

The Wheels of Justice

**The Calder Chronicles
Book Two**

Floyde Leong

The Wheels of Justice

Books in the Calder Chronicles Series

*Upsetting the Balance
The Wheels of Justice*

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Author's Forward

My sincerest apologies to those who'd struggled through the initial release of Books One through Four of '*The Caldar Chronicles*' series and suffered the chronic grammatical, typographical and simply deplorable spelling errors, along with all the other nonsense that occurred during the insane rush to publish back in 2015.

This major revision attempts to substantially correct all of those literary abominations, along with corrections in continuity and consistency.

Thanks for sticking it out.

That said, I will not go into a *detailed* introduction of characters to date since they were all introduced in Book One – along with their back-stories as known at the time.

Suffice to say – there is the Lane family: husband and wife, David and Diane Lane. Their two children: Amy and Andrew Lane. Also aboard is Healer/Midwife Maya Tal from Cletus, Larl Riker from Tyler, and Shay Daishi from Wilder. Lastly is Ronnie Cal, A.K.A Rondal Caldar (or sometimes known as “Tank” when working) who is a citizen of Kantor and part of the Royal family.

He is also the author of their current woes.

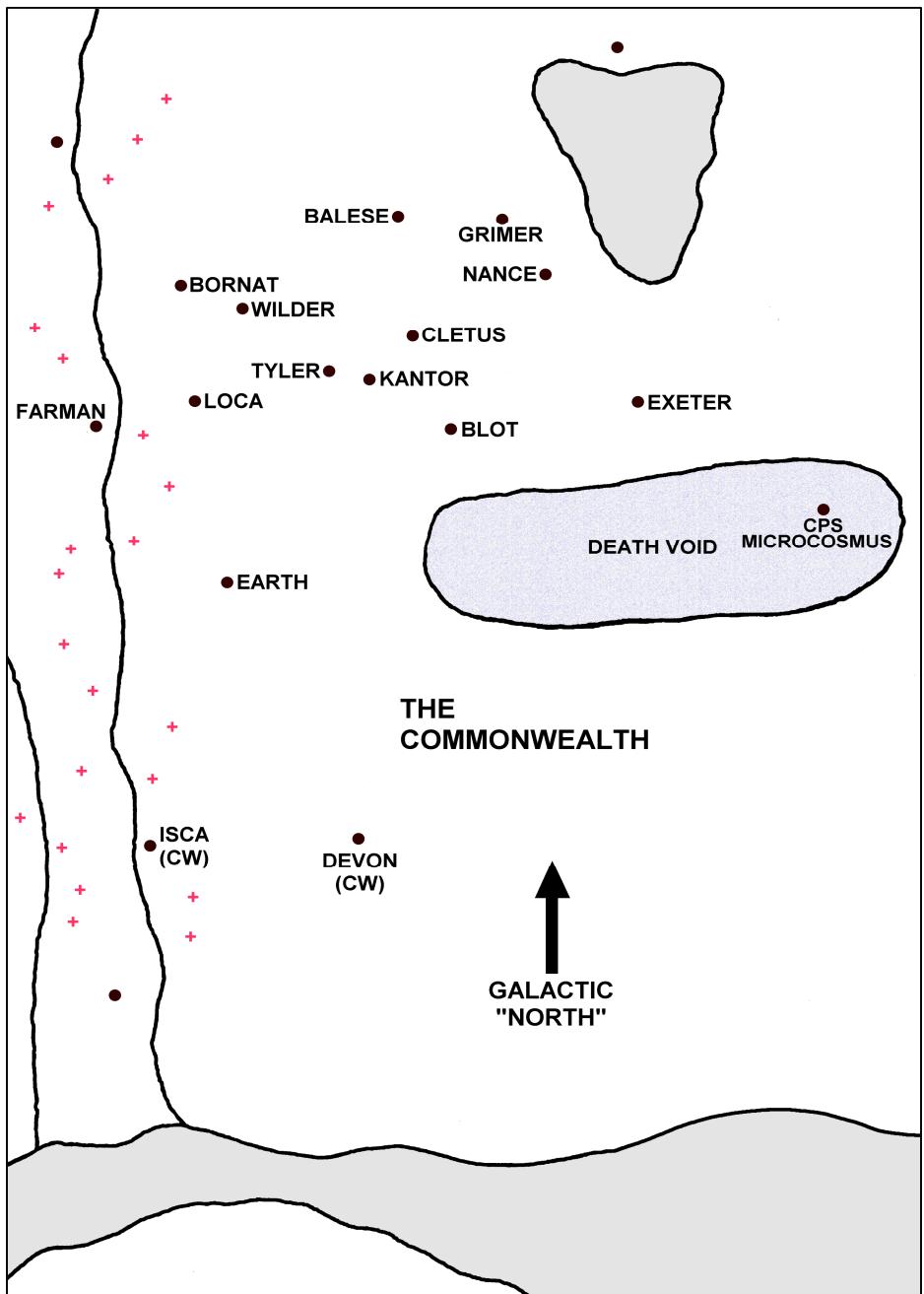
Just so you know, Diane is pregnant by David, Shay is *also* pregnant by David, and Amy is pregnant by some scoundrel she tutored back in high school on Earth (kids these days...).

Yes, it is a convoluted plot to date and shame on you if you're jumping into it starting with Book Two. Those who fail to learn from history will remain clueless in the future ... or something like that.

Anyway, pace yourself. There are six more coming.

-Floyde Leong

*For Susan, who took care of all of us and finally gave of herself fully.
We patiently wait for our souls to come together once again.*



Prologue

In a desperate attempt to save their lives, Rondal Caldar had successfully led his unwitting passengers to a relatively safe haven in the middle of an unsuspected Death Void. During weeks of effort they'd all worked together to ensure their salvation. In the process of doing so, they'd achieved a level of peace and happiness they'd never previously known.

Now they were prepared to set out for Caldar's home world where they might find respite and a chance to rest and eat real food for a change before deciding if they want pursue an existence as sponsored members of the Commonwealth of Planets, or simply return to Earth and try to explain in as little detail as possible exactly where they'd been for the last several months.

However they might later decide, they were all primed to start on this next leg of their adventure...

Noon (Day 92) – An Imminent Departure

It had happened suddenly. The work was done, and there was nothing left to do that would keep them at the platform. They were ready to leave...

The ship had been packed and fully fueled. Both the internal and external converters were up and purring, with David's modified feed tube assembly performing up to standards.

Larl and Amy's room had gained a narrow partition to include separate accommodations for Andy and Shay. This had been approved by Ronnie, and engineered by David and Larl.

Before breakfast on this last day, the primary shield had been *fully* tested outside the platform during another piloting task for David – assisted by Ronnie this time. It had registered stable as a *hard shield*, even when pushed out to ten kilometers.

Afterwards, Ronnie had taken over and wrung the ship through several *violent* maneuvers before finally declaring it sound. Then, while David stood by at the con, he'd gone aft and cleaned up the few things that had fallen out or been dislodged from storage.

He'd then programmed in a very short jump, still within the general center of the local star cluster, and had David transition out and back without incident.

Upon their return, they'd all met in the commons and toasted their departure with another bottle of ambrosia. Diane and David were surprised when Andy toasted with them as well.

Afterwards, Ronnie had taken Larl with him to the platform's con and gone over the shutdown and hibernate sequences with him. He'd also covered the *reverse* because, as he'd told Larl, "You just never know."

As the rest of his crew were leaving the pressure hull and making their way to the ship, both Ronnie and Maya had visited her Grandmother's chambers and said the rites over her once again.

Checking around the cabin, they'd straightened Yandi's sheet and tidied up the trash, before leaving and sealing the door again. Then they'd walked slowly through the corridors and headed out to the ship by themselves.

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Ronnie sat in the navigator's position, while Larl brought the systems out of standby where they'd been since the check ride earlier that morning. He even inset and dumped his converted data packet into the system and set his special message to go out with the first com burst.

With everyone buckled in, Ronnie completed the checklist with Larl, and the ship silently stirred from its landing stands. He retracted them before Larl slowly brought them out of the service bay. They couldn't close the door, but they'd secured everything left loose so nothing would drift away.

Ronnie was thinking that if he ever got back this way, he'd have to bring some commercial hardware to fix the big in-system converter and drives so the spin could be totally cancelled out and the station moved to a better location ... probably near one of the stars.

"Okay Larl, I've calculated a jump to the thinnest spot in the zone. We'll transition to there, then run calculations from there for a transition to the *other* side of the zone. After that, we'll just flutter our way back to a transit lane and find the nearest base. Set standard departure, Mister Riker."

"Coms on, Ronnie?"

Ronnie thought about it for a moment. It *was* standard procedure, but there was no one around to hear them. '*Would it let anyone know we're coming home? No. It's just local, anyway.*'

"Yes! Coms on, Larl. Wide broadcast, but I doubt we'll have anyone hear us. Let's go home!"

Larl made standard departure settings and triggered the transition countdown to fire in thirty seconds – which also transmitted a warning

to local vessels. Not two seconds after initiating, a message came over the com system.

*"CS Odontoceti, IRS Sectorus requests hold departure. Stand by for secure communications, ships master to ships master."*

"Or not," Ronnie muttered. He gestured to Larl, but he'd already punched a hold on departure.

*"CS Odontoceti, IRS Sectorus requests hold departure. Stand by for secure communications, ships master to ships master. Please acknowledge!"*

Ronnie sat back after routing the com port to the main screen in front of him. The communications system opened a window on part of his side of the large display, with the Imperial Crest of Kantor prominently in evidence.

"You decide to show up *now*? Where in the hell were you *three months ago!*" he muttered angrily, before turning to his pilot.

"Larl, look them up – *quietly*. See if they're in attack mode or what. I'll see if I can stall them."

*"CS Odontoceti, IRS Sectorus requests hold departure. Stand by for secure communications, ships master to ships master. Please acknowledge!"*

He enabled the encoder and transmitter before sending his response.

*"IRS Sectorus, CS Odontoceti acknowledges challenge. We have seven non-combatants aboard; repeat, seven non-combatant *civilians* aboard. Ship's master Rondal Caldar sai Caldorous se Earth ne Kantor requesting guarantees of safety for my passengers."*

The display fuzzed before clearing to reveal the face of a rather stern looking man who greeted him with just the tiniest nod of his head.

'*Aww, Crap!*' was just the *first* thought that ran through Ronnie's mind.

### ***An Unanticipated Arrival...***

The man on the display looked at him somewhat expectantly, but finally transmitted a gentle prompt when Ronnie failed to respond any further.

*"Well, Rondal, since when did we become so formal?"*

The question had been asked politely, if somewhat caustically, and – considering the source – it shook Ronnie from his surprise.

“Ah! What a delightful surprise to see you, Sir. I trust you are well, Sir. May I ask ... whatever brings you out here to the middle of –death space?”

*“Inquiries have been made. An accounting must be taken. I trust you will find the time to assist us?”*

“Of course, Sir! As always, I remain loyal to the Crown, Sir! May I ask, just how did you think to find me all the way out here?”

The face looking back at him appeared a little uncomfortable, then glanced around beside himself before relaxing a bit.

*“Lili had received instructions – a ‘hunch’ from higher authority – and we were obliged to accept it,” he admitted quietly.*

“My compliments to the First Wife, my Lord. I, too, find it advantageous to seek guidance from my best advisors, Sir. I shall return to dock and await your pleasure there, Sir. Several compartments shall be opened and available for your purposes. May I inquire as to the number of guests to expect, Sir?”

*“Just the immediate family, Rondal, and a handful of ... other guests.”*

“Ah! Just so, then ... and my welcome to the family, Sir. Please extend my warmest greetings to all – and please remind Mother we have been subsisting on ships gruel for the last three months. She will probably want to bring along something else to eat, Sir.”

The expression on the man’s face wasn’t quite put out, but wasn’t particularly happy, either.

*“Rondal – would you not rather join us here ... on my ship?”*

“Ah ...but, Sir! The protocols of hospitality demand that I offer you the comfort of my home and hearth, my food – such as it is – and the time necessary for you to complete your tasks. It would be disrespectful to you and the family otherwise, Sir.”

A frustrated glare radiated back at him ... followed by the slightest of nods.

*“Understood, Rondal. Oh, and I guarantee the safety of your passengers now and in the foreseeable future; barring any unfortunate acts of observed piracy, sedation, murder – you know, the usual.”*

“Thank you, Sir! Rest assured that I shall do my very best to make your stay with us a comfortable and pleasant one, Sir!”

*“Carry on, Rondal. I have every confidence. Sectorus out.”*

The screen went dead, and all eyes turned to Ronnie when he slumped back in his seat and let out an exasperated sigh. Larl watched him rub his hands slowly up and down his face while adjusting to the new situation.

"Larl, take us back to the service bay ... *slowly*," he mumbled through his fingers. Then he sat up straight and put on his game face while organizing their retreat.

"Ladies and gentlemen, there will be a *short* delay while we return to the platform for disembarkation. Please remain seated until the ship is down securely and comes to a *complete* stop. Do not forget to suit up *before* leaving the ship."

'*Immediate family*,' he was thinking furiously.

"Spacers David and Andy Lane ... I'll need you to open compartment doors for a party of ... about twenty people – to start with. I don't know if he's brought the kids or not. He may have brought staff as well. No, I'm *certain* he'll have brought staff. Maya, I'd like you and the girls to get your stuff moved back into your compartments ... including your toys 'cause, you never know. Leave the new ship suits here, and at least one set of jumpsuits. Then help David and Andy with getting compartments opened up for our visitors. You'll need to reserve at least six or seven doubles for the immediate family ... the rest we can just squish in somewhere. Oh ... everyone make sure your compartments are locked to *your palm prints alone!*"

While his crew thought that through, he turned back to Larl.

"Larl, what did you see out there." He was already opening up a window and doing a quick registry search, while Larl gave his report.

"Big ship, hundred-fifty meters or so, looks like a cruiser, no gun ports active – no gun ports *visible* even."

Ronnie found the ship listed in one of the Imperial Royal Ship groups. It was tasked for protective services to the Royals and armed to the teeth, but this one wasn't displaying *any* weapons?

"Larl, were there any radiation readings coming from that thing? Anything *besides* the drive emissions?"

"Uhhh, no. Just the usual microburst when we enabled the coms. They did that little hand shake thing and updated us – oh *look*, it's an hour ago."

Larl smiled as he pointed to the ships timer, but the look he got from Ronnie quailed his heart, so he continued.

"But nothing else – no tracking signals, no radiation to speak of except for the drives. I can read their navigation beacon and signals, but nothing else."

He continued running down the list.

"Nothing in the gammas, alphas, betas... They don't have any big offensive weapons on board!"

"Yes. For some reason, they left all the *hot toys* home for this trip." '*I wonder if that's all that's keeping ships out of the Death Voids?*' he thought to himself.

While the possibilities kept him lost in thought, Larl got them turned around. They continued in silence until they returned to the service bay and docked. As they were changing and packing up to return to the platform, Andy just had to ask the question.

"Um, Grandpa, who *was* that guy."

"Who? Oh, that's the Ambassador to Earth, Andy. First Lord Radatel Calderous ne Kantor ... my stepfather. Apparently, he comes seeking an accounting."

At everyone's shocked look, Ronnie just shrugged and began gathering his belongings for the return trip to their platform compartments.

### ***IRS Sectorus, Noon –I***

"And how is our stepson, my Lord Husband? Does he join us in hospitality this day?" First Wife Liling Shan Ting Song se Cletus asked politely.

"He is as irritatingly cheerful as always, my love, and offers us *his* hospitality instead. Protocol' he says, although he was kind enough to remind me to bring something to eat that would be more palatable to his *mother's* taste."

"And does he not regard the *rest* of us in that notice?" she pouted while reaching out and hugging her husband by his arm.

"Oh, Lili ... of course he extends his warmest greetings to the family. Although, I suspect his invitation to 'home and hearth, food and time' is another trick of his *Grandfather's*."

"Was he not the *favorite* grandchild of your father? Even only as your *stepson*?" she teased him.

"He was, and yet I *still* worry what that devil's intrigues will bring down upon the Commonwealth!"

“Possibly, my Husband,” she said, before kissing him lightly on the cheek. ‘*But not unless WE allow it,*’ she thought coolly.

### ***Second Wife’s Cabin...***

News had traveled fast throughout the ship. The “Assistant Cultural Attaché” to Earth had been found with his party intact, and with four *extra* passengers as well. This news was welcomed in nearly all compartments ... with the exception of Second Wife’s. The Second Wife’s quarters were in an uproar, while the titular occupant was having yet another tantrum at this otherwise joyous news.

“*HE YET LIVES!*”

Broken pottery was scattered in a wide circle around her. She picked up a pillow, thought better of it, and lunged for another vase of fresh flowers instead. She threw it against the far wall, where it shattered and spread fresh blossoms and water everywhere. Her servants having already fled, the Captain of her personal guard knocked diffidently before braving a peek inside.

“Are you not well, my Lady Meela?” he asked solicitously, but winced at the indignant look she shot him caused by his casual address. Lady Sharla Meili Peizhi se Loca was proud of her *position*, but not so much as by her *name*.

“*Forgive me, my Lady Peizhi,*” he begged contritely, once again caught within the turmoil of her mercurial moods. Sometimes she welcomed family casual from her Captain, sometimes not. Apparently, this was one of the *not* times.

“How may I serve, my Lady Peizhi?” he asked formally.

“He *LIVES*, Tomar! The spawn of that Earthling she-devil *LIVES*, and I will not *HAVE it!*”

He wisely remained silent while letting her continue her rant until she ran down, yet again.

“That devil-child – *the killer of my sons!* He will *die*, Tomar! *He will not live to return in triumph!* No glory for *he* who escaped me once again! I cannot *believe* the stupidity of those beneath me, Tomar! Well, he will not escape me *again – even if it is by my own hand this time!*”

‘*Treason?*’ her loyal Captain thought warily. Having very few personal faults of his own, he tended to worry overmuch about the emotional weaknesses she continued to display in increasing frequency – even for one of the Royals.

“My Lady Peizhi, it has been a long and worrisome journey. It is obvious the stress of it has caused some irritation and confusion to

your otherwise happy and – *loyal* – countenance.” He’d offered this cautiously, and her eyes flashed a dangerous look at him.

“May I suggest a – a warm *bath*, and perhaps *ambrosia* … merely to relax your over-taxed nerves? May I summon your servants to clean up this mess which *they* have obviously allowed due to their carelessness?”

She stood there breathing heavily while contemplating his words, and the meanings *within* them, before finally nodding her head.

“Yes … yes, you are correct, my loyal Captain. I feel the stress of travel upon me. Please ask my servants to come and prepare my bath, my loyal Tomar. I will wait within the inner chamber for my bath attendant. I will expect my compartment to be cleaned before I finish my bath, Tomar.”

“As you command, my Lady.”

“I suspect that I shall require *contentment* after my bath. You may send my daughter to me, thus,” she added.

“I shall inform her *personally*, my Lady,” he said, while backing out the door…

Captain Vitas Tomar was a loyal servant of the Crown. He’d come to his current position through Lady Peizhi’s intervention after he’d been part of the security detail assigned to transport her from Loca to Kantor.

In the intervening years, he’d seen her ups and downs, her triumphs and downfalls. Through it all, he *still* could not love her more if she were bonded to him personally, but ever since the deaths of her twins, she’d gotten further and further away from loyalty to the Crown and had danced along the deadly edge of treason. Now she was getting close to its *sharpest point*.

‘*By the Gods, what must I do?*’ he thought worriedly while trotting away to fulfill his tasks.

### ***In Fifth Wife’s Cabin…***

“My Son *LIVES!*”

Spring Blossom danced in joy and circled her arms around two of her sister-Wives to their husband, Lord Radatel.

“We are so *happy* for you,” Third Wife Mei-Mei said.

“Yes, it will be so good to *visit* once again with your little Ronnie,” Fourth Wife Yin-Yin said.

"Ha! You just wish to savor once again his skills with the Gift of the *First Wife*, Yin-Yin," Spring Blossom teased her, while Mei-Mei giggled beside them. "And you, too, *Mei-Mei!*" she accused Third Wife laughingly.

"And do you not wish to hold him in your arms once again, Spring Blossom?" Mei-Mei asked her with eyes twinkling at the joy Fifth Wife was displaying.

"Yes, my sisters! But I will content myself with seeing him safely home once again," she said more soberly...

Of them all, only *she* really knew and understood what conditions her son had grown up with, and how those who *should* have supported him during his difficulties had instead *ignored* him...

"I thought my heart had left me when Radatel told us of the attack by the Dreckss ... by Lord Gagsa *himself*, no less. My old people reported his ship destroyed, but I would not believe it. Lord Husband did not either, and sent out ships and tracers to look for my son. I lay blessings on Lili's intervention with the Seniors to help find my son."

'AND NOW MY LITTLE TSIŁSQQSÉ BIYIGÉ RETURNS HOME,' she thought warmly in the inner voice of her Arizona youth.

### ***CPS Microcosmus, Noon (Day 92) – Scrambling for Answers***

Instead of splitting up, Andy and David had stayed together while they worked ...having subconsciously picked up Ronnie's paranoia over their visitors.

After having surveyed the available spaces, they'd created a working list and were currently going from compartment to compartment while checking status and environmentals to ensure the safety of Ronnie's guests. They'd started with compartments having doubled accommodations that were conveniently located in an unoccupied corridor. While doing so, Andy was still trying to figure out the adult issues that were happening above his head.

"So, Dad, why aren't we gonna go over to the other ship? Won't it be safer and, you know, have *real* food?"

"Ronnie said it would be better for *all* of us if they were invited here instead. I'm sure there's a good reason for him being so cautious. If he's making us go through all *this* much trouble, then I'd say we're better off here than out on our little ship ... or buried somewhere inside the big one that's coming."

They moved on and opened up the next compartment in sequence before checking its potential for habitability.

## ***On the Bridge***

Ronnie and Larl were sitting in the command center of the platform. Even in as bad a condition it was in, they had access to some limited monitoring tools and other systems not available remotely from the commons access point.

"Larl, I want you to go through the security systems and lock down *every* access point available remotely – including the outer door to the tank service bay. Code it to 'Caldar-zero-zero-one' and keep that code between you, me, and David. Likewise, I voice-coded the airlock of the 'Ceti to 'Caldar-zero-zero-one' ... just in case. If things turn sour, then either or both of you can make a run for it with the surviving crew. Head for the void *opposite* of the one we were programmed for, and then work your way back to civilization quietly. There should be enough fuel and food to last until you can make it safely back to Tyler."

Then he handed him a couple of data tabs.

"These tabs list accounts that should be available from anywhere within the Commonwealth, and I doubt they've been frozen. They include your back pay, plus everyone else's. Please take care of my family, Larl. I entrust them to you now."

Larl was caught flat-footed. This sounded like Ronnie was walking himself into a deadly trap, and it quite frankly scared him.

"Uh, Ronnie – you aren't just ... giving up, are you?"

Ronnie gave him a funny look.

"Why ... no. Whatever gave you *that* idea?"

He held up the two data tabs while Ronnie finally noticed the dread in his eyes. He looked at the tabs again, then leaned back while seeming to deflate in his chair.

"I'm sorry, Larl. I didn't mean to cause you any concern. It's just that..." He paused for a moment to get his thoughts in order before opening up. "I find it *uniquely* peculiar that a ship would be *deliberately* sent into a Death Void just to search for – at *worst* – a minor criminal such as myself. The fact that an *Imperial* ship was to be sacrificed, along with ... apparently, an entire *family* of Royals..." He opened his hands, coupled with a hunch of his shoulders, before going on. "It's somewhat *beyond* belief, Larl. Even if Lili told him to do it, most likely he'd *still* need permission from the Emperor first. Apparently, that permission was granted, but I'll be damned if I can figure out the reasoning behind bringing the entire *family* along for a pleasure cruise into a *Death Void* ... *although...*""

His voice went silent while he looked off in the distance, so Larl took the opportunity to begin a general lockdown of the platform.

In the silence of the moment, Ronnie started contemplating that last scenario. If this *was* a general housecleaning, then the Emperor had finally gone *completely* nuts, and the Commonwealth would fall – if only because there was no one as competent as his stepfather at running the entire show. Either that, or the Elder had finally decided to *replace* the Caldorous dynasty and start over with another. He let out a reluctant sigh before sharing his thoughts with Larl.

“I don’t have enough information to go on, but it’s not beyond one of Grandfather’s grandiose schemes to further his power and control over the Commonwealth. He wasn’t born when his great-great-great-plus-a-lot-Grandfather conceived of the Commonwealth in its current version, but he’s ranted about it – *privately* – ever since he achieved the throne.”

Larl paused what he was doing and swiveled his chair to face him.

“Do you think they represent a danger to you? To *all* of us, for that matter?”

“I don’t know, Larl. Something just feels *off* about the whole thing. Unless Grandfather’s plan includes eliminating the *entire* Radatel Caldorous branch of the family tree, then I really have nothing to go on ... aside from watchful waiting, I suppose. That’s why I pushed them to join us here ... on *our* terms, so to speak. To coin a phrase, here we have the \*home field advantage\*. Locked inside *their* ship, we’d be totally at their mercy.”

“CS *Odontoceti*, IRS *Sectorus*. *Sectorus One* requests secure communications regarding boarding protocols.”

“Well ... and now it starts,” Ronnie muttered dismally, and brought up a com screen that barely seemed to glow – until he smacked the console smartly and it sputtered a bit before settling down to display an image of another familiar face.

“IRS *Sectorus*, be advised *Odontoceti* command has shifted back to *Microcosmus* for the time being. I thought you’d be quicker on the uptake than that, Mister Talon.”

The face of the man on the screen broke into a wide and toothy smile.

“And I thought this was the *LAST* place you’d be found, let alone dragging *MY* ass back here as well. You have no idea how much I tried to convince them it was a bad idea, but Lady Lili insisted. Then orders came down through the Emperor’s staff that she was to be ...

*'accommodated' I think was the word. By the Gods, Ronnie, it's good to see you again!"* He paused before adding, "You've gotten old!"

Ronnie laughed at that, not having seen Ensign – now Captain – Karl Talon since they'd left *CPS Microcosmus* together some 170 years ago. He'd had one visit with him and the rest of his crew while they were still in hospice before he'd been carted off to a debriefing, found lacking, and cashiered out. He'd hoped the rest of his crew fared better than he did.

"Aye, laddie, but they be honest years on my soul. What news of the rest of us? I was never told – military secrets and all."

Talon warmed to hear Ronnie joking as in the old days before returning from the *Microcosmus*.

*"Many of us are still in. We have three other survivors on board. Retirees. I think that was at the request of Lady Lili, but I'm sure it came from higher up. A couple of us got out, got married and had kids. A few of us were lost to the Drecks."*

"I understand, Captain," he said, then took a chance. "Is it true that 'immediate' family has come to call?"

Talon paused and looked around; seeing who was off screen but close by. When he spoke again, he was much quieter.

*"In addition to Lord Caldorous and Lady Lili, the rest of the Lady Wives are in attendance. All of them, along with the daughter of Lady Peizhi. None other than staff are reported with them, Ronnie."*

Ronnie thought for a moment more, but then dismissed it.

"Thank you, Karl. I'll not ask the purpose of your visit."

*"Thank you, my Lord. I have one of the staff present to ask about accommodations and the boarding protocol you would have us use. I notice you seem to be somewhat unstable at the moment. Is there any safe place to attach a transit tube?"*

"My pilot, Captain Karl Riker, sits beside me, and we were just going over that very problem when you called. There's still an unused corridor to an outside entry port that can be pressurized – but not if your ship handling is as good as I remember it. Otherwise, you'll have to come over in shuttles that fit the tank service bay."

He paused while Karl's face registered that little complication, before he added to it.

“Oh, and you might have noticed we’re still missing a few critical pieces of outer hull, so we’ve no meteor shield. Everyone who comes aboard will need to don ship suits and wear them constantly unless in environmentally secured compartments. And our chargers do not fit the new models, so you’ll have to bring enough chargers for everyone.”

“*Combat procedures still? Has he sprung any new leaks since the last time I was here?*”

“Next rotation, look under the departing rim. You’ll notice a big dent with a pile of rock in the middle of it. I would prefer not to risk this particular branch of the Royal family against a preventable accident.”

“*Ah! Understood, my Lord,*” Talon agreed while the sound of someone furiously beating a data pad nearly to death came from close by. “*I have Lady Lili’s protocol liaison here. I will turn this meeting over to her. Good to see you again, Ronnie!*” he said, and stepped out of view before a pretty, blue, and very *intent* face appeared on the screen.

“Ah! The ever-efficient *Kita*. Tell me, young lady, would you like to go for a *walk?*” he asked politely.

### ***Noon +1 (Day 92) – Andy Meets an Alien***

Things had been going *abysmally* slow for Andy.

He’d been opening up compartments with his Dad, testing the environmental alarms, and tagging suitable doors with a marking stick, but then Ronnie had come along and grabbed him. He’d taken him back to the ship and they’d set out to recover the small figure floating just outside a surface port on the *Sectorus*, which was still about an hour away and inbound in real time.

It was a great thrill for Andy when her face shield came down and the very feminine and pretty features retained the light blue cast *without* the suit collar shield in place. A real live “*alien*” alien!

Ronnie made informal introductions in both *Kita*’s native language and Standard before turning them back towards the *Microcosmus*.

Andy showed *Kita* to a seat, but ended up sitting next to her when she’d grabbed his arm before he could rejoin Ronnie at the con...

Ronnie had deliberately dragged Andy along for this trip, as he knew *Kita* would be reporting directly back to Lili with any little tidbits of information she could glean from Ronnie or anyone *else* she met along the way. He’d *specifically* chosen Andy because of his youth and the likelihood that Lili would not look for layers of deceit beneath anything she reported from him. True to his supposition, *Kita* chatted with him

seemingly guilelessly, while Andy was quite pleased to answer whatever innocent-sounding questions she asked...

After docking – and once having reached a corridor with *atmosphere* in it – Kita began running her mouth non-stop, and Ronnie was beginning to dread the prospect of presenting the full diplomatic honors this was starting to sound like. During a lull where she was catching a rare breath, he quickly shifted the conversation over to visitor accommodations and the adequacy of the dining facility. Once they entered the commons, she immediately switched tracks and he was finally able to send her off with Andy so she could be handed over to Maya ... hopefully *another* information source that would be trusted.

"Whew! I think I'd rather face a *Drecks*," he muttered, but flinched before quickly looking around.

'*Dodged another one. Gotta keep my mind on track,*' he thought gratefully, before heading back up to rejoin Larl at the platform con.

As it turned out, it's not that Ronnie wasn't *already* as paranoid as he thought he was. He simply had no idea of how paranoid he really *should* be.

### ***Somewhere Else ... (Slightly Out of Phase with Reality...)***

*The Fate on Duty stirred from her nap.*

*It had been **unbelievably** difficult to show any interest in her assigned client. Aside from those two relatively routine bursts of activity, it now looked like he might expire due to his recent bout of stupidity, or simply continue with his mind-numbingly boring activities until he died of natural causes – **either** of which would relieve her of any more responsibilities towards him. **Unless**, of course, she was assigned to him again after his **rebirth**.*

*Looking over the current situation, she suddenly noted a rather interesting change from the client's usual trivial existence.*

**"He has guests? Family?"**

*Though not particularly interesting in itself, **family** time was prone to **stress** this client. It **may** become entertaining after all, but what was it that had disturbed her nap?*

**"Drecks?"**

*She quickly looked around but found nothing currently at hand.*

*Sighing wearily, she noted it in his logbook, "**Drecks, one or more,**" before settling back to resume her nap. She wanted to be well rested before her relief showed up to take her place in a little while.*

### ***Observations from Without, Nearby***

*'The Others are not here?' '?' asked.*

*'They travel slowly' '?' advised.*

*'Then what of these?' '?' wondered.*

*'Some seem familiar' '?' remembered.*

*'Some have returned' '?' observed.*

*'But they just left' '?' complained.*

*'That is their way' '?' reminded.*

*'They bring the Fire?' '?' worried.*

*'Not this time' '?' advised.*

*'Still, we will observe from far' '?' suggested.*

*'We must remain safe' '?' agreed.*

### ***Noon +4 (Day 92) – Welcome Aboard***

Ronnie and Larl had both been trying to figure out a way to keep *IRS Sectorus* in a station-keeping role somewhere else ... far, *far* away.

Ronnie had been of two minds about the whole thing.

On the one hand, having *Sectorus* anchored to *Microcosmus* would allow an immediate response of armed warriors to come storming in at a moment's notice. On the *other* hand, having it floating off elsewhere might keep armed intruders at bay, but allow the cruiser to launch after them at a moment's notice.

He'd still been in a quandary about it when Captain Talon had called and reported there was a general *unpleasantness* that greeted the prospect of continuously wearing ship suits while onboard, but admitted that as an inducement to keeping his family at bay, it wasn't such a bad ploy.

If they decided to board the platform and followed all his suit protocols, then it would limit the number of souls in danger should the need arise for him and his crew to leave in a hurry ... in an *unfortunate* direction.

Talon's *following* suggestion, however, was that *Sectorus* simply lock on with his shields and apply enough counter thrust to halt the rotation. Then they could *remain* locked on for the transport of personnel, food, and other necessities as defined by the very thorough Kita. The meteor shield on *Sectorus* would be extended out for a kilometer, which would then allow *everyone* to wear relaxed clothing

while aboard *Microcosmus*. Having no reasonable argument, Ronnie had reluctantly agreed – and then kicked himself mentally for not thinking of that himself.

Ronnie, who remembered qualifying *then* Ensign Talon in basic ship handling, felt it had taken a frighteningly *short* amount of time to accomplish the initial task before the accommodation tube had been extended and securely locked into place. *Microcosmus* retained security control over the internal and external locks, and there were no intermediate airlocks between the outer and inner ports. If he kept the inner port door at the pressure hull open – and if their visitors then blew open the *outer* doors to get in – the resultant wind would not only keep them out, but also suffocate everyone within *Microcosmus*. It was a situation he thought might deter even the most *aggressive* security detail – depending on their Imperial orders, of course.

Also very frightening was the extreme efficiency Kita had displayed in getting her crew of stewards, cooks, and housekeepers transferred and installed. This included rearrangement of the commons to accommodate seating for the entire family, and the setting up of Royal compartments and appropriate staff accommodations – as well as a *security detachment*.

Ronnie had *definitely* been at odds with that last bit. He had no security staff at all, unless you counted David and himself. He could see no reason to allow additional bodies on board to guard anyone from a non-existent threat. However, *Second Wife* – no small wonder *there* – had insisted she needed her security detail present at all times to “feel secure.”

On that basis alone, he’d compromised on a total of eighteen security staff – three for each wife, and three for his stepfather. Then he’d had to add three more for his stepsister, Laisee, who would *not* be sharing quarters with her mother during her stay. In spite of his reservations in that regard, he’d found it somewhat refreshingly positive for a change.

Himself a Royal, albeit of a much *lesser* parentage, the loyalty of Royal guardsmen might even be of benefit to *him*. He knew at least a half dozen or possibly more might act in his favor should things go *really* sour between *Sectorus* and Royal security staff.

They were just about down to the wire when Ronnie and his crew showed up for the receiving line – for this was *indeed* what Kita had intended all along – while dressed in the casual ships clothing they’d all adopted when in a secure atmospheric space.

Basically, they were all standing around in their underwear, with Ronnie's long-sleeved variant the only anomaly.

He'd thought for just the *tiniest* of moments that Kita's composure would finally crack, but she'd taken them in at a glance, jotted a few things down on her pad, and hit send. A runner was sent to the outer port, and shortly came back with a stack of "Robes of State, Casual" in various sizes and colors. Then several staff immediately leapt to the task of sorting and fitting them to his nearly naked crew.

Kita turned a wry smile to him, and he acknowledged it with a slight bow of his head. Then she was off and about making final arrangements for the formal reception.

### ***Midnight -2 (Day 92) – A Successful First Impression***

Much to everyone's surprise, the dinner had been a great success – although the abundance of *real* food undoubtedly had much to do with it. While the meal itself was sumptuous, Lord Caldorous had commented on the finely aged ambrosia that had been supplied from the platform's own stock.

To Ronnie's *own* surprise, his crew had eaten very little of it. He knew himself that eating such rich food after subsisting on gruel for so long would be "uncomfortable" in the near term, but his crew seemed to be taking their cues from watching him, and had rationed themselves accordingly.

The dinner conversation had been light and polite. No talk of the Drecks, or Earth, or mention of his dereliction of duty as "Ambassador Pro Tem" was brought up by his stepfather, and he wasn't about to bring it up himself.

Second Wife remained cool and just barely polite as usual. Her daughter remained silent, but she smiled at him when her mother wouldn't notice. The remaining Wives all treated him as if he'd just gotten back from a weekend trip somewhere, and made simple conversation with him.

It almost felt like ... *home* ... but then he remembered the *last* time he'd been home.

And then it was over. They'd shared the meal, said their good evenings, and everyone returned to their compartments for the night. The *real* purpose of the visit would be revealed on the morrow.

### ***In Ronnie's Compartment***

Their sleeping room was dimly lit, save for the slightly brighter elements of the compartment's ships timer on the far wall next to the monitor.

He was laying in bed with Maya while thinking back over the initial stiffness of the receiving line. Each visitor had been introduced formally; first his stepfather, and then each wife in turn; walking down the line, meeting and touching palms with him, then Maya, then David, Diane, Amy, Andy and Shay in that order.

It seemed that Kita had noticed the subtle relationship between Andy and Shay, and placed her next to him instead of next to his parents. Or perhaps it wasn't so subtle? They *did* make such a nice couple together. And when did he get so *tall*? He warmly remembered how proud his crew – his *family* – had made him feel.

Larl would have been there, but they'd established a need for crew stationed "on watch" and they'd have to keep up the illusion for as long as they had company. David, and then Andy, would rotate into the platform con and, if nothing else, continue their studies. Their partners were welcomed to keep them company if they wanted to.

"Can you not sleep, my Ronnie?" Maya murmured by his side. She snuggled closer and stretched an arm across his chest.

"I'm just thinking about dinner, my love. Does it seem to you that Andy has gotten bigger?"

"Ummm, I do not recall, my love. I will try to pay better attention during next ships holiday." He could hear the smile in her voice, and cuddled her tighter with one arm.

"No, my silly one. He seems ... *taller* now. More grown up. Have you four been doing anything special to our Andy to make him grow?"

"Only little Shay. I believe she *frequently* does something special to make him grow." She chuckled sleepily, and hugged him just a bit tighter.

"Ai-yah," he exclaimed quietly, and turned to kiss her forehead and squeeze her closer.

"Ummm, do you need me to make anything grow for *you*, my love?" she asked drowsily.

"I have *all* the comfort I need beside me. Sleep well, my love," he murmured. She sighed and relaxed, before easily falling back to sleep beside him.

Now was not the time to talk about things with her. Especially not the warning Talon had passed on about Captain Tomar.

*"Beware Tomar, Ronnie. He is Meela's creature, and speaks nothing of things concerning security among the Royals. We have better information from the staff – many of whom belong to the First Wife,"* he'd said.

It was a strange warning. It sounded almost as if *Tomar* was expected to fill the roles vacated by his stepbrothers. There would be time enough to deal with Captain Tomar.

Tomorrow. Or the next day, perhaps.

Or perhaps at a time of Tomar's choosing.

### ***Noon –3.5 (Day 93) – Meeting the Family***

As regular as a weekly progress update, Ronnie's stepfather had called for a meeting with him to explain his business there. It was scheduled for Noon minus three.

Having nearly nothing else to wear besides underwear, a much-worn jumpsuit, and a borrowed Robe of State, Casual, he opted instead to wear his ship suit. Then he waited until it was time to leave.

Before she'd left for her own meeting, Maya had hugged him and told him not to worry. "One piece of the puzzle at a time," she'd reminded him, and then left for her informal meeting with the five Wives ... but not before a warning to watch out for Second Wife. "And don't get caught alone with *First Wife*," he'd added, just before she'd sauntered out the door.

Left alone with his thoughts, he paced about the compartment in some confusion over this sudden intrusion from his family...

It couldn't have anything to do with the *Microcosmus* because that issue was dead and buried in the past. He'd been charged, sentenced, and cashiered – all in one day. Very efficient, even for the military.

It shouldn't have anything to do with that *previous* business with Lord Gagsa. That issue had been over for fifteen years.

Of course! It was probably about his abrupt departure from Earth while leaving a very nasty visitor orbiting the South Pole of a defenseless protectorate of the Commonwealth. But whose fault was *that*? He didn't leave with all the damn support ships for a simple cruise home to file routine paperwork. All he'd gotten was a damned *runaround* from the consular staff, and then Miltie's department as well. He'd had no choice but to evacuate, which turned out to be the

*best* thing he could have done. It'd kept his ship *mostly* out of curious hands, and prevented premature dissemination of delicate technology.

As for the *last* thing he could think of – he'd *paid* for all those cases of ambrosia. He'd transferred the credits from his portion of the household budget into his stepfather's budget just before he'd left. He was *sure* of it. *Pretty* sure, anyway...

Time ticked away before he made his appearance at Lord Caldorous' door five minutes early. Some habits were hard to break.

The guard stationed outside the door gave him a cordial greeting, knocked, waited for the command, and then opened the door for him.

"Rondal, please come in and shut the door," his stepfather said curtly.

As soon as the door closed, Radatel seemed to visibly relax before turning to a side table. He poured two crystals of ambrosia and handed one of them to Ronnie. They eyed each other while each sipped and enjoyed the subtle flavors of the exquisitely aged liquor.

Radatel gestured to two chairs before he sat in one of them, and Ronnie took the seat across from him. They both sipped again in silence before Radatel finally played his opening gambit.

"Rondal, you look *terrible*. Have you lost *weight*?"

Ronnie tried very hard to hold it in, and barely managed to stifle a short laugh.

"Most likely... I don't know of anyone who could successfully *gain* weight on ships gruel, Sir."

"Oh, *enough* of that 'Sir' nonsense ... at least between just the two of us. By the Gods, I'm more than twenty years your senior, and yet you look *twice* my age." He slowly shook his head in disgust, before continuing. "How is your Lady ... Maya?"

"My ... my *Lady*?"

"She is your Healer. She had been assigned to you by the Elder. How is she?"

He was still pondering this tiny revelation while responding, "She's doing ... well ... *Father*?"

Radatel inclined his head graciously, so Ronnie took this as an opening to push her case.

“She’s working at *very* high levels, Father. I believe she is working at *Senior* levels. I don’t understand why they refused to let her come back for training and extra Healing. She still remembers nothing about how she got injured, and I feel I’m not the one to reveal the truth to her.”

“How did she react when Gagsa caught up with you?”

Ronnie glanced away for a moment, before reporting what he thought she’d experienced.

“Fortunately, she was in the back, and I’m pretty sure she missed most of the conversation. I was worried then, and the few times it came up afterwards, I was watching for a reaction, but … she … didn’t react. I suppose I should be grateful. I thank you for your support regarding Maya, Father.”

Radatel looked away, before quietly dredging up that issue from the past.

“You know… I was quite sure you’d lost your senses again when you first told me you suddenly needed a leave of absence. But then you returned with Maya and went right back to work. Fifteen years ago, your reports and her reports told a much different story than what I’d expected.” He paused for a moment to consider the *political* issue that had been triggered at the time.

“I don’t suppose you’d *now* like to share the details of how you managed to book passage for Healer Tal so quickly? Aside from the *official* complaint – the one that came through *diplomatic* channels, that is.”

Ronnie looked down this time and sipped lightly at his drink, before meeting his stepfather’s eyes again.

“Ahh … no, Father. I’ve found over the years that too much unpleasant information tends to ruin the digestion. I just can’t bear the thought of causing you that much discomfort.” He’d said it with a straight face, and Radatel considered his oblique answer, while reserving resolution of it for a later date.

“True, Rondal, and I thank you for your concern. But the truth *will* come out … *later*, if not sooner.”

“Yes, Father, but until then, you may continue on in blissful ignorance while you await with avid anticipation for the truth to be revealed. Or until I die. In any case, as I was not working under the guidance or pay of the Commonwealth at the time, there was no consideration against the Crown. I was merely … an ‘independent contractor’ on self-assignment. As it turned out, I returned a valuable

asset to the Commonwealth, and left not too terrible a mess behind ... at *no cost* to the Crown, I should point out."

"Yes, but suppose you'd *hadn't* been so successful? What *then*?"

"Why ... Second Wife would *still* be rejoicing, and *dancing on my grave!*" he said cheerfully.

Radatел groaned, and Ronnie settled into a semblance of contriteness.

"I apologize, but ... how *did* you pry the spider from her web?"

Radatел suppressed another groan at his stepson's accurate assessment of Second Wife. Instead, he allowed a tiny sigh of agreement, before sharing what little he could.

"That, I'm afraid, is just *one* of the reasons we've come out here to meet with you. Lili had received orders from the Elder. The *Elder* thought she knew where to find you, and requested support from the Emperor's staff to do so. They conferred and granted the use of a ship and crew for the voyage ... rather *quickly*, I might add. Lili pointed us in *this* direction, and then spent many hours in her compartment with her eyes closed ... like she *does* ... and finally got us *this* far," he explained, while letting his eyes encompass more space than just the immediate surroundings.

"We'd been wandering all around outside the void for nearly a week, before Lili insisted we had to jump *inside* it to reach you. I finally had to threaten poor Talon with 'consequences most dire' before he'd actually issue the command. I do believe he *still* would have refused if Lili had not spoken to him *privately* – with *me* in the room, of course."

"Of course, Father. It wouldn't do to have the crew think he'd been suborned by the wiles of your *witch*."

He'd said this last in jest, but still gotten a frown from his stepfather.

"Yes ... no doubt. Anyway, I'm sure everyone was quite delighted when we arrived still alive. It was less than an hour later when your departure alert was received. We appear to have been right on time."

Ronnie spared a slight chuckle at that fortuitous timing.

"We were on the verge of taking the *scenic* route back to home world when you called. What ... ah, what happened back on *Earth*, Father?"

Radatел released a silent snort while shaking his head slightly.

"You know, that was the most *peculiar* thing. After they took that shot at you – yes, our monitors caught *that* action as well – anyway, they stayed on station for a while, harassed the Embassy communications staff a bit, and then simply *left*. Lili says she has *contacts* who are looking into it, but ... you know how the *Ladies* are about these things," he said, while looking around warily before continuing. "The one thing that *did* turn up was an unsubstantiated rumor that you'd inadvertently created a *schism* within the Drecks hierarchy. Apparently, whatever you did fifteen years ago seems to have caused a certain lack of ... *confidence*? Lord Gagsa's credibility seems to have fallen *greatly*, shall we say?"

Ronnie pursed his lips while nodding his head knowingly. He could understand how Gagsa might have fallen out of favor with the Drecks Master Pack. It's not as if he'd *expected* uninvited dinner guests.

"I suppose I could understand that. Can the Emperor *exploit* that, do you think?"

"The Emperor..." Radatel paused. He was trying to think of a way to broach it delicately, but it obviously wasn't the right time yet. "The Emperor has been ... *reluctant* in following the advice of his immediate advisors – and of those *above* them. Lili assures me the issue is being examined in great detail. As for your *Earthbound* problems, I understand our friend Milton was recovered shortly after you'd departed, and he managed to set things right."

"Drecks?"

"No, one of their *own* little factions. Apparently, it's been straightened out, but you are advised that your presence on Earth is under review. Your *particular* project is on hold during that review."

"But ... what about my *charges*? Where have they ended up?"

"Oh, they're doing quite well at one of the other camps. I believe it's a mixed-race camp somewhere out on Dyeayoub ... a bit closer to the Fringe. I'm told you've met the local administrator once or twice – Teyadi, I think her name is?"

"Oh yes, I remember her. Hard, but fair, and she's very determined to make a difference. Well, those concerns are no longer prominent in my mind, then. Thank you, Father. Now ... how may I serve the Crown?"

Radatel glanced at him, but looked down at his drink before speaking quietly.

"It appears that some rather delicate issues regarding your stepbrothers have arisen once again. When Meela learned about Lili's

plan to come visit you at your ... *vacation home...*,” he paused and moved an arm out expansively, before turning his focus back to Ronnie, “...she *insisted* on coming along. I suspect she sees an opportunity for *revenge*, Rondal.”

He looked into his stepfather’s eyes, but didn’t detect any malice coming from him ... a welcome change from so many years ago.

“I’ve already been cashiered, and brought shame to the House of Caldorous, and I’ve worked very hard to *overcome* that disgrace. I don’t see what *else* she can expect ... unless she wants my head on a *platter*, and I doubt it will come to that.”

“I wouldn’t be too sure, Rondal. You have no idea of the intrigues surrounding House Caldorous. Meela figures prominently among several of them. Beware her guard, Captain Tomar. I believe he serves her *above* the Crown.”

“Well, I don’t see how he could *not*. He’s loved her probably from the moment she first joined the household. *Anyone* could see that,” Ronnie said bluntly, but his stepfather sat back in shock. “Oh, *really* Father? You *truly* did not see it between them? He dotes on her. And despite her pitiless treatment of him, he is *still* devoted to her – even after all this time. She could have even dallied with him and not raised an eyebrow among the family, but I suspect that if she ever had, it was long ago, and he’s never gotten over it.”

He stood and walked the short steps to his stepfather, before kneeling down and hugging him.

“Father, you have four Wives who love you *dearly*, and a stepson who loves you *almost* as much,” he said while still holding him firmly. He then got up and clasped his shoulder, before turning and sitting back down. “Mind you, I will not share your *bed* with you,” he added, which got them both chuckling.

### ***Meeting the Wives***

Maya had walked the corridors while escorted by one of the Wives’ security men. The prospect of meeting Lord Caldorous’s Wives in private was causing no little trepidation for her, and it finally came to a peak when they’d stopped at the door of the First Wife.

One of four guardsmen had knocked diffidently and waited for a response. A youngish looking woman dressed in moccasins, leather, and beads opened the door and smiled brightly at her before gently grasping her by the hand and drawing her into the room.

The room itself had several soft cushions laid about it, where three other Wives sat at leisure. Maya was brought to the center of the room, where the apparent Indian maiden turned to her and embraced her. She felt the gentle warmth of the Healers flow into her from the girl, but stood there silently while desperately trying to remember everyone's name. She let out a tiny gasp when the girl took a step back while still holding her hands.

"I am Spring Blossom se Earth ne Kantor, mother of your companion, Rondal Caldar, and Fifth Wife to my Lord Radatel Caldarous," Spring Blossom greeted her, and kissed her on the cheek.

A short and somewhat chubby woman stood and stepped over to embrace her. Maya felt even more warmth of the Healers flow from her.

"I am Changying Meifeng Fenfang se Cletus, but that is such a long name, so I am pleased that everyone calls me Yin-Yin. I am Fourth Wife to my Lord Radatel Caldarous," Yin-Yin told her, and kissed her on the lips.

A slender woman stood and embraced her very closely; nibbling on her ear, even while pushing energy through her and pulling it back out again, leaving Maya feeling fuzzy all over.

"I am Dongmei Kisa Wen se Tyler ... but I do not really *like* my first name, so please call me Mei-Mei," Mei-Mei explained. "I am my Lord Caldarous' Third Wife."

The stately, slightly taller, and more *mature* woman stood up and embraced her fully, while giving her an intimately probing kiss in the process. Then she broke away and firmly held her at arm's length.

"I am Liling Shan Ting Song se Cletus, First Wife of the house of Lord Radatel Caldarous. Family is graced to address me as Lady Lili."

Lili looked sternly into Maya's eyes and continued to hold her steady, before closing her eyes and searching through the young Healer.

Surrounded by the Wives and locked in Lili's grip, Maya stood there helplessly while she felt a heat begin to build up within her. She suddenly realized Lady Lili was not just a mere Healer – she was a *Senior* and she was being *examined!*

The energy flowed through her, increasing in intensity while she felt the warmth spread throughout her whole body. It kept building and building until she felt as if she couldn't hold any more. Her head began to hurt terribly, but she wasn't able to move or cry out. She saw traces of images – *horrible* things – but before they could fully manifest, the flow swiftly cut off, and she sagged to the floor in a tangle of arms and

legs. Lili simply let her lay there on the floor, while Maya remained panting and nearly comatose from the experience.

Spring Blossom quickly squatted down next to her and gathered her into her arms, before turning on Lili.

"You've nearly burned her *out*, Lili! She is my son's *true* companion, and yet you treat her such?"

"She is *damaged*, my Lady Blossom. Your son did a *poor* job with her. She could have become *Senior*, except for his interference!"

"Lili, if the reports are true, then Ronnie did a great service in bringing Maya back to us," Yin-Yin offered calmly.

"This is *true*, Lili," Mei-Mei agreed. "If what our little Ronnie has done is true, then he has saved her *life*. If she is still damaged now, then surely she will become whole again when the Elder arrives?"

Lili stood there calmly, while looking at the concern on each of their faces. Then she finally looked down at the innocent victim lying at her feet. With a weary sigh, she kneeled down and gently placed a hand along Maya's scar, before she closed her eyes and began searching within once again – *this* time doing so gently and without effort.

She searched through the injured threads of Maya's mind and found the ones of importance, before following them to their severed ends ... and then *beyond*. Once there, she let those hidden memories wash over her, but had to recede lest she become emotionally involved herself. She finally opened her eyes and wiped the moisture leaking from them, before looking pityingly at young Maya, who was lying in Spring Blossom's arms and panting as if laboring to bring forth a child.

"Forgive me, my sisters. I shame my order ... and myself. Ronnie did indeed save his Maya's life, and more. He saved her from her *madness*, and I am not so sure even the *Elder* can help her now. Whatever steps are taken must involve our Ronnie, and he may find it impossible to bring this hurt back to her for her *own* sake."

"Is it so *terrible*, Lili?" Spring Blossom asked her anxiously.

Lili turned her head to hide her pain. Her *own* loss had been difficult enough, but *Maya's*... She took a breath to steady herself, before turning back to her sister-Wives.

"It is *always* terrible to lose a child, my Lady Blossom, but to watch *two* daughters die in such a—"

"*Shhhh* ... she stirs, my Lady," Mei-Mei whispered urgently.

### ***In Radatel's Compartment***

There was a knock at the door. With Radatel's permission, Ronnie rose and opened it to find Larl standing there with three additional visitors – each of whom looked vaguely familiar.

Radtel stood and walked over to stand beside him, then glanced at Larl and nodded in greeting, while noting that his personal guardsman was keeping an eye on the situation.

*"Doctor Larl Riker, isn't it? Your filings for salvage rights have been summarily denied pending resolution of the previous salvage filings and contact with the current holders of record. Until that time, the Crown has taken the liberty of assuming temporary guardianship of the *Microcosmus*. Rondal, we hereby order that all record access of you and your staff be monitored until such time as the legal owners have been contacted and presented with a formal request for access."*

This little tidbit caught Ronnie by surprise, but Radatel continued.

*"You see, Rondal. There has been a request to access any and all data records from *CPS Microcosmus*. We need to ascertain certain facts regarding actions and events from the date of your assumption of command, until your departure from here – your first departure. To do so, we have brought with us expert staff who will validate the integrity of any data recovery for accuracy, or potential modification – deliberate or otherwise."*

As his stepfather wound down, Ronnie started to chuckle. Then he reached past Larl to hug the three newcomers.

*"Granger – Lon – Donnel! By the Gods, it's good to see you!"* he cried, as he greeted his former crewmates. *"Larl, may I introduce Granger Deltec, Lon Tannis, and Donnel Ardan – three of the finest technical engineers to ever grace a ship of the line. Had their section been saved, we would've ridden *Microcosmus* back, even looking like he is."*

*"That's true, my Captain – 'cuse me, Lord Calder, but it would've been easier if we'd had a working exciter left to play with,"* Granger said.

*"Told you, Granger, we could've built one – in time. We had enough pieces,"* Lon murmured.

*"Aye, bit then we aye wantit a workin' engine or twa, 'n' ah didnae fancy spending twelve years movin' a' they bits fae th' tanks intae th' belly o' th' Kraken juist tae see if it wid work,"* Donnel said obscurely, which caused both Radatel and Larl to blink in confusion, while the rest of the conversation continued uninterrupted.

"You figured out the *best* solution, my Lord, just like you always do," Granger said. "You got us *home*, Sir, and there's not one among us who regret that." That personal bit of praise lightened Ronnie's heart – and the fact that these three were still alive.

"So where did they dig all of you up from? I can't believe they transferred all of you back here just to rescue *me!*"

"Well, Sir, they didn't exactly *transfer* us," Lon said. "We're all *civilians* now, but it seems there's a *tiny, little clause* in our enlistment contracts that states, 'Upon the needs of the Crown, enlistee shall make themselves available for an indeterminate amount of time until the needs of the Crown are met,' ... or something very much like it."

"Aye, it's no a *nice* one," Donnel muttered, and his two companions nodded their heads in agreement.

At the sudden pause in the conversation, Larl finally managed to get a word in.

"Excuse me, Ronnie, but these gentlemen attempted entry to the con, and David called down for some help. I told them it was denied until I heard from you."

Ronnie laughed, and turned to Radatel with a grin on his face.

"And well you should, Larl. Lord Caldorous, I formally *refuse* access to any and all data from the con of the former *CPS Microcosmus*." He sounded almost gleeful when he said it.

Radatel stood there stiffly. Lili had *assured* him there would be no problems with this. When Ronnie turned back to his friends, Radatel shared a cautionary finger-flip with his guard before pressing his case.

"Rondal, I don't see where you have a say in *any* of this. Once the owners of *Microcosmus* are located, we'll simply indicate the desires of the Crown, and access will be ours. We'll pay a *fee* if necessary," he said, which got Ronnie to turn and face him again.

"I don't believe there's enough credit in the entire *Commonwealth* to pay for access to the con, Sir. You see, the former *CPS Microcosmus* is owned by the Kraken Collective – and I *am* the Kraken Collective!"

### ***In the First Wife's Compartment***

Maya was confused and frightened for some reason, but couldn't remember why. Her world was spinning, and she'd caught bits and pieces of words, but without any understanding. She'd heard Spring Blossom talking with Lili and the others, but nothing had made sense. She was slowly coming around, and things were just starting to come

back into focus, when she opened her eyes to see the concerned faces looking down at her.

"Welcome back, Lady Maya ... companion to our Ronnie!" Lili said cheerfully.

"I – I – what *happened* to me?" she asked with a very confused expression on her face, while looking up at the Wives standing around her.

"Our Lili has looked within you and seen a great many things from our little Maya," Mei-Mei said quietly, before looking at Lili meaningfully.

Lili nodded and smiled.

"Yes, Maya. I have looked within and seen much *strength* within you. Perhaps our Ronnie is correct when he says you are ready to begin Senior training. Would that *please* you, young Healer?"

"I..." Maya paused and looked at them in a panic. "Forgive me, my Ladies, but if it means I must leave my Ronnie, then I would rather remain with him, and work with him as I have done for the last several years. I – I *love* my Ronnie, and I do not wish to leave him," she said timidly, before turning away in shame.

They all looked at each other, before first one and then another began to titter. Eventually, all four of them were giggling childishly, with Spring Blossom hugging Maya warmly.

"Silly girl," Mei-Mei chided her.

"Yes, little one," Yin-Yin said.

"We *cannot* take you away from my Ronnie," Spring Blossom said with gentle laughter.

Lili looked down at her, and smiled.

"No, my little Maya. That would not do at all. Our Ronnie would be *lost* without your love and support. And who better to guide him in his work than one who loves him as *you do*?" She reached down, and with the help of the other three Wives, got Maya up and settled onto one of the cushions, before continuing.

"Rondal ... he is of the Royal House of Caldorous. Like *all* of their men, he must be guided and protected from *himself*. They may rule the Commonwealth, control commerce, and protect civilization as we know it ... but they dance to *our* strings, and *we* must be wise enough to guide them where they must surely go."

"I ... yes, my Lady Lili. My Ronnie had said as much when he—"

She stopped at the hard look from Lili.

"Rondal has told you that Seniors rule *above* the Kantite Lords?"

Lili had asked this quietly, and Maya quickly dropped her eyes. Although she'd just met her, even *she* knew better than to lie in front of Lili.

"Forgive me, my Lady, but ... yes. My Ronnie has voiced the – *opinion* that without the Healers and Seniors, the men of Kantor would soon fall into the same chaos and destruction they arose from. He has told this to all of my students. I ... I believe he has told this to all of his crew," she finished in a whisper.

Lili thought about that for a few moments, before turning to Fifth Wife with a smile on her lips.

"Well, my little Spring Blossom, it appears that your *devil-spawn* has grown *wisdom* in his old age ... although I cannot understand that excessive growth of *hair* on the back of his head."

Maya quickly jerked her head up, but all she saw were smiles surrounding her. A knock came at the door, and Yin-Yin opened it to reveal one of Lili's personal guards.

"Forgive me, my Lady Lili. You are requested by Mister Tannis to attend a meeting at Lord Caldorous' compartment. There appears to be some confusion, and he requests your assistance for a successful resolution, my Lady."

Lili gave out a beleaguered sigh, before turning to her companions with a reluctant shrug of her shoulders.

"Forgive me, my Ladies. It appears that a *string* needs pulling. Elder grant that I pull the *right* one." Lili tittered lightly at her own joke, before leaving them to become better acquainted amongst themselves.

### ***At Lord Caldorous' Compartment***

"You're *what?*" Larl couldn't believe what he'd just heard – not after all the research he'd done with David.

"I *own* the Kraken Collective. *Most* of it, anyway. Lady Lili set it up a few years after I returned from my sojourn here. It's a viable registered company within the Commonwealth, and pays annual stipends to each survivor of the *Microcosmus* – such as our friends here..." he paused as his arms encompassed the three engineers, "...with credits earned from investments I've made over, oh ...*lots* of years. Hey, I've been on Earth for twenty years, and haven't needed credit for hardly *anything* in all that time. It all adds up, a little bit at a time."

Approaching from his backside, Ronnie missed Lili's arrival to the discussion.

"Good morning, Gentlemen. I trust all is proceeding as expected?"

As soon as her voice was heard, the demeanor of the men changed significantly ... except for Radatel's.

"*Lili*—" was as far as he got, before being cut off by her sharply raised hand, while Ronnie cluelessly jumped in with a wide smile on his face.

"Good *morning*, my Lady Lili. You look *delightfully* refreshed this morning. If I may ask, my Lady, how did your meeting go with Maya?"

"Alas, Rondal, it was cut short. It seems that Mister Tannis felt the need to call me from the meeting once he discovered there might be a *problem* with access to the records of the *Microcosmus*. Is this not true?"

As always, the sweetness of her voice belied the thoughts she held beneath.

"I'm afraid it is, my Lady. I just formally denied access to my Lord Calderous, and I fear he is somewhat upset about the situation."

Lili's expression never changed at this rather trivial delay in their proceedings – save for the arrival of a demure smile.

"Never fear, Rondal, for I will attempt to resolve the situation."

Ronnie was smiling, but she turned to the three engineers instead of Radatel.

"Mister Deltec, with your vote, do you wish to deny or allow access?"

"I respectfully deny access, my Lady."

"Very well. Mister *Tannis*, with *your* vote, do you wish to deny or allow access?"

"I choose to *allow* access, my Lady. Sorry, my Lord, but it's about time, Sir," he said, much to the surprise of Ronnie, who merely nodded numbly.

"Mister *Ardan*, wi' yer vote dae ye wish tae deny or allow access?" she asked in a reasonably close approximation of the birth world dialect that Donnel had immersed himself in for the last several decades.

"I choose tae *allow* access, mah Lady." Ronnie could see a *very* sad expression on his face.

"Well, I choose to *deny* access, my Lady – *respectfully*," Ronnie said, on the verge of petulance. "That means we're *blocked* – with two *for* and two *against*. But I must *protest!* These men are here under *duress* and beholden to the *Crown*. That places an unreasonable bias against the *validity* of their vote!"

Lili ignored Ronnie's rude outburst, and turned a smiling face towards her husband.

"My Lord Radatel?" Lili asked calmly.

"Huh? Oh, very well. Mister Deltec, Mister Tannis, and Mister Ardan – in the name of the Crown, I release you from further service *now*, and *until* we return you to your place of embarkation." Turning back to Ronnie, he said, "But that *still* leaves Captain Talon!"

"He's an active officer of the *line*, my Lord! I don't believe you can cashier him over something as trivial as *this!*"

"That won't be necessary, my dear Rondal," Lili said sweetly. "As Chairwoman of the board for the Kraken Collective, I *also* have a vote. I vote to *allow* access. Gentlemen, please recover the data as requested."

Both Ronnie and Radatel stood there in shock. Larl looked between the three of them, but at Lili's smiling nod, stepped away to activate a local call station.

"Larl to con. David, when the engineers arrive, you will allow them full access to anything they want – with restrictions on certain passwords as discussed. Oh, and pay attention, will you? Take this as a learning experience, and ask all the questions you can. I understand they are the very best of the fleet."

"Understood, Larl. Con out."

Larl turned back to Lili and basked in the warmth of her smile.

"That was very *kind* of you, Mister Riker. I am so very sorry that your salvage application was denied, but I was very intrigued by some of your suggested *proposals*. Should we all survive the next few months, I would like very much to meet with you and the Lanes to discuss specific business arrangements when it would be convenient for all of you."

"My Lady Song se Cletus is most gracious. I look forward to our potential business opportunities ... should we survive at all," he said, then performed a formal bow.

"Oh, Mister *Riker*, you are such a *charmer!* I now understand what your Lady Amy sees in you," she said, while reaching down and gently

grasping the lower front of his ship suit. "Perhaps we may see more of you *later*?"

"Per – perhaps, my Lady," he stammered, before Lili gathered him closer and kissed him gently on the cheek.

"By your leave, my Lady," he said thickly, then quickly walked away while trying not to obviously adjust his ship suit.

Ronnie turned to watch him go, still somewhat bewildered ... but came to his senses, snagged Lili by the arm, dragged her into the room with him and Radatel, and shut the door before either guard could react.

