few weeks but Cocheta had gradually warmed up to them again – especially since Laisee had stayed at the Embassy for the following two weeks. She'd said she'd try to be back for the birthday party, but it wasn't a given...

"No word yet," Donald said, after having caught where Fred was looking...

The rumor mill had disseminated that Kantite-Earthling faux pas around the garrison before the participants had even managed to get their clothes back on.

While the garrison as a whole had been generally amused by it, Fred and Nascha seemed to take it in stride, whereas Cocheta had been *scandalized*. That was a month ago, but things seemed to be looking up – almost...

Fred looked to where Donald was looking and let out a tiny sigh.

"I think she's finally getting over it," he murmured. "She's been talking to Ling – personal counseling or something. I think she might have said *physical* therapy, although I don't know how well she'd respond to a back rub."

Maya twitched while restraining herself from laughing out loud. In point of fact, it *had* been a form of physical therapy, but she and Ling had been providing it, with the help of Kiki and her *new* trainee, *Kichi*...

Kichi was a Kee "companion" trainee who'd been caught and socialized by Sai and Petrus a few years ago as part of a study to see how easily the Kee could be safely reintroduced back into society. So far, it seemed to work out well ... as long as they were *fed* regularly...

"She seems well contented this day," Maya finally said. "She takes joy in her grandchildren. Is she still considering the bonding with Caius?"

Fred leaned against the armrest of the bench and smiled down at her.

“She hasn’t accepted yet, but I think she’s still considering it. She still has to get over ... well, *lots* of stuff, I guess.”

“One would imagine,” Donald murmured, then looked up and smiled as Cocheta walked over to join them at the bench. He felt Maya bumping his hip to push him over towards Déjà, even as Déjà had already slid over to make room for him.

“Come and *sit* with us, Cocheta,” Maya called to her, then patted the bench next to her in invitation.

Both she and Cocheta shared a secret smile while she sat in the shade with them.

### *In the Residence*

“I’m taking Ekta to the playground,” Mary called out, then stopped when she entered the living room and saw that her daughter was still nursing from Kayla.

Little Ekta Wind Runner was three-years-old now, and walking and talking up a storm. Both she and Kayla were still nursing her, but Kayla was linked with Mary during labor and delivery, then *immediately* decided that *one* child between the three of them was quite enough. That had been three years ago, and although she still enjoyed sharing feeding duties for their little girl, she had *no* intention of adding to the over-population of the world. Thus, Ekta took center stage in the lives of this happy threesome, truly earning her the English translation of her Apache name – Unity.

“She’s about done, aren’t you, sweetie?”

Kayla had looked down when she’d asked her, and Ekta pulled back and let go of her nipple with a happy smile on her face.

“*Playground! We go playground!*”

“Yes, Mama is gonna take you to the *playground*,” Kayla said, then started fastening her nursing bra while Ekta slid down off her lap and ran over to grab Mary’s legs.

While mother and daughter were getting their shoes on, the sound of a toilet flushing, followed by the hallway door opening, drew their attention to Wilber as he wandered out of the other side of the residence.

“Uncle *Wilber!* Uncle *Wilber!* Mama take me go *playground!*” Ekta called out excitedly, then made a beeline across the living room to grab him by the legs.

## Picking up the Pieces

Wilber stretched one hand down to run his fingers through her hair, while the other reached up to scratch his head. The yawn he let loose, along with his generally relaxed appearance, indicated he and Shu had slept in this morning in anticipation of a busy afternoon managing the sugar-infused horde of children expected at the birthday party for the Prince and Princess.

Hopefully, it wouldn't devolve into another episode of multiple trails of "pixie dust" scattered by a "frollick of incontinent pre-pubescent faeries" like what had happened *last* year. Ling had been mildly furious at the violation of the Center's dining room policy against vermin bait, and summarily declared candied sprinkles *anathema* to a healthy environment.

His torso spasmed at the memory of Don muttering that phrase, always amazed at the obscure references he seemed to pull out of his ass with unexpected regularity.

Another flush of the toilet was followed by Shu stepping out and encircling her husband's waist with her arms. At three months pregnant, it wasn't yet difficult, but she was envious of all the children already at the Center. Just over three months ago, Wilber had finally agreed that this was as good a time as any to start their family. He was turning seventy years old next month, and his hair had turned grayer with every passing year – courtesy of cosmetic changes by the Healer staff. Essentially, it looked like he'd aged almost forty years in the last ten, thus making his *official* retirement a done deal, not that it had really changed anything.

Dwayne maintained the official connection between the Embassy and the government while Wilber had been hired as a direct employee by the Embassy to provide onsite support and observation of the Healer Center. If anything, his pay had gone up considerably, especially considering they still lived in the house he'd been in since the Center had gone up, he still ate on the Embassy's dime, and his needs were very few – just his wife and his job – or something equally satisfying to feel productive in his "old age."

Wilber let go of the girl, then patted his wife's arms before heading to the freezer and pulling out his breakfast sandwich. He unwrapped it, rearranged it, then popped it into the microwave for its 90-second journey from a frozen sausage and egg patty to a warm, if not exactly *wholesome* meal. While it was warming, he sat down at the kitchen table and watched as Shu carefully measured out the ingredients for his one cup of special blend for the day. Once she handed it to him, he sipped it while contemplating this portion of his life...

Thankfully, having Donald around had *not* become the burden he'd expected. After that whole chaotic business in Afghanistan, things had returned to normal – more or less.

Word had gotten around – hard to avoid in the current technological age – but they'd not bent to pressure from elements of the government to provide equipment and training for the purposes of fighting the country's foreign wars. They had instead continued to provide specific assistance with *non-military* actions to keep capricious situations from getting out of hand, becoming more of a "special" intelligence organization that was amenable to helping out in a pinch – up to a *point*.

As Laisee had heatedly explained at one government meeting she'd attended, "We're not here to *raise* you children. You have enough knowledge to raise *yourselves*. We're just here to make sure you don't *fuck things up along the way!*" which, of course, had been *less* than enlightening, but sobering just the same.

Even afterwards, the Americans had remained persistent and began trying to exert pressure on the Embassy, and then the Center, until a few tentative probes had been misplaced along the way.

"Misplaced" was actually a misnomer, in that those involved weren't really misplaced so much as relocated to a secure facility where they'd had their brains picked over to reveal their *true* intent – and then those *above* them had been acquired for the very same purposes. A year of that – and after the people involved had been returned in good health, but with absolutely *no* idea of where they'd been, *who'd* they spoken to, or what they were supposed to have been doing there in the *first* place – had resulted in no further intrusions into Center business unless an invitation had been offered *first*, and that was at the discretion of the Center's management team.

The actual number of official visitors had been very few – just those like Howard Mayfield and Dorothy Gale, who'd stumbled across the alien presence by accident. Still, as agencies became more aware of the benefits of cooperation, some inquiries had been passed along that brought curious visitors to the Center to learn more about these strangers who'd said they had their best interests in mind, but wouldn't give them the tools needed to help them achieve it – meaning *weapons* that would let them rule the entire *world*.

A few demonstrations usually fixed that little problem, with a suitable memory block to keep the observers from repeating what they'd observed...

Wilber smiled at that. Before Xue left, she and Ling worked together with Donald in creating a set of guidelines permitting the Seniors to *legally* mess with people's heads in order to keep wildfire disclosures from occurring. They'd been pretty successful so far – more or less. The *less* had suffered an unfortunate lack of credibility when they'd tried to spill the beans, but follow-on counseling prevented them from

## Picking up the Pieces

*total* collapse as individuals or family members – they becoming merely *eccentric* rather than deranged and committable.

On top of all *that*, Donald's counter-conspiracy project placed in action nearly a decade ago was *always* ready with new internet videos of just barely real images and recordings to keep both the nutcases and the scientific brain trust off balance from reality – all as a follow up to counter the theories of those who were *really* in the know and wanted to blab it to the world...

The beep from the microwave cheerfully announced it was done, and Wilber accepted his hot sandwich and unwrapped it with ease. After ten years of practice, he'd managed the right combination of layers glued together with bits of frozen cheese slice to hold everything in place without leaking cheese all over the wrapper. He'd had the occasional slip, as when he couldn't separate the frozen layers from the bread and each other, but they were a rarity now. He took a bite and enjoyed the generic flavors of the sausage and egg concoction while glancing out the window towards the Center.

He saw Lean Bear and his wife arriving with their daughter and being greeted by Jaiying. He watched her escort them to the Center, knowing they were probably heading to the dining room for brunch before the party. He didn't see their car anywhere and figured they'd probably parked in the garage. Most people *preferred* to park in the garage now, instead of out in the open...

That had been one of the additional projects taking place in the last ten years; a *formal* parking structure covered with solar panels. They didn't really need the panels, but it was a show of solidarity with the environmental movement, and Donald had simply said, "Take it out of petty cash." Wilber had thought it silly that – after *forty years* – they were *still* going with the ridiculous fiction of solar panels charging batteries during the day that ran inverters at night to provide electricity. With an average of three-hundred days of sunshine a year, he supposed it made *some* sort of sense.

In reality, they had five power units to feed the needs of the Center – one for the garrison housing area, one for the motor pool and Center, the original one for the residence, and two high-capacity units that individually powered the overall protective shield, and the particle beam weapon housed in the large hut located in the middle of the "Museum of Historical Apache Dwellings."

The museum had been a clever suggestion by Gray Feather back in 2010. It justified the existence of the historical buildings within the boundaries of the Center, and provided a much-needed reminder of how far the tribe had come over the years. Granted, the Apache had not maintained *fixed* locations in their early existence, but at least

here were adobe, and now *reproduction* animal hide examples of their previous way of life.

Gray Feather had lived to see the opening of the museum, but passed away last year at the age of one-hundred and fifteen. To his credit, he'd lived long enough to see that his tribe was continuing to grow strong and fighting off the corrupting influences of the white man.

To Wilber it seemed an almost pyrrhic victory, as they were still being heavily influenced by the "white" and "Asian" aliens at the Center but at least the children were getting more opportunities for personal growth and success than ever before. They'd already graduated two doctors and a dentist, along with several practicing engineers, with the resources Ronnie had obligated for the health, well-being, and education of his tribe.

Ten of the younger tribeswomen had become practicing Healers, and two of them had reached out to one of the other tribes to see if there was an interest among them in learning this "holistic" health modality more in keeping with their history. As always, it remained a work in progress.

The actual "spa" function of the Healer Center had not been a success because of the limited number of options available to the visiting public. Those expecting a "traditional" vacation spa had been disappointed by the absence of plush accommodations, steam rooms, whirlpool baths, and saunas. The ones who'd stuck it out had been cured of many of their underlying problems but the fact that they weren't aware of them to begin with had been a net negative for their generally disappointing experience.

Of course, there were the few who'd actually *known* they had a life-threatening condition and had come to simply enjoy this relatively inexpensive luxury while they were still somewhat mobile. They'd left feeling full of life, and either came back for follow-on visits, or recommended the Center to their friends. One of them had even spoken to her doctor, who'd showed up and played the curious visitor before Jaiying breached his thoughts and outed him in front of Ling.

That had led to a closed-door session between him and Ling, along with a limited demonstration of what a Healer was *actually* capable of doing – something that had left him stunned, concerned, and finally humbled at what little he'd actually learned from his formal medical education. It hadn't helped any when Ling had informed him that men simply weren't built to perform Healings to begin with, which had sent him into a bout of depression over the next two days. She'd finally intervened and sectioned off those offending bits of knowledge in his head, following it with the suggestion that not everything could be

## Picking up the Pieces

explained but alternative methods of Healing were viable upon occasion...

Wilber was rolling up his sandwich wrapper when he saw Barsala and Vibianus walking towards the Center...

They'd been a couple for the last three years after the last of the refugees had been indoctrinated, then immigrated to one of the communities in the Demon's Realm. Asad, Nurani, and their child had immigrated with them, as there was no reasonable expectation they could safely return to *anywhere* in Afghanistan and remain alive.

Early on, they *had* found a very small community of Pashto-speaking immigrants living in Maricopa County but had been disappointed to find that they'd brought along most of the culturally oppressive elements from their native lands with them. After a careful investigation, it had been determined that the women – and especially the *girls* – would not be safe in that transplanted community.