"Lili! Have you *lost your*—"

Any further words from him were frozen by her look of disdain, and he immediately fell to one knee before her and bowed his head deeply.

"Please forgive me, my Lady Song. This has been a morning of great revelations and ...and accompanying stress. I-I have *no* excuse for my actions, even so," he said very contritely.

She stood imperiously in front of him.

Radatel remained standing quietly behind her and not moving a muscle. He remembered well those moments he'd spent in the very same position as his stepson, and how *agonizing* that position was to be in.

Lili reached out and felt *through* Rondal, while still sensing his conflicted feelings.

He honored family, even to his own shame, and yet he'd truly done the best that he could ... the best that *anyone* could, given the circumstances, and his own concept of honor. She felt that *now*, just as she'd felt it so long ago, both before and then *after* he'd returned from the cradle of the *Kraken* for the second time. Her little Rondal had been *reborn* out here, and she wasn't about to let that opportunity go to *waste* ... *not this time!*

"You are *forgiven*, impetuous child."

She placed her hand on his cheek, and he reached up and brought her fingertips to his forehead. She withdrew them slowly and moved them under his chin, before lifting his face up to look down into his eyes. The expression on her face and the cheerfulness in her voice was in conflict with her words.

"You look *terrible*, Ronnie. Have you lost *weight*?"

### ***In Larl and Amy's Compartment***

Amy had gotten up when Larl was called to the con by David – something about engineers from the other ship wanting to poke around or some such.

She savored a leisurely hot shower and dried herself, before contemplating her choice of wardrobe for the day –ship suit, underwear, underwear with jumpsuit, or Robe of State, Casual. The novelty of having an active meteor shield around them widened her choices considerably.

She took one sniff of her ship suit, and immediately dropped her choices down to Robe of State, Casual, underwear, or underwear with jumpsuit. Her rumbling stomach hastened the decision for her, and she donned a clean set of underwear – rethought about the propriety of their guests – and drew on her old jumpsuit, before trotting off to breakfast at the rearranged commons.

She passed one guard along the way, who'd greeted her casually with a nod, but then turned and trailed along behind her while she continued to the commons. She arrived to find the commons deserted, but with a few noises coming from the kitchen area. Not wishing to impose herself on anyone, she grabbed a clean bowl and drew a portion of ships gruel, before sitting down to settle her empty stomach.

A few minutes later, a young woman approached wearing a simple shift, and glanced at her nervously while looking around at the otherwise deserted commons.

Amy watched her for a moment, before remembering she was at the state dinner last night – someone's daughter, she thought, but then remembered – Laisee Caldorous, the Second Wife's daughter.

Amy pointed to her bowl, and the woman nodded gratefully, so she got up and drew her dinner acquaintance a portion. She sat back down and proffered the bowl to her at a position opposite her at the table.

"Thank you, my Lady – Lane? My Lady Riker? I'm sorry, my Lady, but last night was *very* confusing, I'm afraid."

"My name is Amy – Amy Linn Lane, but yes, I am to be bonded with Larl Riker of Tyler." Amy smiled warmly at her when she remembered Laisee's family position. "And you are Lady – Laisee? Grandfather's stepsister?"

It took a moment for that to sink in. When it did, Laisee was shocked at this discovery. A *Granddaughter of Lord Caldor?* Mother must *never* find out!

Amy was surprised at the expression on Laisee's face, and considered what faux pas she'd just uttered, when it suddenly came to her.

"Oh no, Ronnie's not *really* my Grandfather, Lady Laisee. He just kinda *acts* like one with me and Andy – Andy's my little brother. He was the one sitting next to the other Healer, Shay."

Laisee was relieved to hear this, and visibly relaxed. She nodded in somewhat understanding, but also found it interesting that this simple Earth girl kept addressing her in bonded, family familiar mode.

She looked into her bowl and considered the interesting concoction within. She was about to ask how one eats it, when she looked up and saw Amy dip a finger into her own bowl. The young girl wiped a portion of her bowls' contents into her mouth, before drawing her finger out slowly – almost obscenely – in the process. From the look of her facial muscles, she was using her tongue to help with the transfer.

Laisee looked at the mushy mass in the bowl in front of her and tentatively touched a small portion of it with her fingertip before raising it to her lips. Her tongue came out and tasted it ... and then tasted it again ... and finally tasted it one more time, before she reluctantly inserted her finger and drew off the interestingly *bland* concoction within her mouth.

Amy had observed her breakfast companions reluctance and tried to relieve her concerns.

"I would say that it's an *acquired* taste, but since it has no taste we've been able to discern, we just keep eating it, and we somehow keep on living. Apparently, it sustains life."

Laisee nodded politely at her explanation and tried a fingertip-full this time, while not *quite* making a face.

"It's best not to think about it while you're eating it. The good thing is, you'll never gain weight," Amy suggested.

Amy laughed at her own joke, while Laisee offered up a politely closed-mouth smile in response. Amy was still unsure about some things, but the smile on Laisee's face prompted her to seize the opportunity to ask.

"Forgive me, Lady Laisee, but I'm still confused over the divisions between names and associations. Ronnie spoke to us about it, but I'm still very mixed-up. I don't remember the differences between a birth association tag, and a fealty tag – that's the one that shows what planet you pledge your loyalty to? And I thought I heard in Ronnie's –

Lord Caldars name, a ‘sai’ in there somewhere. How do you remember it all?”

Laisee took a moment to swallow the last of her paste before responding.

“Well, my Lady – *Amy?*” Laisee paused, then continued when Amy nodded. “For introductions, it is usually proper to identify your home world and fealty association in that order. You are ‘Amy Linn Lane se Earth’ as Earth is your birth planet. When you become bonded to Larl Riker, you would be allowed to pledge loyalty to the planet of Larl’s birth – Tyler. Then your formal name would be ‘Amy Linn Lane se Earth ne Tyler.’

“Lord Caldars is the child of a *previous* mating to the Fifth Wife of Lord Caldorous. As such, he was allowed to adopt a *part* of the House name of Caldorous. His name, then, is ‘Rondal Caldars sai Caldorous se Earth ne Kantor,’ for he has also sworn fealty to the Crown of Kantor. He has another name his mother calls him in her native language. It is pronounced... ‘TS-EELTH-SOAN-SAY BEE-YEE-GAY,’ she said with difficulty.

A flicker of movement from the direction of the kitchen caught Amy’s eye. Then they heard a shriek coming from behind closed doors. This was followed by shouts and briskly issued orders, which were soon accompanied by the sounds of pots and pans banging around.

The commotion drew the hurried response of one of the patrolling guardsmen, but he listened for a moment, then chuckled at the unintelligible words before turning in their direction. He took in the contents of their bowls and quickly turned away while his body began to shake. He jiggled himself away from the commons, and once he’d turned the corner, whatever self-restraint he’d held finally broke down, and they heard loud echoes of his laughter explode down the corridors.

“What in the *world*? What do you suppo–”

Amy’s verbal thoughts stalled when she suddenly noticed the pale greenish cast on her breakfast companions face. This was quickly followed by the sounds of gagging, and she *almost*, but not *quite*, escaped the flood of whatever Laisee’s stomach had held up to that point. Jumping back, Amy quickly stripped off her jumpsuit and stood there in her snugly fitted underwear that tightened over her baby bump.

Laisee was *mortified!*

She’d overheard the shouts from the cooks and heard the words “ships gruel” before remembering Amy’s comments about how it “sustains life.” Then she remembered Felis and Tanis’ comments on

how it was produced. She'd looked down at her bowl and suddenly realized she'd been eating *processed human waste!* That was when her brain had overruled the rest of her body and forced the rejection of her otherwise nourishing breakfast.

Laisee was panting and looking terrible, but Amy kept her head and rounded the table. She brought an un-splashed portion of her soiled jumpsuit into play to help wipe Laisee's face and upper body, then stood before her with her hands on her shoulders and flooded her with calm and love while trying to overcome her unease at her breakfast debacle.

Laisee shivered, but began to relax. In a few more seconds, she was feeling almost fluttery. Her body felt warmed from her shoulders down to her feet, and her stomach no longer threatened any further revolt. Her eyes lost focus, and at the edges of her vision, she saw a faint glow that slowly subsided before her eyes refocused on Amy's concerned face.

She was still confused, but feeling *much* better now. How – how had this *child?* A *Healer?* But she was introduced as a mere Healer-in-Training; yet she is so *powerful!* So much more powerful than her own *Mother!*

"I - I thank you, my ... my Healer," Laisee murmured, but started fidgeting in place.

She tried to bow, but Amy simply hugged her and kissed her tenderly on the cheek ... while carefully avoiding the still "tangy" areas around her lips. She was truly sorry for the upset she caused, and offered a quiet apology.

"It's all right, Laisee. Please, it's *my* fault. We've been dining on this ... *food product* for several months now, and I didn't think about any concerns you might have with it."

Laisee looked into her eyes and saw her worry. Then she looked over at the mess on the table, and then back to Amy. Her eyes glanced down between them, and she noticed Amy's baby bulge.

"Well then, it must sustain life. But I thought you said you never gained weight?" She pulled away slightly to get a better look.

"Oh *that!* That's the seed from a past relationship. I would rather have it be from my Larl, but he accepts both my unborn child and me. We enjoy each others company as often as we can, and truthfully, *his* seed tastes so much better than *this* does!" she said while gesturing to the two fouled bowls.

Servants rushed forward with two entire place settings, while the delicious aroma of real food lovingly prepared preceded their presence – or so one would presume. Unfortunately, the sight that greeted them was the second, and hopefully *last*, volley from Laisee's tortured intestinal track.

After shifting out of the way *successfully* this time, Amy silently wondered, '*Where in the world is she KEEPING all this stuff?*'

### ***In Radatel's Compartment***

Lili quietly sat down while Radatel prepared a crystal of ambrosia for her. Off to one side, Ronnie struggled to his feet. She tsked silently at his weakness, and that he'd let himself age so obviously. It was demeaning to the House of Caldarous, but she'd ignore it for the moment. Other matters were more pressing in nature.

"*Surely you remember the papers you signed giving me power over the company in your absence, Rondal? Upon further review, my advisors and I found it prudent to restructure the company. We subsequently issued voting shares equally among the survivors. Naturally, as Chairwoman of the Board, I was very successful in obtaining the appropriate number of proxies. You know many of the shareholders, and I thought perhaps that one day Microcosmus would rise once again – albeit in a more festive capacity. Your young man Riker's petition for salvage listed many interesting ideas – but that is for a later date.*"

He wanted very much to confront her, but knew it would be pointless. Instead, he kept his mouth shut and merely nodded at her pleasantly.

"Your Lady *intrigues* me, Rondal. She has been well treated by you, yet I found certain *-areas* have not yet been addressed?" she probed gently, having changed the topic to Maya.

He glanced at his stepfather, unsure of what or how much to reveal to him of so delicate a matter. She caught his glance and understood it immediately.

"The time is rapidly approaching when the truth – *all* of the truth – will come out ... whether we all enjoy the *blessings* of it ... or *not*. The *Crown* does not seek the truth, Rondal. However, *we do*."

He was still reluctant to speak, so she turned to Radatel in exasperation.

"My Lord Husband?"

Radatel successfully avoided twitching at her sudden attention to him. He also knew better than to get involved with things not of his own doing.

"Lili, these things you do are not of my own making. I truly did not want to error at any turn in these proceedings. I have told the boy *nothing*, other than the issue you walked into just now." He turned to Ronnie and gave his permission. "Rondal, you may speak frankly with the First Wife in *whatever* capacity is appropriate. I will just have to risk my digestion and beg First Wife's forgiveness should I embarrass myself at either her or your expense."

Ronnie looked down for a moment, before meeting both their faces.

"Father ... my Lady Lili ... my crimes are so vast that I do not really know *where* to begin."

Lili sipped her drink while contemplating how she could break through his obstinacy without losing his *less-than-willing* participation in revealing the answers she was seeking. If not for his curiously strong resistance to her probes, she would simply seek out the answers herself. She smiled, before sharing a small sign of her acceptance at his position.

"Then, perhaps, my little Ronnie, you should simply place the pieces upon the table – one at a time – until there are enough to start fitting the puzzle together?"

Ronnie stared at her in surprise, before beginning to chuckle. Then he laughed quietly for a few seconds, before reaching up to wipe his eyes.

"Do you *all* learn so well from the first book, my Lady? Such is the advice Healer Tal provides me, and more often than not, it is the best way to proceed. Let us begin then, and I will place my first piece upon the table for your viewing pleasure."

He took a breath before beginning to pace slowly, while revealing his first few tidbits of information.

"To be concise, while I was obtaining my Healer Tal's release from the Drecks, she suffered a most grievous injury to her head that I was sore put to repair. Once safely aboard my ship, I was able to sustain her, but her mental faculties had become overloaded by her experience. I have *little* skill in the matter, and it was ...just not enough to bring her to what I felt was a *safe* resolution. I ... *set aside* her painful memories and locked them away from her. It sheltered her from the *worst* of her suffering, which then allowed the rest of her to Heal more naturally."

Radatel paled at Ronnie's explanation, and quickly gulped at his drink. Lili absently reached over and patted his hand. A subtle glow emanated from beneath her palm, and he quieted in his seat – still quite aware, but now more relaxed.

"And the scar along her scalp?"

"As you know, my Lady, the scar retains a memory of what went on before. I'd hoped the Seniors would grant her a blessing and accept her for training. Once seeing the scar, they would investigate and discover – and *repair* – the problem that exceeds my own meager skills. It was with no little dismay that my repeated requests for her transfer and training for Senior were continually rebuffed."

She looked away for a moment while addressing him.

"That was not of *our* doing, Rondal, but came from above. There may yet be a successful resolution to the problem, but it will no doubt require *your* assistance ... at no little risk to yourself. Do you object?"

"Not even unto my life, my Lady," he immediately offered.

She placed him under her scrutiny for a full minute, while considering his statement. She continued to study him over the rim of her crystal, before finally letting out a thin sigh of her own.

"You are an interesting creature, my little Ronnie. You promise your life *willingly* for so little reward for yourself. My understanding is you would sacrifice yourself to save your family in but a *heartbeat* – and history seems poised to *prove* your words."

She contemplated him for a bit longer, before turning to her husband.

"Your son always speaks *truthfully* to me, my Husband, and yet he dances *around* the truth with the both of us."

She turned back to face Ronnie.

"The day comes rapidly when one will come seeking your truth! *You must not attempt any deceit or misdirection to her questions – lest you be sanctioned most disagreeably!*"

Ronnie nearly choked at that.

"I see you have read the *Senior's* texts, my little Ronnie," she said thinly, but her eyes twinkled before turning deadly serious. "And you will give that truth fully and without reservation – or it will be ripped from you most painfully!"

"I – I hear ... and obey, my Lady," he said softly.

He dropped his head while his shoulders cringed on their own. Then he felt a sour taste in his mouth and Lili broke into giggles.

"It would appear that your adopted 'Granddaughter' has just fed our Mistress Laisee a bowl of ships *gruel* – and the poor girl only just now realized its *true* content! Oh, my little Ronnie, your new family is going to be *such* a delight! It will be so *interesting* to see how things develop if we all live through this!" She turned somber for a moment. "I warn you, though ... Second Wife must *not* learn of your closeness with them. They are merely 'crew' dragged along under unfortunate circumstances." She closed her eyes for another moment.

"Your little Amy claimed you as *family*, but has allayed the worries of Laisee. Our Laisee still dreams *fondly* of you, Rondal, but her mother treats her cruelly and forces service upon her. Meela has truly lost the way, and this, *too*, shall be resolved shortly. I fear for Laisee in this. In all this time, she *still* does not know the true way. Perhaps your adopted family will guide and support her when the time comes?"

Ronnie looked at her in surprise.

"Laisee was always very kind to me, and I was her first – even as poorly trained as I was at the time. Her mother has *still* never forgiven me for that. For a *lot* of things, come to think of it."

He dared a quick glance at Radatel, before focusing on Lili again.

"Lili... Truly, it is time for secrets to surface within the family?"

She also spared a quick glance at her nervous husband, before responding.

"As much as you wish to lift the burden of truth from your Father's heart, the time for the *full* truth is nearly here. There are *other* games in play, and not all the players are as yet present. Beware the Second Wife and her guard, Captain Tomar. He is her creature and well versed with the sword. We do not believe his loyalty lies with the Crown any longer. *Neither* of them."

'*Treason?*' he thought to himself. Although not inconceivable, it should probably have been expected. Then he remembered a saying that applied to the situation.

"So, when my Lady Meela wakes in the morning and her feet hit the floor, does Satan still shudder and say ... 'Oh *Crap!* She's *awake!*!'"

He'd said it in jest, which – after a short silence – brought a titter from Lili, but choking sounds from Radatel.

"Oh Ronnie! We have so missed your presence at our table, but come, we must do honor to our old friend Yandi, and I understand you

know the way.” She put her crystal down, rose, and grasped his arm before turning to Radatel.

“My Lord Husband, be well in our absence, and know that *all* will be resolved in due time.”

He merely raised his glass in salute, while they headed towards the door.

“So, my Lady. Did you know Senior Yandi?” Ronnie asked her, before opening the door for her.

“Why, of course, my Lord Caldar,” she said as she stepped outside the door, with her guard trailing behind and to the side after they passed. “We knew her *well*. It was at *our* request that she was assigned to *you*.”

She was still smiling when the door closed behind them.

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Radatel was left sitting alone in his room. He was stressed to the point of considering calling upon one or more of his Wives to grant him contentment ... but no. Their schedule was known to him, and this time was allotted to the vetting of Rondal’s chosen mate.

The import of their conversation suddenly struck him, with all of its ramifications circling his mind relentlessly.

‘*A Healer. Not just a Healer, but knowledge of the Seniors,*’ he kept thinking.

How much *more* frightful could this situation become? His world was out of control and collapsing around him. Living with *Lili* for the past few centuries had been bad enough, but if *Rondal* became as such?

‘*If they even let him LIVE?*’ the thought suddenly battered at his brain.

He topped off his drink and sat back before sipping it sparingly. He wondered at the delicate scent and flavor of this *exquisitely* aged liquor. At least he’d found out where *this* particular vintage of his ambrosia had been spirited off to.

He still couldn’t understand how the boy had managed to live alone out here for twenty years, then idly wondered if there were any openings along the Fringe picket lines.

A Walk with Lili

Instead of heading directly to Yandi's compartment, Lili had instead insisted on a walking tour of the platform first.

After leaving the corridor of their compartments, Ronnie took her through the few remaining habitable areas and showed her the flight simulator space, the gym, and the Recreation Center – where she sensed from him very faint residuals of their last encounters there. She explored the cache of toys for the use of female crew while remembering similar stress relievers from her early days in the fleet as a Combat-Healer. It brought a smile to her lips, but she sighed and closed the toy drawer.

They continued the tour while he carefully led her past bent and buckled panels to meet up with David and her three contract engineers at the con.

It was interesting to see that Granger, Lon, and Donnel were spending almost as much time explaining the hardware to David as they were extracting data from the systems. Ronnie also noted they'd been making some little repairs here and there after having brought aboard some much-needed spares to replace those lost during the original attack.

Not that it would do any good, since the in-system engines were shot, the exciter was a melted heap of slag, and the *flight* converter – *if it still worked at all* – would need depot-level service to fire it up once again.

As for the weapons systems, Ronnie had given explicit orders that ships weapons – working, or not – would remain under password lock down until further notice. He still felt he had some legitimate concerns and was *not* about to upset the ‘neighbors’ if at all possible. He avoided mentioning them to Lili, only stating a general caution for weapons safety aboard the damaged platform, and Lili merely smiled and followed him out of the con.

Again, instead of heading directly to Yandi's compartment, they made one more stop and picked up the rest of the Wives at Lili's compartment. She bade him wait outside with the guards while she conferred within. Shortly, three more of his stepfather's Wives joined him in the corridor, the seriousness of Lili muting their reunion for the time being. After a short greeting, they continued in a solemn walk past the other occupied corridors until they stopped outside Yandi's door. The guards, now *four* in number, took up places on either side of the door.

Ronnie had meant to open the door, but Lili held him back and pressed her palm against the reader. The door opened for her as the system recognized a Senior seeking access to *another* Senior's quarters. After Ronnie blinked in surprise, the Wives entered and pulled him in behind them, while Lili momentarily remained outside to give instructions to her personal guard. When she finished, she entered the outer compartment, but neglected to seal the door behind her.

He slowly led them to the dimly lit inner chamber where Yandi's body lay in repose. When Lili entered, the lights came up by half. She drew the sheet down and gently kissed Yandi's forehead through the transparent seal, which was followed by everyone in turn. After a moment of introspection, they all formed a circle around Yandi – Lili at her head and looking towards the door, with Ronnie by her left side, Spring Blossom at Yandi's feet, and Mei-Mei and Yin-Yin on either side of Yandi.

Ronnie was surprised, for he'd read of what was likely to happen. He almost backed out, but Lili and Yin-Yin reached out and firmly held his hands, before they joined hands with the others to complete the circle.

Lili began by reciting the simple prayer for home and hearth, food and time, which was repeated by Mei-Mei, and followed by Spring Blossom, and then Yin-Yin. By the time it was his turn, his voice was wavering and tears were running down his cheeks.

Lili then began to recite Yandi's lineage for more generations than he could begin to remember, and as each one was named, a trickle of power began to flow around the circle, and a soft glow began to emanate from the body of their departed sister.

A Walk with Maya

Maya had spent a *wondrous* time in the company of so many loving Healers, and her heart had been eased tremendously. She'd learned she would be considered for Senior training, and better yet, if she were *successful*, then afterwards she would get to *stay* with her Ronnie to guide him in his work.

Lili had even referred to her as '*Lady*' Maya, which was a designation reserved for *Seniors* ... or Healers in a *bonded*-position with a Kantite Lord such as her Ronnie. This had both surprised her and warmed her heart with its implications for their future.

Though Lili was otherwise somewhat forbidding, Maya had found all three of the other sister Wives to be delightful. They'd told her of their

backgrounds, shared many funny stories about their lives with their shared husband, and spoke of how they all worked together to help him in his duties...

Maya had never left the Arizona facility beyond the local town, and she was surprised to learn that both Mei-Mei and Yin-Yin had alternated visits with Radatel for upwards of a year at a time when he was in residence on Earth. Spring Blossom had avowed she'd no desire to return to the place of her birth, and where her son was born – her little TS'ŁSQQSÉ BIYIGÉ she'd named him in what Maya learned was an old dialect of Apache. She'd asked what it meant, but Spring Blossom only smiled and turned the conversation back to the group.

She'd been surprised to learn that Spring Blossom was *not* the youngest of the Wives, although she presented herself at an age approximating her mid-twenties or so, Earth Relative.

As it turned out, the absent Meela was the youngest by a year, but had stopped her aging in her *very* early twenties, Relative, and the rest of them had gossiped it could possibly be a deciding factor in Meela's leaving the Healer's teachings, and becoming a simple, if pretty, *breeding*-wife for the Ambassador ... although, there appeared to be no love between the two of them any longer – especially since the loss of her twin sons.

Slender and graceful Mei-Mei was older, and presented an apparent age of late-thirties, Relative, because, as she'd said, it lent dignity to formal occasions. Short and pleasantly chubby Yin-Yin had settled on her mid-thirties because, she'd said, she was a few years younger than Mei-Mei – which promptly got her a pillow in the face.

This event had almost erupted into a playful pillow fight, but Lili had returned and gathered them together while explaining it was time to render honor to their sister, Yandi.

As the Wives quickly prepared themselves, Lili had pulled Maya aside and given her some very *specific* instructions. She was to follow in a few minutes, and be escorted by her guard. Upon arrival, she would remain in the corridor until she heard the ceremony begin. Then she would enter quietly and approach to the side of the inner chamber door, but remain hidden from those within. She was to pay close attention to all that she saw and heard, but to make no sound at all. If she began to feel distressed, she was to leave the chambers *immediately*. Once the ceremony was nearly over, and Lili assured her that she *would* recognize such, she was to leave unnoticed and return with her guard to Lili's compartment.

Above all, she was not to discuss *anything* she saw, or heard, or learned, or what she even *inferred* with Ronnie, with the other Wives,

or with anyone *else*. She was to be privy to *Senior's* teachings, and any questions would be resolved at a time of Lili's choosing. She'd had to agree to this, and she'd promised to abide by those stipulations...

While she walked along, Maya wondered how this very proper and mature "First Wife" could be the same teacher of the "Gift", as it seemed something a more relaxed and fun-loving person would have developed. The image of Lady Lili, as stern as she could present, seemed at odds with such a discovery. She smiled at the memory of jealousy she'd displayed toward Diane and Amy when they'd let it be known her Ronnie had "Gifted" *them*, as well. The memory of it almost made her blush, but after turning a corner, she could see they were almost at their destination, and they slowed their approach.

Now that she stood beside the door, she trembled at the enormity of what she thought she was going to witness. For a few seconds, she *almost* reconsidered her decision. Then the wavering voice of her Ronnie caught her ear, and her throat tightened for a moment when she wondered what *he* was doing here as well.

Curiosity slowly drew her forward, and she silently crept up to the side of the inner chamber door. She listened when Lili began reciting her Grandmother's lineage back through three great-grandmothers and a great aunt. The door in front of her showed a glow streaming from within the inner chamber.

From her vantage point on the right side of the door, she could see Spring Blossom and Mei-Mei holding hands. Lili was at the other end of the cot and holding Mei-Mei's other hand. She did not see her, but assumed Yin-Yin was there as well, but it didn't explain why her *Ronnie* was permitted to participate. She felt slightly miffed that *she'd* not been invited.

She'd been told it was a *Senior's* ritual, and yet she was only to observe and learn – but like *this*? Obviously, she was not yet qualified to participate in such an important function, but it *still* did not explain her *Ronnie's* presence.

Lili finished reciting the lineage of Yandi for further back than she'd ever heard her mother speak it, and when she was done, Yandi's body had achieved a uniform bright white glow about it, and shimmered in the dim light of the room.

Lili then began a recitation of her *own* lineage. As each antecedent was named, she began to glow as well, but this glow was a purer white in nature, and became brighter as the list continued. Once Lili was done, Mei-Mei took up her family tree, and soon achieved a nice golden tone about her.

Spring Blossom spoke in what she now recognized was her older dialect of Apache, and she went back three generations. This achieved for her a much darker tone of gold. Then she heard the voice of Yin-Yin recite, and peeked around the corner to see her achieve a level somewhere below Lili's – just as white, but not as bright. From that, Maya thought the clubby little Yin-Yin was Senior in quality over the golden glow of Mei-Mei.

There was a delay, and then Maya noticed Lili shake her left arm once, and then once again. This time, an all too familiar man's voice spoke out.

"Rondal Calder sai Caldarous se Earth ne Kantor."

She heard Lili whisper something quietly, and a moment later, she shook her arm again.

"Rondal TS'ILSQQSÉ BIYIGÉ Calder sai Caldarous se Earth ne Kantor."

This time Maya could see another glow come from the hidden portion of the room. Peeking further around the edge of the door, on the opposite side of Yin-Yin, she could see Ronnie's face bathed in a pure white glow, which was nearly as bright as Lili's, and brighter than Yin-Yin's. Ronnie's eyes were closed, as were those of Yin-Yin and Mei-Mei.

Lili turned her head slightly and looked directly at Maya. She nodded her head slowly, and then directed her eyes towards the exit. Maya quickly backed away, before turning to leave the compartment; letting the door close silently behind her before turning to look at it.

"Lady Tal, I am to escort you to Lady Lili's compartment," one of the guardsmen quietly told her.

She stood there, looking at the closed door, until the guard finally offered her his arm and gently bumped her with it a couple of times. Once she noticed it, she wrapped her arm around his and let him escort her back to Lili's compartment.

The guard who'd brought her there stayed behind to replace him, but Maya was confused enough that she never even noticed. She apparently had much to think about, and many questions to ask.

Nearby – More Observations from Without...

'Did you feel' '?' asked.

'It was nice?' '?' expressed.

'It felt good' '?' agreed.

'I felt fine' '?' offered.

'Perhaps one more?' '?' suggested.

'Really?' '?' wondered.

'It might be true' '?' conjectured.

'The Others are near' '?' stated.

'One is weak' '?' observed.

'Perhaps it will join us?' '?' pondered.

'Perhaps ... she will join us?' '?' corrected.

'It has been a long time' '?' reminded.

'She will be welcome' '?' concluded.

Noon (Day 93) – In Andy's Compartment

Shay woke up early. Early for her and Andy, that is, as his “con watch” ran from midnight to noon minus four. They’d both taken turns studying and teasing each other, while trying to stay awake until Andy’s father came to relieve them in the morning. The civilian contractor had paid attention to his task, only answering questions when Andy noticed something interesting, but otherwise leaving them alone.

They’d returned to their compartment shortly after Noon minus four, taken a hot shower, and then crashed.

Even so, Shay had been obliged to visit the facilities in just a few hours. When she came out, she looked longingly at her sleeping Andy, and suddenly felt her need rush over her. She hated to disturb him, but needed relief, so she quietly brought out her toy and lay beside him. That way she could seek his warmth, while working her toy slowly into her passage and thrusting it to the rhythm of a memory from the last ships holiday.

She eventually felt the need for something between her lips, so she scrunched down, engulfed her lover’s shaft, and sucked it into her mouth. In just a few minutes, this caused it to respond, and she felt him rest his hand on her head while he ran his fingers through her hair. He then found her earlobe and ran a fingertip around and over her ear, causing chills to shiver through her.

She speeded up her thrusts, and bobbed her head in time to them as her climax approached. When her moment arrived, she stiffened and felt her muscles clenching around her toy, which sent her sensations into overload. After her immediate rush of passion, she

sucked harder and more determinedly, which finally got him to release himself into her throat.

She relaxed next to his warm body, with his arm falling across her shoulders, and his still firm erection warmly encased within her lips. After several seconds, she felt him pulling up on her shoulders, so she released him and straightened out alongside him.

Disregarding morning breath, he drew her to his lips and kissed her soundly – tickling her lips and teeth with his tongue until she let him in. Their tongues danced lovingly with each other, while she shared his taste with him. He enjoyed her so for another few minutes, before rolling her onto her side and raising her leg. He removed her juicy toy and slipped his own into place, before beginning gentle thrusts in a slow and measured meter. Between caressing her breasts and nipples, he ran his hand in gentle circles over his unborn little brother.

Shay lay still and relished the closeness and love she felt coming from her almost-bonded companion. In just a few short months, she would deliver Andy's little brother and begin service with the Lanes in the capacity of a wet-nurse to her Lord David's child. She would then be free to bond with her Andy.

She wondered at the path they'd traveled to bring them all this far...

It had produced so much such happiness within her. As unpleasant as it was, the nightmare of her harsh service on Wilder was a distant memory now, but she'd survived it and lived to be happy once again – happier than she'd been since before the attack on her clan that had taken her family from her at such a young age...

Andy seemed to sense her dalliance with her past, so reached up and tweaked her nipples teasingly, which brought her back to the present. He wondered at this development – this *connection* they'd been achieving, but never spoken of. He was beginning to sense his companion's feelings and emotions.

At first he thought it was just her being a Healer, but he'd also felt more connected with others around him, as well. He was reluctant to ask Ronnie or Maya for some reason. Perhaps one of the Lady Wives could better explain it to him?

He felt her begin to squeeze him with her insides, and he reached down to “*tickle her fancy*” as Grandpa had so casually remarked that day. He thought of that conversation, even while applying gentle caresses and firm tugs to her clitoris and deeper erectile tissues...

Ronnie had been so open and frank about sex. He and the rest of the “aliens” – his *family* now – were all open and honest about sex, and almost anything else. He thought of his friends back home, and the

confusion and misunderstandings they'd expressed in their bravado while talking about “*pussies*” and “*cunts*” and how one day they'd find a willing girl and “*fuck her silly!*”

It all seemed so *childish* now...

Shay peaked a tiny one due to his manipulations, and he began to apply himself with more attention. By the time he gradually brought her up through several exciting and more forceful contractions, he was ready to spend himself within her.

He made that new psychic connection with her, which joined not only their bodies, but their sensations as well. The feelings she sensed when her vagina clamped down on him were echoed within his own body, which triggered his orgasm that she sensed within herself, which triggered rapid, spasmodic, and tightly clenching contractions around his penis that quickly milked him of his seed.

It was all over in less than a minute, but she became possessed – quivering and crying silently while planting kiss after kiss about his head and face. She awkwardly clutched him with both hands while they remained fully bonded at their groins before he reluctantly separated from her, allowing her to roll towards him so she could keep up the barrage of kisses. Her tears wet his cheeks, as well as her own.

When she finally began to settle down, he hugged her close and whispered in her ear, “I love you, my Lady Shay.”

“I love you, my Lord Andrew,” she whispered back, and hugged him even tighter.

After a few more loving minutes, along with a few lingering kisses, they separated and finally lay back beside each other, with Andy pulling up a blanket to cover them both. He soon dosed off again, but Shay lay awake while staring at the ceiling.

‘It is not the same. It is very much like it, but it is somewhat even more pleasant. We act together in this, and that makes it better,’ she reasoned, and then made a decision. ‘I shall strive to guide my Andy well, that he may share the Gift of Lord Andrew with me very often! And perhaps one day he may also learn the Gift of First Wife, as well,’ she thought contentedly, before curling up next to her Andy and falling asleep once again.

On the Bridge

Larl stepped into the platform’s con and smiled down at the scene over by the console.

“David, how’re things going?” he asked him.

This was addressed to David's backside, since his head and shoulders were currently tucked into a lower panel with one of the engineers he was helping. Backing out carefully, he greeted Larl from a kneeling position.

"These guys are *amazing*. When we first got here, I thought it was a wonder that anything worked at all. Lon and Donnel brought a handful of supplies with them, and systems are coming up all *over* the place! Come to relieve me for lunch, have you?"

Larl could see opened boxes – some of them filled with burnt and broken parts – piled around the console. He also saw Granger off to one side monitoring a recording device with intricate connections into the data system.

"Dinner is being set even as I speak. They have bread – *real* bread! Now if they only had *potatoes*, my Amy could have her *French fries*. You'd better get down there before it's all gone."

"Ach! *French fries,* indeed!" Donnel hauled himself off the deck and dusted off his hands while shaking his head sadly. "There is na steid in th' Commonwealth fur real *neeps,* let alone bile th' dear hings in oil. 'Tis a *pity* ah say."

It had been driving Larl nuts trying to figure out what in the hell Donnel had said earlier that day, but his implicit familiarity with Earth's *French fries* and a remembered cross-reference between *potatoes* and *neeps* were the final clues he needed.

"Donnel ... Ardan? You're from *Earth*?"

"Aye, laddie. I've bin a *captive* a' thae years by thae heathen alien devils 'n' pat tae solid *service*, don't ye see?"

Larl held an astonished look on his face, until Lon finally let out a snort of derision.

"Don't get him started or you'll *never* hear the end of it," he muttered a warning to him.

Granger looked over from his recorder and frowned while nodding grimly.

"His mother was selected for extraction and relocation when he was just two months in the womb. He's been a fanatic about his birthright ever since popping out on Cletus," he explained.

Caught out by his friends, Donnel smiled sheepishly and nodded his head.

"Studied hard early on to learn about my antecedents. Found a *wealth* of information in the Commonwealth libraries, but it was Lord Calder who first showed me someone playing the national instrument of Scotland. It's a sort of bladder with reed pipes attached to the back of it. There's one more that you wiggle your fingers on. By the *Gods*, it sounds like a dying *valaet!*"

"It's like a cat," Larl told a confused David. "A really, really *big* cat. Three-hundred plus pounds, and *really* smart."

David tried to picture that in his mind and shivered a tiny bit, before remembering Larl had come to relieve him for the midday meal.

"Well, then, I'll be off to dinner. Any of you guys wanna take a break?"

"You two go ahead," Lon said, nodding to Donnel and Granger. "I'll keep a wary eye on our Mister Riker here to see the download is not disturbed."

"See that you do, as I'd hate to start it over – *again*," Granger muttered. "It was hard enough fixing all the interfaces, but I don't want to start any more searches now that I'm getting a *good* feed."

"How long do you think your, uh ... download, will take?" Larl asked him, and Granger tilted his head in thought for a moment.

"Well, if the access stays solid and nothing *else* breaks ... maybe another day, but we still have to decipher it all and present it to Lady Lili. Come on, Donnel. I hear they have *real* bread. We get this job done *right*, maybe you can petition to have *potatoes* imported instead of just collecting all that pay."

As the three of them left, Larl hopped up onto one of the con seats and swiveled around to face Lon. He had a lot of questions to ask, but waited several minutes until it looked like the engineer had gotten to a breaking point in his work.

"So ... you three served on *Microcosmus* with Ronnie ... I mean, Lord Calder?"

Lon looked him over for a bit, before nodding his head.

"That we did, Mister Riker. Lord Ronnie's a *fine* man – even after all what's been done to him. You call him Ronnie, too? That's good. You're *family* to him. He was all prim and proper before Zarox. Kept the regulations tight, and held himself formal. Our Senior Yandi Tal and him got the ship together as a team, and they *kept* the ship together right up to the end. Well, *almost*. *Would* have, 'cept for those two fool *brothers* of his." His voice had turned spiteful at the end.

“What do you mean?”

Lon looked at the door, then back at Larl.

“Look, Sir. Just between you, me, and that *bulkhead* over there, it was a terrible shame what they did to our Lord Ronnie. That man did *everything* in his power to protect his crew on *every* mission we were part of. They blamed it all on him ‘cause of his youth, but we were *all* young. By the *Gods*, even our *Senior* was the youngest ever put aboard a ship!”

Lon’s fire pushed him back in his seat a little, but his comments brought up another question.

“I wondered about that when I read a few of the records here. Wasn’t Lord Calder a little *too* young, even among young officers, for a position like this one?”

“You’ve never served?” At Larl’s negation, he went on. “The young are better at some things,” he said without explanation, which only led to more confusion.

This was a new concept for Larl to consider. He’d never heard of anything like it before.

“So ... you’re saying Ronnie was made Captain just because he was *young*? ”

Lon spared him a single snort, before going on.

“Not just young, Mister Riker. He was *talented!* He came up *fast* from the ranks. Went on to prove himself in tanks, and then made exec on another CPS. Then he was given command of *this* one for the last big campaign. Things went fine ... until his *stepbrothers* transferred in. I had a stepbrother myself, but I never treated *him* the way those two treated our *Ronnie*.” The disgust on Lon’s face was evident.

“What happened when they transferred in? What were they assigned to do?”

“Ha! We never *did* figure that out. We thought it might be a *test* for them – to *learn* from their little brother’s actions, so they’d finally learn how to behave like *officers*. A few of us heard about them before they got here and worried they’d upset our happy family, and we weren’t far from the truth. They were *subordinate* to the Captain, but they argued nearly *constantly* over his commands. They made rude remarks about him to the crew, and did everything they could to undermine his authority.”

Larl had studied military protocols as a matter of course. A situation like that should have already had a solution in place to deal with it.

“So … what did he do about it?”

“Do? *Nothing!* He just let it *roll off his shoulders* like it was *nothing* – like he’d been doing it *all his life!* It’s like he was *ignoring* them, hoping they’d be called away by Lord Calderous to torment someone *else*. I swear, if they’d been *my* crew–” Lon stopped to collect himself, while turning to check the data feed again, but seemed to get lost in his thoughts.

“So … you were saying the crew was young?” Larl pressed him.

“Hmm, oh yes. We were *all* young. The advantage of youth,” he said, before turning back around. “You see, the *older* you get, you get more *cautious*. You get *cautious*, you start second-guessing your decisions and start making *mistakes*.”

“I’d say Zarox was a pretty big mistake, Mister Tannis.”

Lon responded with a glare, but it slowly softened after several seconds.

“Aye, but was it really our *Ronnie’s* mistake? They never let *us* testify at the hearing. The first *we’d* known about it, it was already over and done with. Afterwards, Ronnie’d been shipped off somewhere, and we were being reassigned as well.”

“Who’s being reassigned?” Diane asked as she stepped into the con.

“Uh, no one, Diane. Mister Tannis and I were just talking about how he was reassigned after he’d gotten out of the hospital … after making it back from here. Mister Tannis, may I present Diane Lane, wife of David Lane?”

“Very pleased to meet the wife of Lord David, my Lady,” Lon said, which caused a bit of a fluster in Diane.

“Please, Mister Tannis, I’m no lady. We’re just unfortunate passengers of Lord Calder’s … although I’m looking forward to visiting home world – *Kantor* – if we ever make it off this platform before my husband *hurts* himself again.”

Lon looked a bit confused, so she explained.

“David was welding repair parts for our ship when he cut his left hand in two with a … a *beam welder*, wasn’t it, Larl?” she asked him,

before continuing at his nod. “And he’s been sparing with Ronnie in the gym. With *swords*, I mean.”

“Has he now?” And with *swords*? Has Ronnie given you any cause for alarm with a sword?”

“Well, he *did* manage to cut the back of his head one day. He laughed about it afterwards.” She shook her head at the memory of that day.

“Yes, I imagine that he would. Still, he’s not in the same fighting shape that he *used* to be. He’s gotten *old* – and just a little bit *chubby* since the last time I saw him.” Diane smiled at his memories of Ronnie as a younger man.

“Yes. And I understand he came back and spent quite a bit of time here by all by himself, before joining the rehabilitation efforts,” she volunteered.

Lon shared an understanding nod with her.

“Well, then ... I can see where that might soften someone up. It’s a *shame*, though. Our Ronnie was the very *best* of them – even among the ground troops,” Lon said, just as David walked in.

“*There* you are, my love,” David said, and gave her a quick kiss on the cheek. “Larl was kind enough to spell me early, so I ate dinner already. You must have just missed me.”

Lon was staring intently at David’s left hand, which caught Diane’s attention.

“Oh! It’s all better now, Mister Tannis. Our Healer worked on it with all of us – me, my daughter Amy, and Miss Shay Daishi, our ... assistant,” she quickly improvised, and David pushed his left arm out to Lon.

“Old Ronnie shipped out with *four* Healers? He’s picked up some *caution* in his old age,” Granger said from the doorway.

He laughed, and was joined by Donnel while they were stepping into the con. Diane turned to them with a further explanation.

“Oh no! Maya *Tal*’s the Healer. The rest of us are just her *students*.”

“*Students!* Well, that certainly *sounds* like our Ronnie,” Donnel said.

While David still held his hand out for inspection, Lon looked closely at it while slowly turning it over from top to bottom.

“How many years have you been studying under Lady *Tal*?” he asked.

"Ahhh, not too long now. Mostly just since we arrived here. Maybe ... a little over a month..." Diane's voice had dropped at the end, not knowing whether it was prudent to admit it.

All three techs looked at each other.

"Aye, that *sounds* like our Lord Ronnie, all right. And you all took *turns*, did you say?" Donnel asked her.

"Well, Maya did the bones and blood vessels. The rest of us knit the muscles and tendons back together. I did the skin, too. Took us *hours*, but it seems to have come out all right."

"Good enough for me to get back in the gym and spar with Ronnie again," David added.

"He's *sparring* again? Good, good," Granger said. "A man his age needs his exercise. Does he get around well, or ... does he *hobble* a bit in his old age?"

"Hobble? *Hardly!* He brought up this practice program – the *Kraken's Child?* – and sparred with it for a couple of minutes before he turned around, and it..." David paused when he caught Diane observing him intently.

"He – ahh – he said it was a gift from his brothers. A special exercise program. Said Talis even put in something special just for him," he continued while quietly winding down.

"Aye. Tha' hell-spawn would've *gladly* done that," Donnel said tersely.

There was a momentary lull in the conversation, before Lon spoke up again.

"Mister Deltec, your backup of ships logs seems to be going well. Be sure to include the *communications logs* and several of the *auxiliary* programming changes that occurred after our Lord Ronnie took command. Our Lady Lili wants us to be *thorough*."

Not for nothing were these three among the best of the fleet. Granger knew *exactly* what Lon was hinting at, and just where to focus his efforts. Then he thought of a few more places to search as well.

"Well, I'm off to find Amy," Diane said. "She said something happened in the commons earlier and wants to talk to me about it." She gave David a peck on the cheek and left.

"I'll see you at Noon plus four, David," Larl said, and he left as well.

Once Larl had gone, Donnel turned back to David.

"So, Mister Lane, our Ronnie danced with the *Kraken's Child*, did he?" he asked him casually while catching David glancing at the other two engineers.

"Uh, yeah. About a minute or so. Then he stepped out, and it –it almost got him."

Donnel let out a sigh while considering this relic from the past.

"Aye. Just like the *last* time. 'Cept it near took off his *head* that time. 'Twas a good thing the *Senior* was close by, or we'd have lost our Ronnie *that day*."

Lon turned from Donnel to Granger with another request.

"Granger, when you backup the auxiliary programs, please be sure to get an *original* version of *Kraken's Child*, and all revision history for it – *including* the programmer for each revision. It may prove enlightening."

"A whole *minute*, you say, Mister Lane?" Donnel muttered while musing about the reported skills of one, Vitas Tomar. He hid the smile on his face, but his body shook in silent laughter when he turned back to his work.

Noon +1 (Day 93) – Poking Around

Maya had been left in Lili's compartment to await on her pleasure, which was just as well, since she had a lot on her mind. That was how she soon found herself pacing around the room with wild thoughts running through her head.

'He was glowing, but so was everyone else. Even little Spring Blossom, his mother. Mother used to glow like that. But ALL Healers glow when they really connect with the energy and are working, except ... except they were not working. And it was pure white like ...like Lili and Yin-Yin!'

She kept pacing while trying to rationalize all that she'd seen.

*'Maybe ... maybe just because he was standing between the two of them?' she thought fiercely, hoping that was *all* it was, because the alternative ... the alternative meant that her Ronnie was in danger of – of being sanctioned most disagreeably!*

She stifled a sob, knowing that if the Elder found out, her Ronnie's life was forfeit. They had to leave and get away, before the Seniors found out, but ... but Lili *was* a Senior, and she'd seen the *whole thing*, and she was duty bound to report him to the *Elder*!

Not knowing where to turn, she continued to pace nervously while desperately trying to think of a way to save her Ronnie. If only there was a *way*. If only she knew *more* about the Seniors and the Elder.

Her eyes spotted a line of white books – Lili's Senior's texts. She drifted over and looked down at the worn covers. Her hand reached out tentatively ... and then she took the plunge. She pulled out a book and started flipping through the indexes for *anything* about men violating the Healers laws as her Ronnie had done.

She'd gone through five out of the ten volumes, when she felt a presence behind her, followed immediately by a voice.

"My *jewelry* is in the top, left drawer," Lili said sharply.

Maya shrieked and dropped the book in her hands.

"And in the cabinet *below*, there is ambrosia and crystal ... unless my Lord Husband drank it all."

Maya whirled, fell to her knees in front of Lili, and placed her forehead to her feet.

"Please forgive me, Lady Song! I – I – I *have* no excuse. I *know* I should not have touched your books," she whispered fearfully.

"I believe I said that in the *cabinet*, there is ambrosia and crystal – *perhaps*. Bring the bottle and two crystals, Maya."

Maya jumped up, but immediately squatted down to recover the book and return it to the shelf. Then she got out the bottle and two crystals, before turning to face Lili with her head bowed.

"Come sit with me, Maya," Lili requested in a voice considerably softer than before.

She led her to the cushions on the floor, where they sat comfortably at ease – at least Lili did. With a gesture, she bade Maya pour ambrosia for them both.

Lili sipped from her crystal, while contemplating what she should and should *not* allow Maya to be privy to at this particular moment in time. She also detected a considerable amount of fear coming from her, then considered it, and its *source*, as well.

"So, little Maya, it seems you have some *concerns*?"

After a slight pause...

"Y-Yes, my Lady Song," she said softly.

Lili was silent for a full minute, but finally threw her a line.

“Maya … perhaps if we *shared* in your concerns, then a solution might be found that is of benefit to both you *and* the Commonwealth? And you are now *family*. You will please *address* me as such … unless I advise *otherwise*.”

“Yes, my … my Lady Lili. I - I fear for the safety of my Ronnie, my Lady. He … *he may have inadvertently broken the laws of Cletus, and I fear for his life!*”

Lili was *bathed* in the fear Maya was radiating; surprised at its intensity from one so full of contradictions while letting a thin smile grace her lips.

“So you think he *may* have broken the laws of Cletus, little Maya?”

Lili delicately fingered the rim of her crystal, which caused just the slightest of tones to commence before she stopped to speak again.

“And which *particular* law did you find in my books that he has broken?”

“Well … I could not find *any* law in the books I looked through, my Lady, and that was *all* I was searching for, my Lady. *Truly!* I was not reading the Senior books for anything *else*, my Lady. *Truly!*”

Lili’s body twitched in mirth, and her smile widened a tiny bit at this *very* naïve Healer before her.

“I find that *surprising*, Maya. Do you not wish to become more skilled and learn about many more things in order to help your Ronnie, and thus help the Commonwealth?”

“I – yes, my Lady, but I want to serve with my Ronnie. If … if he is to be put to *death*, then all is *lost!*”

Maya slumped in on herself and started to tremble. From where she sat, Lili could see her eyes beginning to water.

‘*What in the world did that – that MECHANIC do to her HEAD?*’

“Come to me, child. Come here. Come to my arms,” Lili said, then set her crystal aside … *far* aside, while Maya slowly crawled over to let herself be comforted in her arms.

Lili held her snugly and started rocking her, until Maya slowly quieted down. She kissed her about her hair and forehead while cuddling her close to her bosom in hopes it would help her relax.

“Now Maya, Ronnie has not violated any laws of Cletus … as far as anyone *knows*. Do you understand?”

"But he – he *glowed*, my Lady. It was not from both you and Yin-Yin. My Ronnie *glowed ... all by himself!*"

Lili pressed her lips against Maya's forehead and thought for a moment, before continuing.

"Yes he did, my girl. Your Ronnie glowed a *pure white light*, did he not? That means his heart is *pure*, and he does not *abuse* the gifts he was given. Your Ronnie has killed *no one* with his gifts, and for that we are *all grateful*."

"You – you already *knew* about my Ronnie? *All this time?*"

Lili paused while dithering over the sense of trying to maintain a rather quickly leaking secret within a slightly wider circle of knowledge. In point of fact, there really was no reason to deny it at this juncture.

"Maya, I knew Ronnie was different before he left us to come here the *first time*," she said, while continuing to rock her slowly. "When Yandi called him back here, he was gone for so long we thought we'd lost him. Then he returned, and I felt again that he'd changed ... even *more* this time."

"So ... so you are *not* going to report him to the Elder?"

"Maya, the Elder instructed me to observe our Ronnie before he even joined the *academy*. The Elder takes the *long* view, little one, and she watches over *all* her children very carefully, lest even *one* of them go astray."

"So my Ronnie is safe?"

Lili paused, before trying to soften the coming blow.

"That remains to be seen, as the puzzle is scattered far and wide. That is part of the reason why we are here – to help Ronnie fit the pieces together *properly*."

She pushed Maya back to address her directly.

"We felt it required the presence of *family*, for if Ronnie should lack in support, then the pieces might scatter once again, and Ronnie might find himself driven to do something *unforgivable*. Perhaps even something worthy of being ... *sanctioned most disagreeably*," she said very quietly, and Maya's face turned pale.

"Oh, but we are *here*, my Lady Lili, and we can *tell* him—" She stopped at a stern look from Lili.

"*That* is the problem. Our Ronnie must figure it out for *himself*. All we can offer is our love and support, as he will have many decisions to

make by *himself*. And he will have to make those decisions soon ... about you, and the test that is surely coming.”

“A decision about *me*, my Lady?”

“Yes Maya. You have Healing that needs to be finished. You still have a scar from when Ronnie brought you back from—” She suddenly stopped. Now was *not* the time, so she changed what she would say.

“When Ronnie brought you back, he fixed a *part* of you that was damaged, but he could not fix *all* of you.”

“But ... it is just a *scar*. It does not bother me, and I never felt the need to deal with it as no one ever sees it.”

“Yes, it is a scar. A tiny one. But our Ronnie had no *practical* training when he left you that scar. He spent a long time out here alone with Yandi. With the *body* of Yandi. Yandi had reported she’d taught him *many* Healer things – things that were *useful* to men in his line of work. She felt there was more in him to give, and before she died, she left him a note to return in time.”

Lili closed her eyes in memory of Yandi’s reports to the Elder – what little the Elder’s Office had shared with her.

“Our Ronnie returned here and studied. He studied *very* hard for nearly twenty years and learned all that he could without guidance, but he is a *man*. He does not have a woman’s *heart*. He sees a problem and *fixes* it like – like a *technician* working on a piece of a *ship*. We Heal based on our love and faith in the *Healing*. Ronnie wields his gift like a – a *field surgeon* wrapping together broken bones when the Healer is not available ... and *still* hoping for the best.”

“But I am *well*, my Lady! I feel well, and I do not hurt. There is nothing wrong with—”

“Nothing *wrong*, my girl? Nothing wrong except there is a part of your life *missing* that you need to learn about all over again. Ronnie must be the leader down that path. That will be *one* of his tests. Not how *well* he does, but if he does so at all, for it will hurt him to see you in pain. I fear he will refuse and fail. As for *you*, my little Maya, you must be Healed, before you can begin Senior training. Your Ronnie was correct. You are *very* close to the skills needed for Senior, and I suspect it will not take *you* twenty years to achieve that level, as you are a *strong woman of Cletus*, and Ronnie is but a *half-breed Earthling!*”

Her sudden outburst brought a shocked look to Maya’s face, and Lili tittered for a moment before becoming somber once again.

"Unless ... you *refuse* Senior training. But you must know Ronnie will need a *Senior* companion by his side when he takes his rightful place in Kantite society. If you choose not to be his Senior, then you may *still* grace his company as second or third wife – but only as a mere Healer. Would you be content as subordinate to the Senior who rules over your Ronnie, little Maya? Do not tell me now ... you must think carefully about this. After all, if you become *fully* Healed, then you may not *want* our Ronnie any longer."

Lili snuggled her a little closer while reading her body a tiny bit. Then she licked her lips in anticipation while lightly flooding the fearful Healer in her arms with an undeniable trigger to her more *nurturing* responses.

"Hmm ... Maya, my little Healer, you feel ... *full*. Would you care to share the gift of your milk with the First Wife of House Caldorous?"

The sudden letdown Maya experienced was surprisingly urgent, but it diverted her fear with a typical Healer response. Besides, providing a personal service to the First Wife could be a *positive* way to support her Ronnie.

"Certainly, my Lady Lili," she said, and smiled widely as she pulled away and slid her jumpsuit and underwear down.

Lili stood and shrugged completely out of her wrap, which prompted Maya to do the same. Maya was already dripping, before being led into the inner chamber where Lili slept. Once there, Lili lay down and patted the bed invitingly while Maya joined her.

"This is *another* test of readiness, Maya," she said, but her eyes twinkled in jest. "You will comfort me with your milk, and I will comfort *you* as well."

So saying, Lili closed in on Maya's lips and brought her to a breathless condition, before eagerly descending to her breasts while smoothing a hand down between her thighs.

'Umm, she tastes delicious. My sister Wives will be so delighted!'

Noon +2 (Day 93) – Amy Tells Her Tale

"Mom! *There* you are!" Amy called out at finding Diane strolling down the corridor headed to her and David's compartment.

"What's up, my only daughter?"

"Got time to talk a bit? I made a *boo-boo* earlier and I don't know how to fix it," she explained.

"Let me guess – you wore out poor Larl again and he's finally cut you off? Well girl, you're just gonna have to start borrowing Andy until he recovers for a little longer. Or, I have a bit of time, if you want to play for a little while?"

"No, it's not that ... well, yeah, that sounds like fun, but *really*, Mom, I..." Amy paused and shifted into *English* as they were approaching a guard headed their way. "*I was getting something to eat, and that girl, Lady Laisee, showed up in the commons, and we were talking and having something to eat, and then she just tossed over *everything*. I mean, I *know* it was my fault and all 'cause she's probably never had gruel before, but she was eating it and all, but then she overheard someone say what it was, and then *-blech!* It was *everywhere!**" she said in a rush.

"*Oh, that poor girl*."

They continued to the Lane's compartment and passed another guard coming from in front of them. Once they reached the door, Diane opened it and let them both in. After closing the door, she flopped down on the bed, while Amy sat on the floor.

Diane switched back to Standard before asking, "So, is she all right, or what?"

Amy raised her hands in a half-shrug, and said, "Well, that's the *weird* part. She *was* all right. I mean, she *tossed* all over me, and I dumped my jumpsuit and wiped her off with the dry parts, and then she was doin' okay. I kinda, you know, did a little *glow-flow* on her and she settled down right away and then she noticed my baby bump and asked about it, so I told her it was from someone else but Larl loved me for me and the baby *anyway*, and then she hurled *again*. I *almost* didn't get out of the *way* that time," she got out in another rush.

"Hmm ... well, she's a contemporary of Ronnie's, so she's not really *that* girl. I understand she's the younger sister of Ronnie's stepbrothers; the ones who were lost on this platform."

"Wow! She looks *good* for being as old as Ronnie. Think it's the food?"

"I don't really know, and I've been too embarrassed to ask. I mean, Spring Blossom is a Native American from an old Apache tribe somewhere outside of Tucson. That was back in the seventeen-hundreds, but she *looks* to be in her mid-twenties or so. It's either the food, or the Healers, or a combination of the two. Or maybe they just have a really good *health plan?* Heh! You remember what Maya showed us, right? But back to your problem. Is that *all* that happened? She just *looked* at your bump and chucked it all again?"

Amy gave out a sigh before tilting her head and playing out the meeting in her mind again.

"Well ... we were talking about the gruel and how tasteless it was, and I mentioned that Larl's seed tastes *much* better than gruel, and then she got all green again and lost it. Mom, you don't think - she's not a real *lesbo,* is she?"

Diane blinked before considering Amy's potentially spurious suggestion in any detail. She finally shook her head at it being a reasonable conclusion - from her *daughter's* point of view, anyway.

"Somehow, baby girl, I can't believe that's the case. I don't think *any* of the Commonwealth women we're likely to meet will have that particular fixation in them. I mean, Ronnie's joked about the First Wife and all, but Lady Lili was affectionate with both Ronnie *and* her husband."

"Oh yeah, she made the moves on *Larl* this morning, too. Grabbed his toy right there in the corridor in front of *everyone!*"

The look on her mom's face made her giggle, and Diane smiled before suggesting a solution.

"Well, as Maya would say, we don't have enough pieces to the puzzle yet. We could go ask Lady Lili, but quite frankly, she scares the *dickens* out of me."

"How about we go see the *other* Wives then, Mom? They seemed really nice and friendly at dinner last night, and Ronnie's mom was all smiles with us."

"I don't really know how to approach them, Amy. I wouldn't know where to start."

"I got an idea."

Amy got up and dug out Diane's ship suit from the closet, but donned just the collar for what she intended.

"Amy to Grandpa. Got a minute for your favorite Granddaughter?"

"*Go ahead, Amy.*" They could hear him chuckling quietly in the background.

"Hi Ronnie. Me and Mom want to go visit with the Wives - three, four or five - 'cause we got, you know, questions and all, and Mom's kinda terrified of Lili. How do we swing an invitation?"

There was a pause in his response, although they could hear a little chuckling in the background before he spoke.

"Ahh ... you should be able to just go down the corridor and ask the guard to announce you. Just avoid Second Wife, if you please. I understand she's still ... indisposed."

"That's it? Just go knock on the door?"

"That's it for 'family familiar' mode. If you need a more formal discussion with the Wives, I can arrange a formal visit for later on – if you still have your robes and all."

"Ah, nope! We're good. We just wanna go and gossip a little, and maybe get to understand things a little better is all. Thanks, Grandpa! Amy out!"

In Laisee's Compartment

Mistress Laisee Dawnae Caldorous paced her moderately comfortable compartment and pondered her situation – particularly the *humiliation* she'd experienced that morning.

"I cannot believe I *did* that in front of that – that *Earthling!*" she muttered furiously.

"That Earthling *Healer*," she corrected herself.

"That *powerful* Earthling Healer," she amended her correction.

"That quite pretty and *solicitous* Earthling Healer," she adjusted her memories, before pausing while thinking of the loving hug she'd received and the gracious kiss given to her by her Healer.

"My Healer... I called her my *Healer*. She's but a child, and yet she is more powerful and loving than my own *Mother*," she murmured sadly.

She flopped back on the bed and lay staring up at the ceiling while thinking of all the stress in getting out here and finding Ronnie again – except now he's an *old* man. He still had the same twinkle in his eyes, and an even *warmer* smile, but didn't pay any attention to her at *all*.

Of course, he *wouldn't* ... not with *Mother* in the same room...

Her Mother had walked in on them and caught them the *third* time they'd gotten together after he'd taken her virginity. Then she'd chased him down the hallways at home, with her sister Wives running after her trying to protect a very young Ronnie from a mother's wrath.

It was with very little uncertainty that they were forbidden to associate from that day on; and although she pined for the loss of his friendship, and the loving contentment lessons they'd shared, he'd honored the Second Wife's decree and stayed away. He'd always found

a way to let her know he still thought of her fondly, though, but it was very discreet, and they'd never attempted to share themselves with each other again.

That was all well and good for *Ronnie*, as he'd had the *other* four Wives attending to his sexual education, and – from what she'd heard from staff – he'd become *quite* accomplished. Unfortunately, her Mother had insisted they adhere to the customs of *Loca*.

Sex between men and women was for breeding purpose *only*, and if Laisee needed contentment, then she was to call upon her *Mother* for it – but *never* from among the other Wives of Lord *Caldarous* ... *ever!*

She'd often wondered why her Mother had even *become* Second Wife, and had asked her that very question just *once* – and received a slap in the face for her temerity, and cessation of all her contentment requests for a *month*.

True, over the years, there were rare occasions when she'd managed a *male* assignation, but they were few and *very* far between; and yet she *still* wondered why her Mother did not like such contentment. She thought it was very fulfilling and relished the *memory* of them almost as much as the actual *doing* of them.

However, her Mother watched over her carefully and did her best to raise her daughter in an *austere* environment – which was almost *maddening* because she knew about, and sometimes heard the sounds, of joyous couplings echoing down a hallway from an open door, or caught an unexpected glimpse of quiet contentment between Lord *Caldarous* and one or more of his Wives while walking past a room.

And she still dreamt of *Ronnie* when they were approaching their teens, both of them just beginning life and trying to enjoy and learn it together within the family, where the *Healer* teachings said it was to be taught – or so she'd heard it was to be taught.

But Mother had never taught her ... never taught her anything about becoming a *Healer*, either. Once she was wedded to Lord *Caldarous* and swelled large with his twin sons, Mother had stopped all pretense of being a *Healer*. At least, that's what she'd overheard the staff comment about when new staff joined and wondered what was wrong with Second Wife.

She'd never really known there was something fundamentally wrong with Mother until she'd started putting pressure on her to get her age fixed in her late teens for, as she'd said, "You'll want to find a *good* match so you can become a wife of importance to a man of *Royalty*, like *me*."

Things started clicking for her then. When she looked back; the early marriage, the twins, and then her, followed by the reluctance, then outright *refusal* to share Lord Caldarous' bed any longer; finally the *rage* when her brothers were lost on the ship Ronnie had commanded. Her mother then cared for nothing more than her position ... and getting contentment from her daughter.

As for the deaths of her brothers ... that was something else she didn't understand. Ronnie was *very* good at what he did and had always been successful in his military career. It wasn't until Felis and Talis were sent to join him that Mother became more animated about their future, but turned vehement about Ronnie's refusal to let them succeed. It seemed like Mother spent a lot of time composing messages to them, then reading and rereading the responses while seething over each one. She'd been heartbroken when the ship had become lost.

That had lasted for six years, until the survivors came back – all eighteen of them – but her brothers were not among them.

Mother had finally lost it for a while, before she began pushing and prodding – all the way up to the *Emperor* – to get Ronnie punished. Once he'd returned to Kantor, it'd taken only a few days to accomplish. In this instance, even her *Father* seemed in agreement. Ronnie had led his survivors home, seen them safely into hospice, then been remanded into custody. The trial on the next day had wiped out his career, his name, and then he was gone.

And now Mother was here – in *person* this time – to find a way to punish Ronnie again, but how much further could he be punished? And he'd brought survivors with him *this* time, as well, and they'd even survived in *death space!*

She shivered at the memory just moments before jumping into death space. Everyone had held their breath ... even the men aboard the ship...

Laisee suddenly remembered the *men* ... *so many men*, and *all* of them so very solicitous of her. She'd fought the urge to find one to couple with for nearly a month. The very *idea* made her tummy flutter, and she wondered if Mother would grant her contentment sometime this week!

“Oh, Mother, why do you treat your daughter so poorly?” she cried softly, before slipping her hand down between her legs to grant herself relief from the frustration these feelings kept bringing her.

In the Wives' Compartment

"I'm sorry, my Ladies, but Second Wife sounds *broken* somehow," Diane blurted out.

They all nodded their heads in agreement.

As Ronnie had said, they'd simply walked up to the guard, and he'd announced them. It wasn't but a few minutes later that three Wives, plus Diane and Amy, were crowded onto cushions and chatting about the *dysfunctional* part of their Lord Husband's family.

"Mistress Laisee is a nice enough child, but her mother has really harmed her," Yin-Yin said.

"Yes," Mei-Mei agreed. "Meela forbids her seeking contentment from any man or woman, or any of *us* as well. She is a very sad and lonely girl."

"And if Meela wishes it, Laisee must provide contentment for *her*, but now I learn she will not reciprocate," Spring Blossom added. "Laisee must be *very* frustrated. I fear she may act out soon or she will become very sick."

"But ... can't she just say *no*?" Amy asked them. "Maya taught us the Healer way is to help when we can, but we couldn't be *forced* to service someone else. I thought Meela was supposed to be a *Healer*?"

"Maya teaches you truly," Yin-Yin said. "A Healer gives when she can, *if* she can, but *she* decides whom she will grace with her sexual service. Of course, if someone is *bleeding* to death, then there is no question – but that does not involve sex, either... *Usually*," she added with a giggle.