During indoctrination, Barsala had picked up Standard rather quickly, then sought out Vibianus as she'd remembered him from the rescue of her and her companions. She'd initially wanted to know more about the Americans, but just as Asad and Nurani had told her, except for very few of them, these weren't really Americans at all.

Their conversations had spread to issues of both their pasts, and they'd eventually become attached to each other. He'd explained about bonding and what it meant, but she'd dismissed the concept of being locked to one person for one year at a time, let alone a lifetime. Vibianus knew she'd had a tough beginning – as did all who'd interfaced with her – but he'd stuck it out for, as he'd explained to him one time, “Karma demands a balance, and she is in need of balance.”

Instead of a true bonding, she'd gone ahead and moved into the garrison with him, then quickly picked up enough English to make herself understood in town...

Wilber sighed as he got up to throw away his wrapper and rinse out his cup. Shu had already gone back to shower, and he smiled at the pretty picture she would make when she came back to the bedroom to dry off and get dressed. He quickly put his things away and headed back to help her in the shower ... and then maybe delay her dressing for a little while longer.

### ***Friday, December 27, 2019, Washington D.C., The Embassy***

Ambassador Caldarous was *fuming*. These insane Earthlings were intent on *destroying* themselves, and she didn't see a way of stopping them that wouldn't bring *chaos* across the globe. Assistants and support staff alike avoided her when she stalked back to her quarters for the night.

The American President, the leader of the “free” world, was an arrogant, egotistical *buffoon* who’d somehow managed to avoid impeachment throughout his term of office, and now had the temerity to try to run for reelection so he could rise up the *rest* of the world against the Americans. It was insanity in action.

She made it to her suite and slammed the door behind her.

“Mother, this will *not* help maintain your neutrality,” Jaiying murmured helpfully. She’d felt her coming all the way from her office, and was standing just inside the door with an unbreakable goblet of ambrosia in hand for her.

Laisee spun in place and stared at her twenty-year-old daughter.

As usual, she’d arrived unannounced and awaited her in her quarters to “surprise her” with the gift of her presence. Laisee glared at her for several seconds until the warmth of Jaiying’s smile finally melted her foul mood. Then she hunched her stiff shoulders before letting them drop. Jaiying held out the goblet, and she took it from her and sipped the sweet nectar that wormed its way down her gullet and began spreading warmth and calm in its wake. She closed her eyes in relief and took a great calming breath before letting it out in a groaning sigh.

Jaiying stepped closer and hugged her mother, before stepping back and taking her goblet from her to sip from it herself, then setting it down on the table beside her. She closed with Laisee again and embraced her warmly, bringing their lips together as she sought to ease her mother’s loneliness and isolation in this hellhole of the Commonwealth. They lingered at the kiss, letting their tongues dance together lightly, before breaking away and sharing giggles at the depths they’d been reduced to.

“Imagine. The Emperor’s daughter and granddaughter being unable to find willing companionship among the Ambassadorial staff,” Jaiying murmured, then leaned in to give her mother another quick peck on the lips before breaking away and leading her over to the couch, bringing the goblet along with her.

“Have you come to report *good* news, or are you here just to *torment* me?” Laisee muttered, as she sat down on the couch and looked up at her.

Jaiying stopped and stared at her, wondering if she’d misjudged her mother’s mood completely. She’d thought a quiet evening of play before the start of the weekend would help her relax.

She was considering an involuntary application of the Gift when her mother let out a sigh and shook her head slowly.



## Picking up the Pieces

"I'm sorry, Jaiying. *This* is no place for you. For *either* of us. I fear the Earthlings are too *stupid* to see the folly of their ways."

Jaiying snorted, then sat down next to her mother.

"Insane ... hairless ... apes," she murmured, then leaned over and rested her head on her mother's shoulder.

They stayed like that for several minutes, neither one of them wanting to break the silence. Laisee finally reached down and took the goblet from her fingers, taking a sip from it.

"What was it John said? Import it by the *tanker* full, and make the whole *world* mild?" Laisee muttered. "Or something like that."

"I wonder if he's still with Xue," Jaiying murmured, then smiled at the memory of him being asked to go along with her to Cletus. "I haven't heard of him in ... five years now, I think."

"Frankly, I would be more worried for *Xue*. Rong and Ju were *less* than pleased when she arrived with John in tow."

Jaiying twitched slightly, then glanced up at her mother. She knew *just* how badly that surprise had affected the Council of Elders at their very *core*...

The Elders eschewed male relationships as a matter of course. But then again, they'd only ever dealt with *Cletus* males for the most part, but avoided *Kantite* males as if they were tainted. At least, that was Cathy and Josie's impression of their history, and it appeared to be centered on Elder Yanmei's assignation with Aquintus Tiberious at the very beginning of the Commonwealth. The fact that she'd been Xue's counterpart on the Council had been one thing, but her death during childbirth set Rong and Ju on a downward spiral that had persisted for over ten-thousand years now. Fortunately, Elders Wen and Daiyu tended to balance them out, with Xue successfully staying all alone in the middle.

At least things within the *Commonwealth* had remained stable ... or so one would suppose.

The Vanir had successfully migrated from Vanaheim, and now regarded their planet as a historical shrine of sorts. No one actually *lived* there, but a few warrens had banded together and set up a representative enclave with a visitor's center and a small mixed staff of maintenance and educational workers. Of course, the enclave itself was *completely* sealed from the atmosphere.

Torga and Manya had a daughter and then a son, before being recalled to Zarox for reassignment. That was the *official* excuse, but Donald had suggested that, even with regular Healer treatments, Gagsa had been feeling his mortality, and wanted to see his

grandchildren, and groom Torga for leadership. As for the Hegemony itself, there remained a few persistent holdouts who tried to keep to the “old” ways, but efforts had been stepped up considerably in the last five years alone to keep the “dinner” death toll to a minimum.

The rewards for compliance had initially been confusing until the *profits* started rolling in. When non-sentient feed stock, coupled with proper land management had started replacing the bloody harvesting of human-standards, fewer had gone hungry, and an industry sprang up to insure adequate supplies were available for *all*. The best part was the support provided by the Commonwealth that fully recognized the Drecks *traditional* lifestyle – still keeping it as an honored and true *historical* fact, but providing a reasonable progression from the past to a vibrant and stable *future*.

It *was*, of course, still a work in progress...

Laisee set the goblet down, closed her eyes, then leaned further back into the soft cushions of the couch with a sigh.

Jaiying let her head slide into her mother’s lap and extended through her, curious to learn if her mother was still lactating or not – *not*, as it turned out. She was thinking of offering a drink from herself, when a thought pinged at her.

‘*Aunt Lili has stepped down*’ Walter shared with her.

The band he’d used was their *very* private one – the one that not even their *mothers* could reach.

‘*By force?*’

Jaiying knew Lili had been becoming less enthused at sitting in the Kantite Elder’s seat for a number of years now. Not even the return of Spring Blossom had bolstered her spirits all that much when she’d returned after the twins fifth birthday, instead making it all the more difficult to leave the family Homestead after a short weekend to return to a week of moderate chaos and confusion at the administrative levels she and her husband shared – at *opposite* sides of the administration.

‘*It was at the request of the Elder’s Council*’ Walter suggested.

‘*It was Xue’s order!*’ Josie spat silently.

‘*It was welcome, either way*’ Cathy shared evenly.

‘*Aunt Lili and Uncle Emperor needed more time together, anyway*’ Rose added helpfully, her bonus comment reaching Earth all the way from the Demon’s Realm.

‘*Who is the new Elder?*’ Jaiying asked curiously, but thought she already knew.

## Picking up the Pieces

*'Xue has decided to occupy the office, while Rong, Ju, Daiyu, and Wen continue to battle each other over inconsequential issues they have no real idea of how to handle'* Cathy opined.

Jaiying looked up at her mother, content that she'd probably fall asleep shortly, then closed her eyes to reach out to Cletus and touch the four Elder's individually just to check up on them. Her cousins immediately joined her.

As a team, they went from Elder-to-Elder, ensuring the individual blocks they'd inserted years ago were still in place, and the salient issues were, in fact, somewhat trivial in retrospect.

At least Rong and Ju weren't wired *nearly* as tightly as they were even fifteen years ago. They both had the same *major* issue, however.

*'They're STILL tweaked about John?'* Jaiying's confused comment stretched out to her cousins.

She'd fully accepted the Cletus standard of morality – "do harm to none." The equivalent Kantite standard of morality – "don't force yourself on anyone who doesn't want to play with you" – was more to the point. Kantites had no problem at all of harming *anyone* who was in the process of harming someone *else* – themselves included.

*'It's too bad the Elder's Council never adopted Elder Ai's solution of having staff on hand to help mediate their bodies physical needs'* Josie suggested. She herself had run through a series of willing young men and women since she'd become desirous of physical attention.

There was an incredible delay of five seconds while that concept bounced around within each of the Senior Staff.

*'It would probably not be prudent to mess with them now'* Rose reminded them, although now that it had been brought up, she started thinking about the last time she'd visited Kantor and spent a wonderfully fulfilling two weeks with Walter, supplemented with additions of Cathy and Josie upon occasion.

*'There is no immediate issue with Xue coming to Kantor, and Aunt Lili will be much happier as a result'* Walter continued. He paused for just a moment, then decided to bring up the other issue.

*'Jaiying ... what is Donald's status?'* he asked.

She knew what he was after. She'd been researching it for the last five years and was confident it could be done. Now it was just a matter of necessity – as in, if it ever *became* a necessity.

*'Donald is a healthy, happy Earthling, who loves his wives and his children. He advises the garrison, and conducts surveillance upon occasion if circumstances seem to warrant'* she reported.

*'Could Grandfather return to us?'*

Jaiying paused while considering his question. Every one of the Senior Staff knew there needed to be a *really* good reason to bring Grandfather out of retirement.

*'What is the need, Walter?'*

It was Walter's turn to pause. As only he'd detected the coming arrival of new visitors, he didn't know if it was because he was male, or if the girls really could not feel them.

*'When the Vanir were revealed, the Bornat headed ten-thousand hours towards the core. I think I feel them coming back ... and I think they're not alone'* he finally admitted.

The silence in the ether was truly silent for several moments.

*'Well... And mother has been contemplating changing Earth from a Protectorate to a Governed Territory'* Jaiying shared flippantly, causing the silence to descend for several more moments.

Finally...

*'I suppose the Kraken's Child would be a welcome resource to have on hand'* Rose suggested.

*'You THINK?'* Josie shot back.

*'How long, Walter? And where should we look?'* Cathy asked reasonably.

*'At their current rate ... perhaps another five years'* he suggested. *'And they are in THAT direction'* he added, and after they attached themselves to him, reached out as a group and made a very tenuous contact with the approaching ships.

*'I don't feel them, Walter'* Cathy shared.

*'Neither do I'* Rose added.

*'Me neither'* Josie chimed in.

*'I do ... but just barely'* Jaiying reported.

She separated from Walter and the contact nearly disappeared on her. If she'd not been watching through Walter, she never would have found them on her own.

*'You should talk it over with Mama Laisee'* Rose suggested, not that Laisee could stop Jaiying if the Senior Staff decided otherwise.

At least the Royal family would get a heads up.

## Picking up the Pieces

The conversation broke up, leaving Jaiying alone with her thoughts. What was it Grandfather had said?

“ODTAA,” she muttered. “One – Damn – Thing – After – Another.”

“Hmmm?” Laisee murmured, then opened her eyes and looked down to see her daughter’s smiling face looking up at her from her lap.

Jaiying rolled over and stood up, before reaching down for her mother’s hands.

“Let’s go to bed, Mother. I’m feeling a little full since I left Arizona. Can you help me with these?” she asked, while cupping her breasts lightly and getting a smile back in return.

They walked off together, heading for the bedroom and a night of quiet comfort. After all, they had a few years left before things became an issue, and nothing else appeared to be on the horizon...