"There's Healing when you have *sex*? Like when sometimes David and I have sex, and I'll suddenly start *glowing*?"

Diane's admission brought surprised looks to all three of the Wives' faces.

"Ah! You do that when you have sex with your David? You are a wild talent, *indeed!*" Yin-Yin exclaimed.

"Oh, Lady Diane, you are most *precious* among us!" Spring Blossom said. "Many of us have spent *years* becoming what we are, and yet you have been learning for only a – a *month*, if that may be believed?"

"Well, I was already a nurse for almost twenty years, before Ronnie *shanghaied* us from Earth," she said, but caught their looks of confusion. "Earth term. It means being taken from one place to another without knowledge or consent, and put to work."

"Ah!" Mei-Mei nodded in understanding. "We were aware that your departure was unexpected." They all giggled at that.

"But we have no regrets, my Ladies," Amy said. "I have my Larl, and Mom has Dad, and now Shay. And Shay has *Andy*, as well. And we all seem to get along just fine. *Especially* during ships holiday!"

Amy giggled at their expressions as the Ladies all leaned together and whispered quietly amongst themselves, before sitting back again.

"It is true, then. Ronnie allows ships holiday on the platform?" Spring Blossom asked her quietly.

"Well ... *yeah*. It's the only saving grace for being *stuck* out here. We ate gruel, and we worked on getting the ship ready to go. Larl transferred a whole bunch of recorded programs from the ship library to the platform library, but the *best* distraction we had was when Ronnie declared ships holiday once in a while and we'd all get naked together in the Recreation room and play with each other. Well ... Ronnie wears a shirt top to cover his scars, but we really don't mind them."

Diane saw the Ladies shiver when Ronnie's scars were mentioned, so she decided to share her experience with them.

"I actually Healed some of the scars on his arms during one of my lesson times with Ronnie, but I don't remember doing it," she admitted. "He wouldn't let me Heal any more of them. He said they were a reminder of his past."

The Wives looked at each other, each of them considering that statement. A discussion best left for another time, perhaps. As for *Laisee*, Mei-Mei took the initiative.

"Amy, about your little problem with Mistress Laisee... Unlike Lady Maya, she is not *Lady Laisee*, for she is neither bonded nor even *close* to becoming bonded. As for her behavior, your problem was two-fold. The first point is obvious. She did not know what she was eating. When she discovered the *true* nature of it, her mind rebelled. We all felt it a little bit here, except perhaps for Spring Blossom?" Spring Blossom just shook her head.

"The second point is that Mistress Laisee is not that well ... *accomplished* with a man. She had only been with Ronnie three times that we know of when they were but ... ten or twelve? And it is not likely Mistress Laisee's 'secret' assignations resulted in her tasting a man's seed, let alone allowing her to develop a liking for it."

Amy's eyebrows went up in surprise.

"That's strange. When I caught Maya granting contentment to Andy, I got a taste of what he splattered all over the both of them. I thought he was *delicious*."

"Well, daughter, he *is* your little brother. Although he's not so little anymore," Diane said, then paused to consider that and decided *now* was the perfect opportunity to bring it up.

"My Ladies – my son Andrew is but fourteen years old – *Earth* years old – yet he seems to have grown much taller in just these last few months. Is it possible we're doing something wrong to make him grow so much? He has gotten taller and wider of shoulder, and his penis has become ... *manlier* in size. Is there something Healers can *accidentally* do that Maya didn't warn us about?"

The Wives all looked at each other again, before Yin-Yin spoke.

"Perhaps I am out of place, and Lady Lili would know better of what I would suggest. It is not *entirely* impossible, but perhaps the combination of all four of you having young Andrew so many times has influenced his growth? Perhaps your *hidden* desires have resonated within him and caused his body to grow and fill out in those properties that you all desire in him?"

Amy gasped, and Diane snorted before saying, "And when she's not making him study, he and Shay are at it almost *constantly*."

They all shared a few chuckles at that comment.

"Lili would be the one to know for sure," Mei-Mei said. "Although, the regrowth of tissue and bone after the loss of a limb is not unusual; particularly during *military* service. I remember Lili mentioning her experiences while speaking of her days as a Combat-Healer. As long as there is food to eat, and the Healer is talented, almost *any* body part may be regrown ... given enough time."

"But do not worry, my ladies," Spring Blossom said. "It is common for young men to suffer a growing shoot like this. It often has to do with their hormones. I imagine young Andrew's hormones are getting quite a work out!"

That brought out a hearty laugh from all of them for a moment, but then Diane thought of the other issue that was confusing her.

"Ahh, my Ladies... Maya demonstrated something to each of us – me, Amy, and Shay, that is. She said it was a means of staying ... *young*? I mean, it felt really *good*, but is it really *true*?"

Spring Blossom started giggling before standing up and dropping her robes. She pirouetted slowly to show them the perfection of her

youthful body, before reaching down and bringing them up across her shoulders and fastening them.

"I am the mother of my little Ronnie. I was already seventeen winters old when he was born. My first son was born when I was fifteen winters in the world," she said, before settling onto her cushion once again. "First Wife took me into her nest and taught me the ways of the *Healers*." Then she looked at Mei-Mei and Yin-Yin. "Third Wife and Fourth Wife were *also* gracious with their teachings," she added, following it with a giggle.

"Diane, what Maya showed you sounds like the method Healers use to maintain our health and vitality," Mei-Mei said. "It took Spring Blossom many years to learn that technique. Otherwise, she would look as young as Second Wife."

"There is a caution for *each* of you," Yin-Yin warned her. "You are with child – *each* of you. If you reset your aging triggers, then your child may be reset as well. It does not happen often, but it *has* happened with unskilled Healers. It would not do to remain with child year after year."

Diane looked at her in disbelief.

"You're not *seriously* telling me that—"

"I would imagine it would become *very* uncomfortable after the first year," Spring Blossom murmured, which got a string of giggles out of Amy.

"So ... so only us *girls* can reset our aging triggers? How about my *Larl*?" she asked, after suddenly realizing she might stay young a *lot* longer than he will.

"It is usually a *shared* thing, children," Mei-Mei said. "Whenever possible, Healers treat each other. It is much more *fun*," she added in a whisper, and waited for the giggling to die down, before she continued.

"If you have a bond-mate, then you treat them and reset your *own* triggers in the process. It is also suitable as a service from Healer to Client – as long as there is caring and acceptance from *both* of you. It will be taught during the Healer teachings at some point ... once your skills become more established."

"And even then, you may not want to stay young for *too* long," Spring Blossom pointed out. "I am actually only six years younger than Lord Husband, but Lili decided she should present a more ... *mature* age for his position."

Amy let out a breath and relaxed.

"Well, as long as my Larl stays healthy, then that's good enough for me – as long as nothing falls *off* of him in his old age," she said with a snicker, then suddenly remembered why they were there in the first place, and shifted them back on track.

"So ... what's the plan to rescue Laisee?" she asked them all, and got a surprised and appreciative look from the Wives.

In Laisee's Compartment

Laisee was lying flat on her stomach, with the fingers of both hands pressing vigorously against her lower lips. Her thoughts swirled around the last time she'd been with Ronnie, and were intermixed with memories of her very infrequent assignations with other men while her Mother had made herself absent from the residence. She rubbed herself frantically until her body finally spasmed once again, and she was rewarded with a cascade of pleasure that washed throughout her groin and allowed her to fall into a state of sleepy relaxation. She rolled onto her side and clutched her lonely pillow, while letting one hand sneak up to squeeze and tug at one of her nipples in distraction.

In the Wives' Compartment

"That is as good a suggestion as any, young daughter," Mei-Mei agreed. "I would suggest that you and Diane, or perhaps you and young Shay offer her contentment if you choose. Do not *pressure*, but let it be known to her that you see her discontent, and you would offer her the Healers contentment she so desires."

"Then wait and see if she responds," Yin-Yin added.

"Yes," Spring Blossom agreed. "And if she responds, treat her *very* well and get her *talking*. Assure her she has *other* options. She is a grown woman and does not *have* to stay with her mother any longer. Amy, you might offer her some time with your Larl, or perhaps your little brother, Andy?"

"Well ... Larl's a pretty big deal for a near-virgin like Laisee," she considered aloud, which caused a glittering of eyes from the Wives around her, "...but Andy is still the smallest of them and he'd probably be much less intimidating to her."

"Yes, that is true, my Ladies," Spring Blossom said. "And did you not see his *features* when we first were introduced? He looks much like our Ronnie did at that age, aside from his hair and his *much* more polite personality."

As the Lady Wives paused to consider it, Diane took that moment to sum it all up.

"So that's the plan, then. Seduce Laisee, get her hooked on Andy's little dick, and then offer her asylum as part of Ronnie's crew ... yet another Healer-in-Training?"

"You got it, Mom!" Amy exclaimed to the somewhat amused nods of the three Wives.

Noon +3 (Day 93) – The Mother from Hell

Meela was pacing her comfortable accommodations, while seething with anger after hearing the servants gossiping about that – that *Earth* girl forcing her little Laisee to eat *ships gruel!* And then pretending *ignorance of it!* The very *nerve* of that evil child!

And how could Laisee *allow* herself to be tricked into such an embarrassing situation to *begin with!* She'd warned her over and over – *stay away from strangers!* Strangers did not follow the teachings of *Loca* and would *ruin* her chances of finding a good match in – in several more *years, at least!* When she *matures* a little more – if she will *ever* mature and get these silly notions about *Healers and men out of her head!*

But time enough for that *later!* Right *now*, her daughter needed another good *scolding!*

In Laisee's Compartment

The servant knocked lightly at her door.

"Your pardon, Mistress Caldorous, but your mother bids you attend her in her compartment," she said through the door.

'She just wants me to provide her with contentment, yet again,' Laisee thought dejectedly while laying there after relieving herself again.

She suddenly realized the risk she was taking, and quickly pulled her hand away and tasted herself on her fingertips.

'Oh! ... I must wash quickly and go to her. I hope she doesn't suspect!'

"I will freshen myself and be on my way," she called out, before dashing to the facilities.

In Meela's Compartment

Meela greeted her daughter at the door with a smile.

"Laisee, my daughter. So *kind* of you to come so *quickly*. Please come in and attend me."

Laisee entered warily and turned to close the door behind her.

She'd arrived late, and both she and her Mother knew she was late. As she turned back, Meela swung out and slapped her hard, which left a stinging handprint across her face and caused her to stumble and nearly fall.

"HOW COULD YOU, YOU STUPID CHILD? HOW COULD YOU LET THAT EARTHLING TRICK YOU LIKE THAT?" she shouted angrily.

"Mother, what ... no - please! I didn't know! She was eating it, too, and just offered me some. She was nice to me, Mother. It - it wasn't bad, Mother. It - it was my fault I didn't ask. It didn't hurt me, Mother!"

"Hurt you? It didn't HURT you? What about your reputation, you stupid girl? Now all the servants can gossip about is how the daughter of Second Wife was so stupid as to eat - eat - *human waste for breakfast!* With the Earthling! That Earth-spawn shall PAY for this! I'll make her SUFFER!"

Meela barely caught a breath, before continuing with the familiar rant while pacing her room.

"By the Gods, child! How do you expect me to find you a suitable match if you keep doing foolish things? Haven't I told you repeatedly NOT to talk to strangers? How will I find you a husband who would be willing to overlook your continuous stream of - of errors in judgment?"

She stopped pacing and turned to confront Laisee directly, approaching slowly while lowering her voice to drive the point home.

"I don't understand you, Laisee. I just really don't understand what it going on in that stupid head of yours!" she said cruelly, but then her face softened a tiny bit. "You were such a sweet child, my little Laisee. You were so pretty and polite, and you used to obey your Mother like a good little girl - until that devil-child ruined you and tried to make you as vile and unprincipled as the rest of the Royals!" she spat, and swung at her again, but missed when Laisee dropped and cowered at her feet.

"Mother, please forgive me! I try to be a good girl, Mother!"

"Ha! Just like all your other false promises? I know all about your secret meetings with some of the maid staff. Do you think it was just happenstance that your little Dina and Asra were sent away? Do you think I did not know how you shamelessly opened yourself to mere serving girls instead of asking ME, your own MOTHER, for contentment?"

"But Mother, please! My need was great upon me! I am so lonely at home. There is no one for me to talk to - to ... to be friends with,

Mother!" She barely stood, shrunken and cringing under Meela's upraised hand.

"And so you turn to mere *serving girls for friendship*? What were you thinking, Laisee? What do you think *they* were thinking when you let them suckle at your breasts or nurse at your womb? Do you think they were *friends* to content you so? Or were they just *following your orders*, lest they be *beaten and sent away – LIKE THE WHORES THEY WERE!*"

"Mother, NO! Why would you do that? They caused me *no harm!*"

"And I suppose *Jarl* and *Tanga* caused you no harm as well? Did you not think to *wash* before coming to content me? *Did you think I would not taste their vile essence when I gave contentment to you that evening?*"

"Mother, I – I was *weak*. I was *weak* and they were *nice* to me. They made me feel *good*, Mother. They made me feel like a *woman*, like Lady Lili said..." Laisee gasped and brought her hand over her mouth.

"Lili? You spoke to *Lady Lili*? *Did I not warn you NEVER to speak to the other Wives, Laisee?*"

"I - I - I just ...I just asked Lady Lili about beginning *Healer* training. We just talked a *little* bit, Mother."

"Just a *little* bit, Laisee? Just enough so that vile witch could fill your head with delusions of becoming a – a *Healer*? You – a *Healer*?"

"*You're a Healer, Mother! You're a Healer!* Why may I not learn to be a *Healer*, Mother? Why will you not teach me as your Mother taught you?"

"*MY MOTHER IS DEAD BECAUSE SHE WAS A HEALER!* She left me *half-trained* because she went off at the Royal's bidding – *and they killed her!*"

"Grandmother wasn't killed by the *Royals*, Mother! It was an *accident!*"

"I know *better*, girl. I searched and learned what *really* went on. They killed her because they could not *control* her. *She was too powerful!* They were *afraid* of her, and so they *killed* her and took *me* in her place ... *but I refuse to play their game!* Do you see *me Healing anyone?* Do you see *me* catering to their *vile whims*? Do you see *me responding to anyone's needs?* *NO!* That is what they *expect* from a *Healer*, and I am *Healer no more – and you will be neither!*"

"Oh, Mother, I'm so sorry you hate me so. Please forgive me? May – may I offer you *contentment*, Mother?"

Meela glared at her while angry emotions continued to wash over her. She forced her anger down as she considered that perhaps it would be suitable. She could *use* the relaxation.

“Very well, Laisee. You may content me. Come to my lips, daughter!”

Laisee tentatively reached out and approached her mother, but Meela stopped her at arms length and grabbed her hand to find it had been freshly washed. She brought Laisee’s hand to her nose and sniffed it carefully. Then she quickly reached a hand into the crotch of Laisee’s clothing and noted the smell of a freshly cleaned mound.

“Laisee, have you been *playing* with yourself ... *again?*”

Laisee looked at her with tears in her eyes and nodded her head fearfully.

“My *own* daughter – she cannot wait for her *mother’s* contentment, but must first pleasure *herself!* Get out! Get out right now! You do not deserve the pleasure of my love! Go find pleasure in your *solitary play, stupid child!* How could I have ever *raised such an ungrateful child!*”

Laisee cowered before her mother again.

“I SAID GET OUT, YOU HELL-SPAWN BITCH OF HOUSE CALDAROUS!”

In the Lane’s Compartment

Amy and Diane had just finished updating Shay on the “Laisee Project” as they’d named it...

Shay was all for it – as long as it was understood that Andy was *still* hers and Laisee could only *borrow* him once in a while. Amy assured her that Andy was indeed hers – mainly because his penis wasn’t “all grown up, yet” – then all three of them shared a laugh at his expense.

Shay had become silent for a moment while she’d given that a little more thought.

‘*My Andy is MUCH bigger than he was two months ago. Perhaps that will continue to grow as well?*’

They all left shortly afterwards. Diane went to join David, before he got off watch and headed to the gym for sparring practice with Ronnie, while Amy and Shay continued to their own compartments.

Their new shadows – apparently courtesy of the First Lord – trailed along behind them.

At Amy and Larl's Compartment

Laisee was pacing at the compartment labeled with Amy and Larl's names. No one had answered her quiet knocking, and she was becoming more and more agitated. As she turned to walk away, Amy and Shay were just coming down the corridor towards her, and she rushed to meet them. Laisee's guard shared a look with the other two shadows that indicated trouble in House Caldorous – yet again.

"Amy! Amy, my Healer, we must talk right away!"

"Good afternoon, Mistress Laisee," Amy said calmly, while taking note of the finger marks on her face. "This is Mistress Shay Daishi, companion of ... my family," she finished lamely, hoping she got that right.

Laisee gave a tilt of her head, did a quick sort, and figured out what Amy had meant to say – *mostly*, anyway – but then tried to compose herself.

"Oh, I'm very sorry, my Lady Amy – Mistress Shay, but I must speak with you ... *privately*. May we speak in your compartment?"

Amy gave her a quick hug, then looped an arm around one of hers and escorted them back to the door, which opened at her touch. Seeing that the lights remained dim, she paused at the door and heard a rhythmic snoring from within. A glance at the ship's timer told her Larl had another half hour to rest, so she backed away and closed the door.

"Shay, is Andy home?"

"Umm, no, my Amy. I believe he is with Grandfather Ronnie in the flight simulator this afternoon. I think he said they were going to update the programming. Perhaps we may be comfortable in *our* compartment, my Amy?"

Amy nodded, then dragged the hapless Laisee off to Shay and Andy's compartment, while trailing a contingent of *three* guardsmen now. Once Shay let them inside, Amy dragged a desk chair closer to the bed and planted Laisee on it. Then she adjusted the lights a little lower, before she and Shay made themselves comfortable on the bed. Even in the cabin's dimmer lighting, both Amy and Shay could still see the red handprint on Laisee's cheek.

"How may we help you, Mistress Laisee?" Amy asked her.

"It is my Mother – Lady Meela. She overheard the staff speaking about – about this morning. She was very angry with me and vows vengeance against you for ... for tricking me into eating the ships ... food product," she ended meekly.

"But Laisee, we *speak* about that. I *told* you I was sorry you didn't know what it was!"

"Oh please, yes, *my Healer!* I told Mother as such, but she did not listen. She blames you for the ... the *embarrassment.*"

"Well... I'm sorry you were embarrassed, Laisee—"

"No, my Healer. *She* was embarrassed! She says she will *never* find a match for me now, and I will remain *husbandless* because of my *stupidity!*" she said, being on the verge of tears by this point.

"Laisee ... you don't seem like a stupid girl to me," Amy told her.

"Nor to me, Mistress Laisee," Shay agreed. "I am but a lowly girl from Wilder, yet I aspire to be a Healer, and Healer Tal trains me. Perhaps there is something you wish to do with *your* life as well?"

"I ... I - I told Mother that I wanted to train as a - a Healer, but she refuses me the training. She says she will not train me, as her mother did not finish training her."

"*Girl* ... listen. I'm sixteen years old – sixteen *Earth* years, I mean. I began Healer training about a *month* ago, and Maya is not my Mother."

Amy reached into her pocket, pulled out a small folding knife, and went to cut herself.

"Oh *no*, my Amy! It is *my* turn!" Shay said, then held out her arm.

"Are you *sure*? Because I thought I cut you *last* time?"

"Oh *no*, my Amy. That was my *Andy* you cut. Remember? Because I did not want to '*hurt the one who loves me*', they finished together. They shared a laugh, before Amy reached over and put a short slash in Shay's forearm.

Amy wiped and folded the knife while letting the blood ooze for a few seconds. Then she placed her hand over the cut and a tiny glow emanated from below her fingers. Drawing her hand away only seconds later, the cut was completely gone; leaving nothing but a drop or two of blood outside the area covered by her palm.

Laisee's eyes went wide in astonishment.

"Yup! And I only been doin' this for about a *month*. Ronnie cut my arm and made Maya fix it. You should've seen what he did to my *Mom*'s arm! He nearly cut it *off* before he made Maya fix it!"

"Ronnie – Lord Caldar cut ... cut your *mother's* arm as well?" Laisee squeaked.

“Yeah... Well, Mom was a hard sell. She didn’t believe what Healer’s were *really* supposed to do. We all thought ... Laisee? *Laisee*, are you all right?”

Laisee was still looking at Shay’s arm; then she looked at Amy, and then back at Shay.

“Mistress Laisee ... do you not know the Healer’s *primary* duty?” Shay asked her.

“I – I had no *idea*. I thought...”

Amy stood and accessed the gym recordings from the room monitor. The lights dimmed somewhat further, and the screen lit up with a selection menu. She scrolled down and selected a start sequence that she remembered was fairly indicative. She walked back, grabbed Laisee, and sat her on the bed between her and Shay before calling out, “Program-Begin.”

The display blipped, and a video of armed combat came up on the screen. The two opponents began slashing at each other with swords that glowed and screeched loudly while they made lunges and swipes at each other. In just a few seconds, a sword – with hand attached – went flying through the air, and the match was over. The power sword died in mid-flight and was recovered –sans hand – by one of the bystanders.

A Healer dressed in uniform picked up the hand and returned it to the loser. She carefully aligned it to the stump, before a bright flash blazed across the screen. Then she smacked him on the side of his head, before turning and stomping off the mat. The winner came over and hugged the loser, then began shaking the recently reattached hand. Both Amy and Shay laughed, and Amy said, “We figure she bet on the *wrong* fighter and *lost!*”

“I – I thought... You and Shay ... you and Shay can Heal something like – like *that?*”

“Nope, not yet. When Dad cut his hand off, it took *hours* to put him back together.”

“Yes, my Amy, but surely you remember that Maya used it as a teaching lesson for all *three* of us,” Shay reminded her, before turning to Laisee. “Maya did most of the bones and vessels herself, but she had each of us practice doing a part with muscles, tendons, and other tissue. She was *very* exacting about it.”

“Yeah. It wasn’t *quite* that bad when Ronnie cut Mom’s arm, but Maya took less than a minute makin’ it go away. She’s *really* good. Grandpa says she’s ready to become a Senior.”

Laisee's mind was whirling. Amy had actually Healed a *real* hurt. Amy's father had had his *hand* cut off, and Maya had just used it as a *teaching* exercise for her students. Mother had never told her *any* of this. All she ever repeated was how Healers had to ... had to...

"My Healer Amy ... Healer Shay ... do you not grant ... *contentment* ... for those who ask for it?"

Amy gave out a shrug, then glanced at Shay, before saying, "If it *pleases* us. If we *feel* like it." She threw in another shrug for good measure. "Of course, we're all *family* here and we love each other very much, but if we don't *choose* to grant contentment, then we don't."

"It is the Healer's way to help those who *need* help, Mistress Laisee," Shay murmured. "But perhaps there may be reasons *not* to grant contentment... Perhaps if someone was ... *abusive*?"

"Yeah, like the father of my *child!*" Amy groused. "He *lied* to me and told me he *loved* me, only just to *use* me and cast me aside once he'd had my body and placed his *seed* within it! I will not grant *him* contentment again – *ever!* But... I suppose if he was hurt and bleeding, I *might* consider mending his wounds – if only to show him my *contempt!*"

"Yes, my Amy, for that is the *Healer's way*," Shay agreed.

"So ... a Healer cannot be *forced* to offer contentment?" Laisee asked them.

"Laisee, the Gift of the Healer is for young or old, pretty or ugly, pleasant or abusive – but *contentment* is between persons who share *caring* about each other," Amy explained patiently. "Ronnie allows us ships holiday in the Recreation Center every few days. There we all gather to love each other, but we don't *force* ourselves on each other."

"Umm, my Amy ... that is not *always* true. You *often* force yourself upon your *Larl*," Shay reminded her.

"Well, *yeah* ... but you never hear *him* complaining about it – not for *long*, anyway!"

Laisee smiled at their intimate banter. She felt the warmth and love between them, then wondered if it could grow to encompass *her* as well. Perhaps *this* is why Mother had always warned her away from the other Wives, so that she may keep her to *herself*? But surely she need but *ask* for contentment, and at least *one* of them would take pity on her – or on *me*, perhaps?

The door opened, and Andy entered, all sweaty and smelly. Shay jumped up to greet him, but stopped just out of reach.

"Ah! My Andy! You are back and – and you are ill of *odor*," she said, then silently pointed to the facilities.

"I obey, my Healer," he said meekly, and was headed towards the other door when his attention was caught by the young lady sitting next to Amy.

"Lady ... Laisee?"

"This is *Mistress Laisee Caldarous*, my Andy," Shay corrected him. "She is the daughter of Lord Caldarous and Second Wife, Lady Meela."

Andy turned up the lights and strode forward, before stopping with his arm and hand raised with fingertips vertical. Laisee rose and placed her fingertips against his, before bowing her head while still watching him with her eyes; her mouth slightly agape.

"Forgive me, Mistress Laisee, but I must shower to please my Shay. Please stay and enjoy yourself," he said, then turned to the facilities and closed the door behind him, with Laisee's eyes following him every step of the way.

"You'll have to excuse my little brother, but he ... Laisee? *Laisee*, you still with us?"

'Jeeze, there she goes again. She's a real *space cadet!*' Amy kept to herself.

"I – I'm sorry, my ... I thought ... I thought it was my Ronnie come back – back from the *past*..." she murmured; trailing off while still looking at the facilities door.

Amy looked at Shay, and then back to Laisee.

"Uh, yeah. Spring Blossom said the same thing. 'Cept Andy is politer than Grandpa was when he was that age. Our *real* Grandfather was Grandpa Walter – my Dad's dad. He died before we left Earth, and Ronnie kinda adopted *all* of us – *unofficially*, of course. He was talking about sponsorship for us if we decided we wanna stay in the Commonwealth, though."

Shay looked at Amy and raised her eyebrows. Then she tilted her head towards Laisee, whose eyes were still glued to the facilities door.

"Umm, Laisee. If, ah, if you sometimes feel the need to *talk*, we're gonna be on the platform for a while, I guess," Amy quietly offered.

"Yes, Mistress Laisee. If you should begin to feel *lonely*, or if you feel the need for *contentment*, then please call upon me or Amy if you wish it," Shay offered. "We would be *pleased* to share some time with you."

Laisee turned her face away from the facilities door, and searched both their faces for the truth, but found only openness and caring reflected back from them.

"I – I thank you for your kind offer, my Healers," she managed just as more noises were coming from the facilities door. "But – I really must be going now, my Healers. I'm sure Mother worries about me."

She spared another glance at the facilities door, before quickly saying, "*Thank you for your time, my Healers*," and hurrying out the compartment door, letting it close behind her by itself.

Andy managed to pop out of the facilities just after Laisee had left.

"Aw, *man!* It was the *stink*, wasn't it! Grandpa crashed the damn simulator, and all this smoke started filling the canopy. Is she gonna come back *later?*" His face betrayed hope for the future, while Shay and Amy shared a glance before turning to him.

"My Andy, we must *talk*," Shay said firmly.

"Yes, my little brother. The pot *thickens*, and *you're* the main *ingredient*," Amy said with an evil chuckle.

'Aw, *man...* What are they gonna do to me *THIS* time?'

Noon +5 (Day 93) – In the Gym

They'd started off at mid-level this afternoon.

David and Ronnie were both facing the wall display while mimicking the exercise program. The video instructor kept them at a steady if not exhausting pace, but after twenty minutes of this, Ronnie shut off the program and they began sparring like they'd been doing every chance they got.

On *this* afternoon, however, they kept their efforts low key and focused on *technique* rather than speed and agility. This was because Diane had begged off from monitoring them and made David promise to avoid injuring himself again.

"So ... how are the techs doing with the data recovery?" Ronnie asked, before shifting subtly and fending off a light blow from David.

"They seem to be getting what they want." David recovered and brought his sword back and down to set up for a mid-torso slice. "There was some talk about the old days, and they mentioned the *Kraken's Child* program having a *bug* in it." He finished his movement and came back to guard.

"Oh? What did *you* say about it?" Ronnie asked, before pushing forward in a weak lunge.

"Well..." David blocked the lunge and countered with a slow sweep, before continuing. "...I told them you thought it was *still* broken. Donnel and Granger talked it over with Lon, and they did some data recovery of the program. Then, 'bout an *hour* ago..." David paused again, cutting the sweep short and counter-lunging towards Ronnie. "...they said they'd patched it or something and we should check it out next time we're in the gym."

They both pulled up to guard before dropping their points.

"You give 'em the *password*? No ... never mind. None of those three would need it. Let's see what they did with it."

In the Guardsmen's Local Off-Duty Compartment

Tomar was off-duty and had heard Lord Calder and the Earthling were practicing at swords in the gym. Not wanting to observe them openly, he monitored the gym remotely and watched the painfully slow exercises and play-fighting that Calder and his pet Earthling were pretending at. He'd thought Calder had merely *looked* old, but he seemed to have lost that fine and deadly edge he'd observed when he was a growing young swordsman practicing with the Royal Sword Master. It was a *pity* he'd let himself go like this.

The Earthman was sloppy, and the old man was almost as bad. They did their exercises with neither grace nor style, and were merely going through the motions. Nothing he saw compared to the initial training *he'd* gone through on Kantor, or how he currently practiced in the training rooms at the Royal Homestead.

He considered there were some *lesser* swordsmen who relied on pellet and beam weapons to protect their charges, but in his mind, *real* warriors fought with *swords*, and *real* skill was needed ... not this – this *play-fighting*.

He watched in disgusted silence when they dropped their points and turned to look at something on the monitor.

In the Gym

They both tucked their swords under their arms and went over to the program monitor, where Ronnie called up the *Kraken's Child* and looked at the new menu options.

"Hmm, ten levels from ten to one-hundred percent, then five more labeled 'Warning', 'Danger', 'Foolish', 'Insane', and 'Demented' ... that must've been *Donnel* making those up."

David spared a glance at his face before asking, “Is it, you know ... *safe* now?” He vividly remembered the *first* time he’d seen it in action and watched Ronnie check some settings and run some calculations himself.

“Well ... it *looks* like they locked it out good and tight. If they took out the extra package *Talis* stuck in there, then it should give us a pretty good workout – *without* going *psycho killer* on us when our backs are turned. You wanna go first? At – ohhh ... *thirty* percent?”

David hesitated, but then figured he’d be relatively safe with Ronnie there with him.

“Uhhh, sure. I guess.”

David rolled his shoulders and headed toward the mat, while Ronnie changed the settings, nodded, then called out, “Program – Begin.”

“WHO DARES TO FACE THE KRAKEN’S CHILD?”

The loud shout that confronted them sounded like a tone-modified version of Donnel’s voice. A pair of swords slammed into floor, ceiling, and four walls, before centering themselves on guard at head height; the face and body of a bloodied Drecks slowly materializing just behind the swords.

“Well...” Ronnie muttered. “*That’s* different.”

In the Guardsmen’s Off-Duty Compartment

Tomar saw two swords slap to the mat, ceiling, and walls, before coming on guard in the center of the room. A few seconds later, they were backed by the slowly solidifying image of a Drecks simulacrum in full battle dress.

The Earthman stepped onto the mat and approached, until the simulation attacked – *oh, so slowly*. Even then, the Earthman was hard pressed to keep his guard up and was nearly hit several times, while Caldar walked around outside the circle and gave him instructions – all the while *laughing at him!*

What a *fool* Caldar was!

Didn’t he know what a *serious* business wielding a sword was?

In Ronnie’s Compartment

Diane announced herself at Ronnie’s door and waited until Maya opened it to let her in. Her Imperial shadow stayed outside and took up a position next to the one already standing guard over Maya.

"I see that you have one as well," Maya said, then nodded pointedly at the second guard.

"Yeah, he's been following me around for some reason. So how did your interview with the Wives go this morning?" Diane asked.

Her eyes twinkled in expectation, but Maya drew her into the room and shut the door from listening ears before responding.

"It was not ... all that I expected," she finally murmured. She was still torn over what she and Lili had discussed earlier that day.

"Well, did they at least give you the dirt on Lady Meela?" Maya's expression turned quizzical, so Diane rephrased it for her. "I mean, did they attempt to explain the dysfunctional relationship between Meela and the rest of House Caldarous?"

"Ahh ... no. We spoke about ... other things."

Diane missed the subtext altogether and just plowed on with the latest gossip.

"Amy had a minor run in with Laisee at breakfast and came to talk to me about it. We ended up talking to Mei-Mei, Yin-Yin, and Spring Blossom. Did you know that Ronnie was her *first* back when they were only ten years old, or so? Story is, Meela went **nuts** when she caught them going at it before she chased Ronnie down the hallways."

"That does not sound like my Ronnie..."

"And all the *other* Wives chased after them both while trying to protect Ronnie!" Diane added gleefully.

"Ah, now *that* sounds like my Ronnie," Maya said with a smile, before focusing on the "Laisee" issue. "What pieces did the Wives reveal about our young Mistress Laisee?"

Diane smiled at the reference. It was right out of the teachings.

"They described her as a poor, distressed child, held captive by an evil mother – one who abuses her and demands contentment from her, but does not often reciprocate. She is allowed compassion from no other, and she is *punished* when she lapses and finds contentment where she can." Maya's face registered shock while Diane continued.

"She is not even allowed simple *friendships* outside of her mother. She is not allowed contact with the Wives, or anyone else, save the staff, and even *then* she is watched carefully. *No one* could live under those conditions for long, Maya," she said, then looked away sadly for a moment before going on. "The Wives fear for her sanity, but Amy and I

have a plan to rescue Laisee and set her free – or at least change her prison assignment,” she said, shrugging with just her hands.

“And what is that plan, my Diane?”

“We plan to seduce our poor Laisee, and bring her into our family for safe keeping ... at least until Ronnie can figure out what to do with her.”

“And does my Ronnie *know* about your plan?”

“Well ... no. Not *yet*. But Ronnie’s already picked up *six* strays. One more’s not gonna kill him.”

‘*Not unless Meela arranges an accident for my Ronnie,*’ Maya thought to herself.

Diane suddenly stiffened and grabbed her left wrist. Releasing it, she looked at it carefully, but then thought of David sparring with Ronnie.

“David is in the gym!” She stood and turned to leave, but Maya placed a hand on her shoulder and turned her towards the monitor, instead. On the display they could see David was fighting a huge simulacrum of something horrible! *And he was shaking his left wrist.*

“I watch from here when my Ronnie is in the gym. I do not fear as much now that ... that I know my Ronnie is much more *talented* than I had originally thought. Still, I would rather not wait for the platform to inform me when there has been an accident in the gym when my Ronnie is there.”

They both watched in silence while David successfully danced around the simulacrum of the monster before slowly backing out. They also caught his quick jerk around to face the swords holding at guard just before he left the mat.

‘*There! That was how my Ronnie was hurt! He turned his back on the beast!*’ Maya concluded accurately.

“Wow! I *never* knew David was so talented. It almost makes me wet just *watching* him!”

In the Guardsmen’s Off-Duty Compartment

Tomar watched for a few minutes, until the Earthman finally backed out of the circle and the simulacrum dropped back to guard. The Earthman *almost* turned his back on it, but suddenly jerked around to watch the swords while he backed all the way off the mat. At least he had *some* bit of self-preservation about him.

Tomar observed the Earthman standing there out of breath after so little effort, then turned off the monitor in disgust. If that was the best the Earthman could do, then there was no point watching the old man struggle with the same program.

In the Gym

“Well … how did … I do?” David asked. He was somewhat out of breath and favoring his left wrist.

“You could have been a *little* bit quicker in some places. Overall … not *bad* for a first time at fifty percent.”

“Fifty percent? I thought you set it to *thirty* percent?”

“No, I *asked* you if you wanted to go at thirty percent, but I set it to *fifty* percent. You never said you specifically *wanted* it set at thirty-percent.”

In Ronnie’s Compartment

Diane blushed when Maya smiled at her student’s reaction to her mate’s masculinity. They didn’t speak of it aloud, though, and continued to watch while it looked like Ronnie was critiquing David’s technique.

In the Gym

David tried to come up with a suitable argument, but figured it was just like the simulator – set it faster and let him learn to catch up with it. Eventually, he’d excel at normal speed – if it didn’t *kill* him first.

“Program-Pause,” Ronnie said, then reset it to “Warning.”

“Program-Begin”

“AH, HAA! – COME TO FACE ME, KRAKEN’S CHILD!”

“I just bet he’s the kinda guy who would add extra ‘Ha-Ha’s’ for every level above that one,” David grumbled while continuing to rub his left wrist.

“Aye, laddie. Tha’ the joyous nature Mister Ardan be afflicted wei’?”

Ronnie smiled as he stepped into the circle and started his workout for the evening.

In Ronnie’s Compartment

“They are much alike, my Ronnie and your David,” Maya said while smiling at Diane’s continuing blush.

Diane turned to her, but saw her smile vanish when fear flashed over Maya's face. She snapped her head around to look at the monitor. Both of them stood frozen in place while they watched Ronnie dance with the *Kraken's Child*.

In the Gym

He kept it up for four whole minutes, before deciding he was getting just too damned old for this business and backed out of the circle.

He called out, "Program-End" when his foot hit the outer ring.

He stood there watching as the swords returned to their storage space – not quite panting, but still a little bit out of breath.

"I don't think it's as fast as it was last time," he said calmly.

"Oh yeah. You still have most of your jumpsuit intact, and I can hardly see any blood at all. *Not to worry*, though. There's *still* four more levels to go. Ready for another round?"

Ronnie didn't burst out laughing, but smiled grimly at the prospect of it.

"Ahh, I think I'll *sleep* on it first, David. You know, I'm just not as *young* as I used to be," he said wryly, then gripped his sword's blade with one hand before stretching and twisting his body in place.

He put away his sword and shut down the system, before grabbing a damp towel and wiping down the few drips and drabs that had splattered on the exercise mat. Then they turned off the lights and closed the gym, before heading back to their compartments.

In Ronnie's Compartment

Both women were still staring while watching the gym being shut down for the evening. Maya was sweating heavily, as trickles of adrenalin were still running through her body.

"Can you *believe* those old fools?" Diane was furious at seeing David and Ronnie laugh and hug each other, before closing down the gym. "Just because we got a **boat load** of *Healers*, they think they can go and play *dangerous games anytime they feel like it!* Well, *I'm* going to our compartment to wait for David, and *give him a piece of my mind when he comes in!*"

Maya was still somewhat breathless and a little dizzy, but that only heightened her senses.

"Diane ... perhaps you would consider giving David a ... a piece of something *else*? I can smell you from *here*."

Diane blushed and looked away, but finally nodded slowly.

"Yes, he will serve *my* pleasure while I make him explain why he causes me such great discontent." She was still smiling grimly when she left the room.

Maya was left alone with her thoughts while trying to calm down before Ronnie arrived to shower.

She had *never* seen Ronnie like this. She knew he was once a true warrior, but never had any *idea* he was capable of such – such *raw power and skill!* It was like watching a beautiful and deadly dance, as he whirled around and blocked every blow directed his way. He made it look almost *too* easy – almost like he had never been changed *at all*.

She was truly worried now that Lili's warning would come true. If so, her Ronnie would fail his test and be killed for his weakness. She *could* warn him, but –she would not ... she had *promised*. She was to love and support him, but she could not warn him. But she could still *love him*.

He opened the door and came in – all mussed and sweaty and smiling.

'*And I am so very wet right now,*' she thought, before greeting her lover with a smile and joining him at the door; her robes dropping around her ankles while they kissed longingly, before leaving a trail of his clothes on the way to the shower.

Midnight –I (Day 93) – Lili Lends a Hand

Lili was in Kita's adjacent room, poring over the reports and raw transcripts supplied by Ardan and Deltec earlier that evening. As she read the reports, she was adding notations to several other files, and building a chain of evidence that should prove useful in the upcoming investigation.

Kita was there as well, reviewing areas of her specialty, and jotting down notes to herself for transmission to Lili's agents on Loca, Cletus, Kantor, and Earth. The investigation was being widened after she'd listened to recordings from various locations within the platform, and compared them to previous recordings taken aboard *Sectorus*, and back on Kantor. Her lines of inquiry had grown accordingly, and she'd already sent off several messages to *Sectorus* for immediate retransmission.

Lili closed several files on her data pad, but sent one file to Captain Talon on *Sectorus* for his actions in the morning. She'd finally grown weary, and having saved her work from this evening, sat back and stretched. She handed over the updated data tabs to Kita, who then

added them to her kit where they would await further updates from the data technicians.

A diffident knock at the door revealed Spring Blossom bearing goblets for three, and a bottle of ambrosia. Lili beckoned her in and accepted a goblet, into which Spring Blossom poured a measure of ambrosia. Kita accepted a small portion as well, then Spring Blossom poured herself a measure. Kita fairly purred when she sipped the ambrosia, and smiled.

“Umm, this is *marvelous*. However did Lord Caldarous find such a fine vintage, my Lady?”

“Oh, it is very *easy*, my sweet Kita. You merely put several cases away and forget about them for perhaps – two hundred *years*, and this is the result.”

Spring Blossom laughed quietly at Lili’s teasing, while Kita smiled at their obvious inside joke, but wished she had the time to linger a bit longer.

“Our Lord Husband is kept company by Mei-Mei and Yin-Yin, my Lili, and I am *all alone* tonight. Would *you* care to keep company with me this night?” The pout on Spring Blossom’s face was almost impossible to resist, and Lili smiled and reached out her arms to accept a loving hug from her, before looking over her shoulder at Kita standing bashfully off to the side.

“And what about *you*, my little Kita? Will *you* join us in comfort this night?” Lili asked her, and watched her eyes open in surprise tinged with regret.

“Please forgive me, my Lady, but it is so *very* late, and there is so much to do in the morning. As much as I would desire your comfort, I feel I must retire, or I will fail in my duties, my Lady. Even now, I fear my concerns will keep me awake, rather than let me sleep right away as is usual for me.”

A tiny gasp escaped from Spring Blossom.

“Oh Lili, we *cannot* let her go to a disturbed sleep! Perhaps ... the *Gift of the First Wife?*” Spring Blossom’s eyes twinkled at her suggestion, and she glanced over at Kita’s bed before stepping back and sitting upon its edge.

“Yes, perhaps that *would* be prudent?” Lili tentatively agreed. “Kita, I have never *given* you my Gift. Would you be pleased to receive it this night? I promise it will not take long, and will help you to sleep.”

Lili smiled at her almost hungrily, while enticing her to dally with them for a while longer. Then she turned and joined Spring Blossom, where she sat on Kita's bed.

"I – yes, my Lady Lili. I will *gladly* accept your gift. What shall I..." Kita paused, thinking of the rumors she'd heard over the years.

"Just lay *here* for a moment, Kita," Spring Blossom whispered teasingly. She patted the bed next to her, and Kita joined her on it.

Lili smiled down at Kita and ran her fingers through her hair.

"My most *apt* pupil is not with us this night, little Kita. Our Ronnie is *particularly* well trained in its application, but I will try my best to share it with you – however *poorly* I may do so," Lili assured her, then kneeled on the bed opposite Spring Blossom before reaching out to hold Kita's hands. "You may begin to kiss her now, my Lady Blossom, while I see how long it takes for our little Kita to fall asleep," she murmured.

Lili closed her eyes and started the tingling deep down inside Kita's genitals – lighting a fire that quickly spread. It was arousing her rapidly and causing her to clench and hunch uncontrollably – even while Spring Blossom delicately held her face and joined lips with her in a loving and soulful kiss.

Lili continued bringing her up and over through higher and higher peaks. Each time Kita climaxed, she moaned quietly into Spring Blossom's mouth. After several minutes of nearly continuous minor orgasms, her eyes rolled back and Lili raised her arousal level even further before forcing several large and forceful climaxes through her little blue body. She finally tapered off and gradually lessened the arousal level, only sending smaller and smaller peaks through Kita's thoroughly comatose body until she finally stopped.

Both she and Spring Blossom withdrew, then watched as Kita quickly fell into a deep, natural sleep with a contented smile on her face. Her breathing tapered until a gentle snoring began. Then her body curled over onto its side, with her arms and legs tucked in contentedly.

Kita was out for the night.

"She seems so *peaceful*, my Lady Blossom. I suggest we withdraw to your rooms so that our play does not disturb her."

They both giggled while covering Kita, before leaving the sleeping assistant alone. Then they adjourned to Spring Blossom's compartment after leaving word with the night guard that Mistress Kita was not to be disturbed for the remainder of the night.

Noon –4 (Day 94) – Checking Out Ronnie

A sleepy but smiling Maya rolled over when Ronnie got up and answered the knock at their outer chamber door.

“Why, good morning, Mistress Kita. You look particularly well rested this morning. How may I help you?”

“Messages for you, my Lord Caldar.” She held out her data pad, but he glanced down at her curiously.

She seemed to be spending an inordinate amount of time looking at his midsection, but he turned his attention to the pad and silently read his first message.

‘Lord Caldar, my crew are advised that the platform gym is fully functional and are requesting permission for the off-watch sections to come aboard the platform and make use of the facilities. If this will in no way impact the efforts of either you or the mission of Lord Caldorous, I would consider it a personal favor if you would allow it. Captain Karl Talon, IRS Sectorus.’

“Kita ... Mistress Kita?” he said a little louder, and finally drew her attention from the general direction of his groin, back up to his face.

“Um, ah ... yes, my Lord?”

“Have you read these messages yet?”

“No, my Lord. They are marked private, Captain-to-Captain, as directed by Lady Lili.”

“Well then, please look this one over. I would like your comments on the practicality of Captain Talon’s request.” She quickly read the missive while making calculations on the fly.

“Ahh ... the exercise room on the ship is, by necessity, very small. It would probably be a welcome respite for the combat platoons if they were allowed use of the facilities here. I would recommend no armor or powered weapons be allowed, sufficient officer supervisory staff at all times, and additional provisions supplied from Sectorus’ stores for extra bodies at mealtimes – should you allow full-access, that is.”

“How many platoons?”

“Three platoons, two squads apiece. That’s sixty men, in total, plus three officers for each platoon.”

“Standard, three-section rotation?”

“Yes, my Lord. The same as you run your con watch.”

“Very well, then. With your recommendations, I’ll allow one platoon per watch shift, and someone else negotiates with Lord Caldarous’ kitchen staff to feed them if necessary – or they can eat ships gruel with the rest of us if they so choose.”

“Very well, Sir. And your second message?”

Ronnie took the pad back and keyed it, before reading it aloud this time.

“Lord Caldar, at the direction of Lady Song, I am to provide additional formal guard staff for each of the Healers of your personal crew. They are fully vetted Imperial Guardsmen of Lady Lili’s choosing, and will be rotated in half-section shifts. Billeting will remain on *Sectorus*. I do not believe our Lady Lili considers this command optional. Captain Karl Talon, *IRS Sectorus*.’”

“Well ... that certainly explains all the *guardsmen* my Healers have been tripping over,” he muttered flatly. “It appears Lili has some concerns that she will, no doubt, relay to me personally at some point.”

He became distracted when he noticed Kita checking him out again.

“Mistress Kita, is there something *else* I may help you with this morning?”

“Huh? Oh, no, my Lord!”

She became a bit flustered and blushed a deeper tint of blue, which also let enticing tendrils of her feelings waft his way. His question had put her on the spot, but she bravely decided to admit what had happened to her. He *was* Lili’s family, after all.

“I – well ... last night. I – we – Lady Lili and I – we worked late on some research. When we stopped, she asked if I may care to stay behind. I begged off from fatigue, but my Lady Lili and Lady Blossom offered me the ... *Gift* ... my Lord?”

“Ah ... the *Gift* of the *First Wife*,” he said while nodding sagely. “And did it help you with your slumbers?”

“Well, my Lady said that ... unfortunately her most *apt* pupil was unavailable, but she would try very hard to give me *some* of the benefits as best she could.”

Her blush deepened even darker as she looked down demurely.

“And were you so disappointed, Kita?”

She looked up in surprise.

"Oh no, my Lord! But ... my Lady suggested I seek out her pupil – her most *apt* pupil – should the platform celebrate ships holiday while we're still here," she said, then looked down again while smiling.

"Well, if we are able to celebrate in the near future, I will be sure you are kept advised of the schedule. Ah ... Mistress Kita – do you remember much of what happened to you last night?"

"No, my Lord. Not after the first several ... *times*, my Lord. I seemed to have fallen asleep."

"Lili actually *let* you get your sleep, then? She must have been terribly tired last night. Rest assured that if you should find Lady Lili's most apt pupil, he will insure that you remain *fully* awake until he is done with you."

"Thank you, my Lord Caldar. By your leave, my Lord." She took back her data pad and withdrew to continue her tasks with a big smile on her face.

Going over to a local com panel, he called the con.

"Con this is Ronnie."

"*David here. Go ahead Ronnie.*"

"Good morning, David. Please add the following updates to the ship's log as follows..."

Noon (Day 94) – A Chance Meeting

Maya slowly wandered towards the commons. She was thinking about last night with Ronnie and how they'd pleasured each other before falling into a light nap. Ronnie had woken up later and wandered out to the commons to have a small bowl of gruel before bringing one back for her afterwards. She thought it funny that, now there was *real* food available, they had no desire to rush out and consume it.

It all seemed so strange to have kitchen staff running up to them and offering a menu selection every time one of them approached the commons. It was as if they were deemed not capable of feeding *themselves* any longer.

As she walked along, she also thought about the problem of Mistress Laisee. Though not really *their* problem, she knew Ronnie would make it *his* problem, and if she did not lend her assistance, he could just as readily work with her students to accomplish ... *whatever* it was that needed to be accomplished.

Mistress Laisee seemed like a nice enough young girl. Well, not *really* young, as she was Ronnie's age, but for a year or two. She seemed so – *childlike*, though. Not vapid, but more *inexperienced?* *Over-sheltered?* And she knew Ronnie was *very* protective of those whom he felt needed protection.

How would *she* react around Laisee? Would she begin to feel jealousy towards Laisee if she joined their little family? She was not jealous of Diane, Amy, or Shay, but each of them had a man of their own, even though they all shared during ships holiday – or any *other* time they found necessary or desirable.

She paused just short of a corner and made a decision.

'I shall seek out Laisee and learn what she wishes with her life,' she decided confidently.

If she had consulted with Ronnie, he could have advised her of the caution to be applied with phrases of that nature, but it was too late.

Somewhere Else...

*At that **particular** moment, the Fates had **indeed** been paying attention and somehow arranged for the object of Maya's concern to be traveling rapidly on the **wrong** side of the corridor. It was merely happenstance that it also **turned** at that particular corner – thus allowing it to plow solidly into Maya.*

On the Bridge

David and Diane were at the con when Donnel finished the last repair. He hit a switch, and the main display suddenly lit up with new instrument readings, while the remaining functional systems began reporting their status on the screen. With the exception of a few non-critical subsystems, the readings were all reporting nominal – with the exception of their reaction-mass consumption rate.

It was higher than expected, so David noted it in the log.

There were a few bad elements where the display crystals were permanently damaged, but otherwise, the con was starting to look like a *functioning* con for the first time in a couple of hundred years. David tried bringing up the navigation system and was surprised that it also worked. He quickly panned around and found their particular location in space. Then he brought up the violet Death Void that currently surrounded the systems they were centered within.

The controls were somewhat similar to those on *Odontoceti*, and he finally found the 3D setting. He did a quick pan, then zoomed all the way out to the edges of the Death Void and noted an interesting

anomaly. He looked at the panel carefully and found the control combination that changed the timeline of the recorded zones.

He took it back to when *Odontoceti* first entered the system before bringing it forward again – slowing as they approached the last few weeks aboard the platform. Then he went back even further and repeated the exercise.

He did it a few more times, before turning to Donnel.

“Mister Ardan, how recent is the chart update on *Microcosmus*? ”

Donnel checked a few settings and nodded his head.

“Twas updated automatically once I powered up the board ... ‘bout two hours now. After that, it’ll update by itself every day when fleet broadcast is available.”

“Look here. Do you see that?” David rotated the timeline slowly over the period of last week.

“Oh my...” Donnel murmured.

“Con to Ronnie – I think you should come up here. There’s something you’re gonna wanna see,” David called out on platform coms.

“On my way, David,” came the reply a few seconds later.

In the Corridor

Maya didn’t fall, quite, but Laisee bounced back, and sprawled spread-legged on her butt in front of her. A tiny bit of snickering could be heard echoing down the corridor from which she’d come, before it suddenly cut off.

“Laisee, are you all right?” Maya asked in concern while squatting down to help her back to her feet.

“Oh ... please forgive me, Healer Tal! I’m *terribly* sorry, Healer Tal. I – I was ... it’s just *another* clumsy accident by my Mother’s stupid daughter,” she said, then hung her head sadly.

“It is all right, Laisee, but you must remember to walk with *this* hand closest to the wall,” Maya explained, while holding out her right hand. “Is it not the same on *Sectorus*? ”

“I don’t – I wouldn’t ... I don’t know, Healer Tal. I was not *allowed* to walk the corridors on *Sectorus*. ”

"Well ... that is just *terrible*." Maya reached out and hugged her closely. "You need some *exercise*, and walking the corridors will be *good* for you. Would you like to take a walk with me?"

Laisee froze at the potential *disaster* she could be triggering.

Maya was a stranger – but she'd *already* been formally introduced to her, so that should not apply. Maya was *not* a Wife, nor was she a member of the Royal family, so that should *also* not apply. She took a chance and hoped it wouldn't come back to punish her later on.

"I – yes, Healer Tal. I would like that *very* much."

Laisee ducked her head and blushed lightly, while Maya looped her arm with hers, before they proceeded at a leisurely pace *away* from the compartment of Lady Meela; being discreetly followed by their Imperial shadows.

'*How very fortunate,*' all four of them were thinking.

On the Bridge

Ronnie stepped into the con and observed David and Donnel with their heads together over one of the control panels. He was impressed at how David was taking an interest in everything he was exposed to, while Diane seemed content to sit back and watch her man at play.

"What do you have for me, David?"

David changed the timeline of the navigation system while pointing to the big display.

"This is the Death Void as of a month ago. Now watch this right here as I advance it day-by-day," he said, while pointing to an area on the display, before adjusting one of the controls.

As the timeline advanced, a depression formed on the outer edge of the Death Void and began pressing towards the interior of the void where they were currently sitting. It became thinner as it did so, and Ronnie watched it through a couple of times.

"Mister Ardan ... when did *Sectorus* arrive at the outer edge of the Death Void?" he asked him quietly.

"That would be a week before we jumped inside, my Lord."

"And you have *nothing* on board that could do anything like this?"

Donnel turned towards him with a blank expression on his face.

"Well, I've been out of it for a *while*, but we all keep our hands in, so to speak ... but no, my Lord. I've not heard of *anything* like that being

developed.” Donnel really looked like he was at a loss as to what they were seeing.

David adjusted the control to a point further in the past and then pointed to the start of the dimple.

“Look, Ronnie, they docked with us two days ago, but look … it started from the month before and it keeps getting *thinner*.” David ran the timeline back and forth again to prove his point.

Ronnie thought about that for a full minute, before turning to the ship-to-ship com.

“*Sectorus – this is Microcosmus One to Sectorus One, secure, most immediate. Respond!*”

“*Sectorus here, secure, please wait.*”

The seconds ticked away slowly.

“*Sectorus One here, secure. What’s so urgent, Ronnie?*” Captain Talon asked.

“My Spacer First discovered something about the Death Void you might be interested in. Sending data,” he said, then sent the coordinates and timeline loops. “Loop time from one month ago and advance day-by-day while observing target coordinates. What do you think?”

Ronnie had asked this prematurely, as it took Talon a few minutes to observe it and produce an opinion.

“Ahh … that – that’s new. *We got here last week and it was already starting to dimple. Davison – when was the last chart update before the latest one?*” They heard his voice become muffled while speaking to someone off-screen, and had to wait until he got an answer.

“Okay, Ronnie. *The last chart update before yesterday’s was over a month ago, which is not entirely unreasonable considering how long it’s taken in the past. We’ve got nothing that’ll do this. This is a nav update from a bunch of monitor drones sent through within the last thirty days.*”

There was another off-screen comment and they could see Talon handed a pad. They watched as he read the contents.

“*Says here that a whole SWARM of monitor drones were fired out this way over the last several weeks. That would explain why we have so much detail, but it doesn’t explain who authorized the extra surveys.*”

“Karl, do you have any idea at *all* of what it might mean?”

"Umm, no... But our Lady Lili is expecting guests in a few days. I'd be hard pressed to approach her personally, though."

"Understood, Karl. We'll keep an eye on it on our side and let you know if anything changes."

"As will we, Ronnie. Oh, and thanks for the use of your gym. I'll try to insure my men don't leave it a bloody mess. Uhhh, that Kraken's Child thing is shut down for GOOD, now, right?"

"Well, I was hoping to erase it, but Granger and Donnel pulled a few of its teeth and taught it some manners, so I'm giving it a test run or two before I make up my mind."

"Very good, my Lord. I'll so advise my platoons. By your leave, Sir. Sectorus out."

"David, log this – anomaly, and keep an eye on it at least once every watch. Updates won't come any quicker than that. Oh, and please advise the Ladies of their new 'official' escorts – courtesy of Lady Lili."

David smiled and nodded.

"So that's where they came from. As long as they stay *outside*, I guess it's all right. I'll let them know."

While Ronnie stepped outside the con, with Diane following him and trailing a silent third party behind her, David dutifully made the log updates, before turning to Donnel.

"Mister Ardan – please teach me something *new!*"

Roaming Free

Maya and Laisee wandered aimlessly about the platform. There weren't too many interesting things to see, but Maya showed her around everywhere – as long as it was *away* from Lady Meela's compartment.

They stopped by the con to say hello to David, wandered by the simulator room, went down to the gym, and finally meandered over to the Recreation Center. Their two guards casually assumed position on either side of the door – *after* Maya opened it and *they'd* confirmed it was empty. One of them had even taken the extra step to visit the attached facilities to ensure that *it* was empty as well.

Once they were finally allowed inside, Laisee seemed particularly intrigued by the possibilities, but after carefully looking around, didn't find anything outstandingly *recreational* about it. She was somewhat confused by the austerity of a recreation room that appeared to be completely empty, and finally broached the question to Maya.

"Healer Tal, what recreations are available here that are not equal to those of the gym?"

"My Ronnie tells me this is where the crew played games much of the time, or watched entertainment on one of the large monitors. They also have comfortable seating for large or small groups, and there is music available as well."

Looking around, Laisee still saw nothing but a few small monitors on otherwise blank walls, and Maya recognized her confusion.

"Here, I will show you."

She took her over to a wall monitor and called up a menu. At her touch, the lights dimmed, and one entire wall began to glow before it displayed a scene of a jungle-like garden with trees, a pond, and many pretty flowers. They could see the leaves and branches of the trees move, and hear the water when small creatures were seen to splash in it. They also saw small animals poking out from between the flowers and scampering along the banks of the pond.

She changed the view, and a beach of red sand and crashing green waves was displayed, with either a sunset or sunrise just occurring. The sound of the waves crashing on the beach *thundered* in the room until she turned the sound down to a murmur.

At another setting, several translucent areas raised from the floor in tints of pastel colors that indicated individual seats, extra-wide seats, or whole platforms. She drew Laisee over to one of the larger of them and sat them down facing the ocean view. The touch of the platform was firm, but comfortable, and it took Laisee a few seconds to realize these were *gravity* projections used as furniture. It seemed a *terrible* waste of energy to her, but felt very comfortable.

Maya gestured to the display, then turned to smile at Laisee.

"I believe it is from one of the southern beaches of Cletus. The program runs for no more than an hour ... should someone else desire another view. I once came in here by myself for half a day and just lay here listening to the waves and watching the view while it looped for several hours."

While they'd walked and talked, Maya had become concerned by the lack of vitality of this little stray –for certainly Ronnie would consider her such – and was seeing for herself that Laisee needed rescuing from her mother. She also knew it had to come from *within* and not be teased or pulled from without.

She sensed Laisee's need to seek approval from her mother – which would *never* be forthcoming – and was reminded of her *own* daughters' worries when they were at a much younger age and still concerned with gaining her respect.

Laisee was lost. Laisee was lost, and she and Ronnie could *help* this little lost child ... but she had to *ask* for help first. Maya needed to draw her out, so she continued to watch the rolling surf while speaking to her.

"Laisee, you are a grown woman now. Have you any desire beyond simply residing at House Caldarous?" She continued to focus on the beach scene before her and did not meet her eyes.

"I – my Mother wishes to find me a suitable match. A man so I may be taken from the house and be well supported."

Maya smiled at what she felt coming from her and let out a tiny sigh before wiggling the bait a little closer.

"That is what *Meela* wants. What does *Laisee* want?"

Laisee glanced at her, but then stared at the beach scene for nearly a minute, before mumbling, "I would ... I would like to learn to become a *Healer*, Healer Tal."

Maya was silent for a few seconds.

"The Lady Wives are *all* very skilled Healers. Surely, you may ask one of *them* the duties of a Healer."

"*No!* I – I mean... I was *forbidden* to ask them, Healer Tal." Her head hung shamefully, and Maya reached over and laid a hand on her knee before patting it lightly.

"Surely no question is forbidden to a *Healer*, Laisee. You may ask *anything* of a Healer ... *any* Healer. A Healer can not help you if they do not know what is wrong." She knew that was not *exactly* true, but it was appropriate for this discussion.

Laisee carefully reconsidered this once again. Maya was a *Healer*, but *not* a Lady Wife. She had also been properly *introduced* to her, so she was not a *stranger*. Therefore, by her *Mother's* reasoning, she should be relatively safe in discussing such things with her.

"Healer Tal, what is the *primary* duty of a Healer?"

After a moment of confusion, Maya started to chuckle quietly, then drew an arm around Laisee and pulled her close. She reached over and took one of Laisee's hands in hers and rested it on her thigh while taking a moment to settle her laughter.

"I believe I shall tell you, my little Laisee, of how I *forgot* the primary duty of a Healer – and how well my Ronnie *reminded* me of it," she said quietly, then related the tale of bloodshed and chagrin, and how she'd been reminded of her *primary* duty as a Healer.

Searching for Ronnie

Diane had been thinking of how best to approach Ronnie about Laisee, but Amy and Shay had immediately intercepted her on her way out of the con. During their quick update to her, she'd subsequently misplaced him and was looking for him now. She wasn't really worried about his reaction, but was still concerned that this wasn't the appropriate time to be introducing another wildcard into the mix. Still, the Lady Wives had all agreed it was a good thing, and the quick conversation she'd just had with both girls told her things might move along more rapidly than they'd hoped.

She finally crossed paths with him at a turn in one of the corridors.

"Ronnie! *There* you are!"

He looked down at himself while patting his chest and stomach, before looking back up at her and smiling.

"Yes, Diane. I appear to be right here."

She looked around and noticed a storage closet close by, so she grabbed his hand and dragged him into it; shutting her personal guard outside the door, which was a good thing, because it was already a bit of a squeeze with just the two of them in there.

"Uhhh, Diane, wouldn't it be much more comfortable in *your* room, or perhaps mine?"

"*No!* Oh ... well, yes, I suppose we would be, but *no*, that's not why I need to see you. We need to rescue Laisee from Meela."

He blinked, before pulling back in the dim tight space for a moment of reflection.

"Yes... That's very probably true. And at some point, I'll have to look into it."

"The game's already *afoot!* When I spoke to the Lady Wives, we came up with a plan to get Laisee to defect to our crew. She may only be trading one prison for another, but we figure our bars are so much *softer* than the ones she's put up with all her life that it can't be anything but *better* for her!"

He would have sputtered, but it would have been undignified of him – especially in such an enclosed space. Instead, he decided to argue to the point.

“Diane, you really can’t just go off and *start* something like this. These things must be planned very carefully, or it might blow up in our *faces*.” She didn’t miss that he’d already included himself in the mix. “Besides, Maya must be consulted, and then a proper review and *interview* must be conducted ... *surreptitiously*, of course, but we can’t *start* anything without a *plan* in place.”

“But I *told* you, we already *have* a plan. Amy and Shay seduce Laisee, get her talking, get her addicted to Andy’s little dick, and then get her to abandon her mother. She’s so starved for affection that it should be *easy*. Besides, the Lady Wives are *very* worried about her, and they don’t want to see her hurt by Meela anymore. And Maya already *knows!*”

“She *does?* Have Shay and Amy started yet?”

“They’ve *already* had a very busy morning. Laisee came to warn Amy that Meela was on the warpath for her because of the little gruel incident this morning. Ronnie – Amy said Laisee had been struck on her *face*. She saw a fresh *handprint* on her *face*, Ronnie!” Just barely catching a breath, she continued.

“Did you know that Laisee wanted to become a *Healer*, but Meela refused to *teach* her? On top of that, all Laisee knew about Healers was they provided *contentment* to people. She thought that was *all* they did – *really!* They’d probably *still* be talking, if Andy hadn’t come back and taken a shower. Amy said she suddenly got cold feet after seeing Andy, and bolted from the room.”

He paused to think about that – and all the *rest* of it. Maya was involved now, too, and she’d know *exactly* what he would do in this situation. He finally let out a great sigh, while shaking his head in the process.

“My dear Diane, you and your family have the most *amazing* talent for complicating my life.” He opened the door, but almost stumbled over Diane’s shadow while blinking from the sudden brightness. Then he turned around to locate the closest monitor station.

Upon finding one, he quickly authorized and accessed his compartment, then peeked into Laisee’s compartment, before closing his eyes and spreading himself out a bit while searching silently. He finally nodded and chose the Recreation Center camera. That’s where he found Maya with an arm around Laisee, and both of them sitting with their heads close together.

He watched intently when he saw Maya speaking and Laisee occasionally nodding her head, or replying to her. He smiled when he saw Maya smile, and watched her eyes light up when she said something to Laisee that made them both laugh. He stood there with folded arms, before raising one hand and tapping a thumb against his lips. He closed his eyes and stretched out again, trying to catch the essence of their feelings, and finding them to be comfortable with each other. He closed out the monitor and turned back to Diane.