***End of Book Eight***

## **Appendix**

The “Birthday Card” that Dwayne sent to Wilber was formatted in Gothic E. It's a really awkward text format to read, but apropos for the context. I decided to provide the plain text translation of it here:

### **Happy Birthday Wilber!**

**It is hard to believe the years have gone by so quickly. Almost sixty years old next month ... it seems like only half of that. I sincerely wanted to thank you for giving me the opportunity to experience for myself this most incredible of all possible jobs. Never in my wildest dreams would I have guessed that a crazy man from Washington D.C. could convince me to take a chance on such a challenging career, and yet – here I am.**

**However things turn out, I want you to know that I am and will always remain your loyal friend.**

**John Carter  
September 2005**

Likewise, the Hebrew comment that Jaiying spoke to John Smith while welcoming him to her family (note that it is actually written from *right* to *left*, thus the comma next to “Uncle” is where it starts – at least according to Google Translate):

“באָגריסן צו די משפּחה, Uncle Barak,” translates to “Welcome to the family, Uncle Barak,” except for, you know, that whole thing about having to read it backwards and all. Come to think of it, I suppose “Barak Uncle” should have been on the *left* side of it. But unlike Henry Higgins, most non-Hebrew readers wouldn't have caught that (‘My Fair Lady’ anyone?).

NOTE: for the SUPER picky readers out there, this was originally Google-translated to Yiddish back in 2019 and presented in this format. A translation during this verification pass in 2023 indicates the Goggle character formats are different, but the translation remains the same. From my viewpoint, it looks like the 2019 version was a more “formal” version, while the latest (2023) Google translation was much plainer... perhaps similar to the difference between serf and sans-serif, or cursive compared to printing?

## ***Author's Afterword's***

Please let me apologize for the geography lessons you'd had to endure as this volume primarily took place on Earth, as in *lots* of places on Earth. As such, the simple freedom to pick and choose imaginary locations in space fell aside, as those eager nit-pickers out there will undoubtedly track down every nuance of location to find fault with as this volume continued to play out my characters' pitiable lives.

That said, I'd gone to extremes in researching the geographical locations and political climates concurrent with the timeline of the story (right down to the time zones involved) and tried to perform due diligence in the creation of an interesting, yet frustratingly annoying, environment within which my characters might work out their problems. If you read along with an open web map program, you would have likely gotten a better understanding of where the characters were at any given moment and what their local observations were telling them of their current situation.

## ***Acknowledgements***

This has been an interesting eleven-year journey up to this point and I would like to thank everyone involved in putting up with my chronic delays while I was actually trying to learn *how* to write, and, more importantly, how to properly *edit* (at least, I *hope* I learned something about it).

My Editor (my long-time "womb-mate") hadn't suffered quite as much as I had during the process (reading and *re*-reading the same passages through every major revision cycle gets *very* confusing after a while) but she still bore the brunt of pointing out the obvious (but not to *me*) errors in spelling, punctuation, word choice, continuity, and a host of other literary sins in the process of beating these volumes into what you see today.

I want to – *again* – apologize to any reader who had to suffer through the first four volumes (Edition One) which suffered from my *own* hubris in the insane rush to publish in the spring of 2015 – those volumes never having previously gone through a proper "ink-on-paper" edit pass – a fact which reared its ugly head during the conversion from the print version to the Kindle version, which revealed an *astounding* number of gross errors in the text.

Sadly, being taken from the "what you see is what you get" environment of paperback publishing to Kindle eventually convinced me that the *complete* conversion to Kindle – as reasonable as that might be supposed – kept throwing limitations into the presentation

such that I decided to drop the Kindle versions due lack of control over fonts, typography symbols and such (and after all that effort, too!).

An alternative would still allow a Kindle version, but also require the reader to constantly pan around the reading device, instead of simply following along in a flowing text experience (or so I'm told).

I would like to extend my thanks to the support staff at Kindle Direct Publishing (kdp.amazon.com) for putting up with my somewhat wordy and difficult tech support questions – not realizing that I'd tasked them with many questions that had obviously *never* been asked in such exquisitely confusing detail before (note that Tech Support is often separate from the *Engineering* groups who actually develop the tools used during the publishing process and sometimes provide differing degrees of information with conflicting reasons behind them).

It was with all their help in making me understand and apply the *correct* processes in getting these stories from keyboard to print that allowed me to reach this point in time, as *without* their help I would have been lost and confused (pretty much the same thing with me) and still be back at square one.

Finally, for any aspiring writers out there, if you have a story in your head, then by all means get it down on paper (or, you know, bits and bytes) and go for it. I'm not in this for the *money*. It was just to get the damn *story* out of my head (at least for *me* it was) which would hopefully let me focus on other aspects of my retirement – although nothing I've ever done before has kept me this involved for this long a period of time on a single project.

Thank you one and all.

-Floyde Leong

### ***Author's Ramblings***

I'd been contemplating writing something really pithy for the closing notes of this volume but I'd actually started writing *this* particular note [and it was supposed to be for the release of volume ONE] way back on 1-22-15, at around 10:20 PM (PST) because I'd just finished watching "*Guardians of the Galaxy™*" for the first time.

*But ...* I'll get back to that in a little bit.

It's been said that whatever writers create is; (1) the product of all their life's experiences, and; (2) exposure to prior art.

I've read a *lot* of early science fiction (E. E. Smith, Robert Heinlein, Edgar Rice Burroughs, et al) along with many later authors of science fiction and fantasy all throughout the last sixty-plus years, and taking



a step back, I can easily see that my work is derivative of these and many other authors, along with a few of the more contemporary romance novelists, in either the mundane or science fiction/fantasy themes. I could not even *begin* to tabulate the number of science fiction/fantasy themed movies I've seen since the mid-1950's and before (reruns were quite popular back in the day).

The question you have to ask, however, is does that somehow invalidate the story I've just told? Is it just a rehash of older works? Is "*Gor*" merely the John Norman version of "*John Carter of Mars*" by Burroughs, but with misogynistic overtones?

I suppose an even *worse* comparison would be any of the dinosaur movie wannabes with absolutely *horrible* special effects that arrived after the release of "*Jurassic Park*" and, rumor has it, there is even a Roger Corman version of "*Fantastic Four*" floating around somewhere on YouTube [actually – *there is!*].