"I will consult with Maya this evening and listen to her report. If Laisee joins us, I'm afraid you may be losing Shay to Andy, but gaining another bed partner for you and David."

"We are *Healers*, Ronnie. We do what we can to *Heal – or help*. You've taught us that, my Lord Rondal."

She bowed her head to him, but he gathered her into his arms and hugged her tightly.

"Yes, I did, Healer Lane, and I am very proud of *all* of my Healers."

As he hugged her, he noticed her Imperial shadow was still guarding the storage room door, but casually glancing away from them for the moment. He thought he could detect the hint of a smile on the man's face.

Noon +1 (Day 94) – Helping Maya

"So, the gift of contentment is *not* required, then?"

She'd already asked Maya several times, and in as many ways, but the answer always remained the same.

"Laisee, the human need for being touched and being close to one another is a very *strong* need. If denied for too long, especially in close quarters such as our ship, it would eventually drive us *mad*. Contentment is our way of keeping our sanity, our health, *and* our youth. In some societies, such as most of those of Earth, the people are very *possessive* of their mates, and it causes them many problems. If one lacks desire for their mate, then there is no other outlet for the needs of their mate's desire, and they are expected to do without. Even if one still provides a sexual outlet for such a companion, if that companion is cruel or abusive, then what one receives from such efforts is a *negative* experience – for both the person providing that service and the person who takes it with improper intent."

She tugged lightly on Laisee's hand, and said, "One must be *respectful* of others and behave properly, lest one be considered an undesirable companion to couple with. Of course, one must be

properly trained to be considerate and to give in abundance, in order to receive in kind.” She chuckled quietly and hugged Laisee a little tighter.

“Our little Amy carries a child, and her need comes upon her so greatly at times that she seeks the attention of not only her Larl, but also her brother Andy, and sometimes Shay and Diane, as well. I remember our first ships holiday where we all gathered to share contentment with each other. Amy was *insatiable!* If Larl had not found the toys, she would have worn out all the men, and most of us as well!”

“*T-Toys?*” Laisee asked in a whisper.

“Yes. Toys ...for *women* to play with. Would you like to see?”

Without waiting for an answer, Maya stood and brought her over to the wall. She turned up the lights, and opened a concealed panel and drawer that revealed a fine selection of toys suitable for feminine use. Laisee’s eyes got really big, and her mouth opened wide.

“Men are very fortunate. Even though there are *some* toys for them, they usually have no problems relieving their distress. *We*, however, sometimes need to feel a firm presence *within* in order to fully achieve our pleasure.”

Laisee was amazed. She’d heard rumors, and had once tried to fashion something like these, but it had been hard, and felt uncomfortable. But *these* – these were all soft and flexible. So many sizes, as well, from very tiny, to some so huge she feared they would be impossible to fully insert.

“If you wish, you may choose one or two among these for your use in your compartment,” Maya offered.

Maya watched her reach out and touch them; letting her hands wander down the row, squeezing some of them, and then grasping them to see how big around they were.

“Do you see one or two you would like to try?”

“I – I do not know – how – how big to select from.”

“Well, this one over here is about like Larl,” Maya said, and pointed to a huge synthetic phallus that brought a slight gasp from Laisee.

“This one is like our Lord David, and *this* is like my Ronnie,” she said, while pointing to two more.

“And this one – no ... *that* one over there is like our Andy. He is very young, but he has been growing a lot since joining our crew.”

She giggled at the memory of some of his antics while pointing to a selection of some smaller devices.

"And *these* little ones may be used at the same time. You place a large one in your vagina, and the smaller one in your passage behind."

Laisee stared at them – wide-eyed and hopeful.

"But – but how do you – *use* them?"

Maya grabbed the Ronnie-sized toy, and sauntered back over to the platform; dropping her jumpsuit and slipping out of her underwear along the way. Lying back comfortably, she wetted the toy and her opening with saliva, before slowly pressing it inside of her.

"You first make sure that you are very wet. When you are wet enough, it will slip in easily, and then you may move it as you desire," she explained, while slowly demonstrating the thrusting motion she preferred.

"It is not the same as having a partner, but when your need is upon you, it will help relieve you of your discomfort. It is *better*, though, when I play with Diane, or Amy, or Shay, and they move it for me. Then there is an *emotional* involvement as I know they are seeing to my pleasure, and I may simply lie back and *enjoy* the feelings."

Laisee stared at her, transfixed. Her openness, and the sudden nakedness spread before her, was something she'd never really experienced before. She was mesmerized by the sight of Maya thrusting the toy in and out of her vagina and seeming to be enjoying it a great deal. Laisee sat close to her and began wondering if it would allow *her* to orgasm easily, as well. Maya had been watching her and observed the captivated look on her face, so she decided to draw Laisee out a little bit further.

"Mistress Laisee, I find this pleasurable, but the angle is somewhat awkward for me to thrust it properly. Perhaps *you* would grant me assistance while I try to achieve completion?"

Laisee nodded, and slowly reached out to grasp the toy while it was still being guided by Maya. She began following her movement before Maya finally let go and let Laisee move it for her. This allowed Maya to raise her hands up and pinch her nipples to help stimulate herself towards a climax.

Laisee was enjoying this enormously! Even as she'd played with some of the serving girls, she knew from experience that lips and tongue never quite equaled the total body involvement that Ronnie had first shared with her. Concentrating on Maya's pleasure, she licked the

tips of her fingers and reached down to gently rub Maya's clitoris in the way she'd enjoyed by herself for so many lonely nights.

Maya moaned aloud, and Laisee increased her efforts. In just a few more minutes, Maya suddenly hissed and hunched upwards onto the toy while gasping and crying out in climax.

Laisee slowed down and stopped fingering her clitoris, but kept pumping the toy. After several more seconds, she looked up to see a smiling Maya looking back at her. Maya let her continue to stimulate her, but finally reached down to stop the motion while the toy was fully inserted. She drew Laisee to her lips for a loving kiss, and the younger woman let herself be pulled up where she gratefully received Maya's attention. It made her feel both excited and somewhat lightheaded at the same time.

"Thank you, Laisee. You made me feel *very* good. If you learn to Heal as well as you have learned to offer contentment, then you should become a fine Healer."

Maya's eyes twinkled at the pleasure she'd just received, and also at the look of lust on Laisee's face. She kissed her once more, before pushing her head down towards her breast. Laisee left a trail of kisses on the way down until she reached out and licked around and over her protruding nipple.

"You have given me a great *gift*, Laisee. Now I have a little one for you."

She pulled Laisee's mouth firmly against her breast before her nipple started dribbling milk within her lips. Just seconds later, Laisee was lost in her thrall.

In the Gym

After parting ways with Diane, Ronnie had gotten a call from the con that officers from each platoon were coming over to check out the gym. He met them at the lock and escorted them to the commons, and from there, to the gym. Along the way, he'd established they were all seasoned officers, and that very few of the men under them lacked actual combat experience through one skirmish or another.

Once at the gym, he gave them a working demonstration of the facilities by having them run through the menu programs one-by-one until they were all familiar with them. Then he paused for a moment, before enabling the *Kraken's Child* at one-hundred percent and pulling a sword from the rack.

"Gentlemen, if you will *attend*, please," he said loudly, before calling out, "Program-Begin."

The program went through its startup routine – minus the “HA-HA’s” from the night before – and came to guard.

“Observe please,” he said, and tossed the sword underhanded at about shoulder height towards the simulacrum.

Upon crossing the inner circle, the simulacrum immediately reacted as programmed, and deftly beat the hapless sword senseless. It continued beating on it until he called out “Program-End” just a few seconds later. About twenty attacks had been rendered during the time it was in play. As the swords returned to the rack, he walked over and picked up the well-battered blade. It looked as if it *might* still be useful, but he’d rather send it to an armory to have it checked, before using it again.

He held it up and announced, “Gentlemen … *that* … is the *Kraken’s Child*. If you or any of your men desire to *play* with it, I suggest that you have a *Healer* standing by at all times. There are ten levels that I will allow. *This* was at level ten. There are five more levels *above* that which have been locked out for rather obvious reasons.”

Everyone had taken a good look at the simulacrum, the reaction to the sword entering the circle, and the condition of the sword less than five seconds later. He saw a lot of knowing nods.

Noon +2 (Day 94) – Laisee Misses Lunch

Maya was having Laisee feed from her, while quietly talking to her and lacing her fingers through her hair like a *real* loving mother would do. She *knew* it wasn’t fair, but *Meela* wasn’t fair, and this poor child *needed* to be loved and protected. Being this close to her, she sensed Laisee’s relaxed contentment – just the emotional relaxation and enjoyment of being close to someone who was kind to her and didn’t berate her for being who she was. This poor child needed a mother – a *real* mother – and she missed her daughters so *very* much.

She considered if she would truly not feel jealous sharing her Ronnie with her. Then she remembered he and Laisee had *already* been together – just a few times, of course, but she and Ronnie had over fifteen *years* together. Besides, as Lili had told her, he would *still* have another wife or two. If Laisee was willing, and Ronnie was content, then *she* could be content as well. And, although this one was just under thirty years her junior, she was *still* clearly capable of giving him a child they could *all* share and love. She momentarily cursed her own breeding that had failed her at such a young age, but then dismissed it as unbecoming of her.

She finally prodded Laisee off her nipple, before withdrawing the toy with a juicy slurp.

"Noon plus two, Laisee," she murmured. "Time to get up, little one. We all have tasks to perform."

"Noon plus ... *two*? Oh no! I have missed the midday meal!"

"It is all right, Laisee. I have given you nourishment." Maya leaned over and kissed her gently.

"No, my – my Healer! They will tell Mother I have missed the midday meal, and I will be in *trouble!* I must go quickly!"

She sat up in a panic, while staring at the sad expression on Maya's face and misinterpreting it.

"Forgive me, Healer Tal. Thank you for your gift! And – and thank you for ... for letting me help content you! You made me feel –it – it was very nice. Thank you, Healer Tal, but I must go!"

She got up and rushed out of the room, leaving Maya sitting there with a bemused look on her face.

"Well – I suppose one must start *somewhere*," she murmured, before letting out a sigh.

She stood and took the toy to the adjacent facilities to wash it, before putting it away. While she was there, she looked at herself in the mirror and hefted each breast while considering if Shay could wait a while longer before her next feeding. Shrugging her shoulders, she dried the toy and returned it to storage, before getting dressed and heading back to her and Ronnie's compartment.

In the Environmental Center

Leaving the visiting officers in the gym, Ronnie had returned to the environmental control room where he'd spent the first few hours aboard the platform back when they'd first arrived. It had the benefit of having access to most of the ship's systems. The *old* security center would have been better, but it was a puddle of slag on the wrong side of an airtight corridor.

Now that Diane had spoken to him, Ronnie was determined to do something he'd tried hard to avoid these last two days – *really* open himself up again...

It'd been fairly easy back on Earth. The jumble of lots of minds tended to cancel each other out. Adding in a little ambrosia and maintaining a reasonable level of stability for his campers was usually

all it took to keep from being constantly bombarded by everyone's fears.

However, once they'd been summarily evicted from Earth and needed to escape from orbit so drastically, the Lanes had been in a panic, and their fears had given him a great deal of pain and distress. Isolated in space as they were, the closeness had been slowly driving him crazy.

It had been Maya's complaint that finally pushed him to act – *mostly* out of self-preservation – to match them all up and push their anxieties aside with the diversion of recreational sex. It had become *much* easier on him once they'd gotten everyone together on the ship. When they'd finally hit the platform and the extra space it allowed him, he'd been able to relax and not worry about it so much. Plus, now he'd had *plenty* of ambrosia to fall back on.

He'd upped his guard since the other ship had shown up – especially since it held all the Wives. He knew they'd be attuned to him, just has he'd become more sensitive to those around him for the last few months – only much *more* so – and was hard pressed to suppress his sensitivity, even as he'd refreshed his knowledge of those techniques from his Yandi's books during those first few days here...

With the new conspiracy involving Laisee, Ronnie now opened up a part of his senses tuned specifically to her, and kept them receptive to her emotions. He'd felt Laisee and Maya together in the Recreation Center, but then picked up her panic over – *something*. Something related to her *mother*, he felt.

It was a few minutes afterwards when he felt a flash of pain and panic coming from Laisee. He quickly enabled a monitor and checked the view inside her compartment, but she wasn't there. Mentally crossing his fingers – and hoping Meela was *still* as stupid as she acted – he enabled a camera inside Meela's compartment and saw the second slap she suffered Laisee to receive.

His anger nearly boiled over, and he desperately wanted to *do* something about it – something terribly *violent*!

In Meela's Compartment

"Mother, no! Please don't hurt me, Mother!"

"I heard about you, you stupid child! I heard that you spoke with that – that Healer – Maya!" Meela spat out her name like a curse. *"What did I tell you, Laisee? HAVEN'T YOU LEARNED YOUR LESSON YET?"*

"But she – she is not one of the *Wives*, Mother, and she is not a *stranger!* We have been *formally introduced!*"

Meela turned away, still seething, then abruptly whirled around and slapped her again.

"No, you stupid child! You will speak to *no one* without my permission! *Do you understand?* Perhaps, *then*, when you've learned to behave *better*, I shall let you content me *later*."

Laisee looked at her Mother in fear ... but then looked at her again with *new* eyes this time.

The last few hours had weighed heavily on her heart. What *more* could Mother do to her that she had not already done? Why should she even care? Perhaps – perhaps Healer Maya would condescend to accept yet *another* student ... if Lord Caldar approves.

She could ask,

Or beg...

Laisee took a stand. *Finally.*

"No, Mother, I will not content you later," she said quietly. Her tears streamed down her face, while she turned and slowly walked out of her Mother's compartment.

In the Environmental Center

While Ronnie had watched this, he'd caught the essence of resolution coming from Laisee. He quickly tracked down Amy and directed her to Laisee's compartment to offer her counsel and advice – which was best given *elsewhere* than in Laisee's compartment – then felt when Amy headed off at a jog. Then he searched for Maya and found her in their compartment where she was just getting undressed and heading into the facilities.

'*Time for a family *pow-wow**,' he thought grimly, then contacted the con. He found Diane there with David, and asked her to join him and Maya for talks about that new project she'd mentioned, before he headed to his compartment.

Lost and Alone

The enormity of what she'd just done struck her the moment the door closed behind her. Laisee turned and slowly walked down the corridor towards her compartment while silent tears streamed down her face.

Something appeared different about her this time, and the few guards she met along the way cast concerned glances at her, rather than revealing the usual amused smirk they reserved for the Second Wife's little mouse. Her Imperial shadow nodded to them knowingly, while sharing a revealing finger-flip with them – causing their eyebrows to lift in hope when they passed.

Amy and Shay intercepted Laisee halfway down the next corridor. They were followed in a loose trail by their newly assigned guards, who were gracelessly attempting to look casual about their new security assignment. They, too, caught a nod and finger-flip from Laisee's shadow, so they held back a bit further than usual.

"Hello, Laisee, you don't look very happy." Amy had kept her voice low when she reached out to her and gently touched her hand. "Would you like to come with us and just – talk for a while?"

"Yes, Laisee. Please come visit with us for a while," Shay offered. "My Andy is out, and our room is quiet. We can have music and girl talks between us?"

Laisee looked up at the concern in both their faces, but just nodded sadly. They each took an arm and began walking her towards Shay's compartment.

"Shall we stop by the commons and get some juice to take with us?" Amy suggested, and one of the guards mimed a thumb at himself, and drinking. She caught on and nodded her approval, so he took off at a jog.

"It seems that our new guard is going to get something for us to drink. Let's go to Shay's compartment and we can sit and talk," she added.

They eventually reached Shay's compartment and entered; wherein Laisee fell across the bed and finally began crying out her anguish in a voice full of despair.

In Ronnie's Compartment

Diane caught up with Ronnie as he reached his compartment, and they quickly entered to find Maya just coming out of the shower. She greeted them both with a smile, but from the look on Ronnie's face, she immediately determined that pleasure was on neither of their minds.

In Andy's Compartment

Laisee was giving it a good go, but finally ran out of tears after just five minutes or so. It appeared that she just didn't have that many left to spill over her monster of a mother any longer.

Her tears were washed away by a cool, dampened cloth applied gently to her face, followed by sips of a sweet juice delivered by Amy's quick thinking guard. Then Amy applied gentle kisses, which were followed by warm and loving hugs, which gradually transitioned into snuggles, which were then followed by loving caresses that precipitated more kisses and sensual touches, which eventually found the three of them stretched out next to each other on the sleeping platform. Laisee soon found herself in between two Healers-in-Training whose *first* two months of training had been mainly focused on delivering wonderful sensations of pleasure and loving care into a willing recipient.

By this time, Laisee was *very* willing.

In the Simulator Room

Andy and Larl were finishing up in the simulator after having run through yet another navigation problem – this time mostly successful on Andy's part – and Larl was reviewing the lesson with him.

"The navigators on the regularly traveled lanes mostly just do lip service to their job, but when you take the path *less* traveled, a navigator needs to review *each* jump carefully, and evaluate the results *before* punching to the next major node."

"So that big jump by Ronnie was just ... *lucky*?" Andy's voice had been stressed with a little concern in it, and Larl was torn between lying to him, or admitting his *own* concerns about it.

"Andy ... *truthfully*, with anyone else, I'd say it was *insanely* lucky, but with Ronnie, it's like – it's like the Gods *themselves* were looking out for him every step of the way. But then again, if you do something extremely well, it *always* looks easy. He's taken you for one of his little check rides in the simulator?"

"Oh yeah – *barf bags* are *not* optional!" Andy joked, and Larl laughed along with him.

"And the thing is, that's truly the way he approaches *everything*. His piloting, his planning, his – well, his *fighting*. Ask your dad about Ronnie dancing with the *Kraken's Child* some time. I'm told it's *magical*."

Andy had started shaking his head, before Larl even finished that sentence.

"I don't even wanna be in the same *room* when that thing turns on. I was walking by one time and heard it from *outside* the gym. I'll settle for something easy ... like flying and navigating!"

They both laughed at that while they finished shutting down the system.

In Ronnie's Compartment

Ronnie was still pacing about the compartment, but he'd already made up his mind and finally told them so.

"Well, if that's the plan and it works out, then Meela really has no control over *what* happens to Laisee. I *still* don't understand why she's stayed under her *thumb* for all these years, though."

"You see it in the big cities all the time," Diane said. "A husband browbeats and degrades his wife over a couple of *decades*, and she gets used to the idea of being worthless in anyone's eyes but his – and even then just *barely* useful to him. Same thing with *children* of abuse. If they don't act out and get noticed, then we have no way of telling if they've been abused. Unless there are bruises or broken bones, emotional abuse is *particularly* hard to determine."

"Yes, my Ronnie," Maya agreed. "You remember some of the people we were training for relocation. You *must* remember the family from five years ago who were so listless and not caring that they did not feed themselves or their children unless *ordered* to do so. We worked *hard* to turn them around. I almost feared it would be impossible." She and Ronnie had worked *very* hard with them, and even kept them over for a second season.

"Um, Ronnie – what I don't understand is that Laisee is – what, *your age*?" Diane asked him, and he nodded to her before she shook her head and continued. "I mean, I can't imagine sitting around doing nothing for a month or two – let alone a *year* or more – without *something* to focus on ... and not just *sex*, either. What has she been *doing* all these decades?"

He stopped his pacing and stared at her for several seconds, before remembering she had nothing to base that question on.

"Ahh ... *most* of us, and not just the Royals, mind you, but most of us have a *wide* range of interests to occupy our time. The Wives don't just deal with my stepfather ... they're also involved in other activities. I mean, it's not like they get *paid* or anything, but they lend assistance to various social programs, and provide a conduit to the First Lord ... kinda like a lobbyist back in Washington. The last I heard, Mei-Mei and Yin-Yin were monitoring specific activities dealing with the

colonization programs. Meela ... she was deep into the court scene until things turned sour at Zarox. Mother helps keep Lili's stress at a reasonable level, and Lili ...she does ... odd jobs ... for the Elder," he muttered obscurely.

"But what does *Laisee* do?" Diane asked again.

"Well, she *was* interested in music ... the last few times I was home, anyway," he said lamely. There was a solid five seconds of silence while Diane let that sink in.

"So you're saying we're gonna separate *Laisee* from her mother after having been *abused* by her for the last two *centuries*, and *then* try and fix her?" Diane's look was incredulous.

He looked at her guiltily, then caught the concerned look from Maya, as well. Letting out a sigh, he walked over and dug out a bottle of ambrosia from his local stash before pouring a measure for them all. He took a quick sip for himself, before handing them the other two cups. Maya cast him a worried glance, before realizing he was feeling *very* stressed at this point. She silently agreed with his choice of relaxation, but would offer him another choice later this evening.

"My Healers, you *are*, of course, more aware of these things than I, and I bow to your wisdom – Gods grant the platform remains intact when all is done. I still don't understand how things could have gone on for so long between *Laisee* and *Meela*. Father should've noticed, and yet he's done *nothing*. Hell, the *Wives* should've stepped in and done *something!*"

He was on the verge of snapping, and they watched him struggle to keep his temper under control. Maya rested her hand on his shoulder and sent some Healing to him, but it took a few more sips of ambrosia to get his hands to stop shaking before he turned to Diane.

"Diane, I sent Amy and Shay after *Laisee*. Hopefully, they'll give her the opportunity to open up and convey a request for sanctuary – *away* from *Meela*. She could approach her father, but I doubt he shares even *that* much familiarity with her after all these years. I've no doubt the *Wives* would accept her into their clutches, but that would cause even *more* tension within the family. Anyway, I'd rather it be focused on *me*, than on Father – *Stepfather*," he corrected himself.

"Why is that?" Diane asked him.

"I should think it would be *obvious*. She *already* hates me."

At Andy's Compartment

Andy approached his compartment, but noticed three guards standing outside. He momentarily wondered what was going on, then remembered the new orders that had come down from Lady Lili and just shrugged. Hopefully they'd let him in to change for supper.

"Good afternoon, Lord Andrew," one of the guards greeted him. "Lady Amy and Mistress Shay are within, and in conversation with Mistress Laisee. Mistress Laisee was distressed earlier," he said in a slightly lower tone.

"Uhhh, yeah. Thank you for the *heads-up*."

Andy knocked quietly at the door, and Shay opened it seconds later. She pressed her finger to his lips, before drawing him inside and closing the door – leaving three guards wondering what "*heads-up*" implied.

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The three guards looked at each other, before one of them quietly remarked, "It's about *time* the mouse got some friends on her side," which triggered agreeable nods from the other two.

"May the Gods grant the mouse her *freedom* from the spider," another murmured.

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Shay drew Andy into the dimly lit room and pointed to the partially covered figure dozing on the bed next to Amy.

Amy had Laisee snuggled up next to her and was running her fingers through her hair. The bed showed a slight depression where Shay had just gotten up from the other side of Laisee.

Amy gestured towards the facilities and made washing motions on her face. He nodded, and both he and Shay headed for the shower, where they washed and cuddled for a bit under the running water. He'd always found these times to be arousing, and Shay wasn't disappointed this time, either.

After drying each other off, Shay brought him back to bed, where she lay on her side with her bottom angled away from Laisee. That allowed her to drape an arm over Laisee and caress her breast, while Andy lifted her thigh to enter her from an upright position and pleasure her as she liked.

Andy kept his mouth shut while making slow, gentle strokes into Shay. He eventually worked his knees up close on either side of her

thigh so he could penetrate her fully and still be balanced and in control. He really enjoyed these times with her, and the fact that his sister was cuddling a naked Laisee, and Shay was reaching over and playing with her breast, just made it all that much better for him.

The motion wasn't rapid or violent, but it *was* noticeable, and Laisee eventually stirred from it. Amy immediately pulled her face to hers and kissed her lovingly, while Shay kept up the attention to her nipple.

Laisee reached to hug Amy one-armed, and returned her kisses ardently. Then she reached down to caress Amy's groin, even as Amy reached down to tickle hers in return. She giggled and gave one of Amy's nipples a tweak, before reaching behind her to caress Shay, who had apparently brought a toy home to play with, just as Maya had suggested for her.

She reached back further and felt Shay's large tummy against her. She was slowly letting her fingers wander down towards Shay's groin, but was stopped by a leg and part of a moving body. She pulled her hand back with a jerk and spun around to see a smiling Shay, with Andy pressed between her legs and having intercourse with her.

"Forgive us, Mistress Laisee," he said quietly, "but when my Healer asks for contentment, I must obey

"Oh *look*, Laisee. See how Shay is *smiling* while her Andy pleases her?" Amy whispered. She snuggled closer to her, and reached across Laisee to caress Shay's breast and nipple.

Laisee was both appalled and fascinated. She'd never seen *anything* like this before. In her years at House Caldarous, she'd heard of *video* presentations showing people having sex, but she'd never actually *seen* it – not like *this*...

Not since her few times with Ronnie had she seen *anything* like this at all, and he'd held a *mirror* for her to see herself when he'd placed himself within her. Even with the few men she'd found time to dally with, it had occurred mostly in darkness...

Amy picked up on her emotions, and reached out to brighten the room lights a tiny bit – just enough for Laisee to see that Andy was indeed plowing his shaft in and out of Shay at a slow, steady pace, before going back to teasing Shay's nipple.

"Oh Amy, you are making my *milk* leak out!" Shay exclaimed softly, then pursed her lips in a tiny pout. "You will make me wet the *bed* like this," she added all wide-eyed and innocent.

"Well, I can't reach you," Amy murmured. "Andy, *you'll* have to nurse from Shay."

Andy bent down to try, but couldn't reach her without pressing too hard on her stomach. This caused Shay to voice her concern.

"Oh dear. What shall I *do*, Amy?" Shay's plaintive murmur was interrupted by a slight gasp from Laisee when Amy's attentive tweaking caused a bit of milky spray to reach Laisee's face.

"Laisee. I can't reach Shay's nipples. Can *you* please nurse from her so she won't wet the bed?" Amy's playful smile could only be seen by Andy and Shay.

"I – uh – I – all right, Amy – if it would please Shay?"

Andy knew *exactly* where this was headed. All of Ronnie's Healers were perfectly capable of this shameless manipulation of behavior, and he'd been the willing victim of it more than a couple of dozen times by now.

'At least my studies are going well,' he considered silently, even as he continued his gentle, steady rhythm within Shay.

Shay's eyes fairly twinkled in the subdued lighting, and she reached out to caress Laisee's face and hair before slowly pulling her down to her breast and over her nipple. As Laisee began to nurse, Shay began the gentle counter-programming of positive loving against the hatefulness Meela had forced upon her hapless daughter for the last two-hundred years.

She hoped she had enough milk to last.

In Ronnie's Compartment

Ronnie closed his eyes and quested for his Grandchildren. Despite the infusion of ambrosia, he smiled and accessed the monitor to Andy's compartment. Using the enhancement features, they all got a fairly clear view of Laisee in bed between Amy and Shay, with Andrew making gentle thrusts into Shay at a steady pace.

"Ha! I told him that was a good position for baby sex!"

They watched Amy kiss Laisee, then watched when Laisee's hand reached back to find Andy in motion, which was followed by her quick retraction. When Amy snuggled up closer to her, they watched Amy reach over and tweak one of Shay's nipples, and soon caught the surprised reaction from Laisee. Diane suspected she'd just managed to spray Laisee in the face with milk and pointed it out on the monitor.

"She already had a lot of my milk this afternoon," Maya murmured, which caused Diane to look at her questioningly.

"Well?" she finally asked pointedly.

"No, Diane. I did *not* take advantage of Laisee in that manner. I was merely *full*."

Diane laughed and pointed to the screen.

"I'd say all *three* of them are gonna take advantage of her real soon now. Hal! Look! Shay's talking to her. She's talking to her, and she's looking back towards Andy. I do believe your *ex-girlfriend's* gonna get *laid*, Ronnie!"

"Please, Diane. Let us not be *crude*. She's my *stepsister*."

In Andy's Compartment

"Umm, my Andy ... this feels *very* nice, but perhaps you should offer some pleasure to your *sister*, as well," Shay murmured while continuing to firmly hold the nursing Laisee to her breast.

"Oh Shay ... you *know* Larl will take good care of me later. You go ahead and use him up," Amy said lightly.

"Laisee, will you please switch to my other breast?" Shay pulled back and turned away slightly while raising her lower breast up and pulling Laisee to her other nipple. "Ahhh ... that feels *nice*, Laisee," she murmured when Laisee suckled firmly and got another spray of milk between her lips.

"Oh, my Andy, that feels so *good!*" Shay caught the look on Laisee's face when she glanced up at Andy almost *appraisingly*. "But we have been so *unfair*, my Andy. Laisee is here and we have not offered *her* contentment. Whatever shall we *do*, my Andy?" Shay asked him sadly.

Her smile told Andy *just* what she wanted him to do.

"My little Shay, if you wish it, I would be *happy* to offer contentment to your guest in whatever measure she would be pleased to accept it." '*That sounded pretty good,*' he thought to himself.

"Mistress Laisee, my Andrew is a young boy still, but he contents me *well*. I would be *honored* if you would accept the gift of his contentment from me," Shay said formally, but with an undercurrent of warmth and love attached.

Laisee's thought processes may have been somewhat obscured, but her body was on *fire!* It didn't take her long to make up her mind. She pulled away and looked at Shay somewhat drowsily.

"Mistress Shay, I would be *pleased* to accept contentment from your Andrew." Turning to Andy, she continued. "It has been a very long *time* for me, my Lord Andrew. *Please* take care with me."

Andy withdrew from Shay and leaned down to give Laisee a gentle kiss, before arranging himself between her thighs – just like he'd been between Shay's. He knew it would be easier on Laisee (thank you, Grandpa!) if he entered her when she was sideways to his shaft, rather than face-to-face.

Both he and Shay, and then Amy, began to caress Laisee and attend to her arousal. He found from his touch that she was *more* than ready, so he placed himself at her entrance and made small, thrusting motions while slowly working himself deep within her. Once he was all the way in, he began a slow pumping motion and watched her face until she got comfortable with him, before beginning to gradually speed up a bit.

Amy and Shay kept up their manipulations, and she soon peaked and clenched down on him lightly, and then once more ...more quickly and a little more tightly.

After several minutes, Andy relaxed and began to feel Laisee's feelings ... and then he felt them join with his *own*. During her next climax, he felt it himself and held back while she recovered. Laisee's eyes were staring up at him in wonder, and he slowed down while rotating his hips against her.

She soon peaked around him again, and moaned out her pleasure. After slowly increasing his efforts, he felt himself quickly rising to the point of no return, while her eyes became almost panicked. As he felt himself go over the edge, he watched her face and saw her eyes roll back while he also felt *her* climax, both around him and *inside* of him, just as she was feeling *his* release inside of her and *within* her as well. She tightened around him fiercely and held him locked within her for several seconds, before finally relaxing.

Both Shay and Amy were looking at them with smiles; Shay knowing *exactly* what Laisee had just experienced. After a few more seconds, Andy started slowly thrusting again while she recovered.

In Ronnie's Compartment

"Oh dear," Maya murmured.

Midnight -4 (Day 94) – A Successful Reassignment

The initial shuffling had happened rather quickly, but more was scheduled for the following day. In the meantime, Laisee had recovered

her personal toiletry items and a few changes of clothing to tide her over for the night. She'd been assigned to Diane and David's compartment, and would occupy the bed with them until other arrangements could be made...

Laisee had a *wonderful* time with Amy, Andrew, and Shay, before promptly breaking down in tears afterwards. Amy had called out the crew – *her* crew – for an impromptu meeting in Andy's compartment, while Larl attended by monitor from the con using audio only – no sense in letting *everyone* know the level of Ronnie's access.

Diane and Maya had lent a sympathetic ear to her when she'd explained her delicate situation and her desire to train as a Healer. Both Diane and Maya had assumed a deliberative pose while considering the *remote* possibility of someone of her *advanced* age to successfully complete training, let alone even *begin* training with any degree of competency. This, of course, was a complete dodge, and everyone except Laisee knew it.

Laisee had made promises that she would study *diligently*, and it was pointed out by both Amy and Shay that just a month ago, they weren't even *doing* proper Healings at all, and said they were *both* sure she just needed a chance.

Larl had pointed out she would have to sever some *specific* ties with House Caldorous, and at least some *close* ties while she began training. She *would*, of course, become subject to assignment once her training was complete. She just might end up *anywhere*, and wouldn't have a whole lot to say about it.

Ronnie agreed with Larl's point, then suggested that when she returned to home world, she should contact the Healers on Cletus and arrange for an evaluation period to see if she was acceptable material for Healer training.

Maya had opined that she *already* had three Healers-in-Training, and one more would surely not be *too* great a burden, while Ronnie countered that they would eventually be leaving the platform, and their little ship was already rather full.

Amy had suggested she could bunk with her and Larl, while Shay suggested the same with her and Andy. Diane had pointed out that, as the *senior* student, *she* would make the assignment, and had determined Laisee's training would *best* be served if she took up residence with her and David.

For his part, David had simply stated that, "Whatever my Healer decides, I obey," and left it at that.

The discussion hadn't *quite* gotten heated, when First Wife had arrived, with Wives Three and Four in tow.

As the situation was explained to her – *again*, as Ronnie had already clued Lili into what was intended to happen – Lili had taken Laisee into her arms and flushed through her with a flood of energy. In just that moment, she'd determined that, unlike what she'd *expected*, Laisee had *not* been unduly influenced, and apparently *had* taken this very rare opportunity to escape from her abusive situation.

She decided to reward her, and then made her pronouncement.

"As a child of the House of Caldorous, your father *will*, no doubt, be upset with your leaving – but that is of *our* concern, not *his*. *Mistress Laisee Dawnae Caldorous* – you are *now* attached to the crew of Lord Rondal Caldar for a period of Healer Maya Tal's determination. During that time, I suggest that you study *well*. Your mother is of Loca ... but your father is of *Kantor*. I expect *excellence* from you."

Lili had hugged her, kissed her on the forehead, and then turned and left; taking her two witnesses, Mei-Mei and Yin-Yin, along with her.

And *that*, had unequivocally been *that*.

In the Gym

Because of the earlier events, Ronnie and David were running sword practice much later in the evening, and ended up sharing the gym with several members of the *Sectorus'* guards. David watched intently while feeling hopelessly outclassed, but gamely accepted mock battle with a couple of guards, and immediately discovered that Ronnie's coaching was paying off.

For himself, Ronnie was going through his slow regimen when he noticed Captain Tomar enter the gym dressed for exercise. As Tomar circulated around, Ronnie could see that he was apparently well known, *not* particularly well liked, and *no one* seemed interested in practicing with him.

He finally pounced upon David and cajoled him into mock combat – which ended up with several painful welts on David, and rude remarks for his cruelty from some of the other guards. Tomar seemed flustered at that, and angrily threw his sword back into the storage slot. Ronnie looked over David's welts and quickly passed a hand over them; relieving much of the redness with his touch. Afterwards, Ronnie considered the situation for a moment before approaching Tomar.

"You hold a lot of *anger* within you, Captain. Perhaps the gym is not the best place to work it out. I would suggest the Recreation Center. It offers many relaxations suitable for calming jangled nerves."

Tomar *almost* – but not *quite* – spoke his mind. He knew his place, chafing as it was, and intended to bide his time. Ignoring Ronnie's suggestion, he looked around at the rest of the gym participants.

"I hear the *Kraken's Child* is available for play. Would anyone object for the time of a *practice* round?" he called out loudly.

Hearing no objections, he turned to Ronnie, who guided him through the menu selections.

"What did your pet *Earthling* practice at?" he finally asked.

Aside from his rudeness, it also told Ronnie that someone else knew how to use the public monitoring system.

"I believe it was at fifty percent."

"I would practice at *one-hundred percent!*"

Ronnie looked at him and *clearly* felt the waves of hubris enshroud his mind for several moments. He shrugged lightly, then turned to the control panel.

"Very well, then. Stand by the outer circle. When the program calls to you, walk to the inner circle. Once you cross the line, it will attack."

Ronnie reset the program, and when Tomar was ready, he said, "Program-Begin."

"*WHO DARES TO FACE THE KRAKEN'S CHILD?*"

In Meela's Compartment

Meela was still seething in anger over Laisee's impertinence earlier that afternoon. The *nerve* of that worthless spawn of Caldorous! Hadn't she worked *hard* all these years trying to beat some *sense* into the stupid girl? *But no!* Laisee was ruled by her "*feelings*", as if they had *any* importance in the search for a suitable match!

She consistently *refused* to obey her instructions on how to *dress*, how to *behave* – even letting herself begin to look *older than her own mother!* How *rude* of her! She tried to throw a vase or a dish, but found the servants had changed them all into something unbreakable. Not even was she granted the satisfaction of hearing the sound of breaking *ceramic!*

Meela had been in a *fury* when Laisee walked out the door after making that *presumptuous* declaration – her own *Mother* she would

deny! *Fine!* *Laisee* would do without, as well. She'd make *sure* of it! Oh, she would be back soon enough when *her* needs were upon her! She wouldn't – *couldn't* – seek her pleasure openly on the platform. She was just a *stupid girl*, but even *she* would not dare to embarrass the House of Caldorous yet *again*.

For the umpteenth time, Meela wondered why she'd agreed to take her mother's place and foolishly marry into the Royal family of Caldorous...

She'd had no desire to leave her home on Loca. She had the properties her mother had left her, and she should have just *stayed* there. She *never* would have been put upon by Caldorous to bear his children, only to lose her two precious sons to the *stupidity of the Earthling half-breed Caldorous had placed over them!*

And then she carried the stupid *female* seed of Caldorous, whose every desire followed the *rest* of the Caldorous household into *debauchery and misconduct!*

She was a *good* wife to Caldorous! She stayed *pretty*. She bore him *children*, and yet she was placed *Second Wife* to the evil matron set *above* her – the *Healer witch, Lili. Healer – Ha!*

Merely teachings to appease the *sex-crazed demands* of *weak-willed men! Just like on Loca.* Just like her *mother* had tried to teach her.

Thankfully, Mother had died *before* forcing her to lay for men in order to "advance her training" as she'd called it. *Whore her out, more truthfully!*

Well, no more for me, and NEVER AGAIN for my Caldorous-spawned daughter!

Meela tossed and turned restlessly, but was still unable to sleep while her thoughts continued to run wildly around inside her head.

She might have eventually dozed off, if it weren't for the pains of a severe beating lashing her about the head and shoulders that caused her to scream in agony.

In the Gym

"*Medical Emergency! – Medical Emergency in the Gym! Duty Healer to the Gym!*"

In *hindsight*, Ronnie probably should have set it to sixty, or perhaps only *fifty*-percent to begin with. The program was *particularly* aggressive, and had a tendency to *learn* from its opponent right out of the gate.

He'd somehow neglected to mention that to Captain Tomar.

To give Tomar credit, he'd lasted nearly a minute – right up until the swords had separated and he'd tripped over his own feet while trying to fend off two attacks from different directions. From that little tidbit of technique – or *lack* thereof – Ronnie had gotten an idea of the school Tomar had been taught from, then stopped worrying about him altogether.

After quickly calling out “Program-End”, he came over with a wet towel to wash off some of the blood while checking Tomar’s wounds. There was nothing *really* serious ... certainly nothing that couldn’t wait for the nearly *platform*-full of Healers soon to arrive.

Surprisingly, it was Lili who arrived first and immediately approached Tomar. Ronnie could sense her questing probe from several feet away, before she slowed and squatted next to him.

As Maya and her students arrived, Lili touched Tomar with a single hand and closed her eyes briefly. The lighting-fast strobe of her Healing blocked what happened, even as it splotched the eyes of the latest arrival, Lady Meela, who continued to rush forward blindly, and nearly stumbled upon reaching the mat.

When Lili stood up, Tomar had no trace of wounds on him – just a torn tunic with traces of blood in the fabric, and on the floor. Ronnie presented her with a clean dampened towel, with which she allowed him to wipe her hand.

“Thank you, my Healer,” he said respectfully and bowed.

She ruefully glanced down at Tomar, who was still lying there in a daze, and then – dignified and stately – proceeded to the door and left with her retinue of one – her assistant, Kita. Interestingly, everyone else in the gym also bowed when Lili passed. All except for the stupefied Tomar ... and Meela, who was struggling to get Tomar to his feet.

As she got him up, Ronnie brought over a cup of water for him. Tomar gratefully drank it and nodded his thanks, while Meela merely glared fiercely at him. He wondered for a moment if Meela knew about Laisee’s defection. Since there wasn’t a knife in his back – *yet* – he figured that was a pleasure she would discover a little later on this evening. He helped Tomar over to a bench and put his sword away for him, before coming back to speak with him.

“To face the *Kraken’s Child*, you must be fleet of foot, Captain. I would suggest working up to it gradually. Be sure to close the program down before you leave.”

He knew Tomar would see the setting, then wondered if he would be humbled by it or become even angrier. He also wondered if Tomar would figure out what the goal of the program *really* was.

After Leaving the Gym

“Tomar, what *madness* is this you do?” she said angrily while walking him back towards the guards’ local off-duty accommodations.

“My Lady, it is merely *exercise*. It is how a guard *trains*.”

“Well, you must *not do it again!*” she declared resolutely.

“I must be allowed to *exercise*, my Lady, else I become *worthless* to you,” he pressed, which triggered an indignant gasp from Meela.

“I – I *needed* you! You were not there, and I *needed* you, Tomar!”

“My Lady, you *have* other guards. Merely open your door, and one stands without – awaiting your command.”

“Tomar – I … I was *hurt!* Something *hurt* me while I slept, and I cried out, but you were not *there!*”

“I am but one guard out of *many*, my Lady.”

“No, Tomar. You are *my* guard. You are the *only* one I can trust,” she said softly, her voice finally starting to calm down.

“Did you call the guard on duty? Did he find what hurt you, my Lady?”

“No. No, he found *nothing* – and then I heard the call and thought –” Meela stopped talking and started wondering.

“What did you think, my Lady?”

Meela remained silent for several seconds, before saying, “Nothing, Tomar. I – I thought there would be something *amusing* to see. I thought that perhaps Rondal had fallen victim to Talis’ –” she stopped again.

Tomar remained silent as they walked along the corridors until eventually reaching the family’s assigned spaces. He paused outside the door to Lady Lili’s compartment, where Lili’s guard nodded to him cautiously.

“Why do you stop *here*, Tomar?”

“I wish to extend my thanks to Lady Lili, my Lady,” he said quietly, but saw that she’d stiffened as his words.

"Then – then tell the *guard!* Tell *him*, and *he* will convey your appreciation!" she snapped angrily, before storming away.

He said nothing, but he and the guard conveyed a look that spoke *passages*. Though serving other mistresses, they'd known each other for years. Lili's guard nodded and smiled, and Tomar replied in kind, before turning and hurrying off after Meela.

Midnight +2 (Day 95) – An Afterhours Discovery

Ronnie turned in his sleep, but suddenly sat up. He extended himself to find the disturbance, then settled back down while chuckling quietly.

In Lili's Compartment

Lili was dozing with Spring Blossom's head tucked under her chin, and her arm and leg curled about her warmly. She felt a sudden flush and smiled. Then she pulled Spring Blossom tighter to her and planted a tiny kiss upon her hair.

Apparently, Lady Meela had *just* found out Mistress Laisee had been relocated; almost as if *none* among her staff wanted the honor of presenting the news to her themselves.

Noon –5 (Day 95) – Moving Day

David and Diane were up early and helping Shay relocate to the primary corridor that Ronnie and Maya occupied. It dead-ended at one end, and the other end was "easily defended" as Ronnie had flippantly put it. The *new* compartment Diane and David had acquired was a tiny bit bigger, and had an additional room. It was a good move because, unlike Shay and Andy, Laisee's needs were a bit more substantial. They'd also had an additional bed placed in the adjoining room for Laisee.

David had thought that wise, as they'd all slept fitfully that first night, because Laisee had hugged the very *edge* of the bed away from him. He'd figured she would probably want to be *gradually* introduced into the more "delicate" aspects of Healer training over time.

Amy and Larl had moved closer down the corridor as well, with Amy doing the brunt of the effort, and Andy and Laisee helping. When it came right down to it, there wasn't really that much to do. Aside from their *immediate* belongings – clothes and Amy's toys – everything else was pretty much the same in each compartment.

Laisee had the *most* stuff to move, and her servants had done the bulk of it. They'd brought *all* of her clothes – three cases, at least – plus

the rest of her personal items, and left them at the door of the Lane's compartment.

Ronnie had insisted only occupants, guests, and their personal guards be allowed access to his crew's residential spaces. He'd also insisted the contents of *all* of Laisee's cases and packages be opened and inspected *outside* the compartment, with only the necessary contents being moved *inside*. The cases and other packing would be placed in storage elsewhere.

Laisee had been indignant about that – right up until he'd shown her the tiny remote units he'd found secreted in two of the cases. He'd turned them over to Maya's guard and received assurances they would be examined, and Lady Lili be informed. Apparently, a little more house cleaning needed to occur within House Caldorous.

Noon –3 (Day 95) – A Meeting with the First Wife

Meela had followed the formal route. She'd requested a meeting with Lili via a formal note – on *real* paper – to discuss the inadvertent relocation of her daughter, who was obviously acting out over a childish whim. When she arrived, the guard followed formal protocol to the *letter* – knocking, and then announcing her when the door opened.

“By your pardon, Mistress Kita. Lady Sharla Meili Peizhi se Loca begs entrance for her scheduled audience.”

“She may enter,” Kita said politely.

Kita was acting as personal secretary this morning, and bowed to Meela before standing aside to let her enter. The Second Wife entered stiffly, and was bid to wait in the outer room – *standing* – as there was no place to sit. She was forced to wait for several minutes after Kita had entered the *inner* room to announce her presence.

Kita finally returned and entreated Meela to enter the inner room. Once inside, she found Lili sitting comfortably and sipping from a crystal of ambrosia. The bottle and an empty crystal were sitting on a short table next to the chair across from Lili.

“Please sit, Sharla. Kita, you may pour.”

Lili had immediately set the tone to family familiar – not quite as rigid as family formal, but still with its own set of protocols ... Senior wife to Junior wife.

“My Lady Song, you are too kind to receive me at such an hour,” Meela said with a push towards family formal, before sitting down and accepting the crystal from Kita. She sipped it delicately and smiled.

"This is a very good vintage, my Lady Song. I commend your selection." She was still pushing towards achieving a family formal tone.

"Thank you, Sharla. It is something that our *stepson* put away for us for a *very* long time."

Lili smiled at Meela's instant frown when the reference to Rondal pierced her like a knife. They continued to sit comfortably like that – Lili, anyway – and slowly and delicately sipped the rare vintage.

Ronnie wasn't the only one who knew patience, but he didn't have the benefit of *centuries* of subtle intrigue Lili had acquired over a lifetime of practice.

Lili read and interpreted every nuance – every flash of eye, every inflection of lip, every twitch of hands, fingers, and even the level of tenseness in Meela's neck and shoulders – all of which spoke *volumes* about her feelings. Not to mention the amount of anger and frustration that was silently radiating off her when Lili extended herself out and felt about her from top to bottom.

'Yes, here is a woman who is nearly like a man. Governed by her own needs as opposed to using them. She is terribly frustrated, even after only one day.' She considered this summation, before letting the tiniest of smiles grace her perfectly formed lips.

"Forgive me, Sharla, for I waste your precious time."

Lili motioned to Kita, who handed her the slip of paper. Lili read it slowly, with her brows knitted in concentration. She tilted her head once or twice as if somewhat confused, before raising her eyebrows and calmly handing the paper back to Kita; afterwards relaxing back in her chair.

"How may I help you, Sharla?"

Her solicitousness flowed out of her in a wave of faux concern.

Meela was stunned. Could the woman not *read*?

"I – I thought my letter *clear*, my Lady Song. The girl – my *daughter* – has foolishly removed herself from my care, and – and she has acquired a – a - accommodations with the crew of Lord *Caldar*."

She'd somehow managed to pronounce his name without grinding her teeth.

"Oh ... yes. I believe I have heard such. What a welcome *relief* this must be for you, dear Sharla, to have your dear daughter – a grown

woman now – finally decide to take responsibility for herself and learn to contribute to the Commonwealth.”

Her languid speech belied her contempt for Meela.

“But – but my *Lady!* She is still but a *girl!*”

“Ah, Sharla, you are such a *sweet* thing. Laisee was but a girl when she and our Rondal were playing mere games together. Now she is a woman and must face her responsibilities as a woman if she is to serve the Commonwealth and bring proper honor to House Caldarous.”

Lili’s tone began to even out as she continued.

“We understand that she aspires to become a Healer. She is somewhat *old* to begin the training, but *we* have allowed her an evaluation period – as directed by Healer Tal. If she learns properly, then perhaps she will eventually be of some *productive* use to the Commonwealth. If she is found *lacking*, then the fact that she is graced with the Royal bloodline should make it a rather simple task to find her a proper mate.”

The subtle shift from “personal” to “*Royal* personal” was lost on Meela while she sat there speechless. She almost exploded, but the fact that Kita was present as secretary, and, no doubt, *recorder*, helped her keep her tongue.

“You – don’t – *disapprove* – do you, Sharla?” Lili’s words came slowly and calmly. “Surely you must be relieved now that Laisee will no longer be a *burden* to you after all these years?”

“I – I...”

“Oh, I understand, Sharla. It must be hard letting go after so many years. I had no children myself, for I was *much* too old when pledged to House Caldarous. And yet I enjoyed the company of my sister Wives’ children greatly, and grieved when they finally moved on – or left us.”

Meela was in a daze.

‘*Nothing is going right this day! And later on...*’

Lili easily picked up Meela’s unspoken thoughts.

“Oh, I understand *that* as well, Sharla. I understand *all too well*. My Lord Husband is a *fine* man, but he lacks the ... *sensitivity* that a *woman* brings towards achieving contentment? Laisee has been granting you contentment for a long time now. Oh my! She must be *very* skilled by now,” she said, then grinned mischievously. “Should

you find yourself in *distress*, my precious Sharla, please do not hesitate to call upon *me*."

Lili reached over and patted her hand. "Or perhaps you would care to test your Captain Tomar? He has a great deal of *affection* for you," she added, then winked at her scandalously.

"He – he *does*?"

Lili abruptly shifted into family casual mode.

"Oh *yes*, little Meela, he favors you *greatly* – ever since the day he first entered your service. Of course, he *is* merely a man, but they are *trainable* if you take the time to *teach them!*"

Her following laughter tinkled in the small room.

Meela was feeling lost, and that was an unfamiliar and very unpleasant sensation for her. She'd lost control of the interview from the very first opening, and needed to get it back.

"My Lady Song, I – I must *protest*. My daughter must be returned to my care. *Immediately.*"

Lili sat very still and gazed at her over the rim of her crystal for several seconds, before finally sipping from it once again.

"We have already granted *our* permission," she stated coolly. "However, you may take it up with the Elder."

"M-My Lady Song, this ... this is a *family* matter and the Elder is ... that would take many *weeks* from now!"

"On the contrary. We expect the Elder to arrive *shortly*." Lili closed her eyes and sought out a trace. "Within a *day* or two, at most."

She opened her eyes and stared at Meela languidly, before her gaze began to harden.

"Inquiries have been made. An accounting must be taken," she informed her brusquely. "No doubt, you will be asked for testimony."

Lili put down her crystal and stood.

The meeting was over.

Kita gently took the crystal from Meela's hands, before mutely standing aside and looking strangely saddened.

Meela sat there for a moment longer, then lurched up quickly. She strained to gather her composure.

"Thank you for meeting with me, Lady Song."

"I am always at your service, Lady Peizhi. If you have need of further conversation ... if you wish advice or counsel about *anything*, Lady Peizhi ... please do not hesitate to seek me out."

Kita escorted Meela to the door before returning to her mistress.

"My Lady, I am sorry it may turn out as such."

"It was a path of her own choosing," Lili muttered. "She chose this path over another, and it may bring her to ruin."

Kita sighed in her unhappiness.

"Is there no *other* way, my Lady?"

"There *is* no divorce on Kantor. If there were, I would have petitioned her *myself*, and Radatel would have agreed. I fear the Elder will *not* be as lenient."

Kita let that sink in for several moments; feeling despair over the situation getting as far out of hand as it had.

"Then Gods grant she find contentment with her Captain Tomar, my Lady." Her voice sounded bitter.

"Jealous, my little Kita?"

"Oh *no*, my Lady, but I would hope to visit with Lord Rondal before ... before the Elder reaches a decision."

"Patience, my little Kita. I do not believe our Ronnie is in as great a deal of trouble as our Lady Peizhi. Besides, either way, I will do my best to make it up to you." Lili's promise was made with a twinkling in her eyes, and Kita blushed appropriately.

"I thank my Lady."

Noon –1 (Day 95) – The Penalty of Impatience

With an hour to go until dinner, Ronnie was getting ready to warm up in the gym. There was an open slot at the moment, and he'd decided to take advantage of it to take his mind off whatever Lili was working on.

This waiting was really beginning to annoy him. He wondered what the devil Lili was up to, and if there was some way he could prepare for it. He wished she'd just get *started* with it, but cringed before quickly looking around to see if his foolish desire had triggered anything deleterious in the immediate vicinity. After nothing bad appeared to have happened, he relaxed and turned back to the control monitor to

enable the *Kraken's Child*. He set it for a few notches above level ten just to see what Donnel had done to it.

Somewhere Else...

*In this **particular** instance, the file now marked “Rondal TS'ILSQOSÉ BIYIGÉ Calder, et al” had been recently updated in status from “hold” to “active,” and the Fate on Duty at this **particular** moment checked his surroundings, but alas – no Drecks were currently available.*

*Still, there were so **many** possibilities to choose from that it took less than a moment to find something **interesting**, and yet rather **benign**. Properly serviced, this particular event would provide an opportunity for **personal** growth, and thus Lord Calder’s wish was granted. He estimated the temporal delay involved, and called for a relief so he could take a short break before the fun began.*

CPS Microcosmus

Just as he was about to begin, Ronnie got a call from the con that he answered from the local com panel.

“Ronnie this is David. You got a call from Sectorus One, secure.”

“On my way,” he said, then let out a sigh, and put his sword away before heading up to the bridge. Along the corridor, he met Tomar heading to the gym and greeted him politely.

“Good morning, Captain Tomar. I trust you slept well?”

“Very well, Lord Calder. Thank you,” he replied formally, and continued past him towards the gym.

‘*Polite fellow ... when he’s not being an ass,’* Ronnie thought with a slight bit of irritation. ‘*Not nearly as polite as when Laisee and I were growing up.’*

Entering the con, he found David and Diane there watching the techs packing up their gear.

“You’ve got yourself a *fine* Spacer First, my Lord,” Donnel told him while nodding over at David.

“Why, thank you, Donnel. I think so myself.”

Turning to David, he asked, “You have a call for me?” David toggled a switch, and Captain Talon was on screen in front of them.

“Sorry to drag you away, Ronnie, but we have visitors coming. CS Shining Light is one day out on approach. A data packet has just been transmitted, secure, to Lady Lili.”

“*Shining Light?* Why does that name sound familiar, Karl?”

“*Guests of Lady Lili, I would presume, Ronnie.*”

“Ahhh... I remember now. Please extend every courtesy on our behalf, and let my con know the needs of the visitors as soon as you find out.”

“*Will do. And if it means anything – I’m terribly sorry, Ronnie.*”

“Nothing at all, Karl. I’ve had a long and glorious life.”

“Understood. Sectorus out.”

David watched Ronnie when he gave a slight shake of his head after Sectorus closed his com.

“Uh, Ronnie ... anything we should know about?” he asked, which seemed to shake Ronnie out of a temporary funk and trigger his more recent smirky smile.

“Oh, nothing serious, I’m sure. Like stepfather said, ‘Inquiries have been made. An accounting must be taken,’ ” he quoted. “These are just my Lady Lili’s bean counters.”

‘Can’t get much WORSE, I suppose,’ he kept to himself.

Somewhere Else...

*Still on break, the Fate on Duty had missed it, and his relief was still dozing peacefully – until that **particular** thought woke him up. Just before he hit the virtual snooze button for another few cycles, he pushed that last phrase up to the supervisor, who chuckled **gleefully** and triggered a **second** event on top of the first.*

CPS Microcosmus

“*Medical Emergency! – Medical Emergency in the Gym! Duty Healer to the Gym!*”

Ronnie froze – and then remembered.

“Aww, *Crap!*” he said, then enabled a monitor to the gym.

The broken and bleeding body of Captain Tomar was laying at the edge of the mat while the *three* swords of the simulacrum were still furiously beating the bent and broken blade of Tomar’s, *which* – luckily for *him* – was still laying back within the inner circle.

Ronnie enabled a platform-wide broadcast and called out, “*Program-End! Program-End!*” before finally seeing the simulacrum fade away. He took off at a run, while David turned a stunned look at Donnel.

“Three swords? How can you beat three swords?”

Donnel looked at him incredulously.

“Didn’t our Ronnie *explain* it to you?”

In Meela’s Compartment

Meela wanted to scream.

Rather, she wanted to *keep* screaming, but she couldn’t breathe anymore because the pain was just too great. Instead of screaming, she lay writhing in agony and had *no* idea of what had brought it about ... not that she was actually capable of thinking about it at the moment. After a bit, the pounding had finally stopped, but it was still impossible for her to move, and she could not vocalize from the pain.

Her duty guardsman stood over her helplessly. There was not a mark on her.

In the Gym

“Medical Emergency! – Medical Emergency in the Gym! Duty Healer to the Gym!”

As the bridge was closer to the gym, Ronnie was the first responder to burst through the doors and ran straight to Tomar’s side. He found him bleeding profusely from his wounds, and gasping weakly from the incredibly agonizing beating he’d just been put through. Ronnie didn’t want to chance moving him, so he placed his hands over the biggest fountain of blood and closed his eyes.

As before, Lili was the first Healer to arrive, but stopped just inside the door to observe Ronnie working on Tomar. Then she walked up slowly and squatted down beside him, before touching his shoulder and extending herself *through* him and, by extension, *into* Tomar. She watched for a few seconds, but then began guiding his Healings while giving him something he’d never had before – a teacher to show him how to *properly* perform a Healing.

Together they worked silently, she guiding and he Healing, while they slowly wormed through Tomar’s tormented body and repaired each critical wound and injury, one-by-one. She observed when Ronnie tried to simply “fix” something, and she’d stop him and redirect his efforts to efficiently achieve the same results, but *correctly* this time.

Considering the source, the *major* damage was triaged in thirty seconds. Lili was impressed — but still went through and subtly “rearranged” some of Ronnie’s more impromptu fixes with the *correct* process while teaching him along the way.

This was the sight that greeted Maya when she entered the gym – Ronnie and Lili bent over a bleeding Tomar, with *both* of them glowing like purest starlight. Lili was murmuring to Ronnie in Cletus while she worked with him, and Maya slowly crept up to listen.

*“*Use your heart. Simply fixing it is not as good as letting it Heal. If you force it, then it will need repair later, and that is a painful process! It takes no more time to Heal than to fix, Rondal! The body knows what to do. You just channel the energy for it to do so on its own!*”*

*“*He’s still bleeding! I’ve got to stop it before he bleeds out!**”

Ronnie was rushing urgently, and Lili patted his shoulder lightly.

*“*Yes! We do patch the leaks and push things together quickly, but then we let the body take over and do the actual Healing. You simply feed it from then on. Let go and trust your heart, Rondal, not your emotions. That is where you failed with Maya, but we will Heal her with your help. You will see, Rondal.*”*

Lili watched him falter when he started thinking about his Healing of Maya. She let him go on for just a moment longer, before prodding him.

*“*No! Do not become distracted, Rondal! Focus! Give poor Tomar your attention now. Maya’s time is not yet.*”*

He tried, but Lili saw he was failing. His glow became spotty, before finally flickering out completely.

*“*You are too distracted, Rondal. Step away now, and I will finish.*”*

As Ronnie let go and leaned back, Lili reached in and flashed ...and Tomar relaxed completely, but then lay as if dead.

That was the sight which greeted the *next* arrival – a breathless Meela.

“TOMAR!”

Fleeing down the Corridor

Maya had used Meela’s entrance to take her leave of the gym.

She’d seen and heard enough to confound her senses even more. Ronnie was a man. An *Earthman*, yet Lili was guiding him – *teaching him* – and he was learning to become a *true Healer* under her tutelage.

And his *glow* – the purist *white* ... just like *Lili’s* ... just like a *Senior’s*. She considered that, and the conversation she’d had with Lili earlier. Her Ronnie had spent twenty years on the platform – *alone* –

reading and studying the Senior's texts with no one to guide him. No one to teach him. No one to practice on – except *himself*? All those scars?

She'd seen the scars – *all of them* – all over his body. Even in places he could not *reach*...

The *Kraken's Child!* He'd faced the *Kraken's Child* and – and let himself be hurt by it so he could practice on himself? Or perhaps it was simply self-preservation?

Either way, she'd heard Lili say her Ronnie had failed her, but would need to help Heal her as well. This, too, was something else to think about.

In the Gym

“*TOMAR!*” Meela cried again as she rushed over and fell to the floor next to him. Aside from the pools of blood and the torn clothing, there was not a mark on him.

Lili was meticulously thorough.

Meela's duty guardsman had just caught up with her, but stood out of the way. Ronnie held up four fingers, pointed at Tomar's body, and mimed picking him up. The guard nodded and rushed off.

“Sharla, you really *must* take better care of your Captain,” Lili said in a tone that bordered on the edge of distraction. “I simply *cannot* be expected to clean up after him every time you enflame his *senses*!”

Meela looked down at her Captain, but then up in confusion, while Lili went on.

“Surely you cannot be so *blind*? Your Captain fairly *pines* for you, yet you *ignore* him. I've looked *within*, Sharla, and he seeks no other. Nor does he grant *himself* relief. If it keeps up, it will eventually *kill him!*”

Ronnie was listening in the background, but was somewhat bemused by this conversation. He'd spent many lonely nights – he'd spent twenty *years* out here – but never did it drive him to foolishness. Well ... not like *this*. Still, to have the object of your desire so close, and yet have it ignore you so *completely* ... yes, *that* would be difficult. Tomar should have asked for a transfer *long* before now.

“Then he will *live*?” Meela asked her anxiously.

“For now. I have set right his body – *most* of it. There is a serious imbalance that *still* needs Healing. Since there is no one available who cares for him, then I, or one of the other Wives, will see to his

contentment. He is not unpleasant to look upon, and his behavior can be overlooked for the time being.”

Meela was struck thinking about that, while her duty guard arrived with extra men and a body carrier.

“Take him to his quarters, gentlemen. I will arrange further Healing for him in but a while,” Lili ordered.

“*No!*” Meela blurted out, but seemed somewhat surprised at her own outburst. “No. Take him … take him to my compartment. He is *my* Captain. I will look after him personally.”

As they bundled him up, Ronnie stood aside and cast a questioning look at Lili, who simply shook her head minutely. Then they all trooped out … all but Ronnie. He stayed behind to clean up the blood from this latest victim of the *Kraken’s Child*. Before doing so, he went back to close the program.

“*Foolish*” was the setting for level thirteen. *Three swords – three!* He’d have to have a word with Donnel before he got in any more exercise!

In Meela’s Compartment

The guards had deposited Tomar on layers of towels spread out on the bed in Meela’s sleeping room. They’d stayed to help, while Lili and Meela undressed and washed his body. Then they’d carefully rolled his body over, while the Ladies checked for hidden signs of damage.

That was Meela’s doing. Lili was sure of her own work.

The guards all left, and it was Tomar’s second who returned with a fresh set of off-duty clothing, before leaving them alone. Lili set the clothing aside, and turned back to Tomar. She observed Meela looking him over from top to bottom once again, before reluctantly covering him with a light blanket.

“He should awaken within the hour, Meela. I will have Mei-Mei or Yin-Yin attend to him and begin his contentment before he fully awakens. We find it much easier to deal with a man already involved, but as yet unaware of his Healer, rather than with one who would normally protest from whom it may be received. You need not be here to observe if it will offend you.”

“N-No … my Lady Lili. I will … be all right,” she said quietly.

Lili offered her a somewhat compassionate suggestion.

"We could have him moved to another compartment? Then perhaps his *own* sense of betrayal towards you would not affect him as much?"

"No, my Lady. I - I will simply wait in the other room. It should not take *that* long, should it?"

Lili emitted a light, tinkling titter.

"Oh my little Meela! Your Captain must be *completely* drained. It will probably take *hours* just this day alone. We shall also have to see about tomorrow and the next day. It will take much work to sever his dependency from you."

"S-Sever?"

"Certainly, dear. He seeks none other for contentment, and you obviously feel *nothing* for him. Since you refuse to provide contentment for him, then we must sever his *emotional* attachment to you. That will free him from saving himself for the attentions you will not grant him, and allow him to seek contentment from one of the available Healers. Perhaps when we reach home world, he will seek a *bonded* mate. That would be for the best. So which do you think at first? Cuddly little Yin-Yin, or slender and sensuous Mei-Mei?" she asked conspiringly while glancing down at the sleeping Tomar.

"I - I ... no, my Lady. I - I will take care of Tomar ... myself," Meela said quietly, and Lili turned a very serious face towards her.

"This is not a *game* we play, Sharla. To toy with another's emotions will *destroy* that person in the end. You will likely end up destroying *yourself* as well. If *we* take up to Heal your Captain's ills, then he will know it was from duty. If *you* presume to do the same, he will believe it is because you *care* for him - and he will expect to share himself with you from then on."

"I - I understand, my Lady Song," she said just above a whisper, but Lili stared very hard at her.

"Do you? Do you *really*? I wonder. Be by his side when he wakes. Do not *lie* to him. Do not *deceive* him. If you care the *least* for him, then tell him so, and in what degree. And then offer him contentment, fully and *without* reservation. Do you remember how? Do you need instruction? I have a little time—"

"I remember, my Lady," she said meekly.

Lili spent a moment gazing at ... and then *through*, Meela.

"Very well, then, Sharla. I shall expect *excellence* from you," she said sternly. "I have every confidence."

Noon (Day 95) – Called on the Carpet

“Really ... leaving *death traps* for unsuspecting guards to stumble upon? This is *not* like you, Rondal. Not like you at *all*,” Radatel said with a corresponding frown on his face, followed by a weary sigh.

“It was not a death trap, Father. It’s just an exercise program. I’ve used it many times, and *I’m* still alive. Besides, Donnel took the nasty parts out that ... that used to be in there. Tomar should have been just *fine* – if he had any *real* talent.”

That excuse didn’t wash with Lili.

“That is not the *point*, Rondal! I simply *cannot* be expected to rush off at a moment’s notice every time our dear Captain Tomar’s *reach*, over extends his ability to *grasp!*”

“Forgive me, my Lady Lili. I was about to start practice – at the very *same* level, mind you – when I received a call from *Sectorus* that your visitors were due to arrive tomorrow. I was distracted, and forgot to disable the program, even as I’d returned my sword, and left for the con.”

“And so ... what if it had been your young Spacer *Third*, my dear boy? What *then?*” she asked him.

“With all due respect, my Lady, young Andrew would not be as *stupid*,” he said lightly, then followed it with a grin.

Lili stared at him sternly for a few moments, before presenting a grim smile towards him.

“Perhaps not, Rondal. *However*, I would request that you have your Healers staff the gym when your exercise program is in operation. I would hate to lose any more of my rest.”

“I thank my Lady for her helpful guidance. I will make arrangements for the Healers of my crew to be in attendance during any further exercises with the *Kraken’s Child*. Please ignore any further medical alerts, my Lady.”

“Oh, Rondal, you are *so* amusing! How could we ignore a *lifetime* of service when duty calls. We *will*, however, take it under *adviseement*.”

“Thank you, my Lady,” he said, but thought of another concern he’d observed that evening. “Ahhh ... Lili ... that’s *twice* now Meela has come running when Tomar’s hurt himself in the gym. It is possible that she and Tomar...”

“Share the Healer’s Bond? It is rare to begin with, but apparently Tomar’s feelings for Meela are such that it overcomes even her *own*

ignorance of his passions for her ... *and* her own limited skills as a Healer, for that matter. We note that Maya's bond with you is *very* strong, as is Diane's bond with her David. And we have felt some *amazing* sensations between Andy and his Shay ... *and* with Laisee. We begin to *wonder* about your new family, Rondal."

"Perhaps a result of the extreme circumstances that brought them all to this point in their lives, my Lady?" he offered hopefully.

He'd suggested this with an open gesture of hands because he didn't want Lili examining too closely *this* particular piece of his puzzle for the moment – figuring the less that anyone knew about his crew, the better.

Lili gazed at him for several seconds while engaged in speculative contemplation.

"Perhaps..." she finally allowed, and felt his relief that she'd failed to pursue the issue ... for the moment.

Ronnie took advantage of the silence to make his exit.

"By your leave, my Lady ... my Lord. I bid you a pleasant day."

He bowed and turned to leave the room, but not quickly enough.

"A moment, Rondal," Lili said quietly, and he paused and turned back to her.

She strode over to him and placed her hand against his face; feeling within him for that *other* little element that needed to be unlocked.

"You work well, but you lack *proper* training. You are also *missing* an important part of being a Senior," she said, then suddenly flushed him with energy.

He rocked slightly on his feet, not having a chance to brace himself for her onslaught – which wasn't really much of one, he shortly discovered.

'*There, that is better'* she pressed into him. '*Is it not?*'

'*Lili ... what did you*-' he suddenly stopped, realizing that her lips hadn't moved ... nor did his.

'*The Elder was surprised at your strength, but she'd determined that you'll need all the faculties of a practicing Senior. It will take getting used to. Do not exert yourself*' she shared silently.

"And remember your Healer watch-standers," she audibly reminded him.

"I hear ... and obey, my Lady. By your leave, my Lady."

He gave her a formal bow before turning to leave once again, and this time actually made it out and closed the door behind him.

"Do you think he will comply, Lili?"

"Putting his Healers in the gym? Of course he will, my Husband."

She closed her eyes for a moment.

"I believe he has already decided on a watch rotation among his Healers. However, perhaps it would be best to offer some *assistance*? Do you and Yin-Yin still partake of morning pleasures, my Husband?"

"Yes, we do, Lili. And Mei-Mei prefers the evening."

"Then it seems simple. I shall have Mei-Mei monitor Rondal's selection for morning rotation, Yin-Yin for evening rotation, and perhaps Spring Blossom can monitor Maya for the midnight rotation."

"What makes you think Maya will willingly take the midnight rotation?"

"Very simple, my Husband. I will request that she *does* so," she said with a smile.

At some point, she would have to look into this other issue Rondal was still hiding from her ... or simply wait until the Elder arrived and ripped it from him forcibly.

On the Bridge

"What *other* little changes have you implemented, Donnel?" Ronnie asked him. He wasn't *quite* angry, but still curious and no little bit concerned.

"Well, since we took out 'back stab' as a viable option and slowed things just down a bit, I thought, 'Our Ronnie would think this just a wee bit too *easy*' ... so I threw in an extra sword at level thirteen to come in random like. Then level fourteen starts out with three swords, and level fifteen starts out with *two* Drecks with two swords apiece. Just to make it *interestin'*, my Lord."

"I ... see. And the speed of the simulation?"

"Oh, the simulation runs as fast as it ever did at level twelve, *which*, if you'll recall, you'd never had any problem with – as long as you didn't turn your *back* on it."

Donnel gave out a snort and turned to David.

“Devil thing would chase you all the way to the edge of the *mat* if you turned your back on it! Chased our *Ronnie*, anyway!” he cackled, before turning to face Ronnie again. “Otherwise, the speed is the same from twelve on up.”

“Umm, very well, then. Thank you, Mister Ardan. It takes out a safety defect, and adds a layer of excellence to practice with. And how is your work up here, then?”

“Oh … all done, my Lord. Lady Lili has her reports, and I’ve just stayed behind to give your young Spacer First a few extra pointers.”

“And how is my Spacer First, Mister Ardan. Is there any hope for him?”

“Aye, my Lord. Give me half a dozen decades, and I’ll have him up to where *you* were when you took command of the *Kraken*.”

“Promise me in less than *half* that time, and I’ll have him and his Lady assigned under your care aboard a ship of my choosing – provided we *all* survive the next few weeks!”

“*Provisional* then? Well enough, my Lord – provided *I* survive the next few weeks,” Donnel said, then chuckled lightly before turning to the large display. “David, show the Captain what comes this way.”

Noon +1 (Day 95) – Working on Tomar

Meela was sitting quietly while watching Tomar sleep.

Lili said that he *cared* for her. That he’d *denied* himself all these years for her. He *did* look a little older now, even as a Kantite Royal from a lower house. She’d certainly *thought* he and the rest of her guards had regularly scheduled contentment sessions to maintain their health and vitality. She sighed in frustration while thinking about that – suddenly realizing that she no longer knew *what* to think…

All those years she’d listened to her mother’s venomous rants about men, and how they had to *obey* them, serve *their* pleasure, and bear *their* children, hadn’t fallen on deaf ears, but Meela had also dreamt of one day finding a *good* man – a man who would love her for *herself, alone*, and do anything for her. Someone who respected her as a *person*, and not just an object of *lust* … something her mother said drove *all* men mad with greed and brutality.

When her mother had been killed, and the Seniors had mistaken her for Sharla, she was both saddened by her death, but also elated. As the wife of Lord Caldorous, she’d thought this would be so much better than staying on Loca and struggling to learn the rest of her “craft” alone. At least … her mother’s *friends* had thought so.

If she were wedded to the Royal House of Kantor, why ... how *delightful!* How *marvelous* to have a loving and *Royal* husband! She would treat him wonderfully, and he would dote upon her, and take her to all the important balls, and parties on Kantor! And then she'd learned that she was to be wife number *two* – and only *that*, because *First Wife* was childless, and the Emperor had demanded *grandchildren* from his remaining son.

So she would be whored out to the Royals. No riches, no honor, and no prestige. Just another *brood* female for the Royal line.

She'd been heartbroken, only *then* understanding her mother's anger at having been chosen as Lord Caldorous' brood female, which was why the Royals had her killed.

They'd said it was an accident, but her mother's only male friends came around afterwards and told her what *really* happened. Of how the Royals knew of her mother's disgust at the prospect of marrying into House Caldorous, and how she and they had planned to take revenge for it. Somehow, someone in House Caldorous must have found out, and they'd had her killed. That wasn't the end of it, though.

Obviously, one group never talked to the other.

Because of their near identical looks, they'd come for *Meili* thinking that she was *Sharla*. Her mother's friends had warned her about it, but then suggested it could *still* be a good thing if she were married to the House of Caldorous. Just think of all the juicy information she could send back to help them bring down the House of Caldorous.

They could then bring forward a *new* Royal family – one that would give *women* their true place in the Commonwealth, and how she could be First Wife to a *new* Royal family after House Caldorous fell. Would that not be *marvelous*?

And that's how the plan had started. Meili would become *Sharla* Meili, and the dead Sharla would become an anonymous accident victim, instead of the *real* intended bride of Lord Caldorous; and *no one* would be the wiser.

So she'd entered the loveless marriage and put up with her new husband's unwanted attentions, but resisted those of his First Wife! How could they have been so *forward* with her? *They* didn't love her. They didn't care anything *about* her. How *could* they? She'd been just another *plaything* for the two of them.

Then came the twins, and then her daughter. And then *another* wife, bringing *stepchildren* into the family. And then yet *another* wife,

with even *more* stepchildren. And finally that – that *barbarian Earthling*, with *her* whelp in tow!

She'd cut off all physical relations with her husband. She'd also never sought them from his Wives, even though they'd offered constantly. She'd been determined to content herself alone. When her daughter grew old enough, she'd taught her to serve her needs as appropriate from daughter to mother – just as she'd been taught on Loca.

Then that *devil-spawn*, Rondal, had ruined her poor Laisee. How could she ever face anyone knowing that that half-breed brute had taken Laisee? There was no hope of *ever* find a suitable mate for her ruined daughter now...

Tomar stirred. He seemed to settle for a moment, but became restless; his arms and legs twitching in slight movements. Meela looked down on him, but now saw him in a more pitiable light.

Her Tomar. Her loyal Tomar. One who loved her. One who'd waited for her all these years. Vitas – who could have been her husband from the first moment he'd seen her, if she'd only known his true feelings for her. She dropped her robes and slipped under the covers to lie next to him, and he stirred once again.

She reached over and tentatively ran her fingers through his hair, before slipping them down the side of his face. She could see a smile form on his lips when she continued down under his chin, and then down his neck. He rotated his head, and she could see a grimace form when it shifted it from side to side.

She slowly brought her hand down his chest and across his abdomen, before stopping to rest it at his waist. He shifted again, and she felt something tapping against the side of her palm.

'That is him!' she thought. 'He dreams of this, and has become ready!'

She lifted her palm and moved it further down, before resting it lightly over his testicles. She could feel how large they were.

'He has been saving himself – for ME. He must be VERY full,' she thought, while gently rolling his sack between her fingers and watching him squirm. She finally let go and measured him with her hand. He was more than two hands long, and she could not close her fingers around him.

'He is so much bigger than Lord Caldarous! He will hurt me terribly if I let him take me!'

She thought back to her marital teachings about the matter, and let go of him to apply her hand to her own genitals. To her surprise, she found she needed no preparation at all – she was already *very* wet.

'He is so big. Perhaps I should use my mouth?' she considered distastefully.

She'd never liked the thought of that particular act, since she felt it was degrading and would make her feel used. She decided she would simply have to mount him instead, so she slowly pulled the covers away and positioned herself above him.

She wetted him with her saliva, and then lined him up with her opening. She began guiding him in very slowly, while letting him stretch muscles and tissues whose last passage had been broached by her daughter's thumb. It was *very* tight, but also felt very *comfortable* to her.

She leaned over him and let her nipples just barely brush his chest, before beginning tentative motions backwards and forwards upon his phallus. She moved slowly while he was becoming aware of her.

Just as she seated him fully within her, his eyes opened, and he stared up at her. She could see emotions running wildly all across his face as she continued her slow movement.

"Am I ... dreaming?" he asked in a daze.

"You have been injured, my Captain," she spoke to him softly while still stroking him with her body.

"You are here ... with me..."

"My Lady Lili was able to Heal *most* of your body, my Captain." Meela paused and pressed herself firmly onto him. "But she also ordered more Healing for you."

"H-Healing, my Lady?"

"Yes, my Captain. You have not been taking proper care of yourself." She sat upright and swiveled her groin atop him deliciously. "She ordered *contentment* for you from one of the Wives."

He looked around for a moment, but then came back to her.

"I told her I would handle things *myself*, my Captain," she said, while trying to clench him with unused muscles. "She was concerned that you would feel ... *uncomfortable* otherwise."

He closed his eyes and sighed while bringing his hands up to her breasts for a moment, before quickly pulling them away.

"You may *touch* me, Vitas. I would enjoy that a great deal," she murmured huskily, then went back to stroking.

"I – you need not do this, my Lady. I can live without."

She simply smiled down at him, before bending down to kiss him delicately on the lips.

"It would appear you have lived *too* long without, my Vitas," she said with a moan, then peaked while tightening herself around him several times. "Umm, Vitas ... you need not hold back," she murmured as she closed her eyes and smiled dreamily.

"H-How long must I be treated for, my Lady?"

"Ummm... My Lady Lili said it might take *days* for you to get better," she murmured softly, and brought her lips to his for a lingering kiss.

She quickened her pace when he began to thrust up into her, and he wasn't far behind when she clenched and quivered around him the second time. He remained erect for her next few times, before he expended himself within her again.

After that, she had to work harder for it.

Noon +4 (Day 95) – Gym Watch for Healers

"That's it, then. You three will rotate the watch," Ronnie told them.

Diane, Amy, and Maya reluctantly nodded their acceptance of their new tasks.

"But why can I not do so as *well?*" Shay complained. "My Healings are very *good.*"

"I suspect Lili worries about the child you carry, Shay," Maya told her. "You are further along than either Diane or Amy. Should you make an error during a Healing, you may accidentally draw energy from the child of Lord David and hurt it. That is too much to risk with the types of injuries users of the gym are wont to acquire."

She directed a frown at Ronnie, before turning back to Shay.

"Besides, you are still having difficulty, and you need your sleep and my milk to keep you healthy," she added.

They were all there, crowded onto the con ... all *nine* of them now. Ronnie had chosen that time and place, not only for the fact that Larl and David were switching out their watch, but it also gave them a bit of privacy now that Lon, Donnel and Granger had all left and gone back to *Sectorus*.

"You must be in the gym during your watch," Ronnie reminded them. "Don't wander off and expect one of the other Wives to cover for you. And woe to she who does not beat Lili to the *next* training accident."

"But that's not *fair!*" Amy whined. "It's not *our* fault if some *doofus* trips over his own feet and hurts himself!"

"Amy... Truly, Tomar would not have survived if my Ronnie and Lady Lili had not attended to him as quickly as they did," Maya said. "Now he is alive and needs even *more* Healing before he will become truly well."

"But I thought Lili, you know, *flashed* him and made him all better," Diane said.

"Yes. She fixed all the *broken* parts, but there were some background issues Lili found when she was working on him. Those require some *additional* Healing," Ronnie said diplomatically, before offering a reasonable suggestion. "Apparently, it's something affecting his *emotional* state."

"Ah... That would be his fondness for Mother," Laisee said knowingly. "Although, I don't know why he's not left her service before this. In some ways, she's treated *him* worse than she ever treated me. Even when she was *beating* me, at least she knew I was *there...*"

Laisee paused and looked away, while both Diane and David came to her side and hugged her; recognizing yet another issue they had to work on with her.

"Well, all I can feel is that something is going on between Lili and Meela," Ronnie continued. "We'd probably best stay as far away from it as we can."

The com beeped, and both David andarl glanced at the display.

"Another batch of encrypted message and data traffic just got routed to ... Mistress *Kita*? The *blue* *chick?*" David asked, and Ronnie snorted disgustedly.

"Yes. Our Lady Lili's *assistant*, *personal* secretary, *protocol* mistress, and probably High Snitch to the Elder. Don't underestimate her, or her connections. Which reminds me... Maya, I learned that Kita was recently given the Gift of the First Wife – *by Lili* – but she was also assured she would receive it from Lili's star pupil. I sort of promised her during the next ships holiday – whenever *that* manages to get scheduled again."

"Oh goody! Let's have it tomorrow!" Amy exclaimed.

“Ahh ... *nope!* I don’t think *that* particular lack of decorum would go over well since Lili’s guests are arriving tomorrow. But as soon as things settle down, we’ll try to schedule a break – for *half* a day, at least.”

“*Half* a day doesn’t even give us a chance to *warm up!*” Diane nearly pouted, which brought smiles all around, except for Laisee.

“Oh ... I don’t know. We invite Captain Talon and his crew over, and you’ll be warmed up in *no time*,” Ronnie said, quite seriously.

“Oh! That sounds like a *great* deal of fun,” Shay exclaimed in anticipation.

“Indeed,” Maya said somewhat reservedly, while Laisee visibly *paled* at the thought of it.

In Lili’s Compartment

Kita read the message over again while sparing some concern for Lord Caldar’s future. She’d worked for Lady Song for several decades now, but never had this many *senior* Seniors gathered within her memory, and certainly not off-planet. Letting out a quiet sigh, she softly knocked on Lili’s door, before presenting her raised data pad to her Mistress upon its opening.

“Your pardon, my Lady. Word from *Shining Light*. The Elder will arrive promptly at Noon minus two, tomorrow. She wishes immediate escort to her quarters aboard the platform. There she will conduct interviews from Noon until Noon plus four, at which time she will retire for contemplation and rest.”

“I see. Does she send a guest list?” Kita handed her the data pad, which Lili quickly scanned.

“Ah! How *lovely* for Maya! Our dear Yandi’s *sister* is aboard and will be visiting! She argued most *vehemently* against sending Yandi aboard the platform, and against sending Maya on that ill-fated diplomatic mission. I dare say the next few days will be *strife* with excitement! Wouldn’t you agree, my little Kita?”

“I would say that is the very *least* we could possibly hope for, my Lady,” Kita agreed easily, picking up her cues from years of familiarity.

“Indeed. Please inform Lord Caldar of the Elder’s timeline and requirements. We must make all preparations accordingly. Oh! And transmit these last log entries from our specialists. The Elder will want to review them carefully,” she said, and handed Kita a data tab.

“Yes, my Lady. By your leave, my Lady.”

Noon +5 (Day 95) – Recognition for Amy

Amy had dutifully planted herself in the gym right after leaving the con. Diane had agreed to spell her in several hours for a meal break, in return for which Amy would do the same during Diane's watch.

Amy wished there were books available, because this looked to be a boring evening for her. At least Maya got stuck from midnight to morning at Lady Lili's request.

Business started picking up about an hour before supper when men from that section's platoon rotated through for exercise and suffered the occasional cut or bruise. It was during this time she'd overheard the rumor that "the mouse was freed" – whatever *that* meant. To her great relief, she'd also learned she wasn't to suffer as some Healers did when anyone else got hurt...

She'd wondered what it would be like as a Healer who felt every twist, every strain, every pulled muscle, or cut, or broken bone that their clients felt. She didn't think it would be a very good thing. Maybe it explained the harder expressions on some of the Healer's faces in the videos she'd watched.

Her Mom felt her Dad. Maya felt Ronnie, and Ronnie ... he felt *everyone's* pain. That must *really* suck...

Ronnie entered the gym already geared for exercise.

As he began his stretches, several of the visiting men approached and offered their thanks for "freeing the mouse" – to which he'd raised his hand and pointed over to Amy. As the group around him began to grow, a larger number of them were now turning to stare at her, and she was getting a little bit nervous about it. Finally, Ronnie brought them all over and introduced her to them.

"Gentlemen, this is Lady Amy Linn Lane se Earth, soon to be bonded with Larl Riker se Tyler. She is the *true* champion of the mouse – both her and Mistress Shay Daishi se Wilder," he said proudly.

"Our thanks, Lady Amy," one of the men said.

"Indeed," another said, "It is a fine thing you did, freeing the mouse from the spider."

"We only ask that you show her kindness, my Lady," yet another said, "She's had enough of hurt in her life."

"I ... you mean *Laisee*?" she asked.

"Just so, my Lady," their leader said. "Not our place to complain, but, well ... we've seen *enough*, all right, and this was a *long time in coming!*"

"That's right, my Lady, and we understand she's to begin *Healer* training, too!" another said, "She truly has the *heart* for it, my Lady, for she knows what *suffering* is."

"I – we'll do our very best. I promise you," she said, somewhat bewildered.

"And that's all that *anyone* can do. Thank you, Lady Amy," their leader said, then bowed before turning and thanking Ronnie for his time.

Her shift seemed to fly after that.

Noon +5.5 (Day 95) – A Lesson Finally Learned?

A very subdued Meela presented herself at the door to Lili's compartment. While the guard sought an audience, she wondered what in the world she was going to say to the First Wife. She didn't have that much time to consider it, as she was ushered in right away.

"Meela, how is your Captain?" Lili asked solicitously in family casual mode. "Have you had any problems? Do you need any assistance?"

"I – no, my Lady. He sleeps now. He ... contented himself well with me, and now rests for a while. I was about to bring him some food, but I wanted to stop by and ... thank you."

Lili tilted her head as she looked at her.

"Whatever for, Meela?"

"Why ... for saving him, my Lady! He would have died without your intervention!"

"Rondal was *first* to arrive, Meela. *Rondal* saved your Captain's life by his quick thinking and actions. If he had not gotten to him first, then Tomar *surely* would have died before I reached him. You really *must* advise your Captain not to grasp for the fruit at the *highest* limbs without first having a ladder tall enough to *reach* it."

Lili felt a ripple of confusion radiate from Meela when that concept impinged upon her mind.

"I – then I must find Lord Calder and thank *him* for Vitas' life," she said, while still unsure of exactly why she should be doing so.

"Nonsense, Meela. Tomar serves the *Crown*, as does our Rondal. Rondal preserved a valuable asset of the Crown so that Tomar may *continue* to serve, just as Rondal serves. As so serves Rondal and Tomar, so does the Crown serve the *Commonwealth*, and the Commonwealth serves our *people* and keeps the peace, permits commerce, and protects its citizens. We *all* serve in our way, Meela," she said deliberately.

"It ... it all sounds so ... so *cold*."

Lili's eyes flashed in anger, and she confronted her in a harsh voice.

"*Does it?* Have you ever visited a *Blighted* world, Sharla?"

"Why ... no. Of *course* not, my Lady."

"We tend to forget how *bad* things could truly be! *Blighted* worlds, *primitive* worlds ... worlds *destroyed* by the Hegemony! We sit up here at the loftiest levels, and pull the *strings* of society to bring order out of *chaos*! At the *base*st level, your Captain is an *example*!"

Meela's eyes flashed in indignation, so Lili softened her tone just a bit, while sticking to family familiar mode.

"Do not take me wrongly, Sharla, but you *must* have observed Tomar's actions have gotten progressively *less* manageable? We have noticed a general decline in Tomar's level of ... *personal* responsibility, let us say."

"He serves me *well*, my Lady!"

"He serves the *Crown*, Sharla. We assigned him to guard *you*."

"Lili! We are not pieces of a ... a *puzzle* to be pushed around and *played* with!"

Lili stared at her while nodding her head slowly.

"So ... it *is* true. You actually *did* have some Healer training at one time?"

"Yes! My Mother was a Healer and began my training, but she was *killed* ... as you *well* know!"

"Yes, *Meili Tung-Mei*, as I had read when I returned from ... an assignment. Your mother lost her life in an accident. We *still* do not know who petitioned to have Sharla's name considered for selection to the House of Caldarous. Nor did I have the opportunity – *at the time* – to notice that *you* had been substituted in her place."

Meela stood in shock. Did they *really* not believe she was Sharla?

"You – you *knew*? All these years, and you *knew*?"

"Of course we knew, but it seemed a minor issue at the time. We were hopeful you would continue your Healer training as befits a Wife of House Caldarous. We were very disappointed, of course, but ... there is no divorce on Kantor," she said stiffly.

"Yes ... and so I stay trapped in a *loveless* marriage to someone who cares *nothing* for me!"

"You could have *refused*, Meili. It was my understanding that you knew *fully* what your position would be, and what would be *expected* of you. No one is truly *forced* into marriage with the Royals. We're usually very careful of our selections, which is why we tried very hard to make the best of the situation."

Lili turned away for a moment, while thinking back many years ago to her first meeting with the stranger with whom she'd been proposed as First Wife. He'd been young and very unsure of himself, but she'd felt the greatness he held within him, and accepted her assignment willingly.

"You say Radatel does not love you, and yet he cares for *all* of us in his own way. It cannot be easy for him, Meili. You only see him as a man with many wives. I see him as a *responsibility*. I am to push and prod and *guide* him in order to keep him focused on his duty to the Commonwealth ... yet I have other responsibilities as well."

She turned to face Meela squarely.

"We noted you eventually *absented* yourself from your responsibilities to your husband. Mei-Mei was widowed and had children. Lest Radatel's life become too stressful at home, we decided she would be a suitable companion. The comfort of her association brought him much relaxation. Likewise, Yin-Yin later joined the family." She smiled at the memory of those vetting conversations that had lasted *far* into the evenings.

"Think of it not as catering to *his* needs, so much as catering to *our* needs. It is not always easy to be even-tempered and supportive of a man of Radatel's responsibilities. I can continue my work; confident in knowing that he is in the ample care of Mei-Mei and Yin-Yin."

"And what of the – the *Earthling*, Spring Blossom?"

Lili smiled and suppressed a quick giggle when she remembered how *that* had come about, but a revelation of such nature was counterproductive at this time. Instead, she went for the cover story.

“Ah, now *that* is a puzzle piece which none have yet to figure out. The Emperor *ordered* her into our care, and we later added her to our extended marriage.”

“Yet you *abstained* during the vote.”

“Oh, *truly* I did. I was *much* too attached to her to vote with an even head.” Lili smiled once again, before glancing at the compartment timer and shifting back to family casual mode.

“Your Captain must be getting *hungry*, Meela. I should not delay you any further. I remind you – you are *always* welcome to seek my counsel and guidance. If there is *anything* you need to tell me ... if anything *pulls* at your heart... *please* do not hesitate to come to me so that a suitable resolution may be found.”

Meela stared at her for a few seconds more, before realizing she’d just been dismissed.

“I – I *thank* you, my Lady Lili. By your leave, my Lady.”

Lili sighed quietly as Meela closed the door behind her.

“Only *now* does she begin to grow,” she murmured sadly. Shaking her head slightly, she turned back to her tasks.

Midnight -1 (Day 95) – Some Late Exercise

“And how is my lovely Healer *Lane*, this evening?” Ronnie asked when he entered the gym for a second round of exercise.

Amy glanced around at the otherwise empty gym and looked at him wryly.

“Well ... I *was* just about to fall asleep until *you* walked in the door,” she said while barely stifling a yawn. “I wish there were some books or something.”

“Have you thought of using one of the data pads?”

His question momentarily stumped her, but she thought back to some of the available data libraries he’d previously suggested that hadn’t really panned out for her. Besides, she was still working her way through Larl’s video library, when she wasn’t putting him through his paces.

“Not having a good reference point in the society makes it kinda hard to get into the stories, Grandpa. Besides, it reads like science fiction for the most part.”

Ronnie stopped and stared at her for a moment, before beginning to chuckle.

"Yes, I suppose it *would* seem like science fiction to you. I recall a book or two aboard *Odontoceti* you might enjoy. I'll get them for you if you like. *English* books ... if you can still *read* *English,* that is."

"I'll read *anything* as long as it isn't science fiction, or totally boring historical records. Really, Grandpa, your society cries out for a creative writer or two if you ask me."

It didn't take him long to begin nodding in agreement. Ten-thousand years tended to thin out the available plot lines.

"Well, then, maybe you can pen the next great Commonwealth novel. Perhaps the story of a misplaced family trapped aboard a madman's ship and transported across the Galactic arm into the middle of a Death Void. No, wait – Larl already *wrote* that story!" Ronnie chuckled again, and Amy finally joined in.

He began his stretches, and when finished, selected a sword and brought up the *Kraken's Child* on the monitor.

"Ronnie – you're *not*..."

"Well, of *course*. Donnel was rather *proud* of the changes he made to the software. It would be rude of me not to try them out. Uhhh ... stay *off* the mat, Amy. And if I should fall, the kill words are 'Program-End,'" he told her before stepping up to the outer circle.

"Program-*Begin!*"

"AH – HA – HA – HAAA! COME TO FACE ME, KRAKEN'S CHILD!" thundered throughout the gym.

Ronnie shook his head, stepped forward gamely, then started his evening exercises.

In Ronnie's Compartment

Maya was in a fitful sleep.

She'd lain down to nap before her "suggested" night watch in the gym, but her dreams were racked by visions of Ronnie fighting a huge beast, while she lay helplessly nearby watching the whole thing. She was somehow held motionless when she felt the spray of blood splash across her. Then her head hurt *terribly*, and she remembered nothing save for a sense of *extreme agony*. Then she was somewhere *else* ... but then drifted away.

What woke her up was the tremendous *pain* she felt in her left arm, which then suddenly ceased.

In the Gym

“Whoa! That was quick!” Ronnie exclaimed after tossing his sword outside the outer circle.

The simulacrum came back to guard and faced his fallen sword, but made no move towards it – with *any* of its three swords. It appeared to be panting while it slowly shuffled backwards into the inner circle. Ronnie carefully backed away from it, but the attention of the simulacrum was still on his sword – which was safely *outside* the outer circle. He stepped away and retrieved it, only *then* noticing the trickle of blood on his left arm.

“Uh, Amy – if you would, please?”

She cautiously made her way around the mat while keeping her eyes on the simulacrum. Then she grabbed his arm once she got within reach of him, and in a few seconds, it was as good as new.

“Thank you, my Healer,” he said, before stepping back on the mat. “All right, ya wee beastie! *Let's have another go!*” he cried joyously while entering the inner circle again.

In Lili's Compartment

Lili stirred uneasily, extended out for a moment, but then rolled back over to cuddle with little Kita.

In Ronnie's Compartment

Maya sat up and looked around, but her Ronnie was missing, and the ship's timer said Midnight minus less than half. She quickly got up and turned on the monitor to view the gym; finding that her Ronnie was once again dancing with the *Kraken's Child* – *and without telling her!* She hurriedly dressed and rushed to the gym, while being discreetly followed by her guard.

In the Gym

Larl entered the gym and watched entranced while Ronnie skillfully avoided the blades that were desperately attempting to remove his head from his body. The simulation seemed to be running at full speed, but it was as Donnel had told David – the third blade added an *extra* challenge to the exercise.

Ronnie was finally feeling a little tired, and it wasn't but a few seconds later when he performed a fighting retreat and backed to the

outer circle – then stepped *beyond* it. The simulacrum paused at the edge of the outer circle – he could *swear* it was panting heavily – and then it slowly backed away and centered itself on the mat facing him, before dropping back to guard.

“Program-End!” Ronnie called out, and the simulation slowly faded away while the three swords returned to the rack.

“By the ... *Gods* that was ... *marvelous!* Oh, *hello* ... Larl. *You’re* off a little bit ... *early*, aren’t you,” he asked, while still panting a bit from his exercise.

“Uh, yeah. Andy arrived early and caught me watching you from the monitor up there. Told me to go ahead and leave a little early so I could see you in person. Are you all right?”

“What? *Me?* I’m just ... *fine*. Did you see the *detail* that ... Donnel built into the simulation! It looked like I was ... fighting a real Drecks, what with ... the glare, the breathing ... the ugly ... *faces* it was making. It even *intimidated* ... me from the *mat!* Did you *see that?*”

“Uh, yeah. I’m surprised Donnel didn’t add *audio* to the simulation just to make it more interesting for you.”

“Ah! That’s a *wonderful* idea, Larl. I wonder if he could take some Drecks recordings and program–” He suddenly stopped at seeing Maya’s angry face when she entered the gym.

“Why, good *almost* morning, my love,” he said cheerfully, “You’re *early*.”

Maya stood there for a moment longer while she fumed. She looked between all three of them, and then down at the mat. There was a tiny splatter of fresh blood not far from where Ronnie was standing.

“You were supposed to *wake* me, my love! Instead, I find you *here*, playing with that – that *thing* once again!”

“Maya, my love ... I thought I *did* wake you. Did you not feel the siren call from my few drops of *blood* there?” he asked while gesturing towards the mat.

She rushed over to him and started beating on his chest with both fists, before he dropped his sword and clasped her to him. She struggled for a moment longer, before slipping her arms around him, and hugging him tightly; her tears not far behind.

“It’s all *right*, my love. I’m *fine*. I could have fixed a simple cut like that myself, but since Amy was here, I let *her* do it instead.” He held up his arm to show her. “Look – *see*? Not even a *scar*. It’s even *better* than

I can do by myself.” His blatant lie did nothing to detract her from her anger and fear.

“Oh Ronnie, why do you *torment* me so? I dreamt about you and me, and that – that *thing*. You were fighting it, and there was blood *everywhere*. *There was blood all over me!* And then I woke up and you were *gone!*”

“I’m right *here*, my Lady. I’m right here, and *Amy* is here to protect me. And now *you’re* here to protect me as well. And *tomorrow* you’ll get to meet the *Elder!* Not many Healers are granted *that* honor. Isn’t that *wonderful?*”

She pushed back from him a bit, surprised he’d stated a *bonded* arrangement between them, but stayed within the circle of his arms just the same.

“And what does that mean for *you*, my Ronnie? What does the Elder want with *you* that she comes all this way to *see you?*”

“I’m sure it is merely *administrative*, my love. There have been inquiries, and apparently I must make an accounting. Undoubtedly, I’ve misplaced a zero on a *spreadsheet* somewhere, and I’m to be called to task about it.”

The thought of that ridiculous assumption brought a tiny smile to her lips, but she was still fearful.

“Are you *sure?*” she asked in a whisper, but had to wait several seconds for his response.

“Mostly, my love. But know this … *whatever* I have done, it has been for the benefit of the *Crown* and the *Commonwealth*. They can call me to task for nothing more than that,” he said proudly … and hopefully.

“Then I will not worry. Yet you will be *supervised* when you play with that – *thing!*”

“I hear and obey, my Healer.”

They hugged for a moment more, before he noticed half a dozen of *Sectorus’* warriors standing just inside the door. After a silent nod of greeting, he slowly broke away from her.

“Welcome, gentlemen. The gym is yours,” he said. “Healer Maya Tal will be on duty tonight should anything *unfortunate* happen.”

“And *remember* gentlemen,” Larl called out loudly, “Should you wish to dance with the *Kraken’s Child*, it teaches you to *defend only!* There is no way to beat it!”

“Oh, and if you should find yourself in trouble, throw your sword away – *outside* the outer circle!” Ronnie added, just before he bent down to wipe up his few drops of blood, and recover his sword. “Sticking around a bit, Larl?”

“Oh no … not *me*. No sir! You and *David* can play the fool with that thing, but there’s no profit involved if it takes *my* head. And if it *killed* me, Amy would *never* let me forget it!” he joked, but still caught the indignant intake of breath from his intended bond-mate.

“Well, enjoy yourselves tonight. Tomorrow promises to be – *different*,” Ronnie muttered hopefully. He put his sword away, then stopped to kiss Maya and Amy goodnight before taking his leave.

As he strode out of the gym, he considered thoughtfully, ‘*I think I have a book Diane might like,*’ and headed back to his compartment for his hard suit.

Noon –2 (Day 96) – The Elder Arrives

As regular as clockwork, the Elder and her retinue of four Seniors arrived, accompanied by their own personal guards. At their request, they would not be presented with formal protocol – other than being escorted in through *Sectorus’* opposite port, through the ship itself, and down into *Microcosmus* via the accommodation tube by none other than Captain Talon himself.

Lili had been *determined*, however, and placed herself *first* in line at the terminus of that corridor, followed by each of the Wives, in order. A somewhat sleepy Maya, then Amy, Shay, and Laisee joined them. Although Master of the platform, Ronnie found himself at the very end of the receiving line. This is the group that met the Elder, followed by her four Seniors and their guards.

As they each entered from the outer corridor, Lili set the semiformal protocol by simply bowing her head as they approached, and waiting until the Elder had passed by. Each of the Wives and Healers, in turn, followed suit.

Ronnie was not exactly sure why *he* was there, but bowed as well, and was surprised when the Elder stopped directly in front of him. He could see from her feet that she was facing him, and then she finally reached out a hand and placed it under his chin – gently raising it up so he could look down and meet her gaze as she held him there.

He was shocked.

He'd known the Elder was old, but thought she'd simply maintain her apparent age at no more than a matron. Instead, here was a diminutive woman who could easily pass for eighty or perhaps ninety years of age on Earth, and yet her eyes were clear and bright, and she had a tiny smile on her face.

The Elder turned to the last Senior in line and reached out to her silently.

'Look, Molara. He resembles his father, does he not?'

The Senior in question turned to look at him.

When Ronnie saw her face, it suddenly hit him, and only *then* did he remember her name. This was Yandi's older sister, Molara.

"He looks much *older*, my Elder," Molara said aloud.

The Elder looked him over carefully while slowly turning his face from side to side.

"Yes," she finally murmured. "We misplaced him for a time while he kept our dear Yandi company ... out *here*," she muttered in irritation.

She continued to examine him for a moment longer.

"We shall have *many* things to speak of, my little TS'ILSQQSÉ BIYIGÉ ... in due time," she finished, before abruptly turning to seek her quarters with the others, as led by Lili's aid, Kita.

'Whoa! That was *unsettling*,' he thought to himself, and was startled for a moment. He could have *sworn* he heard an echoing chuckle run through his mind.

Outside Observations by the '?

'Do you feel it?' '?' asked.

'Do you feel her?' "?" reiterated.

'She seems so frail?' '?' conjectured.

'It is near her time' '?' stated.

'She has such pain' '?' felt.

'You are too close' '?' warned.

'Will she really join us?' '?' wondered.

'It would be refreshing' '?' contemplated.

'We shall await our sister' '?' agreed.

Noon –0.5 (Day 96) – Stopping at the Gym

Ronnie had finally gotten over a bad case of the shakes with a couple of measures of ambrosia, and a simple visit with Diane in the gym.

He'd thought to cancel gym access during the Elder's stay, but Captain Talon had advised him the Elder wished to maintain routine operations during their visit. She didn't want to disturb too greatly the comfort of the crew...

"Here you go, Diane. Amy was near bored to tears last night, so I went back to the ship and picked this up for you both to read. It's mostly true life and not science fiction."

She gratefully accepted it and looked it over. The more she looked, the bigger her eyes got.

"Uhh ... try not to get any *blood* on it, okay?" he asked her, before leaving the gym.

Last night he'd remembered that Diane *still* had no clue as to the background of *Odontoceti*'s roots, so he was making a last ditch effort by simply handing her this major clue – a first edition copy of '*The Whale*' signed by Herman himself back in 1852. It had the inscription, "To my good friend Ronald, who has imagination exceeding even mine own."

He really liked that young man. Hindsight told him that he should have picked up several dozen of the first printing, but like *most* things of that nature, its real value wasn't achieved until much later.

Noon (Day 96) – Interviews Begin

The "interrogations" began promptly at Noon. Shay was the first one called, and she'd returned somewhat shaken nearly an hour later. When Amy had asked her about it, she'd told her she must not speak of it. *Any of it.*

That set the tone for the rest of the interviews. Three more of Ronnie's crew were individually interviewed for about an hour before being released under order of silence.

They took Laisee, Amy, and Diane in that order, then informed Diane that interviews were done for the day, but Andrew would be first up at Noon minus four on the following morning.

Noon +5 (Day 96) – Maya Has Concerns

"I am worried, my Ronnie."

"Maya, my love, you have nothing to worry about."

"But they do not let them *speak!* I am *afraid* for you!"

They were lying together in their compartment and sharing some quiet time with each other, while Maya was *supposed* to be napping before relieving Amy for the mid-watch later that night.

"When your turn comes, just answer completely and truthfully. There is nothing *either* of us has done that reflects poorly on the Crown or the Commonwealth. Well, except for me getting the *Microcosmus* ruined like he is, but that's over and done with. Lili said the Elder will be able to help you, and when *this* is all over and done with, you'll even get a chance to visit with your great aunt Molara. Won't that be nice?"

"Oh my Ronnie, I love you so much and I do not want to *lose you!*" she said while nearly crying out her frustration at his frivolity.

"No, none of that now."

He'd spoken sternly, but then began kissing her around her eyes and nose. She pushed him away, and looked at him with worry, but her face softened a bit, which he misinterpreted.

"Are you *hungry*, my love? Do you want me to bring you something from the commons?"

"No, my Ronnie. I – I seek *contentment*, my Ronnie."

"I am more than happy to oblige, my Healer," he said, then pulled her close to begin by nibbling at her ears.

In Meela's Compartment

"I am *frightened*, Vitas. The Elder *frightens* me!" Meela cried while wrapped in his arms.

"What have you to *fear*, my Lady? You have served the Crown and given Lord Caldarous two sons and a daughter. It is not *your* fault Lord Caldar managed to lose his ship and get your sons killed in the process. You have even let your daughter *go*, my Lady. That was probably the *kindest* thing you could have done for her, and I'm very proud of you for that."

"Oh Vitas. I have been so *wicked* all these years. You've no *idea*."

He snuggled her in his arms while trying to assuage her fears.

"I've watched over you for all these years, Meela. You've put up with *everything* House Caldarous has asked of you, and you *still* tried to maintain your principals as you were raised on Loca. That is

something to be *proud* of, my Lady. I know something of principles. I work very hard to keep myself ready at all times to defend you and House Caldarous. You have lived a blameless life, my Lady, and it was only your loneliness that caused you to take advantage of Laisee. Now you've set her free to do as she wishes."

He hugged her a little tighter, then began stroking her stomach with circular caresses.

"Come, Meela. Let me content you. You will feel much better for it," he suggested, before reaching down between her legs and cupping his hand over her mound.

Although he'd studied extensively and practiced well with Healers when the opportunity arose, he'd kept his heart pure for her since entering her service.

Despite her initial reluctance, Meela found herself becoming hopelessly aroused, and was quite surprised when Vitas caused her to peak so quickly. After her second peak, she gave in and became a willing participant to both her contentment and his.

Midnight –1 (Day 96) – Getting Maya Up for the Midwatch

Ronnie woke Maya by the simple expedient of planting his lips over her vulva and sucking strongly at it while grasping her hands and inducing a small series of climaxes into her body. She awoke feeling his tongue pushing into her, and found herself clenching in response. After several more tiny peaks, he finally relented and let go of her hands.

"Time to wake up, my love," he said, then glanced at the ships timer. "You've just enough time for a shower and grabbing a bite to eat before you go on watch."

"*Hmm ... I feel much refreshed, my Ronnie,*" she murmured, then reached out her arms for a kiss.

He joined his lips with hers and speared his tongue inside for a few moments before she pushed him away from her.

"Oh Ronnie! How could you *stand* me so?" she asked after tasting herself on his lips.

"You *always* taste delicious, my love, but go take a quick shower lest the odor of your feminine arousal *enflame* those who will use the gym this night!"

She paused a moment to stare into his eyes, but kissed him once more before getting up and dashing to the shower. When she came

back, he was sitting up and reading once again, but she noticed the monitor was showing the gym.

“Will you not sleep, my love?”

“I’ve just had a *lovely* nap with you, and I’ll keep watch over you for a while – from *here*, of course,” he said, while grinning boyishly at her.

He continued to watch as she finished drying and got dressed. Then they shared a final kiss before she set out to the commons to eat. He finally saw her on the monitor when she entered the gym.

He later noticed that Spring Blossom had joined her and was having a conversation with her. They both seemed happy, as he could see them laughing together.

“Oh Gods, they’re telling *stories* about me,” he muttered.

He shook his head and sighed before turning back to his book.

Noon (Day 97) – More Appointments are Kept

Andy had kept his appointment with the Elder right on time, and was followed by David and Larl. They were also advised to remain silent after their interviews, and warned that the Elder would know if anyone spoke. None of them doubted it.

Apparently, the Elder was going to interview his stepfather’s Wives as well, since Spring Blossom was called next to the Elder’s cabin. Her interview was much shorter, and Yin-Yin, Mei-Mei, Meela, and then Lili would follow her.

Ronnie had been keeping a discreet track of all the interviewees, but was surprised to learn Meela was skipped over in favor of Lili. He was even *more* surprised to see Granger, Lon, and Donnel having dinner aboard the platform when he went early for the midday meal.

“Well, I’m surprised to see the three of *you* over here. Is the food so bad on *Sectorus* that you must sneak over here for the pleasure of the Caldorous’ kitchen?”

“Aye, my Lord. The food be good, that’s true, but we be invited guests of the Elder,” Donnel said quietly.

“It appears some clarification is required about our reports to Lady Lili,” Granger added softly.

“Yes,” Lon said. “Apparently, the Elder prefers the *personal* touch, as it were.”

"Well, I'd not worry about it. She seems like a fine Lady to me. You'll do well as long as you tell the truth as you understand it."

"Oh, so you've *had* your interview with the lady, now?" Donnel asked.

"Uhhh, no. I've not yet had the pleasure, but I don't anticipate any problems ... *really*," he insisted at their concerned looks, before a slight hush spread across the commons.

"Good day, Rondal... Gentlemen," Radatel said curtly, and the four of them started to rise, but he quickly waved them back down.

He plopped a small bowl of gruel down before joining them at their table. In the now relative quiet, they could overhear the scandalized cooks whispering loudly about it over on the far side of the commons.

"Lili suggested it," he said glibly as they continued to stare at his bowl. "Said it would prevent any unfortunate stomach upset during my interview with the Elder. At plus *one*, I believe," he added, before swiping a finger full and gulping it down ... and then another. Ronnie watched, bemused, as did the techs.

"Is it to your liking, my Lord?" he finally asked him.

"At least *this* version is tasteless. Yin-Yin once produced a batch that tasted like some form of ... *nut* I think she called it. She made it on your ship years ago when she first found out about the recycling system. Gods' truth, I never *did* like the taste, but I couldn't quite bring myself to *tell* her, of course."

Ronnie nodded sympathetically.

"I understand. Sometimes it's the *polite* little fictions that keep our society most tranquil," Ronnie said, then continued to watch while his stepfather quickly finished his bowl.

"Most *amazing*, Rondal. You ate this for six *years*? And then for another twenty, *after*?"

"Well, the truth be known, my Lord, I supplemented that last twenty with a goodly portion of dried goods ... *and* a liberal amount of ambrosia, if memory serves. But even stretching things, the dried goods only lasted the first five years. I never expected to live much longer."

"And most fortunate for our Lady Maya that you *did*, wasn't it?" he commented, before noticing the First Wife passing the commons.

"Ah ... I see my Lady Lili is done, and my time is upon me. Wish me *well*, Gentlemen, for we may not meet again in this life."

He stood and walked over to put his bowl to wash before plodding off towards his dread adventure.

"There goes a fine man, lads," Donnel muttered sadly.

"Indeed. He is the finest administrator the Commonwealth could hope for," Granger agreed.

"And with the heart of a *warrior*," Lon added.

Ronnie was quietly amused at this turn of conversation while watching his stepfather walk away. He'd never considered the issue before...

Radatel had always been the somber administrator going off to an office somewhere and doing tasks that were seldom spoken of at home. He'd always seemed somewhat *distant* from Ronnie while he was growing up.

Being a mere *stepson*, Ronnie understood his lack of compassion for him, but for the most part Radatel, had ignored even his *own* sons and daughter. In his memory, his stepfather was around for very few mealtimes with them. Even then, he was seemingly concerned only with the status of their studies, and their behavior. To his recollection, he'd never played with *any* of them...

"I suppose, given the choice to face the Drecks in combat, or spend a *lifetime* serving as chief administrator to the Commonwealth – I'd choose the *sword*," he finally said.

That was something they could all agree upon.

In Meela's Compartment

"She did not *call* upon me, Vitas!" Meela said with worry.

"She did not call upon *many* people this day, my love," Tomar reminded her. "When she calls, simply tell the truth. The truth will achieve your freedom."

'*You have no idea, my love*,' she thought sadly.

Noon +4.5 (Day 97) – Feature Creep

"I hear Lord Rondal was *most* impressed with your work on the simulator, Donnel," Larl mentioned, after taking over the con watch and finding him there.

"Was he now? Any idea what *level* he's played at?" Donnel asked eagerly.

Donnel had stopped by to chat with David for a while, and then stayed after David and Larl changed watches.

"Well, it had three swords. I understand he got clipped when the third one showed up unexpectedly."

"Ah! That be level *thirteen*, then. The third sword comes in when you least expect it. At level fourteen, it starts *out* with three, and at level fifteen, it starts out with *two* simulacrum with *two* swords apiece!" he said proudly, which seemed to tickle Larl.

"He was very impressed with the new realism you programmed into it. It was most intimidating. I watched it face him down at the edge of the mat before it slowly backed away. Said he was impressed with the facial expressions and the simulated breathing."

"Did he have any *other* comments, perhaps?" Donnel asked with anticipation.

Noon +5 (Day 97) – Laisee Finally Heals

Maya was in David and Diane's compartment with Laisee, and going over her lessons for that day. She was impressed with her progress, and wanted to give her a practical test when the Lanes returned. Meanwhile, she had her reviewing sections from the Healers books while they were waiting.

As Laisee continued with her reading, Maya considered the odd visitors she'd seen earlier at the commons....

There'd been three of them – all men. They were *big* men with the hard looks of veteran warriors, and she somehow vaguely seemed to recall their faces, but couldn't remember where or when.

What had surprised her most of all were the friendly greetings they'd all given her; "It's good to see you again, Mistress Maya," and, "I'm glad to see you're doing well, Mistress Maya," and, "I've heard well of your work with Ronnie, Mistress Maya."

She'd politely thanked them all, but still couldn't place them, and it was bothering her to no end...

'*I'll have to ask Ronnie tonight,*' she was thinking, just before Diane and David entered the compartment.

"Greetings, Maya ... Laisee," David said, and came over and gave Maya a kiss on the cheek, then did the same to Laisee, who flushed a tiny bit.

"Well, is she *ready*?" Diane asked, while standing somewhat behind David with her hand behind her back.

"Yes, my Student, I believe she is."

David stiffened. He'd heard those words before, and it wasn't but a moment later, when Diane grabbed his arm and sliced it neatly.

"Student Laisee, please demonstrate what you've learned," Diane asked sweetly, while David cringed in pain.

Laisee tentatively reached out and covered the wound, while Diane and Maya looked on expectantly. David watched with interest as well. After perhaps a minute, she withdrew her hand, but the cut was still present.

"Try again, Laisee," David said. "I felt you, but sometimes it takes a while."

She tried again, but after another minute, the result was the same.

"I can't do it ... I-I just can't do it!"

"Now Laisee, that's not the right attitude to have for this," Diane chided her gently.

"That is true, Laisee," Maya told her. "Larl and David suffered *much* while Amy and Diane were practicing. Your mother was born on Loca, but your clan was from *Cletus*. You have *true* Healer in your blood, and you can do this. Attend, and I will guide you," she instructed her, then placed a hand on the back of her neck.

Laisee tried once more and felt Maya move through her. She felt the warmth flow from Maya out through her hand to David, but it didn't feel it like it'd been explained to her.

It wasn't coming from *her* ... it was coming from *Maya*.

"Relax, Laisee. Open your heart. Feel David's hurt and Heal him with your *love*. You need not push, Laisee. Let it flow from the top of your head and down through your body until you direct it to David with your hand," Maya murmured, as she tried to guide Laisee's efforts, while gently poking and prodding at the little bit of remaining blockage preventing her from channeling properly.

Laisee again tried very hard, but still wasn't getting any results.

David had seen this frustration with his girls before, and thought of a distraction.

He reached up with his remaining arm and pulled her face up to his, before planting a soul-searching kiss on her lips that included a thorough cleaning of her surprised mouth. Laisee struggled for a

moment, before suddenly leaning into his kiss while responding eagerly.

Maya nodded approvingly, then backed away when she felt the energy blockage finally free itself due to David's distraction.

After a few minutes, David broke his kiss from the breathless Laisee and looked down at his arm before forcefully pulling her clutching hand away from it.

"Look," he said, and showed off the tiny scar that was left behind.

"I did *that*?" she squeaked.

"Yes you *did*, my Healer," he said, and gave her a hug, in which they all joined.

After the general rejoicing and bouncing had calmed down, she was ready to continue.

"What is my *next* lesson, my Teacher?" she asked eagerly.

Maya noted the grimace on David's face and smiled at him.

"I think we will continue to use our Lord David to practice on, my Student," she said, and watched when David's eyes fell. "David, would you be so kind as to shower *thoroughly* so that Student Laisee may begin her *oral* contentment lessons?"

"With *pleasure*, my Healer," he said happily, then dropped his clothes on the spot, before hurrying off to the shower.

"You are very *fortunate*, my Student. Diane is *very* skilled at the oral arts and she will assist you for these next few hours," Maya assured her, without missing the trepidation in Laisee's eyes.

'Hours?' Laisee thought in a panic.

In Radatel's Compartment

"That was *very* frightening, Lili," Radatel said unhappily, before sipping a bit more of his ambrosia.

"Yes! Isn't she *marvelous*, my Husband!"

After finishing their administrative tasks for the day, Lili and Radatel were relaxing and sitting in his compartment. Or rather, *he* was sitting while Lili was pacing excitedly ... even a little *anxiously*.

It was *she* who had given Lili her current assignment as wife to Lord Calderous.

Lili hadn't personally seen the Elder for nearly a year, and was surprised to see how much older she'd gotten. She'd noted, however, that she was still the same very witty and very sharp Elder who'd presided over the Seniors and Healers for over a thousand years now...

Her interview had gone much as she'd suspected the others had. The four attending Seniors asked pointed questions, while the Elder watched and silently observed from her comfortable chair – only raising a protest when Molara became somewhat heated over the issue of Yandi's assignment to the platform so long ago.

The Elder had allowed the argument that – while Lili had made the *initial* suggestion, it was *she*, the Elder, who'd made the *final* decision – regardless of the outcome. Molara had acquiesced, but then held her tongue for the remainder of the interview...

Radatel was watching her carefully. Only rarely before had he'd seen her like this, and those few times he remembered quite fondly.

"Are you quite *sure* you're all right, Lili?" he asked her, gently probing verbally at her current mental state.

"Oh, my Husband! I feel so ... so full of *energy!*" she said, before turning to him and dropping to the carpet by his chair. "Radatel, my need is *much* upon me! Would you *please* grant me contentment?"

He smiled happily.

"As my Healer desires, so I very *willingly* oblige, my lovely Lili," he said, and got up and drew her into his arms.

Their clothes were gone before they reached the sleeping room, and Lili eagerly drew him to the bed before delighting under his *personal* care for the next few hours.

'*If only this job came with a real vacation,*' his thoughts lamented a little while later, before beginning another cycle of arousal and climax for his lovely First Wife.

In the Lane's Compartment

David was lying before her while Laisee was nervously looking over his freshly washed and naked body. The room lights were on full and Diane was explaining all the details about the male parts Laisee had only experienced rarely over the course of her many years.

So poor was her physiological education that she was surprised to learn his parts only differed from hers, mostly by the fact that his were *outside* and hers were *inside*. As far as *physical* response and

excitement factors were concerned, she learned that both men and women were very much the same in many regards.

Diane explained to her that the glans was similar to her clitoris and the sensations were much the same, although he felt much more along the shaft of his penis compared to the sensation she felt when it was actually entering the ring of her vaginal opening.

She also made mention that many Earth men had been altered upon birth by having their foreskins removed.

Since an extreme number of nerve endings are removed – along with causing the glans to become *keratinized* by drying it out – she had no reasonable explanation as to why Earth parents often mutilated their newborns in this manner. She pointed this out on David as – sadly – he'd suffered that same fate from his parents.

Diane told her she might possibly feel a difference having intercourse with David when compared to having intercourse with Andrew or Larl. Then she laughed and said *everyone* feels different during intercourse with Larl, which caused Laisee to blush.

She had her lie down close to David so she could touch it and feel it, tug at it gently, and flop it all around. For his part, David was remaining as relaxed as he could while Diane conducted her class with him as the practice dummy.

"All right, Laisee. Now hold it up with your hand and ... *kiss it*," she said.

Laisee held it raised and looked at it intently, but just couldn't bring herself to approach it, let alone touch her *lips* to it.

"It will be all right. He's not gonna squirt you right away," Diane said reassuringly. "You'll let us know before that happens, won't you, dear," she asked while looking down at David.

"Of course, my love. Go right ahead, Laisee. I trust you not to bite me – not *too* hard, anyway."

His voice startled her. She'd forgotten there was a head attached to the *other* end of the head in her hand, then dropped it and quickly sat back up.

"I – I don't think I can *do* this, Diane," she said nervously, and looked at Diane, and then over at David while shaking her head sadly.

"Well ... perhaps we can start you out a little more slowly," Diane murmured before getting up and going to a drawer to rummage around inside it.

Finding what she was looking for, she dimmed the lights a bit before returning to bed. Using the thin cloth she'd pulled from the drawer, she draped it between David's thighs and raised it up to his waist so it covered his genitals completely.

"All right, Laisee, move your legs to the side and rest your head in his lap so you're looking at his feet. Lie on your stomach. That's right. Just relax now and lay your head on David's lap. That's right. Feel him underneath the fabric. Do you feel how *warm* he is?"

"Yes, Diane," she answered timidly.

"Now, we're going to do this *really* slowly, and I don't want you to worry, dear. You're just going to get used to David a little bit at a time. You just listen and I'll tell you what to do. When I add another step, you either do it or continue with the *last* step. Is that all right?"

"Uh-huh," Laisee murmured from the side of David's groin.

"Good. Now I want you to push your cheek against his thigh and rub it a little bit with your face. That's it ... now work your way up and do the same on his tummy ... just like that."

Diane waited while Laisee tried to relax and did as she was instructed.

"That's *good*, dear. Now put little kisses on his tummy ... take your time, and go *all* over it ... that's nice, dear. Now start down his sides. Go down along his leg and put little kisses on his thigh ... that's *very* nice, Laisee."

Laisee continued to place tiny kisses along his leg while passing slowly up and down it in the process. David tried to stay still during the ticklish progression.

"Now come across to the other leg and put kisses *all* the way back up to his tummy. Take your time and *enjoy* yourself."

Diane waited patiently while Laisee worked her way up David's opposite leg and ended up back on his stomach.

"That's *very good*, dear. Now I want you to lay your head *right* over his *groin*," she said softly. "I want you to press your cheek against him and feel how *warm* he is," she added, but he pushed up from below.

"You sit *still*, David. This lesson is for *Laisee*, not you," she chided him gently, before focusing back on her student. "Do you *see*, Laisee? Do you see how much *control* you have over him? You make him *yearn* for your touch ... do you understand?"

"I ... I do?" she asked somewhat timidly, while gently pressing the side of her face against the cloth over his hardening erection.

"Certainly. Men are *simple* creatures, after all. When we give them pleasure in this manner, we are *completely* in control – *always*. Do you feel how *hard* you've made him? Touch him. Squeeze him gently with your hand and see how hard you've made him."

Laisee reached up and grasped him through the cloth.

"He is very firm, Diane. He feels very warm."

Diane smiled at what she was going to have her student do next.

"Why don't you make him feel a little *warmer*, Laisee? Open your mouth and press it over the cloth around his shaft. Then breathe out your warm breath over him. Go up and down like that ... *slowly*."

Lying across from her on the opposite side of David's body, Diane reached over and gently held Laisee's head with her fingertips, while guiding her slowly up and down David's covered shaft. As instructed, Laisee pressed down and blew her warm breath through the cloth along his length, while Diane guided her.

Diane could see David becoming stiffer as Laisee continued, and his glans was just starting to peek out at the top of the cloth.

"You're doing just *wonderful*, dear," Diane praised her softly. "I want you to keep moving up and down his shaft like that, but now I want you to press your lips against it and *kiss it* through the cloth. That will feel *very* good to him right now."

She continued slowly guiding Laisee up and down his shaft, and as she approached the tip, a portion of naked glans was exposed, and Laisee's lips made unnoticed contact with it. As she continued slowly guiding Laisee up and down, the cloth was becoming wet with her saliva.

Diane was getting a little excited herself, so she figured it was time to move on to the next step.

"I want you to start covering him with your mouth again, but now I want you to *lick* him through the cloth as well."

Diane guided her even more slowly this time. She guided her with the fingers of one hand, but the other one was grasping the cloth between David's legs. Each time Laisee started back up, Diane inched the cloth down very slightly. She continued to guide Laisee, while every pass uncovered more and more of his naked shaft until the cloth was completely removed.

"You're doing *wonderfully*, Laisee," she praised her softly. "David is *completely* in your power. He is *helpless* under your lips, my pretty Healer."

She slowly guided her up and down a few more times until Laisee reached the top once again, where Diane slowly tilted her head sideways and gently pressed it down against David's tummy – which left the head of his glans nestling loosely within her lips.

Laisee continued licking him while Diane ran her fingers through her hair. She continued cooing at her while telling her how wonderful she was doing. Laisee opened her eyes and looked upwards at Diane's smiling approval, then closed her eyes while continuing to lick David's glans...

David was *really* excited. This was how he and Diane had started out with his first blowjob from her. She'd read about it somewhere, and one night when they were necking, she'd worked up her courage and finally decided to let David take her mouth cherry. Although the T-shirt they'd used was long gone, he still had fond memories of that night. This was right up there with it – except he wasn't going to accidentally flood Laisee's mouth with a buildup of semen from a frenzied petting session...

Diane noticed Laisee's mouth had closed over David and her cheeks hollowed rhythmically when she began sucking on him.

"That's *very* good, Laisee. David likes that *very* much. How does he taste, Laisee?"

"e 'astes – he tastes all right, Diane," she murmured, after pulling off for a moment and leaving a string of stickiness between her lips and his glans. "There is a flavor that wasn't there a moment ago, but it doesn't taste bad."

"Watch..."

Diane grasped him at the base of his penis and slowly stroked him up to his glans – which produced a clear drop of sticky fluid.

"That is the lubricant the male produces. It helps make it easier for intercourse and tells us he's ready to play. For now, this is an *oral* lesson, so let's add some variation to your skills, shall we? And when David is about to release, he will tell us. I'll take him in *my* mouth if you aren't ready to do that, yet."

Laisee rested her head back on David's tummy and continued to practice under Diane's excellent guidance. He was in for an enjoyable hour or two.

In the Elder's Compartment

The Elder opened her eyes and smiled.

"Meela's daughter has successfully *Healed*, my sisters. And now she learns a *new* skill under the watchful eyes of our Great-Granddaughter!" Her eyes were twinkling in mirth.

"Rondal has indeed surprised *everyone*, my Elder," Xiu said.

"He *still* has much to answer for," Molara grumbled.

"There is much of circumstance that he is not accountable for," Ai said.

"You protest too much, Molara," Fan said sternly. "You are *biased* in the matter and should not sit in judgment. Do you wish anything, my Elder?" she asked evenly, while turning to their tiny master.

The Elder contemplated that question. More time? More *youth*, perhaps? Or cessation from the relentless *pain* of her age?

"I wish I had paid better attention to what my foolish *Grandson* had been doing before he began neglecting our advice. Molara, do you think your niece would condescend to offer a fresh cup of milk for her Elder?"

"I – I'll go to her *immediately*, my Elder," a chastened Molara said. She'd forgotten for a moment that the Elder was in constant pain.

"She need not bring it *personally*, Molara, but let her know I would esteem it a great *gift* if she could accommodate me."

"At *once*, my Elder," Molara said, then left.

After the door closed behind her, Ai turned to her Elder with a question.

"My Lady, should we update the Elder's Council with our current status?" she asked politely.

Elder Kita looked up at her and closed her eyes for a moment, which was just long enough to determine that – yes – *she* could reach that far, but none of the Elder's Council had the stretch to offer a reply. She could send them an update, but it would be pointless without being able to hear a response. Besides, they'd already voiced their concerns over the way she'd handled the issue of the Emperor. She winced slightly before opening her eyes to look up at Ai again.

"No, Ai. We'll leave them in a state of suspense for a while until we have something substantial to report. Should ... should anything

unfortunate happen while we are here, then it would best be reported in *person*, or when you are within range to reach them yourself.”

“The thought is disagreeable, my Lady, but we will obey. Ahh, what of Lady Molara?” she asked quietly.

Kita closed her eyes again, but it wasn’t due to the tapping of her talents. It was from the sharp needles she was feeling at the base of her skull. When the moment passed, she looked up at all three of them and nodded her head slowly.

“Molara is our fourth. Should it come to pass... If she *agrees*, then she will move up to become your third,” she said, but didn’t specifically look at any one of them when she’d said it. “She will be presented with the truth only *after* I am gone, my Ladies, and not before. Unless she chooses to leave the service of the Elder’s Staff after I’ve ... *retired*,” she said delicately.

Ai, Fan, and Xiu looked down at her and bowed their heads somberly.

The Elder was old and frail, and coming all the way out to the middle of a Death Void was probably the *last* place she should be at the moment. Unfortunately, even having held the position for as many centuries as she had, she’d still refused to abdicate and step down to allow a younger – and perhaps *fresher* – viewpoint to take her place.

They all hoped she would choose a successor soon before she became too weak to continue.

In Ronnie’s Compartment

Maya was resting while Ronnie sat reading in the outer room. He glanced over at her through the sleeping room door and smiled at the pretty picture she made – curled up on the platform bed and dozing contentedly. Not quite as contentedly as he *could* have made her, but she had to be up in less than six hours for her watch. He went back to his book and was just starting a new chapter when he heard a quiet knock at the outer door and got up to answer it.

“Welcome, my Lady ... Molara?” he asked quietly. “It is very *gracious* of you to come visit us. Please come in,” he added, before offering her a comfortable chair in the outer room. Her resemblance to his Yandi was not as obvious as Maya’s, but it still startled him at seeing her again.