This is not necessarily all that bad, as lots of stories are rehashes from previous works to no ill effect.

"*Pygmalion*" provided the source material for the Lerner and Loewe musical version entitled "*My Fair Lady*" that was filmed twenty-six years later. "*Dirty Rotten Scoundrels*" is a remake of "*Bedtime Story*" from twenty-four years earlier.

Does anyone remember "*The In-Laws*" with Peter Falk and Alan Arkin?

The "tip" or the part of the movie where everything suddenly becomes clear occurs *well* into the first reel, when audiences are then assured there is a somewhat *reasonable* justification for the preliminary madness.

Jump forward twenty-four years and here come Michael Douglas and Albert Brooks in a very thin remake of the original – only you already *know* the premise and can pretty much figure out what is going to happen because the "tip" is revealed in the first few *minutes* of the film. I'm not saying it was a *bad* film, but it could have easily stood on its own as a suitable reimagining of the original ... except they kept the same *title!*

*BUT*, I digress ... except to say that I've at least spared you the indignity of stealing another author's title [at least I've certainly tried to avoid it].

The even *bigger* question is, does the story *engage* the reader, keeping the level of interest high enough so one is drawn to find out what happens *next*? Did the reader actually stick it out for all the

several tens of thousands of words, but then throw it down in disgust when it ended on the cusp of some nominally mundane resolution?

That's a question I couldn't answer as yet [as of 5-10-15] because the fourth round of edits to volume three were in process where I'd been correcting punctuation, transposed words, awkward phrasing, and continuity errors (as discovered in still *later* volumes) while still trying to convey the sense of multiple foreign languages by use of punctuation and typography marks, yet keeping them separate from thoughts the characters were either keeping internally or sharing with others.

Volumes one through four were released "into the wild" in the Spring and Summer of 2015 – along with the aforementioned deficiencies to both the hard copy and Kindle versions. The effort since then has been to go back and plan revised versions of volumes one through four (Second Editions for all of them) and then finish up the final revisions for volumes five and six. Of course, volume six ran long, which required cramming several hundred words of it onto the hind end of volume five.

Pissed me off, too, because I'd already found a good breaking point between the two of them.

Enter a revised volume six and guess what?

Here I went through all that trouble to kill this guy off so I could *finish* the series, and he manages to *recover* from it.

I mean – I cut his damn *head* off, and he *STILL CAME BACK!*

[Sigh.....]

Science fiction *space-opera* (which translates into *soap opera!*)

The *new* volume seven started out with selections from the last four pages of book six (at yet *another* reasonable breaking point) but I didn't get my hopes up for completion of it anytime soon.

This was back on 12-26-2016, and I *still* had breadcrumbs to drop all the way back to volume *one* to account for *new* characters who "showed up" somewhere in volumes five and six (hey, it's not *me!* They just seem to crawl out of the *woodwork* somehow!).

Sadly, the story itself will likely never find a following. Kindle Direct Publishing [*nee CreateSpace*] has over 2 million contributors so far – based on *my* account number, anyway – but realistically these stories will most likely wither and die to become part of the vast expanse of creativity that never finds fertile ground within which to take root.

It was a hugely *ego*-gratifying sensation to receive my first released copies, though. Then it was just a matter of finishing the rest of the

volumes until the *first* “final” conclusion was reached, which was initially written back in the summer of 2014.

Did this whole effort originally start out so ambitiously? No.

It started out in November of 2011 with two simple phrases:

“I don’t like this. I don’t like this at all,” she said.

“Well, you’re not gonna like *this*, either,” he said.

By December of 2011, I knew who had said what, and under what circumstances those words had been spoken.

The story then began to flow, or rather; it *spewed unbidden from my finger tips* until I’d finished the first volume at a reasonable stopping point.

An initial review by a local friend (in the spring of 2012) resulted in the question, “Who is this story *really* about?” She was also squeaked by the “adult” content, although my 70-plus year old big sister enjoyed it thoroughly (she’d said it was quite “titillating”).

At that particular point in the story’s evolution there was very little back story about Ronnie concerning both who and what he was – aside from the event where you finally get a clue when he grabs his friends and kidnaps them within the first, I think, *three pages*.

From that first very meager beginning, it could easily be interpreted that the story might well have been focused on David and Diane instead of primarily on Ronnie and his background – although it is an ensemble effort for the most part, with a few lead characters and a large supporting cast.

A rather more *elaborate* back-story was devised beginning with the introduction of Wilber Milton pretty much as it is written – which obviously included the “reveal” about who Ronnie *really* was – *sorta*.

At the completion of the “final” volume of the series [the first draft for volume six being completed in the summer of 2014] I was disappointed with the ending – thinking it was rather contrite and lacking (“And they all flew away, and for those who *still* lived, they led somewhat uncomfortable, but meaningful lives ... for a *while*.”).

On the advice of my oldest son (the one who really *does* have degrees in Journalism) I put aside everything and actually picked up and read a few books on writing. You know – “*The Art of Fiction*,” “*Elements of Style*,” “*How to Write Dialog*,” “*Rules for Using Numbers in Stories*” – all those sorts of things that I should have studied *years* before I’d ever pecked out the first few tentative words on screen.

And it was my scholarly son who read a section of book three and pointed out that “they talk too much” and you have *him* to thank for more streamlined dialog sequences throughout, which also included more physical action – however trivial – to break things up a bit.

Silly me, I thought you *told* a story by having someone actually *say the words*. It’s a lot faster than trying to provide a *visual* description of everything, isn’t it? After all, this isn’t a *screenplay*... (*yet?...*)

So, in the middle of 2014, I put my work down, did some educational reading, and stepped away from it all for six months – letting it fester like an open wound (or a decomposing fungus) to give my head time to clear and approach it from a fresh perspective.

What that meant was I’d waited sufficiently long enough that I’d forgotten specific details about the story as a whole.

This let me read it anew with fresh eyes and a clearer vision – hence the *ease* at which I started making changes (unless you’re *really* an Editor, and you know *exactly* what a load of horseshit that is!).