“How may we serve you, my Lady?” he asked politely, but worriedly asked, “We’ve not missed an *appointment*, have we?”

“No, Lord Rondal. Of course not. You would know if you had,” she said, then sat down in the proffered chair to relax for a moment.

"However, the Elder will call for you and Maya in good time. May I find my niece in residence, perhaps?" she asked, while glancing at the sleeping form in the darkened interior chamber.

"Of course! Please excuse me for a moment and I'll let her know you're here," he said, then headed into the other room. In just a few seconds, Maya rushed out and greeted her Great Aunt with a smile.

"My Lady Molara, it is so good to *see* you! How have you been?"

"I have been well, Maya – considering the state of the *Commonwealth*," she said cryptically, while glancing over at Ronnie.

"If my Ladies will please excuse me, I will visit the gym for a while and you may speak privately," he said politely, then exited the room.

Visitors from the Past

After closing the door behind him, he mimed a chilled shudder for the benefit of both Maya's and Molara's personal guards, and got the expected smiles from each of them, before wandering off to the commons for a snack. He was just rounding the corner when he got a personal shock at the sight of three more of his old companions. Two of them had served aboard the *Microcosmus* under him, and all three of them had contracted with him for the odd job or two afterwards. It appeared that a *lot* of areas were being covered by the inquiries. He shook his head and hoped he'd make good on his accountings.

They each saw him as he approached. Noting they still wore the mercenary band on their clothing, he refrained from calling them by name, but greeted each of them warmly, just the same, and received their welcome in kind.

"It seems like I can't go *anywhere* without running into an old shipmate or two. First Talon, then Lon, Granger, and Donnel showed up, and now the both of *you!*" he exclaimed, while indicating his two former crewmembers, before turning to the third. "I suppose they dragged *you* along just for the ride?" he asked him, and his ex-contractor just smiled and nodded. "So, what brings you gentlemen along?"

"Well, I'll tell you truly, Sir, we were feeling a bit fat and lazy, and just a tad *older*, so we thought we'd fancy a visit to the old platform and go a round with the *Kraken's Child*," one of his former shipmates said. "Imagine our surprise when we'd found that old Donnel's already been here and pulled its *teeth!*"

"Ah ... yes. He pulled out that nasty surprise Talis put in there, but put in a couple of his *own*. I *still* wouldn't turn my back on it, though!" Ronnie told him.

They stood there for a moment, lost for words, until the other of his former crew members spoke up.

“Listen, Captain...” he said, but paused to glance around, “It wouldn’t be fair to say that we’re here as *paid* informants, but you *could* say we’re being paid as expert witnesses to events happening sometime between say ... oh, ten to twenty years ago. If you get my *meaning*, lad,” he said obscurely.

Seeing these three men together and knowing the time frame involved, explained the situation, but he wasn’t concerned.

“I believe I *do*, gentlemen, and I appreciate your candor. And I would expect nothing less than the *full* truth will be acceptable during the upcoming inquisi – excuse me, the upcoming *investigation*,” he finished semi-adroitly while trying to keep his smile in place.

They all looked at each other again, but the pause was slight this time when he remembered how he could temporarily forget his troubles.

“But that’s a day or two ahead, and you mentioned the *Kraken’s Child*. Are you ready for a little exercise?”

In Ronnie’s Compartment

“What news of my mother, Lady Molara? I have not heard from her since before my shuttle accident,” Maya asked.

Molara’s eyes blanked for just a moment before clearing.

“Sai does well, Maya. She misses you, but remains on assignment for the Elder. We hope to have her back in our arms within the next several months. You look *well*, Maya. Our reports said you were badly injured and yet had no Healer to help you. However did you manage?”

“It was my Ronnie... Please excuse me, Lady Molara; it was Lord Calder who helped me. He was on a ship that was passing by when they discovered our damaged shuttle. When the rescue crew brought me aboard, he stayed with me in the ship doc, and watched over me until I was better.”

She pulled back her hair to show her the scar.

“See,” she said. “He has some *little* training for fixing simple cuts and such, so I must not have been hurt too badly.” She laughed somewhat nervously, but then remembered the issue of her Grandmother.

"Ahhh... Aunt Molara ... when Lord Caldar was here by himself, he ... he performed the proper rites and rituals for Grandmother Yandi," she said timidly while dropping into family casual mode. "My understanding is that he knew his place, but also treated Grandmother with great love and respect. When we returned here, he came over first and ... and looked after Grandmother again. He truly *does* honor her memory, Aunt Molara."

Molara considered her words for a moment, before raising her palm and gently touching the side of Maya's head, then momentarily closing her eyes. As skilled as Lili was, Molara had six decades more of *severe* practice behind her and quickly appraised the situation.

Opening her eyes, she sighed internally, before continuing the fiction concocted by that well-meaning, but *woefully* incompetent man. After all, he had saved her niece's life.

"Ah yes ... I see where he has accomplished a *minor* Healing on you. I also see indications of injury to parts of your brain, no doubt due to the accident that befell your ship. Your ... *Ronnie* ... did very well by you, Maya ... given that he is but a man and of *little* innate skills."

She caressed her niece's face for another moment, before resting her hand back in her lap while letting out a sigh full of regret.

"It shames us that we overlooked the *severity* of your distress, my girl. We'd received repeated requests for either a visit from one of us, or to allow you to return for our Healing. Unfortunately, there were other concerns regarding the Commonwealth, and Lord Caldorous indicated you were working well by Lord Caldar's side. Is this something you wish to *continue* with, Lady Maya?"

"Oh *yes*, Aunt Molara... Oh forgive me, please, Lady Molara. I forget myself," she said anxiously, before finally picking up on what she'd just said. "You said ... *Lady* Maya? B-But my Ronnie and I have not... And he has *never*—"

"The Elder assigned you to him after reports arrived describing your accident and subsequent recovery on Earth. I do not believe he was made aware of your change in status until just recently – *here*. Is this a situation you would be pleased to *continue* with?" Molara asked her again.

Maya was stunned at this revelation. She and her Ronnie had been assigned *together*?

"I ... My Ronnie and I care a great *deal* about each other, and Lady Lili suggested that if I were to achieve a Senior level, I may be allowed to *stay* with my Ronnie to advise and guide him."

Molara almost smiled at her niece's proprietary attachment to that clumsy old man.

"And does *your* Ronnie take your advice in all things?" she asked archly.

"He accepts my advice, and we give counsel to each other. In those areas that he is the master of, we follow his lead. In those areas in which I am most knowledgeable, he follows my lead. Thus we have worked together for the last sixteen years, Standard, my Lady."

"So you've had *no* disagreements in all that time?" she asked, while probing the outer and inner feelings of her niece.

"Well... We had a falling out during our trip out here, and it was necessary for my Ronnie to remind me of my duty. It was well that he did, my Lady, as I had let my *feelings* interfere with his efforts to save us all."

Molara nodded slowly while tapping into Maya's feelings once again. It was a confusing mix of anger and contrition – with Maya internally admitting her abrogation of responsibility for several issues.

"And is there *nothing* about your Ronnie you would change, Maya?" she finally pressed.

"Well ... *yes!* He forgets his *position*, my Lady. And he should be more *careful* with himself, but he insists on dancing with the *Kraken's Child!*"

Molara tilted her head before beginning to chuckle, which eventually turned into quiet laughter...

She remembered messages from Yandi that had reported the peculiar behavior of the twins and how badly Rondal had been injured by the new exercise program they'd installed. She'd been *furious* when he'd gone back time after time until he could face the program and return unscathed. Men and their *toys!* And he *still* tests himself – keeps himself ready to protect his family, just as he'd always protected the Crown and Commonwealth. She hated to admit it, but she was beginning to admire certain aspects of Rondal – considering all those years she'd bitterly *despised him...*

Maya was surprised. She'd always understood why her Aunt Molara had hated the Captain of the *Microcosmus* for being the source of her Grandmother's death, but truly didn't understand what was happening with her aunt to bring her such laughter.

"Oh, Maya, our family is *much* too far apart all the time. I serve the Elder, and your mother serves the Commonwealth. And now *you* serve

the Commonwealth as well," she said, then leaned forward, and hugged Maya tightly before kissing her on each cheek.

"Oh! The *Elder!* Now I forget *my* place. Maya, the Elder wonders if you could possibly provide some fresh milk? She has been feeling ... uncomfortable."

"At once, my Lady! Let us go now and I will provide for her immediately!" she said, then started to rise, but Molara held out her hand lightly.

"Ahh, unfortunately, that is not possible at the moment. Although I'm sure she would appreciate receiving it from you directly, the conditions of our deliberations forbid a personal visit from you at this time. She *does* wish to see you, Maya, but propriety demands that it be at the *proper* time and not before. Do you have the means...?"

"Oh yes, my Lady. Come with me and you can help!" Maya started thinking of the situation while she drew her aunt into the inner chamber and started setting up her pump.

"My Lady ... Aunt Molara..." she said, shifting modes to subtly request their meeting become informal in nature, "...is the Elder not well?"

Molara held the cups for her while she thought over her answer. Maya dropped her clothes and started massaging her breasts, and teasing her nipples to start her letdown, before her aunt replied.

"Let us speak privately, then, as *family*, Maya – whose secrets confound even those of the *Crown*," she said pointedly, and Maya looked up at her and nodded before she would continue. "The Elder monitors and administers to the Crown. She has done so for a *very* long time. She was but a child when the Emperor's Great-Grandfather ruled our Commonwealth, and she became the Elder eight-hundred years later. Now it is more than a *thousand* years later still, and she has become old and tired. I fear the aches and pains of our long lives have finally caught up with her."

Maya knew the Elder was old – she'd seen her during her arrival – but didn't understand why she chose to suffer instead of accepting relief from any number of Healers among her staff.

"Are there no Healers among the staff who may provide this simple service for her, Aunt Molara?" Maya's face showed her concern, while her milk finally started to leak, before flowing steadily to the rhythm of the pump.

"Our Healers are all assigned to keep the Commonwealth running smoothly," Molara said while lovingly running her hand through her

niece's hair. "Imagine our surprise when we learned your Ronnie had not just one, but three *more* in training during his little outing. And now we learn that *Meela*'s daughter has performed a Healing as well, and just mere *days* after joining his crew. It appears our methods of training are in need of *serious* revision if he can produce three viable Healers within the space of a month – something that can take us *years* to accomplish. As for our dear Elder, she has just the four of us about her, and none of us produces any longer. All the rest are guards and administrators, such as Lady Lili's little Kita," she said with sadness in her voice, before going on. "The Elder maintains, Maya. She suffers in silence, but maintains. We each help her as we can, yet it is the simple succor of your milk that will ease her discomfort this evening, and we thank you for it."

"I will make myself available for her service *exclusively*, Aunt Molara. Though he begs for it, I will cut off my Ronnie *completely*," she said determinedly, which caused another round of giggles between them while the container continued to fill.

In the Gym

"AH – HA – HAA! COME TO FACE ME, KRAKEN'S CHILD!"

Ronnie's mercenary crewmate shuffled back when the program came to life, but one of his former platform members leaped forward and started his dance. He did fairly well for a few minutes until the swords started to separate, and one tried to take off his head, while the other one swept his legs.

He managed to both duck and roll at the same time and – remembering Ronnie's admonition – threw his sword across the mat *far* away from him while he lay there, hoping the Gods looked after their faithful warriors. At the very least, it was counter-intuitive, and something that would *never* be done in real combat, but it worked as advertized and the simulacrum faced the fallen sword and stood there panting silently at it before finally falling back to guard at the center of the mat.

He did a quick backwards spider-crawl off the mat, before standing up *totally* drenched in sweat and turning to them.

"I ... I remember ... it used ... to *chase* ... you," he said, while gasping for breath.

Ronnie walked over and clapped his ex-crewmate on the shoulder.

"Not anymore. Donnel fixed that little bug. But the next level up he tossed in a *third* sword that shows up randomly, and it's *wicked fast* when it does. It's pretty easy to deal with, though. Come to think of it,

level fourteen should be easier than level thirteen, because all three swords are there at the start – but I haven’t tried it yet.”

“Okay, I’m next!” his other crewmate declared, and Ronnie walked over to pick up the fallen sword. He inspected it, before handing it over and reminding him of the exit strategy, and the start and safe zones on the mat.

This warrior lasted several minutes as well, but when the swords started to separate, he immediately began a strategic retreat and made it to the outer circle safely. Meanwhile, the simulacrum stood there panting, and snarling fiercely at him in total silence. He moved the sword from side to side, and watched the simulacrum follow it with its programmed eyes.

Then he called out “Program-End” before the simulacrum could fall back and drop to guard.

“By the Gods, lad! As a shareholder, I say we *tow* this platform near one of our bases and *charge by the round!* At least let’s get Donnel to license the rights to the Collective and we can *all* make a fortune!”

They all had a laugh at that, before Ronnie turned to his third acquaintance – the professional mercenary.

“Ready for your round?”

“Uhhh, I’ve been up against Drecks before, but I’ve *never* seen one move that fast. You said this thing has a slower setting?”

“Yes, I did. Our man Donnel broke it down from the original speed into smaller chunks. That which you saw was about one-hundred, plus ten or twenty percent above normal. What would you like?”

“Oh. I’ll take a hundred percent, then, Sir,” he said, and Ronnie set it in, before saying, “Any time you’re ready.”

The mercenary took his time checking his kit and sword before striding to the mat, which by this time had acquired quite a crowd of observers.

The mercenary raised his sword in salute, and Ronnie called out, “Program-Begin.”

“WHO DARES TO FACE THE KRAKEN’S CHILD?”

The next several minutes weren’t quite the blur of activity that had preceded them, but it was easy to see this warrior had faced combat in person and survived to tell about it.

He easily danced around the simulacrum and blocked the oncoming blows; not trying to attack, but only defending. He managed to keep

up, but when the swords began to separate, he found himself in the middle of the mat when the attacks began in earnest.

His pride made him loath to toss his sword away, or call an end to the program, and he wasn't about to ask for help. Only moments later, he was on the verge of changing his mind when he slipped on a bit of his own sweat and the program was all *over him*.

As he would admit later, Ronnie had *stupidly* grabbed the nearest sword and rushed to the aid of his fallen companion.

Ronnie easily fought off the attacker while trying to kick the sword away from the downed fighter.

He tried a couple of more times, before finally dodging and rolling; picking up the other sword and – facing the simulation with *two* swords now – drew it to the opposite side of the mat. That allowed his other crewmates to rush in and recover his mercenary, after which Ronnie tossed both swords away from him sideways and defiantly faced the simulacrum unarmed.

“Program-*End!*” Amy yelled out furiously, before stomping over and examining the fallen fighter.

She pronounced him fit. Then she stomped over to Ronnie and smacked him aside his head, before stomping back to her seat where she picked up his ancient copy of “*The Whale*” and started reading again where she’d just left off.

Everyone was silent for a few moments...

“And I’ll wager she’d be one of *yours* you had trained as well, lad?” one of his ex-crewmen asked, which started a ripple of laughter that gradually encompassed the entire gym, while Amy assiduously ignored everyone during the commotion.

Out in the Corridor

Tomar left the gym feeling humbled.

He’d caught just the tail end of the last match, and seen a body in flight dive over the prone one on the mat, pick up a sword – a *second* sword – then turn to face the simulacrum. That clumsy old man had just rushed in, fought off an attack, and rescued his fallen companion.

And he’d made it look *easy*, and at a *much* faster speed than he’d set up for him the time before...

Vitas remembered feeling angry about that. He’d asked Rondal for one-hundred percent, but it’d been set it to only seventy, and he’d *still*

gotten the sense knocked out of him. The next time he saw him, Rondal was coming from the gym, and heading to the con, but he'd left the program activated at one of the locked-out settings.

How *arrogant* he'd been! As the voice thundered through the gym, he believed he would *master* this program! And the very next memory he had was waking up with his lovely Lady Meela providing contentment to him by order of Lady Lili. It was all very confusing...

It suddenly struck him that some of the conversations he'd heard over the last several days concerning "The Old Man" and "Our Captain Ronnie" may have some basis in facts he was not currently privy to; facts that tended to shower *affection* on Caldar, even as his failure at Zarox loomed ominously over his head out here in this death space.

He pushed those thoughts aside while heading back to his Lady Meela's compartment. His evening treatment was due, and he hoped it took a *long* time for him to recover.

Midnight –4 (Day 97) – Meeting Some Old Acquaintances

Ronnie and his former crewmates were having an animated conversation about the events in the gym, when Maya stalked up – still simmering – and stood behind him. The conversation died out, leaving Ronnie confused, until one of his mercenaries expressed a greeting.

"Welcome, Lady Tal. Would you care to join us for supper?"

Ronnie cringed internally and waited for her explosion, but the comment had thrown her off track. She looked at their faces closely, while trying to remember where she'd met them before.

"I – I think I should *know* you ... this is *true*?"

"Well ... yes, Healer Tal, you might remember us from a while back," another of them said quietly.

She looked at them a little harder, but slowly shook her head, and the professional mercenary finally spoke up again.

"We were all crew on the ship that found your shuttle, Lady Tal," he said; maintaining the lie Ronnie had concocted that last night they were together. "I was one of the rescue crew that brought you out of the shuttle, but you were pretty far gone to remember me, I'm sure. I'm sorry we couldn't bring back your sisters? Daughters? Forgive me, my Lady. It's been a long while."

"Oh yes, of course! I do not remember a lot from the accident, but I thank you for being in the crew of Ronnie for that trip," she said, with her praise triggering a comment from another mercenary.

"Ronnie's crew? Ronnie was just a *passenger*, my Lady. Constantly reading. Anything he could get his hands on. Fact is, he was the only one who'd bothered to read the ship doc instructions, so we made him watch over you while we made our stops along the Fringe. Wish we could have found you a *real* Healer, but old Ronnie here could just about make that ship doc purr. Comes from being an old combat hand, I'm told. Anyways, we're glad to see you up and about all vertical like!" he joked, which brought chuckles from the rest of the table.

"Would you care to join us for supper?" the first one asked her again.

"Ahh ... no, thank you, Gentlemen. I just wanted to see my Ronnie and let him know my Aunt Molara has returned to her lair for the evening. I will let you all reminisce, while I go check on the rest of my students. Good evening, Gentlemen, and ... and thank you for your service to me on that terrible day."

"Good evening, my Lady," they all replied, and Ronnie added, "Thank you, my Healer." She stood there and glared at him for a moment, before smacking him alongside the head and walking away.

"I guess she stopped at the *gym* first," he muttered, which started a whole *new* round of laughter.

Noon –1 (Day 98) – Meela Makes a Bad Impression

Maya's gift to the Elder had been gratefully appreciated, not only by the Elder, but also by her Seniors, for it had given the Elder a restful night for the first time in many months. They still took turns staying with her throughout the night, but she'd slept soundly, and had more of Maya's milk in the morning, which did *wonders* for her aches and pains.

Not for the first time did they consider sparing at least *one* nursing Healer for the support of the Elder and her staff.

Maya's interview was scheduled for the afternoon, but there was one thing the Elder wanted to accomplish first – to visit with their dear sister, Yandi. The Elder and her Seniors were accompanied by their guards, plus Lady Lili, and the rest of the Royal Wives. Meela had protested somewhat bitterly that she was *not* part of this event, but was dragged along anyway – not quite kicking and screaming.

As first impressions went, it was not a very good one.

It got *worse* when her lack of proper decorum found her on her knees, with her nose pressed up against the wall outside of Yandi's compartment. She was held there by the Elder's personal guard, while

the rest of the Healers attended to the same rituals Lili and the Wives had conducted just days previously. At the conclusion of their visit, the Elder and her Seniors left the compartment, and were followed by the Wives.

In passing, Molara quietly muttered, “Your time *comes*, useless one,” and Lili looked down at Meela sadly. Once Spring Blossom had passed, the guard released Meela, and she was escorted back to her compartment, where she was instructed to remain until called.

Walking back to their compartment, the Elder and her staff were discomfited by what they’d felt during their visit with Yandi. Yet *another* item to look into, it would seem, and Lili would pursue the matter immediately.

Noon (Day 98) – Skipping Dinner

“Come to dinner with me, my Lady?”

“I cannot. I – I must stay *here!* Oh, Tomar, I have done so many *terrible things!*”

The last two days of her self-depreciation were starting to wear thin on even *his* stalwart heart. She’d often spoken of some horrible things she’d done, but never explained them to him at all.

“What has happened *today*, my Lady?” he asked, while stifling a sigh.

“I – I behaved poorly at the remembrance for Senior Yandi. *And I was punished!*”

“Were you *struck?*” His duty guardsman had not reported that. He’d reported the *other*, though.

“No... No. I was made to kneel in the hallway and face the compartment of Yandi, while the others conducted the remembrance. The – the Elder ordered the guard ... that he ... *he pressed my nose to the wall for the whole time of the remembrance!*”

“So you were *not struck?*”

“*Tomar!* I am ill-favored by the Elder and her staff! Oh, Tomar, what am I to *do?*” she wailed.

He gathered her in his arms and tried to relieve her fears, yet again. As punishments go, he’d suffered *much* worse over the years.

“My Lady, I would suggest that you practice better *decorum* in the presence of those above you,” he said delicately. “You need not *mean* it,

of course. Our host, Lord Caldar, couldn't *possibly* be as cheerful as he presents all the time."

"Oh, Vitas – Caldar is but a *fool*, and a *madman!* Why *else* would he return to this *horrible place!*" she said, while still sniffling.

"If you'll forgive me, my Lady, his coming here has provided you the means to release the mouse safely. It has also brought my heart to you. For that *alone*, I should thank him."

"The mouse? ... My *daughter*, you mean!" she said indignantly, and struggled weakly in his arms, before relaxing in their comfort and leaning up to kiss him tenderly.

"Do you *truly* love me, Vitas? Will you *always* protect me?"

"To the end of my *life*, my love," he said, and hugged her tightly while she ground herself into him firmly.

"My Vitas, I fear you are discontent. I think it is time for me to *attend* to you," she said huskily.

"Then let us content each other," he said, then lifted and carried her to the inner chamber.

In the Elder's Compartment

"What troubles you, Molara?" the Elder asked her calmly.

"Caldarous' *Second*, my Lady! Forgive me, but the woman is *long* past overdue! Her crimes are *legend*, and I look *forward* to her end!"

The Elder considered this carefully. Maya's gift had given her a pleasant night, and her dreams were *much* clearer now. Not as clear as they were a thousand *years* ago – once she'd finally realized what they *really* were – but much more meaningful since before the Zarox debacle. She spoke calmly, and chose her words carefully; knowing even then that Molara would not be party to the final vote.

"Molara, we seek only justice here. The truth will help us achieve order, and order will let the Commonwealth continue. Would you *lower* yourself to seek mere revenge?"

Molara's anger receded before the wisdom of the Elder, but remained close by as she made her decision.

"My Lady ... *yes!* I would seek *revenge!* I would seek revenge for *all the evils that child has wrought!* For that *alone* I heed the advice of Lady Fan, and recluse myself from the final determination. *But I will argue the point most vigorously, my Lady!* And I am sure there is *ONE* here who will *gladly* seek revenge when the truth is finally revealed."

That, too, was something else that had danced through the Elder's dreams last night, but it remained unclear, and better left unsaid.

"That may be, Molara, but first ... let us put all the pieces we have gathered onto the table and assemble the puzzle as we may. We must tread *lightly* here, and I fear I may not see the outcome."

Molara had but a moment to consider her meaning, when Ai approached.

"Your pardon, my Ladies," Ai said, and turned to the Elder. "Our little sister, Lady Maya, brings another gift, and wishes for your good health, Kita," she said casually, and presented a vacuum container of what was surely a fresh lot of milk for the Elder.

"And your niece focuses on the *present*, as always, Molara," the Elder observed with a warm smile.

Her staff scurried to produce a clean crystal, before Ai poured her a measure of Maya's fresh milk that the Elder sipped slowly. As the milk made its way through her ancient body, they could feel the tension she'd held slough away from her, and her eyes closed in the pleasure of temporary relief. When her eyes opened, she sought out Molara.

"Maya's time is upon her. I would conduct her interview at plus two. Then we will make a determination. Remind her of her options, Molara, even as our servant, Lili, spoke of them to her. Either way, we will leave her relationship with Rondal up to her and him ... but it is *his* choice to join us for the Healing. From your tiny look, do you truly believe he may *not* wish to participate?"

"In truth, my Lady, *I* would not wish to be a part of it, even if it brings Maya back to us whole. He will be hard pressed to put her through that pain once again, and in the *manner* it must be done. Once explained, he may decline ... if only for *her* sake."

The Elder folded her arms, then rubbed her temples with one hand while a tiny grimace contorted her features. Ai quickly poured another measure of the gift of Maya, and the Elder sipped it gratefully. She gradually relaxed, before a contented smile finally graced her lips.

"We must have our Maya back, and she must train as *Senior* if she is to be useful to the Commonwealth. Yes, Molara," she added with a rueful smile. "Useful to our Great-Grandson, Rondal."

She thought for a moment more, then had another swallow of milk. She closed her eyes, and when her mind became clearer, she saw an *alternate* possibility for the future ... but frowned at the duplicity she would be forced to act upon in the *near* term.

"Perhaps there is *another* test for young Caldar, more in keeping with your *original* desires, my dear Molara," she said cryptically, while smiling up at her.

She cast her senses out and felt Rondal once again.

"Yes, I believe he would *relish* the task. You might even find it quite *entertaining*."

Molara was confused by that, but also concerned about her earlier comments. *And that Ai had addressed the Elder by her name – directly in front of them.* That was of great concern to her.

Noon +2 (Day 98) – Maya Gets Her Interview

Maya had finally been summoned and was both elated and terrified.

Her Great Aunt had come and reminded her of her options, and she'd repeated that she already wished for a full Healing if it would be of greater benefit to her Ronnie. That had brought a frown to Molara, but she'd agreed aloud that the Commonwealth would be better served by them *together*, rather than the alternative.

Now Maya found herself in the outer audience chamber, while waiting for Molara to return with the other Seniors and the Elder, which happened much more quickly than she'd expected. As she stood there in the center of the room, the Seniors filed in and assumed a position in front of a circle of chairs – the center chair reserved for the Elder. Each remained standing, with most of them looking curiously at Maya.

The Elder finally entered and sat in the center chair. Elder Kita observed Maya closely for several moments, before finally speaking.

"Maya Kao Lai Tal se Cletus, may I present my First, Senior Ai," she said, upon which Ai raised her hand, fingers up, and Molara gently pushed Maya over to render a formal greeting.

"Senior Fan, my Second," she continued, and Maya repeated her formal greeting.

"My Third, Senior Xiu ... and of course, your Great Aunt, Senior Molara, my Fourth," the Elder finished, and waited for Maya to complete her greeting with Xiu.

"I am Elder Kita," she said, and stood up and raised her hand.

Maya came forward, and gently touched her fingers to those of the ancient leader of their sect.

She'd felt a general discomfort in the area from the second she'd first entered the chambers, but the moment Maya touched Kita's fingers, the suppression she exuded to protect her Seniors was broached.

"Oh my *Lady!* Your need is so *great!*" Maya cried, and immediately took Kita's hands and held them tightly, before Kita's Seniors could move to block her. Then she kneeled before her and began drawing in energy.

Pleasantly surprised by her action, Kita basked in the youthful application of the Healer's art, while beginning to feel *much* better, very quickly – even better than Maya's *milk* had made her feel. The Seniors, however, noticed that – in addition to Maya drawing from the *universal* source – she was also starting to draw from *them*.

As much as Kita may have needed it, they reluctantly came to the same conclusion. Almost as one, they strode forward and pulled her away from the Elder. Kita was startled and unsteady at first, while Maya lay sprawled at her feet, before quickly scrambling back to her knees.

"Please forgive me, my Elder! I – I *forget* my place," she said fearfully.

Ai and Fan assisted the Elder in settling into her chair, while Xiu poured a fresh crystal of milk for her to help steady her after that wild rush of energy. Ai remained standing by her side, while Elder Kita relaxed and smiled down at Maya.

"My Ladies, that was quite ... *refreshing*. Come to me, child."

Maya stood up a bit wobbly and approached the Elder, who took her hand in hers and pushed a bit of energy back her way to steady her.

"Oh, my Elder ... you must *not*," she protested and pulled away.

"Sense me, child. What do you feel?"

Maya paused for a moment before closing her eyes to focus on the Elder, but what she felt dismayed her.

"Oh, my Elder, it serves you *not*," she said sadly, which released a titter from the Elder while she looked around at her staff.

"Do you *hear*, my Ladies? She gives me great comfort, and yet calls it *worthless*. Do you value yourself so *little*, my child?"

"Oh, my Elder, it is just – just that..."

"It's just that at some point you cannot undue the past, and must let things conclude naturally," Kita said kindly.

"But surely you must have *something* for the pain, my Lady?"

"My Ladies attend me as they can. It is merely the downside of such a long and ... *interesting* life."

"But my milk *helps* you, my Elder? If it makes you feel better, I would be pleased to supply you as you wish."

"And I thank you for your gift, little Maya, but I fear we will not be staying much longer. Time presses on, and we have much to do in very little time. However ... we do have a *little* time for friendly conversation. Is there a chair for our young Healer?"

"She may have mine, my Lady," Ai said, and moved her chair over in front of the Elder, before returning to her side.

"Thank you, Ai. Maya, please sit and let us chat for a while."

The chat was essentially meaningless, save for the exercise of social graces. The Elder had gained all she needed to know about Maya's unfortunate circumstances from her first touch. She'd also decided on the final test for Rondal. She was hopeful he would pass it, for she would hate to have Ai discard him as a threat to the continuance of the Commonwealth.

Noon +2.5 (Day 98) – Observations By ‘?’

'Did you feel?' '?' asked.

'It was powerful' '?' stated.

'We were weakened' '?' worried.

'We were too close' '?' pointed out.

'She joins us soon?' '?' pondered.

'Then we will greet her' '?' agreed.

Noon +4 (Day 98) – Ronnie Meets the Elder

"I beg your pardon, my Ladies. Lord Caldar is present, and bids entry for his interview," their guard reported.

"Let him enter," Molara ordered, and Ronnie was ushered in.

He came in wearing his best jumpsuit, and bowed formally to his hosts. The introductions went around, and Ronnie greeted each Senior as graciously as if he'd still been at court. As Elder Kita touched his hand, he felt the questing probe and automatically blocked it as best he could. He was fast, but not *that* fast, and could still hear her quiet laughter echo in his mind.

"So, my little Rondal ... still a rascal *and* a trickster? We must be *wary*, my Ladies, for he evades my charms easily."

She laughed at her own joke, and looked around her with a serene smile on her lips. Ronnie smiled at finding himself quite enthralled by his first ever formal meeting with the Elder.

"How may I serve, my Elder?" he asked politely and, for him, truthfully.

Kita stared at him in contemplation.

She'd already picked up what she needed to know, and was deciding whether to enjoy peeling away the layers, or go right to the center of the fruit. The ticking of her clock, and the grimace on her face, made the decision for her. Even before she began to speak, he came forward and opened the vacuum container sitting nearby. He poured out a measure for the Elder, then tasted it just before handing it to her. She paused for a moment before accepting it and sipping gratefully.

"I beg pardon for my presumptuousness, my Elder. The same supplier provides for my needs and I wanted to make sure the product was still ... *fresh*."

Kita smiled over her cup.

"Oh, you are *quite* the charmer, my little Rondal," she said with a quiet titter, before sipping once again with her eyes a twinkle. "My Ladies, this little devil-spawn would keep us dancing here all *night*. It would be a refreshing excuse to play ... but we have many paths to follow, and so little time to reach their ends."

Her voice had turned serious at the end, and she dropped all pretense of frivolity.

"Rondal, your help is needed to untangle the web of *lies* you've constructed to protect your Healer from herself. We will assist you, and you will see that she suffers not for it. I promise you that."

Her abrupt change startled him, but he quickly caught up.

"How may I be of service, my Elder?"

"You will need to relate to us the *entire* circumstances of your involvement. There is no current issue between the Commonwealth and the Hegemony, although we understand Gagsa paid you a *personal* visit during your very untimely departure from Earth a few months ago. Otherwise, as far as the Commonwealth is currently aware – any issues between us and the Hegemony, remain strictly between *you* and *him*."

"Understood, my Elder."

"Now, as for your *other* concerns... We will tell you what little our investigation has been able to confirm regarding the *reasons* why Healer Tal was involved at all."

She was gratified that her knowledge of his unspoken desires came as a surprise to him.

"Mind you, we do not know *all* that went on after we lost diplomatic contact with the Dreck's, but we have all the information leading *up* to it – to a *degree*," she said, staving off his questions before he'd even had a chance to ask them. "If you agree to help us Heal your Lady, then we will share all that we can confirm with you. If not, then the best she may hope for is to become *Second Wife* to whomever *we* assign to you."

She watched his face, and felt his emotions, as that stipulation perambulated through his thoughts.

"My understanding is that she would not particularly *care* for that option," she added tactfully. "You may think about it, of course. But we would like to *eat* at some point," she chided him gently, which brought a smile to all of them.

He stood still and brooded for a while, before he began pacing in a small circle. He'd folded his arms on his chest, but a hand occasionally reached up to bounce a thumb upon his lips. He also reached up to scratch his head or squeeze his temples.

'It would bring more pieces to the table,' he thought, but then chuckled to himself. *'They knew what she was doing there, but did they know why?'*

As he paced, his mind continued to jump across tracks.

'Maybe we would learn better how to deal with the Dreck's?'

He considered it might become useful in the *long* view ... maybe.

'She promised Maya would not suffer.'

This was something he'd *always* feared for her, and knew he couldn't fix her himself...

"Oh, *please!* Someone bring that old man a *chair*," Kita said petulantly. "He makes me *dizzy* wandering about like that."

Still deep in thought, he walked over, and poured another measure of milk for the Elder, but absentmindedly sipped from it himself, before handing it to her. He paused for a moment, chagrined.

"Your pardon, my Elder. I forget my place. It – it is much better when it's very *fresh*, my Elder. I will summon my Healer for you, if you wish? We would be pleased if you would have us tend to your comfort, my Elder?"

She contemplated his offer, and the hidden subtleties beneath it, with a twinkle in her eyes.

'He just might mean that ... and it has been so very long...'

She pulled herself out of her reverie and spoke to him.

"That will not be necessary, Rondal, but perhaps when Maya is herself once again, you may choose to offer once more?"

"It would be my *honor*, my Elder," he said with a bow, before continuing. "As for the matter before us, I accept your conditions. How shall we proceed?"

At a gesture of Kita's hand, her staff piled a small table with several reports, and a chair was placed in front of it.

"These are all the confirmed records leading up to and during Maya's involvement with the Drecks. They stop at one point, and then continue four weeks later when word was sent by you requesting a Healer for her. There may be more information pertaining, but it is unconfirmed. It will *remain* withheld until confirmed. They may not leave this room, and you have from now until..." she paused to glance at the timer in the room, "... until supper time to complete your readings. We will attend to Maya *tomorrow*, beginning at noon minus three. We will make all arrangements – you need merely show up at minus one to begin your part of the process."

Before he could express his thanks, the Elder stood and was escorted to her inner chamber by her staff – leaving him alone with the pile of records.

With a hopeful sigh, he sat down and began his task.

Midnight –4 (Day 98) – Lili Visits Maya

Maya was resting fitfully and tossing about; obviously having been affected by him telling her he would participate in her Healing on the next day. Ronnie looked in on her and was of a mind to set her to sleep, but was still too distracted by the thoughts running around in his head. He moved to partially close the door, before returning to his seat in the outer chamber...

In his opinion, the story the reports told was inconclusive, and any indications of weakness with the Drecks were *tenuous* at best. They

didn't reasonably explain how Maya had ended up on a *diplomatic* mission to the Drecks outpost, either.

The Emperor had decided – convinced by person or persons currently only *suspected* – to send a mixed diplomatic mission to the Drecks composed of an Ambassador, several assistants, and three Healers. For some reason, Maya and her two daughters had been selected. The fact that they'd been on *Loca* at the time was remarkable in itself.

The mission was on rocky ground to start with, but it got rockier when Maya had found a very young, injured Drecks and Healed it with both her milk and her talents. In her initial report, it had sounded like a reasonable action, but subsequent reports indicated that the child was *expected* to die because it had suffered injury by reason that it was "defective" in the eyes of the Drecks.

Apparently, only the *strong* survive among the Drecks.

Lord Gagsa – *possibly* the child's father – had taken great exception to the fact that the previously injured child was alive and well, and paying *far* too much friendly attention to Maya – a member of an enemy race. Before losing all further contact, the last communication indicated Maya had been caught nursing the child once again, and her status as a Commonwealth Healer had been revealed.

The transmission had ended there, and nothing else was known, until he'd reported recovering her – aside from the subsequent reports and claims of multiple Commonwealth attacks against the very same Diplomatic Outpost, of course.

He had to laugh at that – one used and unarmed tank, and a handful of mercenaries. It'd been totally *worth* it, of course, but he would have preferred to save them all...

A quiet knock broke him from his memories, and he found Lili standing outside when he opened the door.

"My Lady Lili ... is something the matter?"

"The Elder bids me brief you for the tasks tomorrow, and provide you with extra instruction. Is Maya within?"

"Yes. I'm trying to let her rest before the mid-watch, but she sleeps fitfully. Please come in, my Lady."

She walked in and waited for him to close the door, before turning to him with a sigh.

"Why do you not see to her *contentment*? Surely you have not forgotten *how*?"

"I – my mind is still on the path the Elder set it upon earlier today, my Lady. I worried I might do poorly by her, and make her even *more* restless," he said, but she reached out and took his arm.

"Come then, and we will content her together. The Elder wishes her to have a good night's sleep, so I will stay the watch this evening, and Spring Blossom shall keep me company."

When they entered the room, she gazed upon the sleeping Maya and noticed her fullness – which brought a *smile* to her lips in anticipation.

"Oh dear, Ronnie, she is *very* full. We must drain her *completely* so it will be *very* fresh when she offers her gift to the Elder tomorrow morning."

She pulled the covers fully down to reveal a naked Maya, before beginning to gently squeeze and pinch her nipples. When Maya stirred and opened her eyes, Lili bent over and kissed her deeply.

"The Elder has ordered that you get a full night's sleep for the morrow and bids me to insure it. Spring Blossom and I will watch for you tonight. I am here to help you sleep, little Maya."

"I ... thank you, my Lady. *Oh!*" she said, when Ronnie latched on and began nursing from the other side of her.

"Oh yes, Maya. Ronnie and I must also drain you *completely* so your milk is *very* fresh for tomorrow. You will offer your gift directly to the Elder, and it will help her while she ministers to your Healing," she murmured, before latching onto Maya's other breast.

Maya lay back comfortably and reached a hand around both Ronnie and Lili's heads to hold them firmly to her breasts. After a little while, she felt Ronnie's hand drift down to her mound, which was quickly followed by Lili's.

After a moment's duel, he brought his hand back up and used it with his other to continue pressing and teasing the breast he was nursing from. Once he'd drained it, he moved up and began kissing her, and she could taste her milk on his tongue when it danced with hers.

Lili finally finished her side, and trailed a line of kisses down to Maya's lower lips, where she applied herself to her pleasure – causing her to wiggle delightedly. When Maya stole her hand down to Lili's head, she reached up and pulled her other hand down as well, so that *both* hands were guiding her head in directing her pleasure. Once

Maya had achieved a small climax, Lili took both of Maya's hands in hers, and held them firmly.

"Little Maya, it is time for you to go to *sleep*," she said, then nibbled at her lower lips again for just a moment, before saying, "Ronnie, please kiss her very well, now, and I will set her to sleep."

As Ronnie continued kissing her, Lili began at Maya's point of pleasure and began induction of the Gift – bringing her up and over several small climaxes, one after another, while Ronnie kept her mouth occupied, and her impassioned cries to a minimum. Eventually, Maya simply lay quivering from the number of continuous peaks Lili was pushing through her, and Ronnie pulled away to report that her eyes had rolled back.

"Hold her very steady now, Ronnie, and I will *finish* her."

Lili induced several massive convulsions within her, which left Maya nearly breathless. As Ronnie sat back, he lifted up Maya's arm and let it drop. She was indeed out.

"Thank you, my Lady. You are, as ever, most skilled."

"Ah. I see now that *you* have a problem," she said, and tittered while looking at his groin.

"That can easily wait until later, my Lady. What about my briefing and instructions?"

"I believe we can do *both* at the same time," she assured him, and grinned in anticipation, while helping him pull Maya over to make room for both of them to join her on the bed.

Midnight –1 (Day 98) – Lili Receives a Visitor

"My Lord Husband, what brings *you* here at this late hour? Was Mei-Mei *less* than satisfactory this evening, my love?" Lili teased him lightly.

"No. I just wanted to make sure you were up for your mid-watch, my love," he said, and leaned in to kiss her. "Were you successful with Rondal and Maya this evening?"

"Oh *yes!* Maya was *delicious*, and I am *still* somewhat full of her," she said with a giggle.

"Yes, but you never *share*, Lili," a pouting Spring Blossom called from the other room.

"I promise you, my Lady Blossom, when this is all over, we shall celebrate and entreat Healer Tal to share her bounty with the Wives ... and my Lord Husband," she called back, while smiling at her husband.

Instead of anticipation, Radatel shared a look of concern with her.

"Will Rondal be all right? I worry about the boy," he said quietly.

"Nothing is sure, but Molara recluses herself, and that is hopeful. She does not seem as angry with him as she once was. Perhaps our reports have provided much *new* information?"

"Then I remain hopeful, my love."

"As will we, my Husband. Now, you must hurry back to Mei-Mei before she wakes and makes more demands upon you," she teased him.

"I hear and obey, my Healer." He leaned in for another kiss, before taking his leave, and she sighed when the door closed behind him.

But, first things first...

"Come, my Lady Blossom. Let us go and find something *good* to eat, before we must go watch all those *delicious* young men in the *gym* this night!" she called out, and heard a giggle, and the rustle of robes from the inner chamber.

Noon –3 (Day 99) – The Preparations Begin

Maya showed up right on time, and was admitted to the Elder's suite.

The antechamber to the Elder's three-room compartment had been rearranged. It now held a comfortable platform, with several chairs arranged around it. There was a place at each of its sides, with another where her feet would be, and two places where her head would lay. She was reminded of the arrangement she'd witnessed at Yandi's ceremony.

When the Elder came in, Maya could see she was *much* frailer than she originally suspected. She thought the stress of the situation was taking too much of a toll on her, and immediately bared her breasts to offer their comfort to Kita.

Rather than partake of her immediately, the Elder bade her lie down on the platform, and had it adjusted it to a height that would allow her to sit and lean forward to nurse from her comfortably. Just as Ronnie had promised, Maya was *much* more delicious when fresh, rather than pumped. As she nursed, Kita felt her pains ease away and finally leave her body.

As much as Kita dreaded what they were going to put Maya through, she welcomed the relief this wonderful child was providing her. She decided to recommend they rotate in a stream of younger nursing Healers to provide support service to the office of the Elder when Ai took over as the new Elder. What better way to serve the Commonwealth than to keep its managers healthy and focused of mind? She winced at that last thought, and Maya automatically reached up to caress her hair and ran her fingers through it; causing Kita to sigh in *long* forgotten pleasure ... yet *another* recommendation to Ai.

Kita didn't drain her completely, for she needed to leave something for Maya. She had Ai and Fan take turns nursing from her, before transferring the sweet milk directly to Maya's lips.

Maya protested at first, but Kita explained it would help relax her, and ease her from any possible physical pain. Maya reluctantly accepted, and drank until she was nearly emptied. The last two mouthfuls were shared with Xiu and Molara, who closed their eyes and savored the feelings of comfort running through them.

As the minus two hour approached, Kita sent Molara off to perform the first of two tasks, while the other three Seniors helped remove the rest of Maya's clothing, and performed a very detailed inspection of her body.

They were looking for any other signs of injury, scarring, or anything *else* that might possibly interfere with the primary purpose of their task this day. Eventually, all three of them confirmed what Molara had presented, and the remaining issues were just the scar on Maya's head, and the severed memory connections Ronnie had made when trying to keep her from going mad.

In all her years of service, the *worst* thing Kita had ever dealt with was madness – either physically induced, or by situation. In *most* cases, what Ronnie had done would have been considered a *blessing*, and left alone. Unfortunately, the needs of the Commonwealth demanded they try to reconstruct Maya's memory intact. That meant having Ronnie help guide them while they retraced every step he'd taken in blocking her memories in the first place. From what she'd picked up from Ronnie's mind, that process had taken several days at best. They would not have as long.

In the Recreation Center

At the appropriate hour, Molara gathered the official witnesses, and had them escorted to the Recreation Center, where they were locked in. They included Lord Caldarous and all of his Wives, Ronnie's entire

crew, and the three mercenaries who were on the raid with Ronnie. Diane was concerned, but told that one of *Sectorus*' Healers would be stationed at the gym in her stead.

David was present as well, having been told that Donnel would stand watch for him. Larl took charge, and set up comfortable seating for everyone, before setting some quiet music playing, while they were waiting for ... whatever. He had instructions to assist Lady Molara when she returned.

A row of the Elder's guards was lined up outside the room, along with the guards for the Wives and Healers – Tomar included. He'd been a bit miffed that he'd been locked out of the Recreation Center, but there was nothing he could do about it. Besides, he was sure Meela would tell him all about it at the end of the day.

In the Elder's Compartment

It was half-way to minus one, when the Medical Officer from *Sectorus* arrived with his medical case. When he was ushered in, he brought out his instruments, checked Maya's heart and other vitals, declared her fit, and then prepared an injection. He asked something, and Maya heard one of the Seniors mention "six hours." He nodded, before slightly reducing the amount in the injector, and then approached Maya with a friendly smile on his face.

Kita made the informal introductions.

"Maya, my child, you must listen *very* carefully now. This is the ship's doctor, Commander Woldron. He will give you something to keep you from *moving*. It is very *delicate* work we must do, and you *cannot move even a tiny bit* or it will go *poorly* for you!" she admonished her.

For being Elder over the entire Cletus society, Woldron didn't think much of her "bedside" manner, but he withheld his sigh, while trying to put Maya at ease.

"Good morning, my Lady Tal. Captain Talon tells me you've trained several Healers in the basics of the art in very little time," he said, while smiling down at her kindly. "I am very honored to meet you, and proud to offer what little assistance I can during your Healing. As we are in dire need of more help out here, my hope is that you recover fully so you may continue to train Healers."

"I – I thank you, Sir," she whispered timidly, before clearing her throat. "W-What are you going to do to me?"

"Well, as the Elder said, you must stay *very* still, and what I'm going to do is give you something that will prevent you from moving at all. We use it on our patients going into ship doc, so the automatic

systems can work on them safely. In your case, you will be able to hear and smell ... and *breathe*, of course," he added with a little chuckle.

"Because you will not be able to blink properly, we will close and cover your eyes so they do not dry out. You will not be able to move, talk, or twitch in any fashion. Many patients become fearful when this happens. We usually put them to sleep, but my Lady Elder advises that you must be awake for this. Do you understand, my Lady? What I give you will not *harm* you. It will only keep you still."

"I understand, Sir. Thank you," she said quietly.

"We are nearly ready to begin, Doctor," Kita murmured.

"Very well, then. Lady Tal, I will press this here and it will sting a tiny bit," he said, then pressed the injector to her thigh and watched when she jumped from it.

"You will feel some weakness spreading out from your leg, but do not be alarmed. We *all* had to experience this in medical school. It did not harm us, so you will be fine."

Turning away, he asked the Seniors to cover her in a blanket so she wouldn't get cold. Then he came back with a cloth for her eyes.

"How are you feeling now, Maya?"

"I feel funny, Sirr," she drawled a bit. "My mouff wol—"

Her eyes suddenly looked around in panic.

"Do not fear, Maya," he said calmly. "This is normal. You're safe here, and you're among those who love you," he continued calmly, while her eyes slowly became dull and lifeless.

He waved a tiny light over them, and noted that even her pupil's response had deadened.

"I'm going to cover your eyes now so the light won't be so bright, and your eyes won't dry out. Do not be afraid, Maya. Everything is as it should be. We all love you here," he said while gently closing her eyelids, and covering them with the cloth.

He leaned over and kissed her chastely on the forehead, before checking her pulse and respiration one more time, then put away his instruments.

"My Lady Elder, you have about six hours. If you feel the need for more time, then simply contact me on the ship, and I will return. I will return anyway in about five hours to see how your Healer is doing.

Gods grant you good fortune,” he said, then patted Maya’s arm before taking his leave.

Noon –1.2 (Day 99) – Almost Ready

Molara walked with Ronnie while he was on his way to the Elder’s compartment, then left him near their corridor while continuing to the Recreation Center, where she would hold court. She saw the food carts had arrived, but were withheld by the guards, as she’d instructed.

“Have they been checked, my Captain?” she asked the Elder’s lead guard.

“Yes, my Lady. Nothing other than food or drink is apparent. The servers will return in three hours with more drinks and other snacks if required.”

“Very well, then. Let’s get them inside,” she said.

She did a quick head count as the food was brought inside. Then she gestured for Larl to drop the music and bring up the lights. A low murmur followed this while she waved Larl over and told him what more she wanted, before stepping to the front of the room to address the observers.

“My Lords and Ladies, Gentlemen and Gentlewomen. My Lady Elder requests that you observe and witness this testimony regarding prior events related to the injury of our sister, Maya Kao Lai Tal se Cletus. Three of you may be required to bear *additional* witness as to the veracity of Lord Caldar’s testimony regarding any actions he may or may not have committed on or about the time of our sister’s initial injury.”

She’d stared pointedly at the three mercenaries during that last statement, before turning her attention back to the rest of the group.

“For the *rest* of you, the Elder advises that this testimony may prove useful in further deliberations regarding any actions Lord Caldar may or may not have committed from the time of his assumption of Captaincy of CPS *Microcosmus*, and times forward. Because of the delicate nature of these deliberations, you are all advised that these proceedings are considered Crown and Commonwealth *secret* ... and the office of the Elder will frown upon dissemination of *any* of the information learned here today.”

She took the time to seek out each face, before turning her attention to Larl.

“Captain Riker? If you please,” she said, and the room lights dimmed, while a view came up on the image wall of Maya, Ronnie, and

the rest of the Elder's party. Low murmurs could be heard from the area of the screen before the testimony began.

Noon –1 (Day 99) – All Alone?

Maya was terrified. She'd been paralyzed and couldn't move, twitch or make a sound. She just *knew* something was wrong. *This whole thing felt wrong!*

Ah! There was her Ronnie! He was going to protect her and get her out of here, but wait? He was patting her on her arm. He ran his hand along her face? He ... he thought she was *dead*?

No... He held her arm and felt for her heart. She could feel it herself, beating *oh* so slowly. And she felt her own breathing, too. She suddenly felt his lips upon hers, and he gave her that tiny lick she liked so much – his *tasting* of her, he called it.

'Maybe this will not be so bad. My Ronnie will protect me. He will never hurt me. He PROMISED he would never hurt me. My Ronnie LOVES me, and he has never LIED to me,' she told herself, but the panic continued to build.

'Maya... Maya, my child ... you are not alone' Kita silently pushed into her mind.

'Elder? Elder Kita! ... Help me! ... Please help me!'

'Patience, Maya... We begin, child'

~~~

Ai spoke first while looking directly at Ronnie.

"Your name is...?"

"I am Rondal Caldar sai Caldarous se Earth ne Kantor."

"Is that your *true*, full name?" Fan asked.

He paused for a moment, before remembering the ceremony with Yandi and the Wives.

"I am also called Rondal TS'ILSQQSÉ BIYIGÉ Caldar sai Caldarous se Earth ne Kantor."

"TS'ILSQQSÉ BIYIGÉ... What does that mean?" Xiu asked.

"I – I do not know, my Lady. It is the birth name my Mother gave me back on Earth."

"And she never *told* you what it means?" Ai asked.

“No, my Lady.”

“Did you never *ask* what it means?” Fan pressed.

“Several times, my Lady, but she never told me.”

“Curious...” Xiu said, before asking, “Who is this that lies before us?”

“This is Maya Kao Lai Tal se Cletus, a Healer ... *my* Healer ... assigned to me during my last Commonwealth position on Earth,” he said, and placed his hand on Maya’s arm.

“You seem very *possessive* of this mere Healer, Lord Caldar,” Ai said. “Do you presume to claim *ownership* of her, perhaps?”

“I ... no, my Lady.”

“So you do not care if she comes or goes, stays with you, or is reassigned to someone *else*?” Fan asked.

“I *care* ... I ... my Lady Tal and I have become as if bonded during our time together. Both she and I would prefer to *remain* together if at all possible, my Lady.”

“You would accept a bonding with this mere ... *Healer*, Lord Caldar?” Xiu asked.

“I would gladly accept *marriage* with Maya Tal, my Lady.”

“We find that *curious*, Lord Caldar,” Ai said. “Do you not know she has suffered a *grievous* injury?”

He stiffened. If they were going to go over old business, this was going to take all day.

“Lord Caldar?” Ai prompted him.

“Yes, my Lady. I am aware of Maya Tal’s injury.”

Simple questions ... simple one-line answers. Nothing offered, nothing withheld. Almost as if she’d read his mind, Fan asked the next question.

“Lord Caldar, you are aware that during the Elder’s inquiry, you must avoid any evasiveness, misdirection, or dishonesty – lest further problems arise?”

“I – yes, my Lady. My Lady, may I ask–”

“*NO – YOU – MAY – NOT!*” the voice of doom coming from the tiny, frail Elder sitting by Maya’s head, pronounced loudly.

"Yes, my Lady Elder," he said, and hunched his shoulders in chastened condemnation, while Xiu continued his instructions.

"Lord Caldar, in order that the Healing of Maya Tal may proceed *properly* ... you will provide short, and *completely accurate testimonies* related *only* to the questions or information that we ask. Do you *now* understand?"

"Yes, my Lady," he said humbly.

### ***In the Recreation Center***

"Your son can be extremely stupid at times," Lili said very quietly.

"Stepson, my dear," Radatel murmured in his own defense.

The observers had segregated into groups. Lord Caldarous and his Wives had gathered into one bunch, while Ronnie's crew gathered into another. The interface was a tiny space occupied by Laisee on one side, and Meela on the other. For some reason, the seriousness of the proceedings had drawn Meela to seek out her daughter, and although they didn't talk, neither did they radiate any animosity towards each other.

*Progress*, some would say.

The three mercenaries were right up front in a group by themselves. They were slouched on the floor; sipping drinks and nibbling on snacks, while waiting in anticipation for the *next* piece of the puzzle to be revealed.

After all, they had *lived* it.

### ***In the Elder's Compartment***

"Lord Caldar, you say you would gladly accept *marriage* with Healer Tal ... *unconditionally* on your part?" Ai asked.

"Yes, my Lady."

"You must care for her very *much*, Lord Caldar," Fan suggested.

Ronnie didn't hear a question there, saw a tiny nod from the Elder, and heard that tiny echo of laughter once again.

"If the Healing for Maya Tal fails, will you *still* accept her in marriage, Lord Caldar?" Xiu asked.

"Yes, my Lady."

"In your position in the Royal House of Caldarous, you would normally be assigned a *Senior* as companion, and she would be

positioned as *First Wife*,” Ai said. “Would you *still* accept Healer Tal, even as Second or *Third Wife*?”

“Yes, my Lady.”

“Do you think Healer Tal would accept a *lower* position as a lesser wife, Lord Calder?” Fan asked.

“I would ... *hope* so, my Lady,” he said hopefully.

“I see,” Xiu said.

There was a pause while the Seniors looked down at Maya, and then at the Elder. Kita gave the tiniest of nods, and Ronnie knew the *easy* questions were done with.

~~~

‘Maya... Maya, my child ... this is Kita, your Elder. Do you still feel my presence?’

‘Elder Kita! Elder Kita, I am so afraid! Help me! Please help me!’

‘You must be brave, child ... You are a daughter of Cletus, and I know you will make me proud’

‘I will try, my Elder. Elder ... please don’t leave me! Please! Please!’

‘I am right here beside you, Maya ... I will not leave you, but I fear you must suffer some heartache ... Your Ronnie will explain everything, and then we will make it all better ... We love you, little Maya ... Your Ronnie loves you most of all’

~~~

“Lord Calder, regarding the recovery of Healer Tal on or about the time of her original injury...” Ai paused while looking back at the Elder, then down at Maya, before turning back to Ronnie. “There appear to be some *discrepancies* between the memories of Healer Tal, the *official* report you submitted, and the diplomatic complaint submitted by the Drecks Hegemony. *Why* would that be?”

Ronnie closed his eyes, took a slow, deep breath, then sighed. It was a long, *steep* slide into Hell from here, but at least his Maya was knocked out, and wasn’t hearing any of it.

“I ... lied, my Lady.”

### ***In the Recreation Center***

Radatel gripped Lili’s arm tightly, while his stomach did flip-flops. Lili merely patted his hand and gave him a shot of glow to settle his stomach.

Everyone could hear a bit of snickering coming from the front row.

### ***In the Elder's Compartment***

'Elder? ... Elder!'

'Patience, child ... All will be revealed, and I will help you through it'

'I hear, my Elder ... I ... try to obey'

~~~

"My ... my ... my..." Ai said enticingly, almost as if she was *daring* him to say something further, before turning away from him and letting Fan take over.

"Lord Caldar, aside from the *diplomatic* complaint from the Drecks Hegemony, what parts of your *official report* and the memories of Healer Tal appear to be at fault?" Fan asked curiously, then waited several seconds for his response.

"Mostly ... *nearly* all of them," he said. There was a slight pause while they digested that tiny revelation from him.

"A very fine line, *indeed*," she finally commented mirthlessly.

"What are the *truthful* consistencies between Healer Tal's memories and your 'official' report, Lord Caldar," Xiu asked him.

"Ahhh... I was *there*... I did my very best to *help* her... And then I offered her a position with me as my assistant and Healer after I brought her back to Earth with me," he said warily.

"So... there was *no* shuttle accident?" Fan asked.

"No, my Lady," he said quietly, then dropped his gaze.

"Lord Caldar, we find this very *troubling*," Ai stated irritably. "You willingly lied on an *official report* and ... apparently, you *also* lied to Healer Tal. *Is this correct?*" she asked him sternly, and backed it up with a frown on her face.

"Yes, my Lady."

Ai moved her hands out in an expression of surprised, yet subdued indignation.

"This sets a very bad *precedent*, Lord Caldar. Just imagine if ... if *all* members of the Royal families routinely lied in order to accomplish their ... *personal goals*," she said slowly, while turning to stare *directly* at the compartment's monitor.

In the Recreation Center

Meela shivered. Lady Ai was looking *directly at her!* She just knew she was! They *knew!* They must know *everything!*

For his part, Radatel merely brushed off Ai's comment like so much dandruff. Lying was business as usual among the Royals, and for most businesses, for that matter – unless there was a *paper trail* involved, or it detracted from the *Commonwealth*.

A certain amount of giggling could be heard coming from the front row.

In the Elder's Compartment

"Lord Caldar, the *official* complaint from the Drecks Hegemony lists an attack force of *four* Commonwealth-registered war ships, with a total complement of at least four dozen Imperial Warriors – said force landing an attack group whose *sole* purpose was to break up a ... a diplomatic *dinner party?*" Fan's eyebrows had risen at that last. "Would you say that is an *accurate* assessment of the situation that occurred on or about the time of Healer Tal's recovery?"

"I would say ... *no*, my Lady," he said slowly.

"What would be a true and *accurate* assessment of the number of ships and personnel of Commonwealth registry and descent that occurred during the event in question, Lord Caldar?" Xiu asked.

"That would be *one* ship ... and a crew of *six*, my Lady. Plus the pilot."

"You sound very *sure* of your assessment, Lord Caldar. On what do you base your statement?" Ai asked.

"My Lady ... it is based on the fact that it was *my* ship, and *my* crew ... and *I* was the pilot."

In the Recreation Center

A variety of reactions ran around the Recreation Center.

From probably least to most, Larl was nodding his head in approval, Lili's eyes were glittering like diamonds, Lord Radatel was groaning quietly, a couple of "Ai-yah's" came from Mei-Mei and Yin-Yin, Spring Blossom muttered something like, "THAT'S MY LITTLE TS'ILSQQSÉ BIYIGÉ", David blew out an entire mouthful of juice, Diane began choking lightly on a snack, both Andy and Amy chimed in with a "*Way to go, Grandpa!*", Shay was having trouble following the investigative questions and answers, a quivering Meela was clutching a very nervous Laisee ... and the front row was rolling on the floor.

In the Elder's Compartment

"Lord Caldar, at the time of the *alleged* attack on the Drecks outpost, you were assigned as 'Assistant Cultural Attaché' to the Ambassador's staff on *Earth*," Fan said. "This is *true?*"

"Yes, it is, my Lady."

"Yet you say it was '*your ship*,' '*your crew*' and you were the '*pilot*' during the event in question," Xiu repeated to him. "How is it that – during your assignment on *Earth* – you were able to *allegedly* pilot a ship into Drecks territory and return ... *without* official sanction?"

"I'd requested a 'Leave of Absence,' my Lady. I'd been working on Earth for five years. At that particular moment, I felt the need for a small ... *vacation*," he said, following it with a shrug, while hoping they would buy his simple explanation.

He noticed Kita frowning at him, and felt her glare was a warning to stay on topic ...and *keep it accurate*.

"Your pardon, my Lady. I truly felt that I was required elsewhere, and desperately so. I requested the time off, and the Ambassador granted my request. My work on Earth was not significantly impacted, my Lady," he offered contritely.

"Noted, Lord Caldar," Xiu said.

"Lord Caldar, was your ship a '*war ship*'? That is ... does it carry *offensive weapons*?" Ai asked.

"No, my Lady. It is a surplus Galaxy-class tank that was stripped of all offensive weapons. I'd had it converted for private use as a long-distance transport for a small crew, or group of travelers," he said while hopefully deleting an entire string of questions.

"What was the funding for the event in question?" Fan asked.

"*Funding?* Ahh ... it was *privately funded* – out of my personal account, my Lady."

"What was the make up of your crew at the time of the alleged attack on the Drecks outpost?" Xiu asked.

'Aww, *Crap!*' Ronnie paused in consternation, until he heard a tiny echo in his mind. '*Tell the truth!*'

"It held a complement of six warriors I had previously worked with, my Lady," he reluctantly admitted.

"I ask you very *carefully*, Lord Caldar ... were any of your 'warriors' then on *active duty*, or assigned to *any active duty Commonwealth-authorized military organization?*" Ai asked slowly.

He almost breathed a sigh of relief for the safety line she'd tossed him.

"No, my Lady. They were all independent contractors from one of the mercenary companies located on the Fringe."

There was a general pause while that answer was evaluated.

"It seems you have friends in *low* places, Lord Caldar," Ai chided him lightly. "And you, yourself, at the time of the alleged attack, had already been stripped of your rank and cashiered from military service by order of the Emperor *himself*. It would appear that you also have enemies in very *high* places."

That was a comment he couldn't ignore.

"As always, I serve the *Commonwealth* and the *Crown*, my Lady," he said proudly.

There was a significant pause while that circulated around the Elder's group.

"Noted ... Lord Caldar," Ai said, before she and her sisters turned to face the Elder while a furious, but silent, conference began among the Elder's staff.

~~~

*'My Elder ... My Elder ... I do not understand'*

*'This will bring you much sadness, Maya, but remember that your Ronnie loves you'*

~~~

With the quick conference over, the Elder and her Staff focused on him once again, with Fan leading off this time.

"Lord Caldar, we will accept the stipulation that you willingly hazarded a ship of your personal ownership, on your own time, and with a contract crew of mercenaries, in order to perpetrate the event in question – which violated the boundaries of the nominal Hegemony/Commonwealth demarcation line. It is also noted that the demarcation line in question is often subject to *casual* adjustment ... upon *occasion*," she said, then glanced at Xiu.

"You will now tell us – *in detail* – both *why* and *how* you conducted your intrusion into Hegemony territory," Xiu said. "We may stop you at

any time for further details. You may begin with why you felt the necessity for such an intrusion to begin with.”

He knew they were never going to believe him, but...

“My Ladies ... before departing Earth, I’d been having ... *dreams* of someone or something calling to me,” he said, then paused to look at each of them.

Ai closed her eyes, then opened them, before nodding to him and speaking.

“It is not entirely unknown in various primitive or even advanced species that such sensations are reported to occur. This phenomenon happens frequently among the Healers and Seniors of the Commonwealth. We will accept your interpretation,” she said, and he bowed his head slightly, before he continued.

“As each night progressed, I felt a greater anxiety that I had somewhere I must go as quickly as possible. By the end of the week, I’d requested a Leave of Absence, and departed Earth in the general direction of the calling.” He subconsciously glanced in the direction of the Diplomatic Outpost, before going on.

“Once I was sufficiently far along my way, I saw that my course would pass either close to, or through, the edge of the demarcation line. At that point, I felt it prudent to hire mercenary troops in case of future need. I detoured slightly off course and contacted a previous acquaintance who was able to provide me with six contract warriors for security purposes.” He paused again, but there were no questions.

“When we came closer to the demarcation line, I felt a shift in the calling, and established that my *new* line would pass either very close, or through the Dreck’s Diplomatic Outpost in that quadrant. I managed to evade detection by their pickets, and we were able to establish a line to the strongest point of the calling.”

Lady Fan raised her hand.

“To be perfectly clear, you did not receive any *mechanically* produced signals, or other communications from the outpost in question requesting your assistance?” she asked.

“No, my Lady. It was just a – a *feeling*... A very *strong* feeling,” he said, then continued when no other question was asked. “Once I’d determined the most *precise* location of the calling, I landed. Six of us exited the ship to attempt entry into a lesser used area of the pressurized habitation. I left one crewman behind to move the ship as necessary.”

Lady Xiu raised her hand.

"What offensive weapons were brought to the Drecks outpost, both on your ship and personally carried?" she asked.

"My ship was completely disarmed ... no offensive weapons whatsoever, save for the pellet throwers and beam weapons carried by the contract warriors. The crew that left the ship with me carried a mix of beam and pellet throwers. We all carried power swords – molecularly-edged swords of Fringer manufacture similar to the power swords located in the gym here..." he said, then paused once again.

"Continue," Xiu said.

"Ahh ... standard hard suits with limited armor – for increased mobility. And each of us carried two emergency vacuum bags for transport of ... unsuited ... individuals ... in a vacuum ... should the opportunity arise."

He was starting to remember that visit, and it was getting harder for him to speak. He stared off at a distant memory, while continuing his testimony.

"We entered ... we entered into an area that was for food preparation. As we passed the waste containers, we noticed various items of ...of clothing. It ... it was a mixture of male and female attire found in a ... a business, or other office working area... We ...ahh ... we ... we passed a storage area, and found portions of human ... remains ... hanging on hooks..."

He was finding it very difficult to speak, and began wiping his eyes.

"Ahh ... somewhere along the way, we heard noises ... shouts and yelling in Drecks. We heard screaming ...many female voices. I felt the calling practically jerking me towards the sound, and we started running forward. The door we pushed through opened into a large room ... a Drecks dining room."

He paused in memory of the view, and struggled to catch a breath.

"By the time we entered ... only one voice was still screaming ... the other two females had already been ... partially dismembered. I ... I remember seeing one of them ... her head was facing me and ... and her lips were still moving ... her ... her eyes ... I watched ... as they died..."

He stopped completely, with his head down, and his tears falling freely. The Elder lifted a finger, and Ai brought a cloth for him, and a small measure of milk.

In the Recreation Center

The mood in the Center had become somber.

Lord Caldarous was a professional administrator, an Imperial “bean-counter” of the *highest* caliber. Much of the Empire ran under his advisory supervision at the direction of his father, the Emperor.

From the complaint filed by the Dreck family, Radatel had understood Rondal was somehow involved, but the details had been thankfully spared him – right up until *now*. The reasons why he’d never really understood his stepson were now becoming *painfully* clear to him.

Ronnie’s crew were all sitting closer together.

David had been in combat before, but was spared scenes like what was being described. Diane had also seen her share of bloody messes, but nothing like this had *ever* come to mind, and she was wondering now if she’d ever be able to forget it. Amy was clutching Larl, even as Shay was holding on to Andy.

Meela was crying tears ... *real* tears ... and Laisee was trying to comfort her, while the Wives grouped tighter together, even as Lili was keeping an eye on Meela.

The front row had become quietly grim. All three of them had been part of the entry team.

In the Elder’s Compartment

“Tha – thank you, my Lady,” he said in a whisper, and sipped the milk while closing his eyes for a moment. He drained the cup and wiped his face, before continuing his testimony.

“The surviving female had been abused pretty badly. She was splattered with blood and other ... liquids. When we were finally noticed, everything got real quiet for a few moments ... and then the big fellow – we later identified him as Lord Gagsa ... he ... ahh ... he tried to remove her head.”

He paused to wipe his eyes once again, before going on.

“Since I was closest, I powered my sword and cut through ... two tables, I think it was – maybe three ... anyway, I got close enough to interfere, but I ... I wasn’t *fast enough* ... just too far away, it ... I blocked his strike, but it wasn’t ... his blade cut partway into her head. I disarmed him, and blocked other attempts to reach her.”

He took a breath and held it for a moment, before letting it all out and continuing.

“Anyway, once he was pushed back, I maintained a protective circle around her. I ... I was hoping she was still alive. One or two of my crew were able to bag her, and I had them withdraw back the way we came while I kept anyone from following us. When we got to the lock, we cycled out, and I cut a hole in the outer door so they couldn’t follow us without causing a blow-out. By that time, my ship handler had closed up to us, and we all got aboard by twos ... the ‘*Ceti*’s got a real small lock on him.”

Lady Ai raised her hand.

“Please provide the proper identification for the ship you call, ‘*Ceti*’,” she said.

“That is CS *Odontoceti*. Registry is on home world – Kantor. It’s listed as a private yacht.”

“I am not familiar with the word ‘*Odontoceti*’. What does it mean?” she asked.

“It refers to a large Earth mammal that lives in their oceans. They are carnivorous air breathers called whales. This particular breed is commonly known as a toothed whale. Maybe eighteen, twenty-meters long at full growth,” he explained, then paused again.

“You may continue,” she said.

“Ahhh, we got into my ship ... we got into my ship and powered up the shields, then moved aside a bit where we thought they wouldn’t notice us right away. Two of my crew got her partially unbaggled and strapped down while I was trying to hold her brains together long enough to wrap a bandage around her head so we could get out of there.”

~~~

*‘He is talking about me! He is talking about my head – my – my brains!’*

*‘Yes, he is, little Maya. He saved every bit of you, and put you back together’*

*‘He LIED to me. My Ronnie LIED to me!’*

*‘Yes he did, little Maya. He lied to PROTECT you’*

~~~

“Ahh ... she was barely breathing, but that had to be good enough, because it seemed like they’d called in every picket in the area to blanket our escape,” he said, then paused while rubbing the back of his ear, before continuing. “I finally got up to the con and determined

we would have a very poor chance of survival if we tried to fly straight out, so I chose an alternate direction. I – ahh – I'd done a quick survey scan of the outpost upon approach and noticed that it wasn't very thick in a particular direction. I rotated the ship, and readjusted the shield a little bit – and punched through the outpost bedrock."

In the Recreation Center

Larl nodded his head at having another rumor confirmed, while the men in the front row were starting to warm up again with a few chuckles at the memory of *that* bumpy ride.

In the Elder's Compartment

"My survey indicated I should have missed any occupied areas of the planetoid. I don't think we covered more than a couple of kilometers or so, and I don't recall hitting anything but rock. Once the rock and debris trail fell away, we shifted course and took an evasive path back to the demarcation line."

He paused, thinking that he was done, but Lady Fan prompted him to continue.

"Ahh ... we worked our way back to the Fringe, and sent out calls for a Healer, but found none, so... I did the best I could with our survivor."

"Lord Caldar, in order to best deal with Healer Tal's injury, we must know better details of her treatment by you. This you will provide," Fan said evenly.

"Yes, my Lady. I – ahh – I stabilized her head wound as best I could, and ... I ... *Healed* portions of her skull and brain back into its original configuration ... as close as I could with the remaining pieces."

The silence of the Seniors was palatable, but since he wasn't struck dead from the looks the Elder and her Seniors were giving him, he continued.

"She – she was able to articulate words at first ... within a day, I think, but then her memory seemed to come back all at once, and she started screaming ... *constantly*. I finally sedated her as little as possible while we continued searching for a Healer – a *real* Healer – but we never found one out on the Fringe."

"Lord Caldar, why did you not simply jump to a *transit* location where you might better find a Healer to take over care for your survivor?" Xiu asked, but had to wait while Ronnie steeled himself, before admitting to his next crime.

"I – uhhh – I recalled reading that extended transit jumps with severe head injuries could be detrimental or possibly fatal. We'd already jumped our way out of Hegemony territory, and I feared it would be imprudent now that we were out of immediate danger. As it was, our outbound transit was a little over eight minutes. Coming back using typical micro-jumps was going to take us nearly a month. By then I'd determined another way to mediate her anxiety. I ... ahh ... I adjusted portions of her memory to *exclude* certain facts about her injury, and ... and fabricated a convincing lie that accounted for her loss of memory and injury."

In the Recreation Center

This was met by silence.

Although the Seniors were already aware of what he'd done, the Healers in his crew, having an understanding of the *significance* of his actions, were shocked. David, of course, had already seen evidence of this, but it was news to Larl, Andy, and the girls.

Radatel had already known as much, but the horrible details of the event had been kept from him until now. He shook visibly, even with Lily steadying him with an application of more energy.

His three previous contractors, all of whom had served *decades* with him when he was still known as "Tank," had often suspected there was something special about their Captain. This just confirmed it for them. One of them was smiling almost proudly.

In the Elder's Compartment

"By the end of the third week, she was talking pretty much normally, and her dizziness had gone away. She was still fretful over the loss of her companions in the shuttle accident I'd fabricated to ... ahh ... to replace her real trauma memories. Once I got her back to Earth, I tried *several times* to get a Healer to come visit her there, or to have her transferred back to Cletus for proper treatment ... but I was refused – *every time* – with *NO EXPLANATION!*"

"For the record, Lord Caldar, please confirm the identity of your recovered survivor," Ai requested calmly.

"I'd determined the survivor's name was Maya Kao Lai Tal se Cletus – she who lies before us."

"When did you first learn the identity of Healer Tal?" Fan asked.

"Ahh ... I believe that would be about the end of the second week. It was just before I'd dropped off my crew for separate transit back to their origin of embarkation, since they'd pretty much fulfilled the

extent of their contract. As I recall, she'd been just barely able to say goodbye to them. I passed along with them data packets for transmission back to Cletus and Earth – advising them of my recovery of a shuttle accident survivor who still needed care."

"Perhaps if you had mentioned her *existing* level of treatment and current impairment, you would have received following instructions?" she suggested.

"Yes, my Lady. In hindsight, I see that would have been prudent on my part."

"Indeed..." Xiu said, but paused for a moment. "We remain curious, Lord Calder. To what have you attributed the calling that precipitated the rescue of Healer Tal?"

"I – I felt it was ... the spirit of Senior Yandi calling me, my Lady."

"Would that be Senior Yandi Tal whose body lies aboard this platform?"

"Yes, my Lady."

"Please explain why you would believe it was the *spirit* of Senior Yandi Tal who called you to rescue Healer *Maya* Tal," Ai asked.

He looked around at all their faces, then glanced down at Maya, before he began speaking.

"I ... we were assigned here aboard the platform together – Senior Yandi and I. I was Captain, and she was Senior to the other Healers. As is typical among the fleet, the Captain and the Senior Healer provide their services to each other – the Captain almost exclusively to the Senior Healer. As such, in the short time we served together, we became well acquainted with each other's moods and feelings. Our emotions were known to each other."

"After Yandi died, it was very hard to let her go. I'd often dream of her, but never did I feel her at that time. Once we returned from here, I was released from service, and I took employment elsewhere for a while. Then I returned here for ... maybe twenty years. I felt comfortable here, and I was with Yandi once again."

"Previously ... she – she'd gotten angry with me one too many times when I'd used the gym and become injured. She began to teach me simple Healer techniques to 'glue my own damn self back together' as she used to say. She worked with me a little bit at a time until I became proficient at fixing the minor problems I got myself into. After I returned, I spent many hours sitting with her in her compartment. Then ... one day ... I opened her books and started reading."

He paused and looked at each of them in turn.

"I had come out here to *die* with my Yandi ... and yet the more I read her books, the more I thought perhaps there was more for me to do."

He looked down while remembering it was also when he'd first started hearing the 'voices' in his head – which weren't as irritating as the *visual* snippets of other places and events, but those had started occurring several years later. He took a breath, while realizing this was also something that *no one* else need know about.

"I eventually returned and tried several occupations. I finally joined Reclamations and started working the Gleanings from the Blight. I felt good about it and – and then one day I got the call ...*her* call ... to come and get her – to *rescue* her.

"When Maya ... when we got her cleaned up, I didn't see the resemblance at first. Once I got the swelling and bruises to fade away, I really thought that my Yandi had returned to me, or – or that she'd been reborn in this Healer. After Maya agreed to work with me on Earth, we used to argue about that quite a bit until I finally understood how angry it was making her.

"It is now my ... my *feeling*, that the *spirit* of Senior Yandi had called me to go rescue her *granddaughter* – Maya Tal. I no longer feel Yandi's spirit, and after fifteen years of working alongside Maya, I ... I'm afraid I've fallen in love with her," he said, but paused while wondering where else this was going.

"Is there anything else you wish to know?" he finally asked.

"Lord Calder, how many Drecks were killed during the event on the Drecks outpost?" Fan asked.

"I, ahh ... I really don't recall, my Lady."

"I will rephrase – how many Drecks did you *personally* kill during the event on the Drecks outpost?" she asked.

"Myself? None that I am aware of, my Lady."

Fan's look of astonishment was followed by her biting words.

"By your *own* admission you carried a *power sword* and employed it to cut through two or possibly *three* tables in order to reach Lord *Gagsa*, and yet you did *not* take the opportunity to kill him once he was *disarmed*?"

"Ahh – no, my Lady."

"Were there *no* opportunities to take Drecks lives during the event in question?" Xiu asked.

"I'm sure there were plenty of *opportunities*, my Lady. There was just no reason for me to *do so*."

An indignant gasp came from Ai, before she zeroed in with her next question on him.

"By your *own* testimony, you observed *human body parts*, and observed the partially dismembered and presumably *eaten* bodies of *two human females* – one of whom *died* before your very eyes. Did that not indicate to you the *necessity of killing the Drecks in retribution?*" she asked stiffly.

He felt her anger, but paused to consider his next words carefully.

"My Lady – in the short time that I was Captain aboard this platform, I was ordered to reduce several outposts and a few planets. Before my failure of command, I'd managed to complete *all* but my final task. I'd caused *millions* of Drecks deaths – military *and* civilian alike. I did so at the order of the Emperor to support the goals of the Commonwealth. Those killings were done in *retribution!*"

His eyes flashed dangerously, but he closed them, and fought down his anger, before continuing calmly.

"During the event in question, the Drecks I *personally* faced failed to maintain a viable threat against me and my crew. This allowed us to make a guarded withdrawal, and leave with minimal loss of life. By *my* standards, the mission was very successful."

"So the loss of Healer Tal's two daughters meant *nothing* to you?" Fan asked abruptly.

"It was unfortunate we were not able to arrive in time to protect Maya's daughters, or the rest of her party. I deeply regret not having the understanding to act more quickly on my feelings."

"Are you then saying that you will *not* kill enemies of the Commonwealth?" Xiu asked.

"My Lady, I will protect and defend the Commonwealth and the Crown with my *life*, and if that means *taking* lives, then I will *do so!* Likewise, I will protect my family and crew even unto my *death!* Otherwise, I choose *not* to kill ... not for *retribution!*"

"Why is that, Lord Calder?" Ai asked.

"Because *I made a promise to the spirit of Senior Yandi, my Lady!*"

He was struggling to maintain his calm, even while his body quivered from her accusations. He finally looked down at Maya to help settle his nerves.

“Indeed...” Ai said very quietly.

There was another silent conference with the Elder and the other Ladies. Finally, Ai looked up and addressed the monitor.

“This concludes the testimony of Lord Rondal Caldar regarding the event in question. All records will remain sealed until further notice. All observers are reminded to speak *not* upon these proceedings to anyone *outside* the recipient group. You are excused.”

“Huh? *Wait!* Who was watching just now?” he asked in a panic.

“Your immediate family and crew, Great-Grandson. Now go wash up and let’s get started on your little Maya before she wakes up,” Kita said, maintaining the fiction for his benefit.

Noon +0.4 (Day 99) – Additional Evidence

The party in the Recreation Center was just starting to wind down, and everyone was breathing much easier now. Conversations were starting up, but remained muted from the affect of the testimony they’d heard.

One of the mercenaries glanced at Lili, and she nodded to him. He approached Molara with a data tab and had a quiet conversation with her. Then she called Larl over to input a new video stream. There appeared to be further evidence.

The mercenary started back while glancing over at Ronnie’s new crew, then stopped while staring intently at them for several seconds. Then he shook his head slightly before resuming his seat.

In the Elder’s Compartment

Ronnie was washing up, while the Elder was in contact with Molara.

She thought about this new testimony and the time they had left, before deciding the official witnesses would watch the video now, and she and her Seniors would view it later this evening. Perhaps Rondal and Maya would also view it later – *if* Maya was up to it.

She authorized further detention of the group for a little while longer. Apparently, the video was thankfully short...

Kita had stayed with Maya, keeping her company silently, even while directing the Senior’s questions. She’d continued to give Maya her support, while paying attention to the side emotions of Rondal

when he was giving his testimony. That *last* bit might give her problems in the near term, but she would have to wait and see.

The testimony had many goals. One was to adequately address the complaints of the festering Dreck's grievance. Another was to establish the truth of the events as Ronnie recalled them. The last was to show Maya the extent of Ronnie's deception – not only of his ability as a Healer, but the *actual* events and reasons he'd had for changing her memories.

Granted, the increased complications within the House of Caldarous over the last two centuries had much to do with the lack of her *own* proper oversight, as *no one* had suspected the depth of the Dreck's conspiracy within the Commonwealth.

This was the hidden *primary* reason for this investigation that Kita had never revealed to Ronnie or Maya. She hoped some little bit of information a *fully* Healed Maya could reveal would place more pieces upon the table...

~~~

Paralyzed as she was, Maya could not cry out or make any movement letting anyone know how she was reacting to the story Ronnie had told about her. He'd lied to her *after* all. And he'd *kept up* the lie for over *fifteen years!*

'Elder Kita ... Elder Kita, are you still there?'

'Yes, child, I am here'

'Why did you not tell Ronnie I am already awake?'

'Because we felt he would not participate in your Healing, child'

'But – but he loves me. Why would he not help Heal me, Elder?'

'It is because he loves you, Maya. Did you not hear his testimony?'

'I – I understand he lied, Elder'

'Child – you grieved for your daughters, did you not?'

'Yes, Elder ... I – I still do'

'And you now know how they really died. How does that make you feel?'

'I ... I still grieve, Elder. Why? What will be different?'

'Maya, when Ronnie saved you, he said that you woke up screaming, and he could not resolve it. When you are Healed, you will remember

*EVERYTHING you saw before he removed your memory of it. We believe he would not help Heal you if he thought you would be crying out in fear from these painful memories as before'*

*'I will try to be strong, Elder. I promise, I will try to be strong'*

*'Yes, my child, and this time I will be with you, so you will not be alone. Lady Ai and Lady Fan will work with your Ronnie to put your pieces back together – properly this time'*

*'You will not leave me?'*

*'No, my little Maya. Just call to me with your heart, and I am right here. We are about to begin. Let us see how well your Ronnie learns his lessons'*

### ***Noon + 1 (Day 99) – A Quiet Departure***

The additional “evidence” had been thankfully short – less than thirty minutes in duration – even including the multiple views from the light armor combat cameras worn by the six warriors who’d entered the compound. They *all* could have done without Molara’s stop and replay requests, though.

Molara had finally released them after once again admonishing them to remain silent about the things they’d seen and heard during the testimonies they’d witnessed that afternoon.

Radatel led his Wives out first, followed by Laisee and Meela. The mercenaries were cleaning up their debris, while Ronnie’s crew – minus Larl, who was still in quiet discussion with Molara – reached out to each other over the horrors they’d just witnessed.

They waited as a group until Larl was done with Molara, and then left as a group. Outside the Recreation Center, they split up into couples and headed back to their compartments – all except for David, who’d said he’d head back up to the con and relieve Donnel early.

Diane had seen the same haunted look in his eyes she remembered from when he’d first returned from Vietnam, and decided to let him deal with it on his own for a while. She knew where she could find him and trusted him to call for her if he needed her. In the meantime, she thought she would take advantage of her watch relief and decompress in her compartment with perhaps a book – and as *much* ambrosia she could down without losing consciousness.

Andy and Shay walked along with her, while Amy and Larl diverted to the commons to share a small meal of ships gruel. They figured they could probably manage to keep it down, and if it *did* come back up, it wasn’t that much of a loss.

### ***Outside Meela's Compartment***

Laisee walked her mother back to her compartment, but didn't enter with her. Tomar remained outside, and at a distance, along with Laisee's guard.

"Mother, are you feeling better?"

Meela looked at her, glanced at Tomar, then looked at her again.

"Laisee, I – I understand that you are training as a *Healer* now."

"Yes, Mother. I am," she said, her voice becoming guarded as her mother searched her face.

"That – that's a *good* thing, Laisee. I ... your Grandmother did not teach..." She broke off and closed her eyes tightly.

"Mother, are you well?"

Meela opened her eyes, but was seeing something other than her daughter standing before her, then forced herself to focus on Laisee again.

"Laisee – I had no *idea* ... there was so much *blood* ... he ... *he Healed her, Laisee! ... Rondal...*" she paused and clutched at her daughter while her eyes began to tear. "*He Healed her!* He is ... he is like *them!* ... *I was wrong ... all these years ... I was so wrong!*"

She glanced around nervously, suddenly remembering Molara's admonitions, and lowering her voice.

"You go back to them, Laisee. You go back to them and *you study very hard!* You learn to serve the *Commonwealth*. I was so *wrong* ... and now I'm so *lost*... You... You go and be the *good* of me, Laisee."

She smiled at her once, reached out and hugged her, then turned and closed the door behind her.

Seeing Laisee now standing alone, Tomar walked over.

"Mistress Laisee, what has happened to Lady Meela?"

She paused for a few moments while pondering what to tell him.

"My Mother has lived her life in darkness, Captain Tomar, and now the darkness is lifted, and she is blinded by the truth. You *love* her, don't you, Vitas?"

"Yes ... I fear that is true, Mistress Laisee. I have told her such, and she has declared for me."

"That is good, Vitas. She had always secretly hoped for a man who would love her and not abuse her," she said. "I read her secret writings," she added confidentially.

"I will *never* abuse her, my Lady. I will protect her with my life."

"That is very brave of you, Vitas. I would be *honored* to find a man who loved me as much. I choose now to serve the Commonwealth, but finding true love is a dream worthy of *any* man or woman. Take care of her, Vitas. I fear she is at a decision point in her life," she said, before turning and heading back to her shared accommodations, with her shadow following in her footsteps.

"Even unto my life," Tomar said softly, as he watched them walk away. He turned and quietly knocked on the door before entering.

### ***In the Lane's Compartment***

Diane arrived at her compartment with Andy and Shay in tow.

All three of them entered and shared a hug, before Diane pulled away and dug out a cup and a bottle of ambrosia. Then she turned to look back at both of them, and got a nod from each of them in return. She pulled out two more cups, and poured a small measure for each of them, before collapsing into one of the compartment's chairs. Andy and Shay simply sat on the floor and stretched out on the carpet, while being very careful not to spill their drinks, as they sipped lightly at them.

Diane looked at her book sitting nearby, but frowned and decided otherwise. Instead, she got up and selected a movie from the room monitor. She made sure Standard subtitles were enabled for Shay, before the room was filled with the cheerful strains of a Lerner and Lowe musical. If nothing else, it was distracting, and there was no violence in it *anywhere*.

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

Amy and Larl took their time at the commons while their body language clearly diverted everyone away from them – even the kitchen staff. They sat and ate their gruel while keeping their thoughts to themselves.

Neither of them could eliminate the sights and sounds they'd just witnessed from the viewpoint of six different cameras. The video had started while they were preparing for the assault...

*A view from within the ship ... armoring up and arming ... comments...*

*“Tank, there better be a damn good reason you dragged our asses all the way out ta here!”*

*“By the Gods! Did ya see alla them PICKETS out there?”*

*“So many body bags? Tank, ya really think they be leav’n any whole, or we just gonna be pickin’ up pieces, ya know?”*

*“You know, Ronnie, I’d known you were bringing us here, it would’ve cost you more.”*

*The approach ... going in the back door ... cameras panning wildly ... beamers and pellet throwers sweeping back and forth ... passing waste bins...*

*“Tank, you be right. Have a look a this...”*

*Pieces of clothing ... standard diplomatic dress ... a woman’s bloody robe, and under things ... pieces of bone ... a piece of scalp with a woman’s long tresses attached ... a man’s shoe ... part of a foot...*

*Passing an open door ... meat hooks holding human meat...*

*“Think we be too late, Tank...”*

*“No – I feel her just up ahead...”*

*Indistinct growls and guttural utterances ... getting louder...*

*A door shoved open ... the view of a Drecks dinner party in full swing ... three huge serving platters on tall tables ... the remains of one woman – parts of her – closest to the camera labeled “TANK” ... another platter just beyond with another woman ...legs removed and abdomen cut open, with her distended intestines pulled out and partially bitten into ... her chest barely moving in the sudden stillness ... her head rolling towards the camera and her lips moving even in death...*

*The camera labeled “TANK” shifting into fast forward as the power sword in the forefront energizes with a brilliant flare and a horrible scream ... it slices through two tables with their dismembered occupants spilling to either side ... a desperate lunge with that same violet blade to block the cut from that hulking monster next to the third woman, but slicing its blade only partly to leave a portion of its remains to strike her head ...the subsequent back swing that removes the rest of the offending knife – with arm attached – and sweeping up across the face that was rapidly jerking back...*

*The camera labeled “TANK” becoming fuzzy...*

*The cameras labeled "ONE" and "TWO" showing a whirlwind of sword work from the warrior apparently called "TANK" as he appears to float over and around the remaining intact woman.*

"ONE - GUARD!"

"TWO - THREE ... BAG HER!"

"FOUR - GUARD!"

"FIVE - REAR GUARD!"

*Jumbled camera angles from five other cameras ...two views of power swords swinging and pieces of Drecks falling to the wayside ... dizzying turns and twists fending off attacks with short swords - dinner knives for the Drecks ... other swords energizing and the Drecks falling back warily ... camera "FOUR" swinging back and forth with views of "ONE" guarding "TWO" and "THREE" while they're carefully loading the woman into a vacuum rescue bag ...blood quickly covering the interior of the bag ... camera "FIVE" swinging between a view of the room and the back corridor ... camera "FIVE" turning and steadily watching "TWO" and "THREE" carrying the woman back with "ONE" and "FOUR" guarding their retreat.*

"GOT HER, TANK! LET'S GO!"

"TIME TO GO, TANK!"

*More jumbled views as the group retreats down the corridor ... more Drecks interference ... more Drecks pieces go flying ... camera "FOUR" faces the dining room from a doorway ... "TANK" quickly backs away from the angry dinner guests...*

"TEN FEET ... FIVE FEET ... I GOT YOU!"

*A hand reaches out and grabs "TANK" by the collar, pulling him through the door ... camera "FOUR" shifts and heads back down the corridor ... camera "TANK" backs up, the power sword taking out parts of either wall, and the ceiling collapses in front of it ... camera "TANK" turns and bounces, running down the corridor ... passing through an airlock in a group ... the lock opens and faces the open lock of a ship, a great white whale is painted on its side ... camera "TANK" spins, and a huge hole is carved in the outer air lock door...*

"RONNIE, COME ON!"

*Jumbled images ... cameras facing other cameras ... a camera faces the woman in the bloody body bag ... a camera goes forward to the con ... two cameras follow two men carrying the body bag to the rear compartments ... two men leave, and two cameras go off line ... another camera goes off line ... camera "TANK" shows four hands peeling down*

*the bag seal and uncovering the bloody head ... so much blood ... parts of her head missing ... part of her brains cut and bleeding ... a package of dressings is tossed on the bedding ...*

“You got her, Tank?”

“Yeah ... thanks, One ... ahh ... Oh crap! ... Ahh, get Six to lift us and put us sideways somewhere – keep the shields up, and for the GODS’ SAKE, don’t change the cloaking settings!”

“Aye, Tank. Don’ wanna have ‘em find us now!”

*Two more cameras go off line ... another camera goes off line ... shaky hands open a dressing and hesitate while trying to position it across her head ... camera “TANK” shifts position to the side of her head ... more hesitation and gentle touches ... tilting her head ... hands raise and lower in defeat...*

“Oh ... fuck it!”

*Hands reach out to cover the open wound ... a subtle glow comes from under, then around, and then over the hands ... seconds pass ... hands shift ... a little more glow ... the glow gradually changes from light yellow to a brilliant white for long minutes before fading away ... hands pull away to reveal a tiny scar line ... a new section of hairless bare scalp leads away in two directions ... blood is everywhere except for the immediate area...*

“Huh? That’s new ... Well, little girl, you made it this far. Hang in there, okay?”

A sing-song voice coming closer...

“Ron-nie, comp-an-nies a com-ing ... hey, not as bad as I thought!”

“Uh, yeah ... head wounds ... real bleeders ... what we got?”

“Bout every picket within a diameter. Time to go, lad.”

“Right ... hey, nice work, Four ... every one of you ... uhh, stay here and wrap her head – just in case. Please be gentle.”

“I always am, lad. I always am.”

*Views shifting ... heading to the con ... muttered curses ... monitors flashing ... a loud sigh ... displays shifting ... the main display pointing down at the surface of the planetoid ... a sudden rush forward ... ten seconds of bumpy darkness ... a sudden view of a clear star field ... a sudden jump ... a shift ... another jump ... another shift ... another jump...*

*"By the GODS, Tank! Give my stomach time to SETTLE at least, man!"*

*Quiet laughter.*

*Another jump, and a green light flashes on the display.*

*"Welcome back to the Fringe, Gentlemen ... Crap! ... I stink ... Six, you got the con 'til I get back ... We got anything left to eat besides ships poop?"*

*"Ai-Yah! You Imperials! Always thinkin' with your stomachs!"*

*More laughter.*

*A jumbling of the camera ... the recording ends...*

Amy and Larl looked at each other, but couldn't find any words to say. They picked up their bowls and put them to wash, before heading back to their compartment. Once there, they showered and then lay together just for comforts sake while they talked quietly about the day's events. Not feeling the need for a physical encounter and having nothing else to do, they decided to nap until it was time to go on watch.

They both hoped Maya's Healing would be quick and painless, but after hearing the testimony and seeing the video, *neither* of them had any confidence that would be the case.

### ***Noon +5.5 (Day 99) – Maya is Reconstructed***

Ronnie sat back in relief and closed his eyes. He was tired, and hungry, and *very* grateful Maya had been out for the Healing...

With Ai and Fan guiding him, he'd let them help him remember his steps from when he'd first worked on Maya's brain over fifteen years ago. As meticulously as he'd worked back then, retracing his steps today had been agonizingly slow.

He was amazed they could uncover each element in his treatment so precisely, while they proceeded through the exacting steps he'd undertaken to excise portions of her memory, so she could function at some reasonable level of non-anxiety.

Each step was important, since they needed to *exactly* back-step every change in her mind, before they could reestablish the connections in the *proper* order. That was the only way Maya's memories would be complete and in the correct sequence.

Except for Ronnie and Maya, all of them knew the *real* purpose for her memory reconstruction. Certainly, Maya might become a

successful Senior without recovering her memories; even Lili knew that, but a history of suppressed trauma could eventually catch up with a Senior. If she were to experience even the slightest flashback, then her Healings would become suspect, or worse, there could even be subconscious interference with her Healings.

Ai and Fan had spent almost two hours working with Ronnie, both verbally and internally, while he pointed out what he'd done, why he'd done it, and what the result had been at the time.

All of this was *without* making any changes to Maya. She'd been appalled at the running commentary she heard, but was unable to give any evidence of it, since she was still paralyzed. At least, the Elder was still keeping her company, and talking to her with her mind, and reassuring her.

The next several hours were not so pleasant for *any* of them.

Ronnie was led by Ai and Fan to reverse Maya's disconnections, one by one, while the Elder tried to keep control of first an anxious, then panicky, and finally a *horrified* Maya.

Xiu and Molara had joined with the Elder to help lift her burden and share their love with Maya, but it was difficult and very painful for the both of them. Molara shared side information with the Elder and Xiu to prepare them for what was coming, but even then they knew their suffering was as *nothing* compared to what Maya was going through now.

Still, they tried very hard to make it easier for Maya without Ronnie's knowledge, but she was reliving it all over again, and silently screaming while the reconnections continued, even as she lay as if dead.

She was remembering... She was remembering *everything*...

~~~

'AAAAAAAAAAWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWW!'

'MY BABIES ... MY BABIES THEY KILLED MY BABIES...'

'NNNNNOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO...'

'THEY KILLED MY BABIES...'

'AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAWWWWWWWWWWW'

'Maya ... Maya ... Maya come back to us, child ... Maya...'

'MY BABIES ... THEY KILLED MY BABIES'

'I SAVED HIS SON ... AND THEY KILLED MY BABIES.'

'Maya, it is over ... Maya, it is all over now ... Maya, it is safe now'

'MY BABIES ... THEY ... THEY ATE MY BABIES ... AND HE LET THEM!'

'Maya, you are safe now, and everything will get better...'

'HE CUT THEM! ... HE CUT MY BABIES! ... HE KILLED THEM!'

'HE KILLED THEM! ... HE KILLED MY BABIES!'

'Elder, she is confused This has gone poorly...'

'HE CUT THEM IN HALF! ... HE KILLED MY BABIES!'

'A ... A BAG ... THEY'RE PUTTING ME IN A BAG ... MY BABIES!'

'HE KILLED MY BABIES! ... THEY'RE TAKING ME AWAY!'

'Elder, this has gone wrong ... This has gone so very wrong...'

'Molara ... Xiu ... continue to support her ... Maya ... Maya...'

'HE KILLED MY BABIES! ... AND NOW HE TAKES ME TO KILL ME!'

'KILL ME! ... KILL ME! ... PLEASE KILL ME! ... MY BABIES!'