And from this refreshed perspective, I found that Ronnie needed even *more* back story to justify the actions we see him perform – from the lead up to the end of volume one, and the continuation throughout volume two – the “why” if you will, for the “way” he behaves, and the “how” it all began ... up to a point.

As for the *subsequent* volumes... Like a runaway snowball, it all sort of went downhill from there.

If this story is consumed by no more than my peers, I’m sure they will easily agree that sometimes the characters take over and insist on telling the story in their *own* words – no matter *how* much you fight them for control over it.

For some reason they also don’t always perform the actions you’ve plotted for them – almost as if there was a *counter*-plot working against you. Sometimes they even do stuff “off stage” that you only find out about later on – a “hidden” back-story, if you will.

In other words, plot be damned! *This is what really happened!*

Such was the case with Maya’s surreptitious work at the local hospital during her early years on Earth (the little minx!) And *then* the ungrateful wretch turns her *back* on Ronnie at the end of book *two*! Even *I* didn’t see that coming.

I’d also found other situations that benefited from additional scenes that helped explain other events, or justified “off-screen” actions by the various members of the cast.

All of this, of course, had the unfortunate side effect of lengthening the story – hopefully in an interesting fashion – and not turning the reader away due to the wordiness of the story line, or perhaps the somewhat familiar themes.

But I did it anyway, and by August of 2015, for better or worse, the first four books had been released into the wild with my hopes that anyone reading them would enjoy the “drama” my characters were going through, for without drama and conflict, there *is* no story, is there?

Now, what has *any* of this got to do with my opening paragraph?

Way back in the beginning, I’d mentioned “experiences” and “prior art” and that is why these few facts should be pointed out:

I found myself sharing the joyful news of my first volume’s tentative release with a professional friend and happened to mention that a character in Marvel’s “*Guardians of the Galaxy*™” movie had the same name as my primary aggressor species.

He’d immediately suggested that I avoid the ire of “the Mouse” (the owners of Marvel™) and rename my characters, races, and proper names to avoid potential conflict. A discussion of possible litigation ensued – starting with cease and desist letters, all the way up to multimillion-dollar court appearances (he has a particularly extensive background as a professional witness to such events, and I would have been foolish to ignore his advice).

So, in the very early weeks of 2012, I’d originally named my “aggressor” species the “Drax” – which is also the proper noun for a prisoner character in the movie, “*Guardians of the Galaxy*™.”

That was just a coincidence, I assure you (I’d never even *heard* the word before, and I’d never even read the comic books, having stopped reading most comics back in the late 1950’s).

Thus, the “Drax” became the “Drecks” (an English word for “rubbish,” plural. Not intended as such, but I wanted a similar sounding name).

The race of “Kree” as depicted in “*Guardians of the Galaxy*™” is not the *same* race of “Kree” that I had originally envisioned in my universe. The planet of “Kree” in *my* universe was discovered at a later time (sometime during the fall of 2012, according to my notes) and thus establishes the providence of a character introduced in volume two, back in early 2012.

Again, this was just a coincidence.

Thus, the “Kree” became the “Kee” (a proper Scottish surname), although singer/songwriter Kree Woods is still alive and kicking, and I don’t suppose Disney™ will be going after *her* parents to change her name anytime soon.

I had momentarily thought of changing “Kree” to “Cree” but figured I’d probably already pissed off enough Native *American* Indians, and didn’t need to piss off any Native *Canadian-American* Indians, as well.

Something I’d *completely* overlooked until then (having just watched an “Honest Trailers©” segment on YouTube™) was the name “Xandar™” which was one of the featured planets in “*Guardians of the Galaxy™*.”

In *my* universe, I named the dominant planet of the principal ruling cluster “Kantor,” which some might construe to be close but Kantor is currently both a widely used proper noun and business name, and “Cantor” would be too revealing of my age, as if you couldn’t already guess (Is there anybody out there besides me who still remembers Eddie?).

Likewise, I’d gone through and performed a verification pass for all the other place and proper names just to insure they were either already in common usage or not likely to breach trademark or copyright infringement with anyone (Google™ is *such* an amazing tool for the budding author).

Not related to the movie, but “Zarox” as opposed to “Xerox™”? As a planet name it sounded appropriate for the home world of the “Drecks” and, although not *widely* used, it is currently in use as a proper name of a few individuals, as well as in several business derivatives.

Besides, the “Drecks” had to live somewhere and “Xerox™” was already taken.

At least I didn’t plagiarize “Zardoz™,” not that any of you young whippersnappers would even know what that refers to without Google™ to look it up for you – or who starred in it for that matter.

Or what a “whippersnapper” is.

Continuing with due diligence research, (Gods bless Google™!) I vetted the remaining “alien” planetary and proper names, and was delighted to find that, of them *all*, I’d only blundered on the first two. The rest are all either dictionary, biological, Latin, or geographical place names, or are widely used as family or business names by several separate entities.

If anyone had *really* wondered, the specter of “cover art” (which had been hanging over my head courtesy of Createspace.com©) had originally been resolved by using their generic cover art on the first

editions of volumes one through four: basically, they were *color*-coded simply because I have *no* artistic talent whatsoever, and the prospect of me doodling something apropos would be totally pointless.

It's almost as difficult as trying to come up with appropriate titles.

I must say that – at the *time* – I was heartened to learn there was a bookstore in Australia (Elizabeth's Bookshop in Newtown, Australia) whose employees actually select books during Christmas and Valentine's, then wrap them in plain brown wrappers with string before adding a few words of description to an otherwise blank presentation.

The object, of course, is to avoid “judging a book by its cover” as is so often done.

I mean, *really*, how many times have you made a selection based simply on the *graphic* content of the cover of a book or movie?

I remember purchasing a movie “starring” Sandra Bullock, and finding out she had maybe *five minutes of screen time* as one of the main character's *girlfriends*. How about that “Godzilla” movie where the big guy finally makes his entry during the *last fifteen minutes of the movie*?

Judging a book by its *cover*? When you get your ass kicked by that skinny kid down at the bar who just *happens* to hold several black belts in the killing arts, remember that I told you so.

*HOWEVER* ... I have since seen the *Light!* Or, more appropriately, discovered *royalty-free artwork and images!*

The *NEW* covers for books one through four (and beyond) had been created using freely available science-fictiony themed artwork and running it through some obsolete graphics programs I still had installed before layering them into the semblance of respectable book covers using the free graphics editing tool called “GIMP” (*no* idea what it stands for, but it runs on PC's, Mac's, and Linux, and it's *free*. It's also a *bitch* to get comfortable with).

Very little needed to be done – aside from formatting the images to the *correct* size (courtesy of the Kindle Direct Publishing guidelines and templates) – then layering in text as appropriate.

This was followed, of course, by an extensive “print for effect” effort to make sure everything was legible on front, back and spine.

It was a lot of work, and had a huge learning curve, but I only had to farm out a few images to my daughter (with the degree in Graphic Arts) to get it done.

As for other elements of the story, I will say right now that spreadsheets were an absolute *necessity* in keeping track of *everyone* and every *scene* from volume six going forward.

That said, I never appreciated the freedom I had with fictional locations until my characters took up residence on Earth for an extended period of time. Multiple locations, multiple scenes *occurring* in those locations, and dealing with different *time zones*! (That last one was a *real* nightmare).

I was fortunate in having access to the World Wide Web, with readily available graphic and topographical maps of target locations, along with Wikipedia for accurate checking of event dates and locations.

Sadly, I never knew I sent Donald into Afghanistan just before the Kashmir Earthquake (but rest assured, they were 144 miles west of the epicenter, which was located 12 miles northeast of Muzaffarabad in Pakistan at the time, and they'd already left town anyway).

It certainly didn't hurt that I had access to a full-size plotter (you should see the pretty area and *topo* maps I have, including the cave drawing referenced in the manuscript, along with all the Healing Center buildings, the motor pool, and the residence for Wilber, Shu, Mary, Kayla, and Danny ... whew!).

So on *that* note, I close now so I can *finally* shelve this sucker and get on with my retirement.

I do not "wish" anything for *anyone* ... but I *do* hope you've all enjoyed the ride.

-Floyde Leong

P.S. – for those offended by the somewhat crude storyline depicted at the very *end* of this volume .... Hey! I know it's rude, crude, and totally inappropriate ... but it's the end of the line from the paperback version, where I felt the last two buffer pages in each book really should be used, rather than wasted. They started out with tic-tac-toe markings, but then they started talking to each other (Hey, how you doing?) (*Oh, just hanging around.*)

And then, *She* showed up and started making trouble...

Anyways, these last two pages are the culmination of eight paperback books of pointless paper waste, except its all here for you in this Obooko version in Ones and Zeros. For FREE!!!

Thanks for reading

-FL



*(Well, Hello Boys. I'm Soooo glad to finally meet you in Person!)*

*(Umm... Ahh... Yeah... How you doin'?)*

*(I was getting so Lonely all by myself. Where is your Friend?)*

*[Here I am! Down here!]*

*(Well, aren't you just the Cutest Little Thing...)*

*[Gee... \*blush\* \*blush\* \*blush\*...]*

*(Dude... Don't let it go to your head. She's probably too much for you anyway)*

*(Please don't say that.*

*I'm Sure there's enough of me for the Both of you...)*

*(What... Ah, what are you suggesting?)*

*[Umm, yeah... What he said...]*

*(Well, like I said, it's Very Lonely here, and there's just the Three of us, and it would be a Shame to play favorites among the Three of us.*

*I would Certainly appreciate spending some quality time with Both of you... There is a Lot of me to go around... \*wink\* \*wink\* \*wink\*)*

*(Hmmm... What do you think, dude?)*

*[Are you KIDDING? We've been stuck without for a WHILE now.  
Let's GO FOR IT!]*

*(I was HOPING you'd say that... Ahh, Miss... where exactly would you ... umm ... like us?)*

*(Oh My! You Both make me SO Excited! Let's sneak over 🐾 and ...  
get to Know each other a little Better...)*

*(That ... That sounds real cozy. Come on, dude...)*

*[Right behind you... or ... you know...]*

*(Ummm.... Ohhhh...)*

*(Here, you take THIS side...)*

*[No way! I just got started on THIS side!]*

**(Ohh... \*pant\* \*pant\* \*pant\*)**

*(She's certainly energetic, isn't she?)*

**(\*oaf\* \*oaf\* \*aahhhh...\*)**

[Man... It has been SO long...]

**(\*quiver\* \*quiver\* \*shake\*)**

*(Don't stop, dude. I think she really likes us!)*

[I think I really like HER!]

**(Oh... Don't stop... Don't stop... Don't ... Don't...)**

*(Dude! I think she's gonna BLOW!)*

[Great! I've missed THAT, too!]

**(Almost ... There... Just a ... little ... MORE...)**

*(Not what I meant! I think she's gonna...)*

**(Augg... Augg... \*woof\* \*woof\* \*woof\* AUG!!!)**

♂ ♀ ♂ ♂ ♂ ♀ ♀ ♀ ♀ ♂ ♀ ♂

**(WHEW!!!)**

***(Thanks! Just needed to get that out of my system.***

***Later, Boys!)***

[Huh? What? Where'd she GO?]

*(Dude, I think she set us up.)*

[But... But WHY?]

*(I think it was because of ... THEM!)*

(↓↓↓↓↓↓↓↓↓↓↓↓↓↓↓↓↓↓↓↓)

♀ mom? ... mommy?} {♂ mommy, where are you?} {♂ where's  
mommy, daddies?} {♀ daddy, where did mommy go?} {♀ is she coming  
back, daddies?} {♂ mommy, where are you? \*sniff\* \*sniff\* \*sniff\*}

[Well... THIS was unexpected...]

*(You THINK?)*

*{daddies ... we're HUNGRY!!!}*

**[FIN]**



This is an authorized free edition from  
[www.obooko.com](http://www.obooko.com)

Although you do not have to pay for this e-book, the author's intellectual property rights remain fully protected by international Copyright law. You are licensed to use this digital copy strictly for your personal enjoyment only: it must not be redistributed commercially or offered for sale in any form. If you paid for this free edition, or to gain access to it, we suggest you demand an immediate refund and report the transaction to the author.