'Children, stay with her ... let me deal with Rondal for a moment'

~~~

"We're all done here, Lord Rondal. Perhaps you would care to go eat or refresh yourself?" the Elder said, facially calm.

"I will stay here with my Maya, Elder," he murmured.

"Are you *sure*? It has been a very long afternoon, and we are *all* fatigued. My sisters and I will keep watch over her, and she will not be left alone."

"It is no bother, my Elder. I've sat with her before, and I'll stay with her now. At least she didn't have to suffer like the *last* time. I'm grateful for that."

The Elder's face darkened, but he was looking at Maya and running his fingers through her hair.

"Very well then, Rondal. Lady Xiu and Lady Molara will keep company with you here. I will go to rest. Lady Fan ... Lady Ai, please accompany me."

### ***Once behind closed doors...***

"How may we serve, Kita?" Ai asked her.

"Rondal is focused on Maya at the moment, but he has a quick mind and can hear things I would rather him not."

"We've been blocking her cries, my Lady," Fan said.

"Yes, but from what Molara showed me, he is *different* from most men – even among those we discover using our talents. Maya still has not integrated her old memories with the last fifteen years. She is stuck at the death of her daughters, and I would now rather choose that we had *never* attempted this Healing at all! Another danger lurks ...she now perceives *Rondal* as the cause of her daughters' deaths. He was not. They were already dead when he passed through the space they occupied in order to save her life, but she does not now understand that. In her mind, he cut her daughters apart, and she now thinks he served them up for the Drecks."

"Then we must continue to hold her silence, my Lady," Ai said.

"I could call the ships doctor, my Lady," Fan suggested. "He could come and sedate her for us. At least then she would be sleeping. We will keep her here for further Healing, and try to put her back in control of her memories."

"An excellent point, my Lady Fan. We have little time left, and he may already be on the way. Contact him at once and tell him Maya will need to be sedated. *Quickly now!*"

### ***In the Outer Chamber...***

Ronnie was glad it was over.

He was sitting there and petting his love, while tenderly running his fingers through her hair, and caressing her face and ears. It was at her ears where he felt the wetness. Rubbing his fingers together and then tasting them, he was confused for a moment.

'*Elder, we have trouble!*' Xiu silently cried out.

He became curious and pulled the cloth away from Maya's eyes, only to see a steady stream of tears leaking from their corners to dampen the pillow beneath her head.

"What have you witches *done to her!*" he said loudly, then extended himself through her.

'*Elder, we cannot hold him away!*' Molara shouted silently.

He tried to reach her and heard a distant screaming ... pushing ... a barrier blocking him ... pushing harder ... the screaming getting louder ... crying ... ‘*My babies ... My babies*’ ... words he’d heard before so long ago ... ‘*He cut them ... He killed them ... My babies ... My babies...*’

He finally pushed very hard, and in the moment of that, he pushed away the effects of the paralyzing agent, and the screaming became vocal and *extremely loud*.

“*HE CUT THEM! ... HE CUT MY BABIES! ... HE KILLED THEM!*”

“*HE KILLED THEM! ... HE KILLED MY BABIES!*”

“*HE CUT THEM IN HALF! ... HE KILLED MY BABIES!*”

“*HE KILLED MY BABIES! ... HE KILLED MY BABIES!*”

“*Maya! Maya, my love! I’m here! You’re safe! I’m here, my love!*” he cried, but Maya turned a frightened face towards him, raised her arms up defensively, and shrank away in terror.

“*YOU CUT THEM! ... YOU CUT MY BABIES! ... YOU KILLED THEM! YOU KILLED THEM! ... YOU KILLED MY BABIES!*”

She pushed herself off the platform, and cringed away from him when he reached for her – still crying and shrieking, while huddling on the floor. Xiu and Molara moved to block him, and he shoved Xiu out of the way, but Molara proved somewhat more substantial.

“Rondal, she needs *us* now,” she said while putting a hand on his chest. “Your part in this is *done!*”

He looked down at the cowering and wailing Maya, as Ai and Fan joined them, and the Elder followed them into the room. Ronnie’s face was stricken with agony when Maya looked up at him in terror, before turning away while still screaming in agonizing torment. He’d seen that look before.

He closed his eyes in grief, then opened them to finally notice everyone around him.

“*KITA! What treachery have you done this day? You said she would not suffer!*”

“I said ‘you will see that she suffers not for it,’” she blandly quoted herself to him. “Did you think *you* were the only one to play your games? And you saw – she did not appear to suffer in your eyes.”

“But the *pain! The horrors she witnessed! How could you—*”

“*THINK CHILD!* What would you *expect us to do?* Do you think this was pleasant for *any of us?* How *else* to reassemble her memories,

Rondal? From her *dreams*? They must be current and *present* in her mind ... *and we needed you to show us where you put them! Certainly, your Maya suffers!* She suffered *then*, and relives it *now*, except that now, WE are here to support her, and WE will help her through it, *Man-child!*"

While the shouting match had gone on, Ai and Molara joined Maya on the floor behind the platform. Kita could see Maya glance up while still gibbering, crying, and clutching at her Aunt. She was in tears while Molara rocked her and tried to comfort her.

The Sectorus' doctor had also arrived and caught that bit of business about Ronnie and moving memories. He was flanked by two of the Elder's guards, but still didn't feel very comfortable; even facing the tiny Elder from behind Ronnie's back.

He cleared his throat, before speaking very quietly.

"Um, your pardon, Elder. I see that Maya is awake. How may I serve you, Elder?"

Looking at him around Ronnie, and then down at Maya, she considered for a moment, before speaking quietly.

"Hifacious ... at this time, perhaps something to help her sleep? She is under a great deal of stress, and relives a terrible ordeal from her past as if it had just occurred."

"I understand, my Lady," he said, and prepared an injection.

He started towards Maya, but Ronnie deftly lifted it out of his hand, and handed it to Molara with a whispered request, "My Lady, if you please, at the junction of her neck and collar bone."

After a quiet hiss, Molara handed it back to Ronnie, and he returned it to the doctor. Maya slowly stopped quivering, before finally relaxing, and the room became very still.

"How long?" Ronnie asked quietly. He ran his hands over his face, before stepping over to help Xiu back to her feet.

"Six hours or so," the doctor said.

"I beg your pardon, my Lady. I have no excuse," he quietly apologized to Xiu, and bowed his head.

"Forgiven, Lord Caldar," she said, being equally subdued.

"Thank you, my Lady."

He bowed again, before turning back to the doctor.

"Prepare another injector for later. Same dose," he said, then turned to the Elder. "Should she wake and you find she needs ... more rest, my Lady Kita," he added with a bow, then straightened up, before looking down at Maya being held safely in her Aunt's arms.

"By you leave, my Ladies," he said in a whisper, then bowed once again before leaving their chambers.

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

Hardly a word passed between them when Larl arrived with Amy to relieve David for his watch. Amy hugged her father before he left.

Larl had greeted Donnel quietly, then checked the status of the platform before sitting down in a seat. Amy drifted close by, and then crawled onto his lap to rest her head against him, while he settled for gently rubbing her tummy. Both of them seemed to be lost inside themselves, and yet clung to each other for comfort. They didn't seem to notice that Donnel was still there with them.

Donnel had seen that reaction before, as well, years and years ago. He knew they needed to talk, and he'd been intensely concerned ever since he'd heard that three of Ronnie's crew from the between-times had shown up from the Elder's ship.

"So, Captain Riker ... without giving *specific* details ... how do you think today's investigation went for our Ronnie?" he finally asked quietly.

Larl thought about that for a while, but considered he had a few more questions of his own he'd like to ask first.

"Donnel, what happened to Ronnie ... *after* he was cashiered?"

### ***Midnight -4 (Day 99) – A Return Visit***

"Lord Rondal, your Lady still sleeps," Molara said in greeting through a small gap in the door.

He raised Maya's traveling case, with her pump and accessories in it.

"It has been several hours, and you will need this. She keeps her bounty up in order to supply for others needs. In particular, the Elder should partake, as should you all. It was a very trying afternoon for everyone."

Molara quickly pushed through him, but he never flinched. He'd left himself completely open and guileless.

"I thank you for your thoughtfulness, Rondal. Please come in a moment."

"I do not wish to intrude, as I am sure you all need your rest, as do I," he said, then turned to leave.

"A moment, please. Another issue has come up," she insisted.

He stepped inside and looked around. The platform that had held Maya was gone, and been replaced by two comfortable chairs. The three adjoining doors were closed.

Molara stood silently by the rear door. She'd not signaled, but the door opened and Kita slowly came out. The Elder stepped over to one of the chairs, and as she started to stumble, Ronnie was right there to catch her, then helped her to her seat.

"Thank you, Rondal," she said quietly. "How do you fair, child?"

*'I have eaten and had enough drink to ease my mind, my Lady Kita'* he pressed tentatively, while expressing himself silently.

*'Ah... So you see we did not abandon your Maya entirely, Rondal?'*

*'I ... had much to reflect upon ... and much to review. The work that was done was most exacting ... and more art than mere work'* he continued slowly.

"And *enough* of that chatter. My mind is *full* enough as it is," she said bitterly, then gestured to the other chair.

As he settled into his seat, Molara poured a small measure of milk for Kita, and proffered a crystal of ambrosia to Rondal, who graciously accepted it, but noticed it was of a much younger vintage.

"If your Ladies would accept it, I will send over a case of some very rare ambrosia – aged to perfection," he offered, which brought a smile to Molara and Kita.

"A few bottles, to be sure, Rondal. A case would make us *too* incautious," Kita said, then paused before presenting her request to him by covering it with a few sips of Maya's milk.

"Rondal, we have been reviewing evidence gathered by Lady Lili since she had it extracted from the platform by your former crewmates. We would normally continue our investigation without comment, but we find that an area of propriety and *honor* is now involved."

He wondered where she was leading, but the worst he'd ever considered had already befallen him.

“How may I help you, my Lady Kita?”

“We ... I ... am requesting your permission for the body of our sister Yandi to be examined by the ships doctor,” she said very quietly.

He sat back in shock.

“May I ask *why*, my Lady?”

“Rondal ... your injuries were dire, indeed, yet Yandi was a *Senior*. We understand the stress she must have been under, but we also knew of her capabilities. The Healers on a combat ship such as this *routinely* deal with severe injuries. I understand that you and Lady Lili treated one such together; she teaching, while you learned – *hopefully*? ”

He smiled and nodded, while letting out a quiet sigh.

“Yes, my Lady. *Proper* instruction was given and very much appreciated.”

“Yet when you became distracted, did she not finish the job in but a *moment*? ”

“Yes ... yes she did,” he said, while wondering where this was leading.

Kita paused again before choosing a path.

“Rondal ... Lili was in service to us for several hundred years before she was assigned to Lord Caldorous. Previously, she served in many capacities, and the speed and accuracy of her Healings is a reflection of that service. Lili could have Healed the injuries you received in but a few minutes, if not *seconds* ... as long as you had enough *food* in you to fuel the process.”

“With all due respect, my Lady, I was *severely* damaged. Most of my body from here to here was taken by burns and destroyed,” he protested gently, while crossing several handbreadths across his torso in example.

“Yes – and yet you *lived*. Once you were stabilized, it was just a matter of feeding you until you had enough body mass and fuel to reconstruct yourself. That would have taken mere minutes a day. Perhaps no more than an *hour* every day, total.”

“But – but she *died* ... *Healing me!*”

“Rondal, the records ... *her* records ... show your injury, the initial treatments you received, and an estimate of *three* days before you became ambulatory once again. Lili made the same assessment based on Yandi’s records.”

She paused when she remembered Lili's *original* offer so many years ago.

"You did not know this, but Lili *herself* had suggested that *she* be placed out here with you ... but I thought that improprietary – she being your stepmother." She paused while remembering she'd had to point out that Lili's *first* duty was managing the *First Lord*.

"I had another Senior in mind with similar training and experience who was quite a bit *younger*, but much more skilled than even our dear Lili, and she finally agreed. I sent you Yandi ... and that *trivial* injury she was treating you for should *not* have killed her. Certainly not after a mere *three days*."

Ronnie's brain momentarily locked up at what she was suggesting.

"But – if my Healing did not kill Yandi, then what ... how *did* she die?"

"*That*, dear Grandchild, is what we would very much like to find out. Her remains would not be defaced in any way, Rondal. I do not lie in this. The doctor will need blood samples, and a stomach sample, a lock of her hair, perhaps. I promise you she will not be dismembered or sectioned. I understand that is a common practice on your birth world, and I find that distasteful in the extreme," she said, before reaching out to hold his hand.

"Lili honored you by having you attend our grieving ceremony, just as we participated later by ourselves. Lili did not feel it, but *we* – my *Sisters* and I – felt something was not ...*right*. It is somewhat ironic that your feelings for Yandi led you to Maya, and now our feelings for Yandi may lead us to the *true* cause of her death."

"I – certainly, my Lady Kita. Yet another piece of an ever-growing puzzle. Gods grant the picture eventually becomes clear," he murmured.

"Indeed," she agreed, and they both took a moment to sip their drinks.

"But ... what of my *wounds*?" he asked, and got a frown back in return.

"*Seriously*, Rondal? You study for *twenty years*, and yet you do not *learn*?" she chided him, before prompting with, "You save the *life* ... and the *limbs* ... and *then...*"

"And then *rebuild* when the client is awake and aware enough to help guide their *own* Healing," he said in self-rebuke at suddenly remembering his readings.

“Just so,” she agreed, then sipped once again.

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

Amy brought supper for Larl – a bowl of “ships poop” as the voice that sounded very much like Ronnie’s had said on the video they’d seen. She’d seen a *lot* on that video ...images she didn’t think she’d ever get out of her head. The *blood* ... the *fighting* ... those *things* like the thing in the gym, only *very* big, *very* real, and very much *alive*.

And she remembered, too, seeing the anxiety of those hands searching for a way to help Maya as she lay bleeding from that terrible head wound ... watching as he finally gave up and saw him *praying* for a Healing he wasn’t expecting to happen ... and the surprise in his voice when it had. It couldn’t have been his *first* Healing, could it?

The thought of it, though ... Lord Rondal Caldar of the Royal House of Kantor – a *mercenary*. A *contract killer for hire* – her “*Grandpa Ronnie*.” But that wasn’t the way Donnel had explained it, before he’d finished up his “little gift for Ronnie” and headed back to *Sectorus*.

According to Donnel, Ronnie was gone *well* before anyone was out of hospice and reassigned. They’d all asked about him, but the Royal House had remained quiet.

It was over a year later when rumors were starting to come out of the Fringe – that no-human’s land between the Hegemony and Commonwealth spaces – of a new crew of mercenaries using Imperial tactics to fight back at the relentless Drecks incursions far away from the “civilized” portions of the Commonwealth. Not only that, but the crew included a *Madman* – someone who *never* backed down from a fight, and *never* left a man behind to suffer at the hands of the Drecks.

They fought using a small squadron of old Galaxy-class tanks crewed with *extremely* well trained warriors. The counter-raiders swept into Drecks-occupied space, just like the Drecks had crossed the line and attacked Fringe holdings. It went back and forth for years, before both governments produced a treaty that widened the borders. Afterwards, the number of cross-border incursions dropped significantly.

Then, when Commonwealth investigators finally started nosing around, the Madman had disappeared. Interestingly enough, Lord Caldar was noted visiting his home on Kantor shortly afterwards, before he disappeared again – for nearly twenty years or so – before coming back for another visit.

As both the testimony and Donnel had offered, Ronnie then did “odd-jobs” here and there, although no one really knew what that

meant, and there was his working with the Gleanings from the Blight, and then finally heading off to Earth to manage refugee reclamation there.

By that time, of course, most everyone Donnel had known was long gone; transferred, retired from active duty, taken up a civilian position like Donnel – or dead. He'd been surprised when Lady Lili had first contacted him and appraised him of his voting shares in the Collective. Then there was this recent recall to duty to come pick the "brains of the *Microcosmus*" for details from the past.

He'd assured them, however, that whatever "bad" they'd heard about Ronnie's past was likely to change – in the next few days, perhaps.

"Don't give up on the old man, yet," he'd told them.

### ***Midnight + 0.5 (Day 100) – Old Movies***

On his way back from the Elder, Ronnie passed by a storeroom and drew five bottles of ambrosia. These he delivered to the Elder's compartment – passing off four for the Elder's staff, while leaving one for the guards to share. Then he wandered around the platform with his mind drifting in worry...

Maya had been horribly tormented at his hands – unintentional to be sure, but it was still his responsibility. Now she was sedated and under the Elder's care; Gods grant she regain her sanity and they could move forward from there.

Then there was this business with Yandi and the Elder's request for "samples" to be taken. Yandi's death was "questionable," and yet he'd read the Senior's text carefully about the dangers of drawing from your own life-energy to effect a Healing. It'd made sense at the time. He and Yandi were very close, and she could have accidentally over-extended herself in saving him. He'd even experienced a little bit of it himself when severing and shifting Maya's memories those many years ago.

The alternative – the alternative was *unspeakable*.

Who would *deliberately kill* the *only Healer available!* And for what purpose? They'd lost several more crew that last year – his stepbrothers almost immediately.

The worst part of the evening was seeing Four again in the commons. Four had been sitting there – *alone* – savoring a drink of stronger spirits, and he'd looked up warily when Ronnie had chanced by. After catching him with a glance, Ronnie had come over and sat

across from him. They'd sat in silence for a minute, until Four pulled out a data tab and pushed it over, muttering, "I'm really sorry, lad."

Then Four had gotten up, but paused – watching when Diane walked by while juggling two food trays – before he'd shook his head and walked away.

Ronnie sat there a few moments longer – almost afraid to pick up the data tab, but finally did, and pocketed it. Once he got back to his compartment, he eventually inset it and watched it – several times.

On the fourth viewing, he switched from horrified observer, to tactical analyst – noting the duration from opening the dining room door to backing out again had taken over two-minutes and fifteen-seconds. They should've been in and out in less than ninety-seconds. And he'd cut through *two* tables, not three – well, it *had* been fifteen years ago, and the details were a little fuzzy.

The blocking stroke had been late and at the wrong angle to begin with. The female should *never* have been struck at all. From two other camera angles, it looked like "Tank" had actually struck her instead of target one. Likewise, the agility of target one had been underestimated, as the stroke that had neatly disarmed him was supposed to have gone through most of his *breastbone* as well – bad placement of the feet and being too slow, yet again. He'd have to work on that...

That last bit of internal dialog snapped him out of it. He wasn't a warrior any longer. He was a Reclamations minion working the Gleanings. He no longer had to train everyday. Probably never again after all this was finished.

It would all be better once his Maya returned to him. *If* she returned to him. If she still wanted to *be* with him.

He finally opened his private stash and dug out a whole bottle of ambrosia. It performed its necessary function by letting him sleep the rest of the night with not even a dream to disturb his slumber.

### ***Noon –5 (Day 100) – Maya Still Sleeps***

"Doctor, it was very good of you to come so early," Molara greeted him before gesturing for him to sit.

"It is no problem, my Lady. How is our Lady Maya this morning?"

"Still sleeping." She glanced at the door behind which Maya rested. "Lady Ai and Lady Fan watch over her."

"And how is the Elder?" he asked, then waited as Molara considered her response.

“She … slept, Doctor. The milk from Maya helps tremendously.”

“It is most unfortunate that we cannot synthesize it, my Lady. The only help I can offer—”

“…will prevent her from functioning as our *Elder*, Sir, and you know her feelings about that,” she interrupted him.

Commander Woldron had known Elder Kita for a *very* long time and had always wished she not hold herself above her self-determined celibacy. Hifacious paused for just a moment longer, before pressing for more intimate information.

“Has she chosen yet, my Lady? It will relieve her of a great burden, and then perhaps she will let me ease her pain.”

“She wishes to finish what she has started, no matter the cost to herself… Yet I agree, Sir. She should accept your kind offer, for once Maya leaves us, she will suffer greatly.” Molara looked away and sighed.

“It is of the greatest irony that I, who would gladly serve the Elder with my lifetime, for a *tenth* of the skills you all possess, can offer her the surcease of pain she so desperately needs. Yet even among all of you, there is but one who can ease her pain – and she a child at that. I have advised her many times that she needs younger staff to provide this simple service for her, and yet my pleas fall upon stubborn ears.”

“We, *too*, have requested as much, but you know the needs of the Commonwealth must come first, Doctor.”

“Yes, but at what *cost*, my Lady? At what *cost*? ”

Xiu slipped out of Kita’s chamber and quietly closed the door, while shaking her head.

“While Maya sleeps, have Lady Ai and Lady Fan harvest her gift, Xiu,” Molara requested, and handed her the pump. “And then we must be off to seek Lord Caldar this morning. What did our Lady say, Xiu?”

“She said I was to ask him directly. Do you think he might refuse?”

“From all accounts, Lord Caldar has never been known to be less than willing to ill convenience himself at a ladies request. Perhaps it should best be broached after our appointment with Yandi?”

Xiu nodded, then left to advise Ai and Fan that Maya should be milked while she still slept.

Once they were alone again, Hifacious continued to pry into Lord Caldar’s skill set.

"My Lady ... from what I understood upon my visit yesterday, Lord Calder is quite ... *adept*? At the Art of the *Healers*, that is? Such gifts could be put to good use were they to be teachable?" he suggested.

"You remember the *histories*, good Sir. Certainly you know the danger. Calder's life often hangs by a *thread*, yet he somehow manages to protect it from the Elder's wrath."

"Then may the Gods find him *worthy* in the Elder's eyes, my Lady," he said, himself, being *fully* aware of the danger.

When Xiu returned, she and Xiu headed to Ronnie's compartment, while Commander Woldron waited patiently for his morning audience with the Elder.

### ***Noon –3 (Day 100) – Dreams of Disaster***

Maya was dreaming...

*She was dreaming of her two little babies. They were so young, just barely starting to walk, and just beginning to make words. Their faces always held a smile for mommy. A dark shadow passed overhead, and she looked up...*

*She looked out the door and saw that her daughters were just coming home from a visit with their Grandmother; laughing and talking, and eagerly awaiting the time when they could start to practice their new lessons with some of the boys they knew. Maya smiled at their naïve excitement and anticipation. She, too, was looking forward to her girls becoming women, and beginning to learn all the new joys of becoming a Healer and helping others. She heard a noise from behind her, and turned to look...*

*So proud she was of her daughters! They had both become excellent Healers after just a short time in training. They held the sure promise of a wonderful future in their hands as they served the Commonwealth and brought forth daughters of their own. A flash of light off to the side distracted her, and she thought she saw...*

*She could not believe how exciting this was going to be – part of a new Ambassadorial mission to the Drecks! It was unprecedented in trust from both sides. That nice man who said he'd worked so hard behind the scenes to make it happen was there to see them off; he and his two friends, laughing and waving. She wished her Mother could be there, but she was "on assignment" for the Elder once again. She was glad she was not assigned to the Elder and stuck all day in an office somewhere. She liked being out with people, meeting them and helping them. That was what she liked about being a Healer. And the best part, was that*

*her daughters were assigned with her this time. It was going to be so wonderful. She stubbed her toe on a loose rock and nearly tumbled...*

*What was that? Was that a tiny leg? Why, it is a Drecks! A little Drecks. What was it doing playing down by the waste bins? Oh, it is hurt, but nothing serious. She pushed through it and found a broken bone. The break was very painful, and it was making faces at her, and growling at her. She did not hesitate, and pulled open her robe, and drew it to her nipple. Ouch! It bit her! Ah, now it tastes her. Now it nurses and calms down. Its pain is going away. Now she can fix the hurt. Oh, watch it wiggle so funny! It let go of her and smiled at her. She smiled back and hugged it, then put it down. It was so tiny looking up at her, and then it ran off. She felt a hand on her shoulder and turned...*

*He'd sought her out, her little friend! He rushed up to her and hugged her leg, then held his little arms up to her. She picked him up and hugged him. He fumbled with her robes, searching. She laughed, knowing that he was thirsty, so she sat with him and fed him. He lay there calmly in her arms as she cooed at him and let him nurse. He smiled at her around her nipple, and his eyes got real sleepy. Her daughters stood by, smiling at the little Drecks. There was a loud sound at the door, and she turned her head...*

*Her daughter was frightened. She could not find the Ambassador, and they could not send out any messages. They were locked in their rooms by their hosts, the Drecks. Well, they would just have to wait and see what they wanted. She heard a sound at the door...*

*They found the Ambassador and his staff! She and her daughters were thrown in with them in a small room off one of the back corridors.*

*They came and took the Ambassador. They came back and took two more of the staff – a woman and a man. They were locked in the room, but they could see out through bars in the door...*

*They heard screaming – lots of screaming, but then it got quiet. In a little while, they saw the Ambassador once again – parts of him, mostly – being carried down the corridor to the waste bins. Her daughters started screaming. They were all screaming...*

*They were screaming so loud. They were begging, but they still took them out. They took her daughters out, and she heard them screaming. She saw their clothes being carried past to the waste bins, and then they came for her. She struggled, but they brought her out. She started screaming again...*

*She saw her daughters, and screamed even louder. They were tied naked to huge platters and being carried out of the – the kitchen! They*

*ripped her robes from her and tied her to a platter. They rubbed something all over her, and they hit her. They kept hitting her until she stopped screaming. Then they carried her out...*

*They carried her out to the other room. There were Drecks in there! So many Drecks were there!*

*She saw her daughters! Her daughters were screaming, and she was screaming. Then her youngest stopped screaming. She couldn't scream. She couldn't scream because she no longer had a head! She started screaming again. She screamed with her oldest daughter! She screamed watching the Drecks cut up and eat her youngest daughter! They cut her.*

*Then they started cutting her oldest daughter! She screamed. She screamed as loud as she could, and they all laughed. They dropped her in front of Lord Gagsa.*

*He yelled at her. He yelled at her and cursed at her. He cursed her for being a witch! He hated her kind. She'd ruined his son! She'd saved his son when he was supposed to die!*

*He'd killed the Ambassador. He'd killed their staff. He was serving her daughters up for dinner! He had the knife in his hand. She watched it in terror. He was going to cut off her head! Then it got so very quiet...*

*She turned and looked, and a man was running at her! He – he cut her daughters in two, and he was coming to KILL HER! He was straining to KILL her, but he MISSED! He hit my HEAD – he – he – he KILLED...*

Maya woke up screaming.

### ***Coming Back from Visiting Yandi***

Ronnie stumbled.

Xiu steadied him in the corridor, but he brushed her off and apologized for his clumsiness, before continuing to his compartment...

Xiu and Molara had joined him earlier and kept company with him until Doctor Woldron had arrived by escort. Then all four of them visited Yandi. The doctor had suggested they wait outside the room, but they entered with him and stood by to watch while he'd uncovered Yandi and unsealed her bag. He'd bowed deeply, and then took, first a blood sample, and then extended a tiny tube down through her nose and into her stomach, where he'd siphoned out a sample of fluid. He'd also carefully turned her head and cut a sample of her hair, followed by pulling out several strands down to the roots.

As he was doing that, Xiu reached out to Ronnie and held his hand, as Molara stood by stoically while the doctor had taken his samples; all

the while noticing the care and honor he displayed during his careful and deliberate procedures.

Before the doctor closed the bag, he once again bowed deeply, then placed a chaste kiss upon Yandi's forehead, before backing away and bowing a final time. He sealed the bag and told them it could be a day or two before he would have any results. Ronnie had thanked him, then stepped forward to cover the body once again. Molara and her guard escorted Commander Woldron back to the airlock, while Xiu had stayed behind with Ronnie...

Both Ronnie and Xiu were feeling low, and they somehow found themselves holding hands as they slowly walked back towards the commons. Once they got there, she continued with him all the way to his compartment, where he stopped and looked up in surprise.

"Oh, I'm sorry, my Lady. I should have walked you to *your* door, not mine. I'm afraid I'm not quite myself this morning."

She didn't say anything for a moment, before lowering her head.

"I would speak with you, Lord Rondal. If you have a moment, please?"

Her guard quietly stepped back and placed himself several feet away, before assuming the official guard's position.

Ronnie opened his door and ushered her in. He gestured to a waiting chair, before going over and pulling out another bottle of ambrosia from the case he'd stashed in there the night before. He poured them both a small measure, then joined her after pulling over a chair to face her. She accepted the drink and sipped it lightly, before speaking.

"My Lord, yesterday ... when you ... removed me from your path..." She paused with some difficulty.

"My Lady, I am so terribly sorry for that. I have no excuse, my Lady, and I beg your forgiveness," he said, then came out of his chair to go down on one knee with his head bowed.

"I – *no*, my Lord – I – I forgave you for that *yesterday*. It's just – it's just that I felt you ... so worried about Maya," she said while fumbling for words.

"I *do* worry about her, Lady Xiu. Maya and I have been together for over fifteen years and we've become very close. I hate the thought that she was hurt again by my actions yesterday."

She spared him a small smile and reached out her hand to caress the side of his face lightly.

“As my Lady Kita said, it was very hard, but also necessary, my Lord. Just as a broken bone must be repositioned to properly Heal, so must Maya suffer the pain of her injury in order to properly Heal from it.”

“But ... but it wasn’t the *physical* pain, my Lady. She watched ... watched her *daughters*...”

He couldn’t say more, and she came down to her knees to hug him.

“My Lord, we watched the video – the one from your rescue of Maya. We understand now – *fully* – why you did what you thought you had to do. The Elder now wishes it wasn’t necessary to put Maya through all that pain again, but it is done now, and we must help her as we can until she recovers fully.”

He tentatively reached out to hug her back and was not rebuffed.

“Do you think she will recover, Lady Xiu? I reached out to her ... I *felt* her. Lili did something ... she opened up something within me. In the corridor, I felt Maya cry out, and it took my heart from me. I saw her loss in her heart, and I also felt ... something else ... directed against me.”

She pulled him in closer and ran her fingers through his hair, before speaking softly to him.

“Maya is just confused, my Lord. When she is herself once again, she will no longer be confused, and you may return to your lives.”

“Will we? There are still many pieces on the table, my Lady, and only a few of them are clear to my eyes. For all I know, my time here is measured in days, if not hours, until Lady Kita decides.”

He paused while remembering a new feeling.

“Lady Kita ... she is not well, is she?”

“I may not... No, my Lord. My Lady Kita is ... she is very *old*, my Lord.”

“Cannot the Ladies Heal her?” he asked, but she just shook her head. “Is there *nothing* that can be done?” he persisted, while Xiu looked at him with moistening eyes.

He hugged her tighter and sensed a feeling of great grief roiling within her. He tried to mix with it, thinning it out little by little to give her some comfort. He felt a jumble of feelings and emotions surrounding her, before she clutched at him desperately and hugged

him even tighter, while letting her tears fall freely in the silence. They knelt there together, he gently rocking them while still on their knees – until he felt it was time to get off the floor. After all, *neither* of them were young any longer.

“My Lady, let us get up. You may sit, or you are welcome to rest in my compartment for a while if you wish. I would be honored to keep you company, my Lady, should you choose it.”

She looked at him, wondering if he understood what she was feeling and why. She let him help her up, and then he reached for her cup and handed it to her. She finished it in a few swallows.

“My Lord ... I – I would like that very much, my Lord Rondal, if only for a few moments. Would you ... stay very close to me, please?” she whispered.

He surrounded her with his arms and drew her close. Then he felt her body press against him tightly while nearly quivering with need, and wondered if he was reading her correctly.

“My Lady, as Captain of this platform, Senior Yandi and I comforted each other when we felt the need, yet I did not share my comfort with any other ... until we found ourselves here and we were all, more or less, in the same troubled maelstrom.”

He leaned down and rested his lips on top of her head, while trying to feel what she needed – although it seemed fairly obvious by this point. He decided to work around to it slowly.

“The problem with being of some responsibility is that the higher you are, the fewer confidants you have to share unguarded moments with. A person could seek contentment with a servant or a guard, and truly maintain a friendship with them on that basis alone, but to fully ... let go of oneself ... a companion is needed who truly shares your understanding of your position, lest the act in itself become merely mechanical. For the staff of the Elder, I cannot imagine a more lonely position, even as you have each other to seek contentment from. And who seeks to comfort our Lady Kita? Her need must be terribly great for all her fragility.”

“Oh, my Lord, we *all* of us feel her need. She fairly sparkled with it when dancing with your words the other day, my Lord. We wish there was one she would accept to share her contentment with.”

It sounded like a strange way for the Elder to live – cutting herself off from her own humanity for the sake of the office?

"She appears aged, but will her body still respond comfortably? It would not do if she were to be in pain, even as she seeks pleasure for pleasures' sake."

"We take turns monitoring her, my Lord, but it is true. The only thing granting her relief has been the milk from Maya. We are giving it to her in small measures to keep her pain in control."

"Surely, the ships *doctor* can provide something for her? I remember many times when I wished I were *dead* because of the pain, yet a pill or injection was received, and minutes later I was functional once again."

"That is the problem, my Lord. If she takes any medication, it interferes with her ability as a Healer. She needs to be both clear-headed and capable to function as Elder. We ... ahh, we all ... we *all* wish she would simply choose her successor and let the doctor make her remaining days comfortable for her. He worries about her, so."

"Still, she could take relief in measured doses, at night, perhaps, so she could at least *sleep* properly," he suggested.

"Perhaps you would recommend that to her, my Lord?"

"My Lady, without me sounding too forward, do you think Lady Kita would accept contentment ... from *me*?"

"Oh, my Lord! Do not jest, Sir!"

"I do not jest, my Lady. I have been with Maya for a long time, and we have, here with my family, shared contentment among all of us. Maya is a Healer, and it is in her nature. I, unfortunately, appear to suffer from the same affliction, and would offer my contentment to your Lady. Even to ... *Molara*," he murmured, following it with a shudder.

That finally brought a smile to her face, and she gave him an extra squeeze before he went on.

"My only worry is that I would not measure up to the standards of the office of the Elder. At one time I had a beautiful body, but it has since gone bad on me."

She leaned upwards and kissed him lightly on the lips.

"Then, my Lord, perhaps I should inspect it and measure its performance to insure its quality for our purposes?" she suggested, while smiling timidly and drawing him towards the inner chamber.

"I hear and obey, my Lady," he said, and followed her lead.

### **Noon (Day 100) – Caught!**

Amy was concerned about Maya, but couldn't find Ronnie anywhere to ask him what was going on...

She knew he'd forgone the wearing of his own ship suit within a few days of their visitors' arrival – "conformity", he'd called it – and besides, they didn't appear to bring any animosity with them ... as *yet*. She also didn't want to disturb everyone with a platform-wide announcement since a private "family" issue was involved.

What's more, she was still surprised that – for all their technology – these "Galactics" *still* didn't have anything like a personal communicator among them. Jeeze, they were livin' the whole \*Star Trek\* experience out here, but with none of the *toys*! Not even a damn *beeper*!

She finally overcame her trepidation, and started working her way towards the corridor holding the large suite occupied by the Elder and her staff, along with her recovering teacher. Suddenly thinking about Maya again, she paused and closed her eyes while trying – yet again – to put the images of her abuse out of her head. She couldn't imagine what Ronnie had felt at the time...

They'd all been shocked to learn Maya's Healing had not gone as planned, and that she'd suffered and was *still* suffering greatly from it. Ronnie had blamed himself, and from what her Mother had told her, drunk himself into a stupor last night.

Amy wanted to visit him and cheer him up a little. Maybe even provide a little comfort as well. He might be really old and not a little bit *damaged*, but she loved her adopted Grandpa and wanted to make him feel better, even if only for a little while ... except that he wasn't in his compartment...

As she turned the corner and entered the corridor of the Elder, she paused when the door down the corridor opened and Ronnie came out.

He was all *smiles*! Maya must be feeling *better*! She was just about to call out, when a hand reached out and turned him around. Then a woman's arms reached out and drew him into a fierce hug. The kiss she launched on him was not merely "friendly" either. Things must *really* be going well for Maya!

The woman backed off, and the door finally closed, before Ronnie turned and headed her way. She stood there and waited with anticipation!

### ***Noon +0.5 (Day 100) – On the Bridge***

“Good afternoon, Larl. How are things today?” Ronnie asked him.

“Well, we’re still *here*, they’re still *there*, and the *Shining Light* is still hanging off the other side of *them*. How’d you sleep?”

“Like the dead … once I finally added enough sedation to safely slide into Morpheus’ arms.” Ronnie paused for a moment, before making his request.

“Ah, *Doctor Riker* … I wonder if I may presume upon you to produce a monograph for the enlightenment of the Elder and her staff?”

Larl was startled by that request. Over the years, Ronnie had seldom acknowledged his extensive studies or academic achievements, but never in his memory had he *ever* asked him an official request of this nature. This should be interesting.

“Why, certainly, my Lord Caldar. Would you prefer a casual observation, a studied thesis, or an in-depth evaluation?” he asked formally.

“Well … let’s suppose you were to examine the relationships between various social levels, and the desire … or perhaps even the *necessity*, of partaking in regular opportunities of contentment?” he asked vaguely while gesturing randomly.

“My Lord Caldar … I am not suggesting that … for the proper amount of transferrable *credit*, shall we say … I couldn’t be convinced to lend a small portion of artistic verisimilitude in order to provide a convincing narrative for a theory which you *already* appear to have in mind. *However*, since you helped me so readily with that little fiasco with my Amy, then *please*, my Lord, choose your fiction—”

“And you’ll endorse it?” Ronnie gave out a hearty laugh while shaking his head a few times.

“Well, my Lord…”

“No, no, Larl. It isn’t *that* bad. Ahh … let me share my observations, and then propose the question. Your goal would be to answer that question based on your extensive knowledge and observation of our society as a whole. Oh, and you have only a day or two at most.”

“Good! No pressure then. What’s your question?”

### ***Noon +1 (Day 100) – Ratted Out!***

Amy had been shocked by Ronnie’s apparent duplicity, and immediately sought her Mother to complain about it. She finally tracked her down in the gym.

*"Mom! Mom, I swear it's all true!"*

There was a lull at the gym, and finding themselves temporarily alone had given Amy ample excuse to let it all out.

*"I swear, Mom. I caught Ronnie sneaking out of the Elder's compartment and seen him \*sucking face\* with that – that \*bimbo\*! And then he admitted to it not a minute later!"*

That was actually true. He'd told her *exactly* what he'd been doing – stating it casually, even.

*"Amy, don't get so excited, dear," Diane said calmly, while sparing a glance at the door. "I'm sure you were just mistaken. Maybe even a little confused, baby."*

*"He admitted it, Mom! He'd just spent a couple hours \*bangin'\* her, and then he walked her back to her door like they was on a date or somethin'! And Maya's still really sick, Mom! He said so! How could he, Mom? I thought he really loved Maya, and he's already moving on!"*

At this point, Amy was almost in tears.

*"Things are not always like they seem, sweetheart," Diane reminded her, while trying to provide her best motherly advice. "And Ronnie and his people weren't raised like we were, dear. They have different standards. Maybe they're appalling standards to us, but that's how their society works, is all. I'm sure that's all it is, baby."*

*"But Mom! He was like, completely happy, and then – then I asked him about Maya, he went all sour again like yesterday. I looked all over for him this morning 'cause I was worried about him, Mom, and then I found him and–"*

She stopped at a look from Diane.

*"And you were looking for Ronnie, because you were worried about him, and you just wanted to talk to him ... and maybe try to cheer him up a little?" she suggested pointedly, which caused Amy to open her eyes wide, before contritely admitting her intentions.*

*"Well, yeah, I was thinkin' about it. But isn't that what a Healer's supposed to do?"*

Diane sighed and drew her daughter into her arms, while trying to put it into perspective for her.

*"And what is a Senior on the staff of the Elder? Aren't they among the most advanced among the Healers? Isn't that what Maya taught us?"*

It took Amy a few seconds to work that out, but she still felt upset about it.

"Well, yeah ... I suppose... But Mom, she was, like, *old!* Like, older than Lady *Lili*, even!" she said, but then quickly looked around.

### ***In Lili's Compartment***

Even though pressed nearly to her limits in keeping track of all the loose threads she was trying to follow, *this* raw thread was easily discerned, and caught Lili's attention. It had tainted her lips with a bemused smile, and she'd traced it back and followed the cross-streams. Finding its roots, she nodded thankfully that Ronnie had found momentary respite in the arms of Lady Xiu, although she once again considered how awful the Elder and her staff had chosen to live.

If *she* were Elder ... well, perhaps she would choose such as well ... but then *she* could be going mad when she reached the age of the Elder.

'No... *Not mad*,' she corrected herself, but terribly distracted by the failure of her body that constantly interfered with the *true* readings of the winds of society.

Lady Ai, or perhaps Lady Fan, seemed *more* than adequate to the task, and she hoped the Elder would choose to enjoy the few years she appeared to have remaining, rather than continue to fight a bitter and ever losing battle with forces she no longer had any control over.

And as for little *Amy* ... she was tempted to grace her with the Gift, *which* – although usually reserved for a *special* occasion – would be a fine example of the passions still seething beneath her *matronly* appearance. Alas, there *was*, of course, the tiniest risk of premature labor to consider.

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

"So, that's *it*? That's *all*? Man, for a second, I thought you were gonna ask for something *really* difficult," Larl said in relief.

"What, you have it written *already*, then?"

"Not *all* of it, no, but it's quite similar to a piece Nolaff wrote nearly a century ago. I quoted it in one of my thesis' ... oh, about four decades ago. I forget which degree it was for. Your gradually narrowing focus is rather new, though. Probably never pursued due to the 'delicate' nature of the subjects under study, I suppose. Who you going to sacrifice for the delivery?"

"Sacrifice?" Ronnie asked.

"You've never heard of the phrase, 'Remove from life, the unfortunate postman of undesirable tidings'?"

"You mean, \*Shoot the messenger\*?"

"If you take all the *poetry* out of it ... yeah. And it's not gonna be *me*. They're not enough armor to protect *anyone* from an angry Elder."

That made Ronnie chuckle.

"Well, perhaps the Elder's staff had best read it through and make their opinions known, before presenting it to the Elder. So you see no difficulty, then?"

"The only downside is the small pool of data."

He saw Ronnie's head tilt in query, so he continued.

"There have been far fewer Elders in all of Commonwealth history than there have been Emperors. The 'wear and tear' on male nobility is somewhat excessive ... *historically*. But ... I think I can give you what you want." A sound at the door drew his attention, and David stepped through it.

"David ... you got the con," Larl said. "See you at plus four."

Ronnie sat there nodding his head, while Larl walked past David and headed back to his compartment to start researching this new paper. Anything – *anything* to make those eight hours in this barren cell go more quickly this evening! David had caught the tail end of the mini-meeting, and Ronnie brought him up to speed on it. To David, Ronnie's arguments sounded plausible to him, even with his Arizona background. Considering the arrangement Lord Caldarous had with his Wives – *all* of his Wives – it seemed quite reasonable.

### ***Noon +2 (Day 100) – Another Service Request***

Ronnie answered the knock on his compartment door.

"Good afternoon, my Lady Fan," he said politely. "How may I be of service?"

Fan smiled and placed her hand on his chest, before gently pushing him back into his compartment. She reached behind her and locked the door while looking at him almost *hungrily*.

### ***In the Lane's Compartment***

"My Amy, I truly do not see your concern in this," Shay told her.

She was sitting very still while Laisee was Healing a shallow cut on her arm. Laisee was attempting to ensure the scar smoothed away and left no mark whatsoever this time. It was especially hard for her since she was also trying to follow the conversation, even as she had very little practical knowledge to share on the topic.

"Shay... Ronnie's being a total *\*jerk\** about this! He's already *\*boinking\** *another \*chick\** while Maya's still really, really *sick!*" Amy whined.

"My Lady Amy, the act of pleasure is *often* used to ease injured feelings and bring about comfort to those who suffer from hurt – even *physical* hurt at times," Laisee said timidly. '*There ... that looks pretty good this time,*' she thought.

"Well, *\*duh!\** But he – he didn't hafta look so damned *happy* about it!"

"My Amy, do you not feel happy when I give *you* pleasure?" Shay asked with worry. "I would worry if you did not *look* happy, my Amy."

"You mother did mention he'd taken too much ambrosia last night when she stopped in to see him," Laisee reminded her. "Does that not seem an act of *sadness*, my Lady?"

"Nah! Not for Ronnie. He's just a *\*lush!\** You shoulda seen him the day my Dad cut his *hand* off."

Both Shay and Laisee wondered at this new term Amy had intermixed with Standard. She would sometimes mix in Earth words that they'd decipher mostly from context, with Shay bringing Laisee up to speed for some of them. They both turned a questioning look at her.

Amy quickly thought back; *\*jerk\**, *\*boinking\**, *\*chick\** and ... *\*lush?\**

"*\*Lush,\**" she said. "One who consumes too much mind altering liquid in order to feel a sense of euphoria, or deaden their senses."

"Ah," Shay said, and nodded. "One who drinks to excess for no other purpose – a *\*lush\*.*"

"Umm, it also means a few other things, though," Amy admitted.

"As do *many* of your *\*English\** words, my Lady Amy," Laisee commented. "It is unfortunate that your Earth does not welcome only *one* language. This I do not understand, for your *music* only has one language – one *written* language, I mean. Is this not true?"

"Umm, yeah. I guess it's true," she said, then thought about it for a moment. "How do you know about our music?"

"Ronnie and I – I mean, Lord Rondal and I—" She stopped when Amy raised her hand.

"Laisee, I told you before – you're *family* now. I am 'Amy,' *she* is 'Shay,' and Ronnie is ... 'Ronnie.' You've known him since you were *kids* together. *Gods*, he was your *first!*"

Laisee blushed, then ducked her head and smiled shyly, while Shay took note that Amy was now invoking the 'Gods' to whom Galactics all seemed to pay poor lip service, and yet called upon for inconsistent favors.

Her Amy was *indeed* becoming civilized.

"So ... you know our *music*?" Amy continued.

"Yes, my ... A-Amy," Laisee stammered. "When ... Ronnie and I were growing up, he would sometimes sing little songs his mother had taught him. He didn't know what the words meant, but he would teach me, and then we would sing them together. After he left, I searched the records and learned all about Earth music while I was trying to find out what we had been singing. Then I discovered something *amazing!* There was a *printed* language of Earth music! I learned to read it, and it let me hear what Ronnie's planet sounded like in music and song. There were so many different *speaking* languages, though, and the language of Lady Spring Blossom is a very minor one, but the music from all over your world is printed in the *same* language, and I learned to play many of the songs," she said, while her eyes looked off to a distant vision.

"I wanted to play for him when he returned from here the first time. I wanted to show him that I still thought very much of him, but he left us quickly, and I simply played for my own enjoyment after that. My Mother thought it foolish, for there were citizens who were paid to perform for us if we wished it. Mother never appreciated the happiness it gave me to play. She would *never* consider letting me play for *her*."

She let out a sad sigh, before pressing on.

"When Ronnie came back several years later, I sought him out and we spoke secretly. We had to be very careful, of course, lest Mother find out. We spoke of many things while remembering our past. I asked him about what music he likes, and he gave me several names that I had to look up. I'm afraid they wrote music that was meant to be played by *dozens* of citizens! Years later, I learned that Ronnie also liked music as played by a single citizen. Then I learned some of what he liked in more recent years. I would someday like to play for him ... him and Maya, of course. If it would please them," she said shyly.

"What instrument do you play, Laisee?" Amy asked her.

"It is called a ... a *panno*? It has many levers and hammers to hit many, many strings."

"You play the \*piano?\* That's *great*, Laisee. Um, where did you find a \*piano\* all the way out here ... in the Commonwealth, I mean?"

"There was one on display in a museum of Commonwealth musical history. It sounded funny when I pushed on the ... \*keys?\* The guide told me it was 'out of tune.' I was able to commission a \*piano\* to be constructed from the specifications on record. I did not learn until later that all the \*pianos\* on Earth were replaced by \*piano\* machines," she said, but noticed Amy's quizzical gaze. "A machine that makes sounds like the \*piano\*, but without all the strings and hammer things?"

"Oh, a \*synth!\* I played a keyboard when I was younger, but Mom said I had to practice better before she'd get me a *real* \*piano\*."

She was surprised at Laisee's look of astonishment.

"Yeah, I had to take \*piano\* lessons when I was younger. Grandpa Walter said it was character building. And then Grandpa died, so I ... just stopped playing."

"What?" she asked at the look from Laisee.

"What is a \*synth\*?"

"Oh, it means \*synthesizer\* in \*English\*. I don't know what the Standard word is. It can play simulations of many different instruments using the same keyboard – the levers you push – but you can change the settings for different instrument sounds. \*Pianos\* are very expensive – even small ones. I was hoping to get an electric \*piano\* when the price comes down."

"Oh Amy, I would very much like to hear a *real* Earthling playing *real* Earth music!"

"Umm, well, I don't know too much music, Laisee. Grandpa Walter liked some pretty old stuff, and I learned a few pieces just for him."

"But you will play for me sometime?"

"Well, yeah. If we ever come across a keyboard or somethin'," Amy promised vaguely.

They continued to banter back and forth about the differences and similarities between Earth and Commonwealth music styles, while completely forgetting their previous conversation.

### ***IRS Sectorus, In the Lab***

A chime sounded in the medical lab on *Sectorus*. The technician read the results, considered possible contamination as the cause, and selected another portion of the hair sample to test. She restarted with the new sample, just as the blood sample from the subject triggered a chime on the second test machine.

That was *really* strange.

### ***Noon +5 (Day 100) – Bad News Comes Calling***

Ronnie answered the knock on his compartment door, and wasn't surprised to see Ai standing there.

"Good afternoon, my Lady Ai," he said politely. "How may I be of service?"

Without warning, her look turned stricken.

"Is Maya well, my Lady?" He could feel her stress, but it didn't seem related to Maya.

"Ahh ... oh no – I mean, there has been little change with Lady Maya, my Lord Calder," she stumbled out. "It is the other matter ... concerning our sister, Yandi."

"Please come in, my Lady," he said, and lightly grasped her arm to draw her inside.

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

Diane was just getting back to her compartment when she noticed one of the Elder's staff entering Ronnie's compartment. He was solicitously guiding her in by her arm – rather quickly, too.

For just a moment, she considered listening at the door, but thought it might look rather suspicious; with her guard walking discreetly behind her, the Lady's guard standing by the door, and Shay, Amy, and Laisee's guards standing further down the corridor.

Wisely deciding that it was none of her business, she continued to her compartment, thanked her guard for his company, and entered. She left a trail of clothes on the way to the shower, where she found David already in residence and slathered with the soap substitute that was compatible with the recycling system. Slipping into the shower with him, she captured her favorite toy and began playing with it.

## **Noon +6 (Day 100) – Blowing Off Steam**

Amy was reading another old book Ronnie had pulled out of his personal library and loaned to her mother. It helped to wile away the hours she spent sitting there in the gym, waiting for somebody to make a mistake and need the services of the human band-aid dispenser. It was *especially* handy when there was a lull in the activity, as there was right now. It seemed like everyone else was either off to eat, in between shifts, or somewhere else, which left her all alone in the gym.

She'd already finished the first book Ronnie had loaned her, but Mom had been pissed when she saw the creases she'd put into it; pointing out that it was a *first edition* signed by the author and dedicated *personally* to Ronnie! She was just remembering that little literary sin, when the door burst open and Ronnie stormed in.

*'Gods! He got his book back and he's gonna KILL me!'* she thought in a panic.

To her surprise, he ignored her and strode over to the monitor panel, where he called up the *Kraken's Child*. She watched as he stood there in confusion for a moment while reading something on the monitor. Then he nodded grimly and grabbed a sword. He paused another moment, grabbed *another* sword, and then turned and shouted, "*PROGRAM-BEGIN!*"

*"AH – HA – HA – HAAA!!! COME TO FACE ME, KRAKEN'S CHILD!"*

### ***In the Elder's Compartment***

"So ... how was he? You were not *gone* very long," Molara asked her.

"He was ... oh *no*, we didn't," Ai said unevenly, after seeing the curious expression on Molara's face. "We only talked. I related the Doctor's findings to him. He was ... *less* than pleased."

"As were we all," Molara reminded her.

"How is our Lady?" Ai asked Xiu, who was just closing Kita's door. "She was still very upset when I left."

"Our Lady is resting. Fan is with her. Little Maya rests. The Doctor gave Maya something to relax her, but it did not make her sleep. She is aware, but not as excitable. She is able to speak and respond to simple questions now. She is watching a monitor showing a beach from southern Cletus. It seems to calm her," Xiu said, and Ai let out a tiny sigh of relief.

"That is good. *Very* good. I fear she would be feeling some of the anger coming from her Lord Rondal if she still had all her awareness."

"So you did not get a chance with him at *all*?" Xiu asked curiously.

"I perhaps foolishly told him of the Doctor's results *before* we could commence our contentment," Ai admitted sadly. "I was so looking forward to it. It has been so *very* long, and ... oh no, my sisters! It is very good with *all* of us, but ... we have been together for ... oh my ... so *very* long ... and yet we seem to find so little *time*..."

"Yes," Xiu agreed. "We do not content each other *nearly* as often as we should for our continued good health, and to maintain our rational minds. And Lord Rondal has indicated an interest in serving the pleasure of our *Lady*, as well."

This both shocked and interested Ai and Molara ... Molara in particular.

"*Truly?*" she asked.

"Yes. He..." Xiu paused, smiling as she remembered his words, "He told me he fears he suffers from the same affliction that *we* all do. Apparently, he can't help himself, for he feels the Healers' calling within him and is driven to serve."

"Well ... how very fortunate for *us*," Molara muttered with a smirk.

"And our *Lady*," Xiu reminded them.

With their conversation focused on long-denied pleasures, they'd blanked out much of their perceptions ... until Fan entered and drew their attention.

"*Xiu* – attend to the child! *Ai* – our *Lady* *needs you!* *Molara* – go find the Man-child and *stop him!*" she ordered urgently.

As the others rushed to obey, Molara stood there in confusion, which only further irritated Fan. She closed her eyes for a moment while sharing the crisis with her.

"Go, sister! To the *gym!*" she said afterwards, before glaring at Molara. "His anger washes over the Elder and threatens *madness!*"

### ***In the Gym***

Amy was *terrified*. She'd seen Ronnie in the video, but *this* – this was *completely different!*

In the video, it was almost matter-of-fact. Business-like. Get in, do the job, and get out. Nothing personal – strictly business ... like she'd seen in a mobster movie once.

But *this* ... she was seeing a whole *other* side of Ronnie this time! If anyone could say Ronnie had a *dark side*, this was *his*. She even *felt* his anger radiating from him in *waves*, and that *alone* was enough to fuel her terror. Not that the creature he was fighting wasn't fearsome all by itself, but Donnel had been busy once again and added a little *bonus* feature... The simulacrum was no longer *silent*.

Ronnie danced with the *Kraken's Child* and did so with a *vengeance!* A tiny portion of his mind commended Donnel for his programming skills, but the *majority* of it was immersed in this virtual-reality combat scenario; complete with Drecks *grunts*, *growls*, and *roars!* The simulacrum seemed solid as well. When his sword passed boundary areas where flesh would normally reside, it dug in a tiny bit, as if it really *was* slicing into flesh. Areas where armor was displayed caused his sword to bounce a bit, as if glancing off a plate or shield.

And the *sounds!* Along with all the panting and growling, the simulacrum was *swearing* at him in Drecks, and calling him all sorts of rude things that only served to inflame him even *further* – so much so that he started *replying* in Drecks!

Then there were the *pauses*. The simulacrum didn't just keep coming. It took breaks where it stepped back and dropped to guard, while panting loudly as if out of breath. Then it *taunted* him until it launched yet *another* attack. It was in the middle of one such, when Molara burst into the gym.

### ***In the Lane's Compartment***

Diane was just coming down from her latest climax. She was looking forward to finally draining David, when she started feeling uneasy ... so much so that she pushed David away from her and sat up. He ended up kneeling next to her while looking at her funny.

"What's wrong, baby? You're not done *already*, are you?"

"No ... no, it's something else ... I feel ... Amy – *something is wrong with Amy!*" she said, and got up and turned on the monitor to the gym.

"Oh – my – God!"

### ***Panic with the '?***

'It burns!' '?' screamed.

'Let us leave!' '?' demanded.

'Too close!' '?' agreed.

'Why does it not die?' '?' wondered.

'Not for lack of trying!' '?' said.

*'Let us wait ... over THERE!' '?' suggested.*

### ***In the Elder's Compartment***

Maya was struggling in Xiu's arms, and mumbling senseless words in a panicky recitation, while Xiu was doing everything she could to block Ronnie's projections from overwhelming her. Likewise, Ai and Fan were with the Elder and trying to accomplish the same task.

Kita was not handling things well, and she was very vocal about it.

*"I was ... WRONG, Ai!"* she cried out loudly between winces of pain. *"I was ... so WRONG! Gods' forgive me, but ... he must be DESTROYED! See to ...it, Ai. He must be ... ELIMINATED! Kill my ... GRANDSON! KILL HIM FOR ME!"*

Ai and Fan were struggling with her, but felt this was only a new projection of Kita's suffering, nothing more. They were *sure* of it ... *mostly*. As Kita continued to struggle, Ai looked over at the injector several times, before finally making the decision. She left Fan to hold the Elder, while she charged the injector and came back to place the tip between the Elder's neck and collar bone.

"Forgive me, my Lady Kita," she said, then kissed her while triggering the injector.

Kita continued to struggle for several more seconds before slowly beginning to relax. She was smiling in less than a minute, and reached out her hand to Ai with a silent word of thanks on her lips just before closing her eyes and dropping into a peaceful sleep.

Fan looked at Ai in betrayal, which caused her to cringe in guilt.

"My Lady Fan ... Fan ... I did what was necessary."

"It is not what she would have *wanted*."

"This is a case of *need*, Fan, rather than want. She was in great *need*, and we had the means to *deal* with it."

"*You chose the means to deal with it!*" Fan said accusingly.

Ai sadly looked down at the sleeping Elder, and gently ran her fingers through her silvery-white hair.

"Yes, I did, Fan, and I am a Healer, first. We are Healers, *first*. Kita was in great need," she murmured, before squatting down to straighten Kita's blanket and pillow, then settled her arms comfortably to her sides, before gently kissing her on the forehead.

Both Ai and Fan winced as a wave of anguish rolled over them again.

“Will you *not* kill Lord Rondal, then?” Fan asked her.

“Dark choices made in the heat of passion may not always sustain through the brilliance of the following day. Lord Rondal still has many crimes to attest to and must be around for the final trial. Besides, Molara has not yet had *her* turn with him. Nor has our Lady.”

Even while speaking, she was forcing her blocks up and trying to hold them tightly against Ronnie’s inadvertent assault.

“Nor *you*, my Lady Ai. Does not Xiu seem much more *refreshed*, my Lady?” Fan struggled to get out.

Ai painfully closed her eyes, before reaching out. Xiu was handling Maya, and Molara was ... *frozen in place*?

‘*Molara – our Lady rests, but Maya still suffers! Deal with him!*’ she pushed out.

‘*I ... obey, my Lady*’ came the faint reply.

“Is something not well?” Fan asked painfully.

“Molara is conflicted and needs support,” Ai said. “Our Lady sleeps. Go assist Xiu, and I will go assist Molara.”

As Ai hurried out, Fan stayed a moment longer and bent down to kiss Kita. Then she patted her on the hand, before leaving to assist with Maya. For her part, Kita simply lay there in blessed *relief*; the smile on her face deepening after they’d both left her bedroom...

She’d put up with the torment her blasted *Grandson* had put her through in hopes that Ai would finally come to her senses and *take charge!* She was beginning to despair, when she’d found the decision dithering in Ai’s thoughts while she struggled in pain – no acting required on her part for *that* – but her declaration for his *imminent* death had ripened that decision and forced Ai to come to the conclusion she’d been dancing around for the last several years now.

Nearly *two-thousand years*, and it comes down to *this* – the *end* of her adventure. She’d earned the rest, though, and Ai was very capable. There would be *changes*. She’d known that, even as Rondal had been talking to his Captain Riker. She’d seen the wisdom of *that*, finally – if a little too late for *her*.

She thought for a moment more of continuing to fight the drugs, but it was just so very *pleasant* at the moment ... *nothing hurt* ... and it

really wasn't so bad to be *totally* deaf to everything around her – for a little while, at least.

Kita laced her fingers across her waist, and decided to take a nap.

### ***In the Gym***

Molara stood transfixed.

She'd known, intellectually, and then by the video they'd viewed the day before, just what some men were capable of. But to see it in person... It was *madness! Total madness!*

Ronnie danced *exquisitely* with the beast – darting all about and fending off its attacks, while taking swipes and lunges at it in return. Each time it was struck, a grunt or a groan, or sometimes a roaring *howl* erupted from it, and then it would pause before attacking again. Being completely focused on the beast as he was, Ronnie ignored the blood streaming from half a dozen places on his upper body.

She could not even sense any feelings of *pain* coming from him – nothing other than the savage *joy* he was feeling as he vented his frustrations against the beast!

As soon as Ai arrived, she gave Molara a physical shove that brought her back to her senses. She spun around in shock before recognizing its source. Then she noticed Amy, who was huddled in the corner of the gym. The *child* should know. This was *her* duty station.

### ***In the Lane's Compartment***

David and Diane quickly dressed and headed for the gym. Diane felt the fear radiating out of her daughter, and it just kept getting worse. They passed the commons and the supper crowd at a run. The closer they got to the gym, the more they heard the muffled, beastly howls echoing down the corridor.

Tomar had been about to sit down, but seeing the Lanes rush by, got up and followed at a somewhat more sedate pace.

### ***In the Gym***

"*Healer! ... HEALER! HOW DO YOU STOP THIS?*" Molara shouted over the din. Amy stared blankly at her, but flinched again when the beast roared and backed in their direction. Molara tried to shake her, but Amy suddenly clutched at her and hid in the shelter of her robes like the terrified child she was.

When David and Diane burst through the door, they had a side-on view of Ronnie fighting a very *vocal* beast. Instead of waiting for an appropriate opportunity, David foolishly called out to him...

“Ronnie!”

At the very moment of his distraction, the beast seemed to take note of it and body-swiped him across his midsection ...leaving a bloody trail, followed by curses from Ronnie – who stood there for just a moment more, before *both* of his swords energized in a violet screaming rage and separated the blades from all three hilts of the simulacrum’s weapons; followed by him planting a lunge deep into the center of the beast with both blades.

Save for the screeching from Ronnie’s blades, the room became silent while the simulacrum looked down at its center, then looked directly at Ronnie. It finally howled a screaming cry that shook the walls, before it faded away to nothing.

The broken hilts wafted back to the storage rack where they dropped into place – before promptly falling to the floor; three more swords sacrificed to the *Kraken’s Child* with nothing at all to show for it.

The gym was silent save for the panting Ronnie and the keening of his blades – high-pitched and now pure of sound. The swords suddenly cut off when he fell to his knees. Then he pitched forward onto his face, while blood streamed out from underneath him.

Diane rushed forward and rolled him over, while trying very hard to remain calm. She began pushing through him and working from the inside out. This was new ground for her, and she was terrified she would make a mistake. She was urgently performing triage on him, when Molara squatted down next to her and placed a hand on her neck, before flowing through her.

“Very good, child. He is no longer critical, so there is time for a little lesson,” she said with a grim smile. She remembered her days with the fleet and the harsh lessons she’d had to learn.

While still clutching her robes, Amy had started over with her, but broken off to cling to her Dad. She was still by his side when he bent down and picked up Ronnie’s swords. David held one of them out and looked it over carefully, which only caused him more confusion.

Tomar had finally caught up; only to watch from the doorway when the Healers squatted down to work on Ronnie. Apparently, the old man’s luck had finally run out. Perhaps he wasn’t as quick as he’d appeared the other day. He turned and left with a grim smile gracing his lips.

David checked both swords; pulling the dummy power packs and looking at them carefully, before sticking them back in the handles. Amy was still attached to him when he walked to the storage area and pulled the dummy packs out again. He almost tossed them in the drawer with the others, but pocketed them instead, and pulled another two dummy packs and stuck them into the swords, before putting them away. When he looked up, he noticed the monitor flashing a warning – “*Illegal Use of Power Sword - Score Does Not Count!*”

*This was new... Donnel had added score-keeping? A timer display showed Ronnie’s total time, defense time, and attack time, and put them side by side on a timeline. According to this, Ronnie had spent a little over six minutes dancing with the Kraken’s Child before illegally killing it with the power sword.*

He was already shaking his head, before he heard a groan from the mat, then a voice mumbling out, “Program-End,” very weakly, and he smiled.

‘*Just a little late this time, Ronnie,*’ he thought before shutting down the system.

“Ronnie? Ronnie, are you all right?” Diane asked him.

Molara looked at her approvingly, if somewhat confused. Something had felt funny during the Healing. Was it because the Healer was so *new*, perhaps? But this Healer Diane did fairly well for her lack of experience with – only a *month* of training? Her performance was *excellent!* Which reminded her...

“Healer Amy!” Molara called out sternly, and turned to see Amy still hovering around her father. “Come here, girl!”

Amy walked over like a puppy who’d failed paper training and knew it. Her eyes were downcast as she approached.

“Young Healer! When a Healer is *frightened*, it frightens *everyone!* Were you not *taught* this?” she demanded sternly.

Amy ducked her head even lower, and barely whispered, “Yes, my Lady.”

“Speak up, child!”

“Yes, my Lady,” Amy said, a little louder. “Ronnie ... Ronnie mentioned it to us one time.”

“Ah!” she said, and smiled grimly. “Then we must consider the source!”

She looked down and kicked Ronnie lightly on his thigh, then reached out and drew Amy to her, before kissing her gently on the cheek.

"Healer Diane, our young Healer Amy is currently without temper to continue her duties this day. Do you have the time to stand the..." she paused while looking up at the gym's timer, "...hours that remain of her watch?"

"Certainly, my Lady. David, you and Amy help Ronnie back to his compartment. Maybe one of you could stay with him a while?"

"Excellent suggestion, Healer Diane," Molara said, before turning to Amy and David. "As you both have other duties, I will stay with Lord Rondal and administer additional Healing while he rests. Healer Amy, I fear he has made such a mess of himself over the years that it will require *extra* skills that neither you nor Healer Diane have yet been taught."

David squatted down and helped Ronnie up, only to find that he was wobbly on his feet.

"I'll be back in a little bit, Mom. I ... I'll eat and be right back after we drop Ronnie off," Amy promised her.

Amy took Ronnie's other side, before they slowly proceeded out of the gym and down the corridor. They were joined by Ai, who'd simply stood and watched when Molara had finally acted after her physical prompting. She could understand her hesitation, though. The sight of the simulacrum had been terrifying.

Diane looked around and suddenly realized she was left cleaning up the mess – *again. Damn!*

"You can take the housewife into *space*, but she's *still* left cleaning up after everyone!" she grumbled furiously, before going to get some damp towels.

She was wiping up blood very close to where Molara had been squatting beside her, when she noticed a familiar smell.

'*By the Gods, does he do that to EVERY woman?*' she thought with a smirk.

### ***Midnight -4 (Day 100) – Yet Another Search***

"Mister Ardan, back again so soon?" Larl greeted him at the con.

"Aye. Our Lady Lili has another little request, and I'm here to see if there's a record of it somewhere." Donnel stepped in and put his data recorder down next to the console.

“Another secret record, then?”

Donnel looked at him sharply, but softened it to a thin smile.

“Well ... not so secret, maybe. You know we got here without shields, so the Captain had us wear ship suits at all times unless we were in quarters.”

“Just like Ronnie had us wearing until you guys showed up. He told us about that. Is it significant?”

Donnel considered it just for a second, before sitting down with a sigh.

After glancing at the door, “It *could* be,” he finally said, “You see, every suit has communications built in. The system talks to it constantly and keeps track of it. If we know who was wearing it, then we should be able to tell who was where, and when. Lady Lili wants to find out where certain suits were, at certain time periods – and who was wearing them.”

“\*Low-jacked\* ship suits?” Larl asked, but then explained the phrase in a few words to Donnel.

“Aye, that be about it,” he agreed, but then needed to ask. “I hear our Ronnie played with the *Kraken’s Child* tonight. Any word on how he liked the changes?”

“Not *personally*, no ... but it nearly scared the pee out of my *Amy!*” Larl laughed, which caused Donnel to join in, before he went on.

“It also tried to *gut* him ... but it wasn’t the program’s fault,” he quickly added. “David distracted him at just the wrong moment – took one across the mid-section.”

“He be all right, then, with your little Amy on the spot?”

“Ah ... actually it was one of the *Elder’s* staff. Apparently, the sheer *joy* radiating from Ronnie was interfering with the Elder’s rest, and she’d sent someone to come put a stop to it.”

“Aye, them witches can hear a *pin* drop clear across the system,” Donnel said in a whisper. “And the Gods *bless ‘em* for taking such fine care o’ the *Commonwealth!*” he added much louder, while looking around warily.

Not finding himself struck dead, he opened up his recorder and made a connection.

### ***In Ronnie's Compartment***

Molara was waiting patiently...

David and Amy had stripped and gone into the shower with Ronnie, and after they'd cleaned him up, they'd gotten him tucked into bed. Amy had thought of staying behind to watch and learn, but she'd promised her Mom she'd be right back. She'd left with her Dad, while Molara had stayed behind to monitor Ronnie's condition.

Two hours ago, Molara had taken the opportunity to look around Ronnie and Maya's compartment a bit. She'd spent some time looking at the books Maya had sitting out – the Healer volumes – and wondered what she'd done with Yandi's Senior volumes. She'd need those pretty soon once she got back to herself ... if she *ever* came back to herself after the *Man-child* had messed her up so badly.

Strike that. The *Man-child* ... Lord Caldar, had saved her niece's *life*.

She somehow just couldn't have imagined that – certainly not before witnessing the recordings she'd seen the day of Maya's Healing. And after *today*...

Her mind's eye displayed his savagery before her, and she drifted over to his doorway to look in on him again. As she looked down at him, she thought of all the years her niece had spent with him...

He'd saved her life on a *hunch*, and then brought her back to Earth. He'd done all he possibly could to help her, and *yes*, he'd messed with her *mind* – which was considered *terribly* rude in Healer circles – but even a ships doc couldn't done better under the circumstances, and Rondal had done better than most *Healers* could.

It wasn't *his* fault that, time-after-time, repeated requests of Healing for Maya had been rejected. She'd argued most vehemently for it, but Kita had been steadfast. She'd even requested a short leave so she could go to Maya and take care of her *personally*, but Kita had said *no* – *emphatically*. She was not even allowed to tell her *mother* how badly Maya was in need, not that Senior Tal would not have already known it, considering the connection between mother and daughter.

It was probably only Maya's memory loss that had prevented Sai Tal from tracking her down and punishing the wicked for being the cause of her daughter's injuries.

As for *why*... Kita had determined – *somewhat* – that Maya's future was with Rondal. It was also somehow clear to Kita that it would be resolved approximately *now*. Would that Kita's vision had been so clear over two-hundred years ago when things started to slide away for

House Caldorous – all mysteriously coinciding with the arrival of *Second Wife*.

Of course, once Lili had returned to the residence, she'd known *immediately* that Meela was a substitute. She'd reported it, before starting the investigation that had determined the agents representing *Sharla Meili Peizhi se Loca* had somehow “misplaced” her and substituted her *daughter, Meili Tung-Mei Peizhi se Loca*, in her place.

The investigation had eventually found evidence suggesting that Sharla Meili had been killed in an accident, thus making the Loca agents fearful of having the prestige of a Loca woman joining the Imperial bloodline slip between their fingers. Apparently, for *them*, the political coup for Loca was too much to lose – thus the substitution. She was the daughter of the prospective bride, and was of childbearing years – which was the whole *point* of the exercise to begin with. Based on that, the Elder's staff had let it go. After all ... there *is* no divorce on Kantor – certainly not for one of the *Royal* family.

As for the *other* ... there was nothing they could put their finger on – at *first*.

In Kantite mores, Meela had been polite, although somewhat prudish, regarding physical relationships with both her new husband and the First Wife. She *did* find favor with the Emperor, however, and spent much of her first year in attendance at court – not so hard to do, since Radatel worked so very hard for his father, the Emperor.

It was only after her sons had been born that she'd started acting even *more* reserved around Radatel and Lili. After the birth of her daughter, she'd completely closed herself off from her Royal husband and his First Wife.

That was what had prompted Lili to petition for Mei-Mei, and eventually Yin-Yin ... simply to fill out the household in order to give Radatel someone solid and loving to come home to at the end of the day...

Molara halted her reverie and looked down on Ronnie, while considering a more *clinical* assessment of his situation. She brought a chair over to the bed and sat in contemplation of his battered body.

Aside from the *immediate* repairs Diane had performed earlier, she'd seen how much overall damage he'd sustained while he was naked – all from events happening *prior* to the festivities he'd participated in this afternoon. It looked like it would take *several* days of breakdown and reconstruction to bring him back into *proper* condition once again.

Considering the age of most of his scarring, she grinned at the thought of how much *pain* it would bring him during his Healing. Looking further within revealed other areas that had suffered fractures, muscle tears, punctures, and slicing wounds, along with impact damage to several of his organs. She would need a *data pad* to catalog everything properly, before beginning such a monumental task, but that wasn't what she was sticking around for this evening. She checked the ship's timer and nodded. It looked like it was about time.

She dropped her robes and slid under the covers next to him, before snuggling up and reaching down between his legs to grasp him. She became gratified when her gentle stroking and the little kisses she was planting on his neck and throat began having the desired effect. After a few more moments of this, she reached down to confirm she was just as wet as she'd gotten watching him in the gym, then pulled the covers down and carefully swung a leg over him.

She wetted him with her saliva, before fitting him into her opening with caution. She slid down on him *slowly*. It had been a *very* long time for her, and she didn't want to tear while he was stretching her open.

"Oh my ... it has been *much* too long," she murmured in delight, while mentally shivering. "We must talk of Lady Xiu's – Rondal's suggestion," she purred quietly.

She slowly began stroking him with her body, while looking at his extreme scarring again.

'*Stupid man*,' she was thinking when his eyes finally opened slightly.

"Yan ... Yandi?" he mumbled weakly, before trying to lift himself up.

His words made her freeze above him...

Yes, it would have been better if he'd called her *Maya*, but she did look more like her younger sister, so she started stroking again and squeezing him with long-forgotten muscles that – weak as they were – reminded him even more of his lost love. She watched his eyes flutter, before beginning to blink rapidly. Then they opened wide and stared up at her.

"*M-Molara?* I – I – by the Gods... I'm *dying*, aren't I?" he finally stammered, before relaxing back on the bed.

He smiled up at her, and then lazily reached up to caress her breasts and tweak her nipples – sending little shocks down through her body and making her shiver in return. Her breasts had little fullness to them, but he still treated them tenderly while caressing

them with a lover's touch. Finally leaving her nipples alone, he reached up to her shoulders and brought his hands up behind her head.

He drew her lips down to his, where he played upon them for a moment with his tongue, before forcing the gate and dueling with the defender within. As he continued his assault, he ran his fingers through her graying hair and delicately teased her earlobes.

His words had swirled around in her mind, even while being distracted by his touches and kisses. She finally took a moment to examine them, which caused her to laugh into his mouth, and also forcibly pushed him out of her vagina.

She sat up on his waist and looked into his devilish eyes, while her heart basked in the warmth of his smile. Trapping his shaft between them, she slowly rubbed herself along it before confronting him.

*"Man-child! Have you no idea of the fuss you caused this day? Your selfish, self-absorbed, self-destructiveness nearly drove the Elder mad!"* she chided him, while sliding herself along him sensuously.

*"Me? Selfish? I – I was merely exercising to get a much needed release of tension! That's what I do. Didn't you see? It was marvelous! Donnel outdid himself once again!"*

*"Release of tension? You radiated waves of anger and frustration all over the platform, Rondal, and Lady Ai was sore put to keep the Elder from asking for your head! Fortunately, Lady Fan sent me to stop your madness,"* she said, then rose up and put him back inside, before settling down once again. He reached up and pulled her down atop him while raising his knees to keep her in place.

*"I was merely playing, my Lady,"* he explained from inches away, then started pushing up into her in short strokes. *"If David had not distracted me, then I would have played for a minute or so longer and been done for the day."*

*"And since David distracted you, you had your middle split and was bleeding out all over the floor! If I had not been there—"*

*"Then Amy was ready to come Heal my minor wound. In point of fact, I'd already started on it,"* he pouted.

She considered that, even while synchronizing with his thrusting, which continued to bounce delightfully upon some of her most enjoyable inside parts.

She did remember sensing something going on in there, and there was that funny feeling to some of the flesh Diane was trying to work on. She was startled for a moment... He had been Healing himself,

blocking and patching most of the serious damage while leaving just enough to let someone of Amy's limited talents take over and finish the job – if she worked *very* hard at it.

"Do you *really* expect me to believe that you *planned* on getting sliced open like that? Just so your baby Healer would have someone to *practice on?*"

"My dear Lady," he said, then pushed up forcefully, which caused her to gasp. "I've suffered *much* worse and dealt with it alone."

"Oh *really?*" The skepticism was plain on her face, so he reached up and pulled her hands to the back of his head and held them across his scars back there.

"Tell me, my dear Lady Molara. What do you feel back there? Look *very* closely."

Molara dutifully closed her eyes and reached inward; feeling and sensing what had gone before. The scar told her where and when. The underlying tissues told her ... how *clumsy* he was.

"I feel you could use some more *training*, my Lord Rondal," she said with a smirk, then began thrusting back at him once again. "Your work is *barely* adequate and leaves *much* to be desired. I trust you will no longer turn your *back* on an enemy?"

He laughed, and then clutched her tightly to him while rolling them over. He braced up on his elbows and smiled down at her, before leaning in and kissing her lingeringly. He began thrusting once again while she hunched up to meet him. He broke away from their clutch and asked her, "Do you have some time to teach me tonight?"

"Ha! Tonight I am to relieve you of your tension so we can *all* get some sleep," she said laughingly. "Will it take you much longer?"

"I will take as long as you *need*, my Lady," he said gallantly.

"*Braggart!* I know about *men*, Sir," she said, and started humping up to him rapidly. "Once you are used up, you'll sleep like a *baby*, and *then* I can leave for my quarters ... *early*."

"Well, if you do not have the time, I suppose I should hurry, then," he said, and began stroking faster, between pausing to grind his hips at the point of deepest penetration.

"Uh ... *oh* ... you certainly are *vigorous* for such an old man," she teased him, even as her plateau was broached and a small climax shuddered through her. "*Ohh!* ... *Ahhh!* You have proven your *point*, Sir. Now finish off quickly and I'll leave and let you sleep."

At the moment, the *last* thing on his mind was sleeping. Instead, he slowed down and withdrew to rearrange her slightly. He pushed a pillow under her bottom, before getting her legs up on his shoulders. He grinned when he slid back into her and began the long, slow steady strokes he enjoyed.

"My Lady, if you will assist me, I'll do my best to finish off satisfactorily," he said politely.

"What must I do, Rondal?"

"First, raise your knees just so, and then wrap your arms around them here," he said, then nodded approvingly when she did so. "Now, just let me hold your hands..."

### ***In Lili's Compartment***

Lili was in her compartment with Spring Blossom, and they'd just enjoyed an interesting video that Mister Riker had mentioned. He'd said it was educational, and she certainly had to agree. Its lessons had Spring Blossom squealing in a *most* delightful way.

She was just settling down for a nap, when she felt a flush run through her; making her smile. Quickly reaching out, she felt the source, and smiled even deeper.

Then she rolled over and planted her lips on little Spring Blossom once again to wake her up for another tumble.

### ***In the Wives' Compartment***

Mei-Mei and Yin-Yin were contemplating an entertainment selection, when they felt a flush running through them. They looked at each other, but shook their heads ...before reconsidering and *nodding* their heads. They turned off the entertainment monitor and went in search of their footwear, before leaving their compartment.

### ***In Radatel's Compartment***

Lord Caldorous looked up and was surprised at the arrival of two of his Wives in his sitting room. They both had strange smiles on their faces.

### ***In the Elder's Compartment***

Ai left a peacefully sleeping Kita and closed the door to her room. She joined Fan in the outer room and had just let out a worrisome sigh, when they both felt a flush run through them.

They hurried over to Maya's room, where they found Xiu bent over and rubbing herself frantically. Even in her fitful rest, Maya was hunching a bit as well.

Ai reached out, found the source, and smiled. She connected with Molara and let the sensations wash over her ... *several* times, in fact, until nearly losing her footing.

She looked at Fan and Xiu, then at the restless Maya.

'*Time for another decision,*' she thought.

"Fan, please take Xiu to the other chamber and provide for her contentment – both of you with each other, and as *often* as necessary. I will stay with Maya and provide for *her* contentment until she sleeps again ... and then I may join you."

Fan and Xiu looked at each other and smiled. Taking Xiu by the hand, Fan led her to their sleeping chamber and followed her instructions *most* exquisitely, with *both* of them tapping into the sensations coming from Molara under Lord Rondal's *special* care.

Ai dropped her robes and pulled the covers down from Maya, before leaning over to help her deal with her arousal. She started by reaching down to cup her mound and began planting kisses along her neck and cheeks, before finally attaching her lips to hers and probing them deeply. Maya responded almost automatically and reached out to hold her while Ai continued her manipulations. After a very short while, Maya humped madly upwards before relaxing back onto the platform. Ai moved down a bit and began nursing from her. A few moments later, Maya drew her hand up and held Ai to her breast, while absently running her fingers through her hair.

Ai reached out and felt Ronnie still tormenting Molara, which once again urged her to touch Maya while flushed with her need. She continued to nurse from Maya, while reaching down to deal with her. She slipped the fingers from her other hand down along her own mound and began teasing herself, just as she was doing to Maya. It took very little time for Maya to peak again, and Ai climaxed but a moment later.

Ai sat up, gasping, and saw Maya's eyes opened to a slit. She reached down and caressed her face, and Maya reached up and drew her down to her lips – at first kissing her gently, then with more neediness. Ai stretched out alongside her and was surprised when Maya ran her hands down her body and began caressing her with purpose. She responded in kind, and they continued to kiss and pleasure each other through several peaks, before Ai needed to taste Maya's lower lips.

She crawled down between her thighs and planted her lips over hers, before licking and sucking aggressively, which pushed Maya up and over several more violent peaks until she finally collapsed into a restful sleep.

Ai was *still* eager, though, and got up and covered Maya with the blanket, before gathering her clothes and running out to join Fan and Xiu. By the time the connection with Molara was finally broken, they'd spent a very pleasurable two hours in mindless sensation, and felt *very* relaxed afterwards.

Ai tried to reach out and contact Molara, but could not. She presumed that Ronnie had either killed her or simply let her sleep. If the latter, she would undoubtedly see her in the morning. If the former ... well, it could *still* wait until morning.

'*And there would be a few changes if I were in charge,*' she was lazily thinking just before falling asleep herself.

### ***Noon –5 (Day 101) – Waking Up***

Molara smiled in her sleep and stretched languidly, before rolling over and landing an arm across a dozing Ronnie. She felt around for a moment, didn't recognize the rough texture of the skin she was feeling, and was suddenly startled awake. She sat up in bed and looked around in the dimly lit compartment.

Her eyes spotted the compartment timer, and she groaned aloud, whereupon Ronnie reached out and wrapped an arm around her to cup one of her breasts.

He mumbled something that sounded like, "You insatiable creature, you," and drew her down beside him. He opened his eyes to find himself staring directly into hers, and asked, "Are you ready to play again?"

Then he kissed her soundly, even as she resisted ... albeit weakly. She finally pushed him away and sat up again before, turning and started beating him very gently with the bottom of both fists.

"Insatiable? Me? By the Gods, Ronnie, what did you *do* to me last night?" She'd asked this with a huge smile on her face, before sliding down beside him again.

"Ah! You mean the *Gift*? Surely you know of Lady Lili's *Gift*?"

"*That* was the *Gift*? I'd heard it was a form of *punishment!*"

"Oh, it *is*, Molara, it *is*. She's like a sadistic teacher. If you do it wrong, she makes you do it *over* ... and *over* ... and *over...*"

"I believe I understand, and I *thank* you for sharing it with me. I will treasure the memory of it..." Molara paused before asking, "I don't suppose..."

"Why *certainly*, my dear Lady. Just give me your hands."

"What? Oh... Oh *no* ... I mean ... not right *now*, but ... do you think you can *teach* me? For the edification of the Elder and her *staff*, you understand."

"Well, we'd really need another participant. Lili taught me on Mei-Mei and Yin-Yin. My final practice was on Mother. Then Lili gave me the *final* test herself. You have to be guided while you're performing it for another person for the first time, and I don't really know how to teach it one-on-one. In fact, I've never taught it to *anyone* before, but Lady Lili is here and you could ask her. It would certainly help sustain the spirits of the Elder's staff."

She looked away for a few seconds, when another consideration rose in her mind.

"Ronnie – it – it wasn't *mind control*, was it? I mean ... it felt like I was out of control from the moment the first climax overtook me. Mind control is *frowned* upon, you understand."

"As far as I know, it's a simple bio-feedback loop induced into the genitals, which – for a *woman* at least – is nearly self-sustaining. Since there's no *real* friction, no penetration is needed at all, really. The stimulation is effective until you pass out, fall asleep, or just really want it to stop. I don't recall *anyone* I've ever been with wanting it to stop ... although I understand Lili has used it to help others get to *sleep* upon occasion."

"No penetration? So you didn't need to be..."

"Nope! I just enjoy the feeling of a woman's orgasm clamping down around me. And with the Gift, it can keep on going until it grants my relief. Alternatively, it can be used to take the edge off nervousness or passion, or used as a quick way to start the day brightly."

He paused and looked at her studiously.

"Molara, you still look a little ... *tired*," he said in all seriousness. "Would you care to start your day a little more ... *brightly*?"

She smiled with the hint of a twinkle in her eyes, before holding out her hands.

### ***In the Elder's Compartment***

Elder Kita stopped nursing for a moment and sat back in some confusion. She was suddenly feeling somewhat ...*tingly*. With the clarity provided by Maya's milk, she realized she was feeling the remote sensations from Molara running lightly over her nerves.

"By the Gods, Fan, that boy must be taught *manners!* We shall never get anything accomplished if he is either *wallowing* in grief, or delving into *hedonistic pleasures* with my staff!"

She turned to the shyly smiling Fan.

"Did he grace both you and Xiu with the Gift – as *well* as Molara?"

"Oh no, my Lady, but we three embraced it voyeuristically last night, as did our young charge here. I fear that you missed it, my Lady. It was *most* delightful."

"Humph! And I suppose I should still be thankful I was incapacitated by Ai? She presumes *too* much, don't you think?"

Kita was waiting to see if Fan would see the wisdom of Ai, or keep her pledge to the Elder.

Fan took a breath and spoke delicately, while avoiding looking directly at Kita.

"I – my Lady Elder ... it was a most *difficult* situation for Lady Ai..." she began, then paused to collect herself, before continuing.

"We all wish to follow your guidelines to the letter, my Lady, but we are all Healers as well. If Lady Ai was in error, it was because she was following the *heart* of the Healer within her – not the guidelines established for the office and staff of the Elder. With so many paths before her, it was the *least* harmful of paths to take."

Kita considered her words thoughtfully.

Although balanced on a fine edge, they were spoken truthfully. She nodded in silent agreement, before bending down to nurse some more; all the while wondering if Ai and Xiu were *ever* going to wake up.

### ***With Ai and Xiu...***

In the other room, Ai and Xiu were just stirring – partly because of the fresh set of sensations flowing from their tenuous connection to Molara.

They sat up with a start and looked at the compartment timer, before scrambling out of bed. Rushing to dress, Ai struggled with and

finally closed her robe. She fumbled with both doors on her way to Kita's chambers, which she found empty. In a panic, she checked the facilities, but caught a thought from Fan that everyone else, save for Molara, was in the child's room, and Elder Kita was having fresh nourishment provided by Maya. Ai relaxed for a moment, before getting herself together a little more *neatly*.

### ***With Maya...***

Maya was lying there quietly and petting the Elder's head, while Kita was nursing from her, but she wasn't aware of who was in the room, or what was going on. Her eyes remained focused on the monitor, whose seaside display with rolling breakers looped constantly, hour after hour. It'd been running continuously since last night, but seemed to keep her calm, if not very communicative.

Kita sat back with her aches and pains mollified once again, although this morning they hadn't seemed so sharp to wake up to. No doubt Ai would attribute it to the quality of her slumber the night before, and in truth, she could not argue the point.

She sat there looking down at the girl, then reached out a hand to caress her hair and cheek. Maya turned and looked at her, before smiling softly and reaching out to her. Surprised, Kita let herself be grasped and brought in for a kiss – a gentle, lingering, and yet chaste kiss – before Maya drew away and turned back to the monitor.

Kita probed gently, but found that Maya's mind was stuck in neutral. It would take some effort on the part of Ai and Fan to bring her back to the weeks *before* the incident had happened. That would let them search for clues in Maya's memory that could tie up some loose ends they needed resolved before the last testimony could take place. In the meantime, at least she was no longer *screaming*.

### ***Noon –4 (Day 101) – The Walk of Shame***

Molara was on her way back to the Elder's compartment – *late* – after having left Ronnie's compartment *well* after her normal waking hour...

She'd taken a quick shower with him after their morning play, then dressed while speaking with him about his reaction to the information he'd learned from Ai the day before. He'd admitted that he'd run the gamut of feelings from shock, confusion, all the way up to profound loss – *again* – before reaching *extreme anger*. He'd told her he decided to "work off some steam" in the gym, rather than take that anger out on an innocent bystander.

He'd been unsure of what else they could determine from so many decades before, but promised he would *gladly* place himself at their immediate disposal should the perpetrator of his Yandi's demise be found. She thanked him for that, and for the evening – and *morning* they'd spent together, before she'd left...

Now she found herself approaching the Elder's compartment alone, and with no little embarrassment at the thoughts running through her mind. For nearly three-hundred years, she'd not slept elsewhere without at least *one* of her sisters beside her, and *last night* ... last night she'd had to simply stop Ronnie – *Rondal* – from causing emotional turmoil to the Elder and the Seniors.

It'd turned out a little bit differently than she'd expected.

Even as Ronnie – *Rondal!* – kept pushing her higher and higher, she could *still* feel the tenuous connection with her sisters ... *all* of them Seniors. *Oh dear!* They weren't the *only* Seniors on the platform! That meant Lili, Yin-Yin, and probably Mei-Mei, *also* felt her ravishment last night. And *Shining Light* was close by and housed a Senior who ranked just below *herself*, as well!

At least Ronnie hadn't insisted on "walking her home" as he'd suggested, after he'd "brightened" her morning for her. She smiled at the memory of it, and made a note to meet with Lili before they left the platform for their return to Cletus. She was still smiling when she entered the Elder's compartment.

#### ***Noon –4 (Day 101) – A Visitor for Lili***

"I beg your pardon, my Lady," Lili's morning guard announced, "Mister Ardan is here with a report for you. He said you would be waiting for it."

This being the morning hour, he kept his eyes focused *above* her shoulder level.

"Ah! Just so! Send him right in! Lady Blossom, your *attire* if you please. We have *company!*"

A muffled groan came from behind a partly closed door, followed by snickering from within as well. The door closed quickly, just as her visitor came in.

"Mister Ardan – *Donnel!* You have the information that I need, perhaps?" she asked a wide-eyed Donnel, who was staring openly at the beautiful, if matronly figure, standing before him in her thin dressing gown.

Noticing his stare, Lili straightened up perfectly and linked her arm with his; making sure it firmly pressed against the side of her breast before guiding him over to a comfortable seat. While getting him settled, she bent over and let him catch a glimpse of her ample cleavage in the process.

*'Humph! Old? Older than Lady Lili? THIS one does not seem to care.'*

Donnel caught his breath and shook himself narrowly. This being a Lord's wife, perhaps he'd present himself at ships holiday – but not before. He composed himself, and got down to business.

"My Lady, I extracted the data you were looking for and matched the records with the time periods. Since it didn't really take any longer, I ran it back from the beginning of our Ronnie's – forgive me, my Lady – Lord Rondal's Captaincy of the platform. I also cross-checked the changes due to maintenance swaps and such just to make sure it was most accurate for your purposes."

"And you changed no data to flavor the ... *truth*, Mister Ardan?" she asked sweetly, leaving the hidden menace transparent below the sugar.

Donnel smiled openly. He'd had a long and full life, and wasn't afraid of a little intimidation. Of course, Lili did nothing in a small way. Never the less, he continued.

"If you forgive my *inquisitiveness*, my Lady, the very specific time periods matched against the *Microcosmus*' log records provided me with an inkling of the information you were seeking. I made every effort to ensure the accuracy of the records was *most* pristine in nature," he said, but looked away in embarrassment for a moment, before braving her eyes once again.

"To my great regret now, it was not something we followed up on at the time, my Lady. We'd just lost our Yandi, and the Captain was still in poor shape. If you'll excuse my frankness, it's just as well those two fools did something *else* extremely stupid and ended that particular source of our problems. Just an observation, my Lady."

Lili eyed him narrowly while probing him smoothly. Donnel was an open book to her, and she knew just what he was capable of. She knew that someone with *his* extra-ordinary skills could fake the records in that short amount of time, but *he* would not. Not that it wouldn't be beyond him to try. For *him*, though, he suffered much the same as their Rondal did – just a little bit too much personal honor in his make-up to stoop to such subterfuge; even in order to protect his Captain. He might delete the data by *accident*, but wouldn't modify it.

"So you think our Ronnie will be exonerated by your efforts, Mister Ardan?" she asked, while still listening within.

"Both Granger and I vetted all the information we'd previously prepared for you. Flagged it as we thought appropriate. Not that we worried you'd miss anything, my Lady, but the more eyes ... well, we were just concerned that certain *esoteric* bits might be overlooked in the overall review."

"Yet you've made no conclusions, save for just now?"

"We'd made our conclusions more 'n a hundred-eighty *years* ago, my Lady, just about a month after those two joined the ship. If I were to guess, which I would *never* do outside these premises, I'd imagine this concerns our Ronnie *less*, rather than more. That, plus he'd already been cashiered for the loss of the battle, and the platform, my Lady."

Lili took a few seconds to ponder his words and finally nodded in agreement. She rose, and Donnel followed suit.

"Thank you for your service, Mister Ardan. I trust you will keep your *own* counsel on these matters until the issue is resolved. I would that you advise Mister Tannis and Mister Deltec of my same request to them."

"Ahh ... we three are already of the same mind, my Lady. I'll still give them your request, just the same. By your leave, my Lady," he said, and bowed, before turning towards the door.

"Oh Mister Ardan," she called out, causing him to pause and turn back. "Perhaps when things are finally settled down, Ronnie will allow us *all* to celebrate a ships holiday? I shall expect to see *you* there, if possible."

"I ... it would be my extreme *pleasure*, my Lady," he said, then smiled widely and bowed again, before turning to leave.

'Not *all* YOUR *pleasure*, Mister Ardan,' she thought to herself, for she'd seen several hidden talents within Donnel during her probe, and they looked *intriguing*, to say the least.

### ***Noon –3 (Day 101) – An Elder Confrontation***

Kita looked into the outer room and sought her target's attention.

Ai, having just returned from a very late breakfast meeting with the staff on *Shining Light*, saw her Elder's eyes, and the impatient frown on her face. She followed mutely and closed the door behind her. Once inside, she stood silently while waiting for her Lady's wrath to fall.

Kita went over to her dressing table, pulled out a chair, and sat wearily. Gods, she'd just had her fill of Maya and a full nights' rest –

and yet she was *still* tired. And now, once *again*, she had to confront Ai to test her mettle.

“So, my dear Ai, you felt the need to disobey my orders, and you – you *drugged me! Here, in my own chambers!*”

The drugs had worn off enough to let her extend herself, and she stretched a delicate probe into Ai while hoping she still had skill enough to block its detection. As soon as it touched her, she realized Ai felt such trepidation that she needn’t have worried about it. Still, she really needed to see what was going on in her mind.

*Fear ... a touch of – pity? ... some sadness for me and also herself? ... concern for my mindfulness ... worry about her decisions ... still that business from two-hundred years ago ... no worry about herself? ... interesting that, but still no resolution ... not like last night...*

Time to push more buttons.

“Well, child? Have you *nothing* to say?”

*Anger ... fear falling – good, good ... concern for my pain – well, of course ... thinking of what the doctor had said ... the conversation with Fan ... thinking of talking to Rondal – oops, he’s already on his way!*

“My Lady, my duty as a Healer forced me to choose between your orders, and what was ultimately best for you ... at the *time*, my Lady.”

*Forceful – good ... still no resolution, though...*

“So you took it upon yourself to *sedate me? ME?* What ever was going on in your *mind, child?*”

*Ha! That set her back ... let’s see how she handles it ... interesting...*

“My Lady, in the situation you found yourself in, you were making poor decisions. I felt the decisions you made last night were extreme and unwarranted. I took the path which would allow clarity in the morning.”

*Better ... much better ... just a little bit more ... Damn! Rondal is nearly here...*

“Decisions? *What decisions?* I told you to go and stop my *Grandchild!* He was causing me such *pain!* What foolishness are you speaking of?”

*Confusion ... fear ... a decision? Perhaps...*

“My Lady ... you ordered the *death* of Lord Calder last night. I did not believe it was appropriate to the situation, my Lady.

"I did *what?*" Why, I did no such *thing!* I certainly would have *remembered!*"

"My Lady, I have also noted of late that your physical condition continues to deteriorate, and you *still* will not accept help from the doctor to manage your pain – even if only at night," she said, stopping just short of what she really wanted to say.

"So you think I am falling apart and cannot manage my office any longer?"

*By the Gods, will this child never get to the point!*

"My Lady, you are in constant pain and refuse treatment for it. You make bad decisions under poor conditions which have the chance for disastrous outcomes –"

*"And I have served this office for over a thousand years!"*

*"Yes, my Lady! And it is time for you to step down!"*

Ai suddenly paled at her own outburst, and paused while composing herself.

"I... I would recommend that Lady Fan take your place as Elder, and ... and that we bring up Lady Lili to become our number four," she said with finality ... and resolution.

*Stubborn child ... Finally ... And about time!*

Kita sat back and sighed deeply, while looking sad and lost.

*"So ... you would have Fan replace me? And ... what of yourself?"*

"I would serve Lady Fan faithfully, my Lady, or I would be pleased to continue service to you in your ... retirement. Should it please, my Lady," she said, then bowed her head deeply.

Kita sat and contemplated her for just a few moments more.

*"Hateful child! You shall serve neither Lady Fan nor me. And Lady Trenka from the ship will be our new number four ... afterwards. Lili is too valuable to us where she is."*

Ai gave her a sad look, which slowly became somewhat confused.

"Oh... I've been watching Trenka for quite a while, now," Kita muttered, seeming quite relaxed now and speaking in a reasonable tone. "She is of like mind with Molara, but refused to consider the Elder's office if it meant living under conditions which *will*, no doubt, be changing soon. My Grandson comes with a few notes from that salacious scoundrel, Riker."

Kita stretched in her seat and let out a relaxed sigh. A hand stole up and idly scratched a spot on the back of her head, while Ai just stared at her – *very* confused now.

Kita looked up at Ai and smiled.

“You didn’t *really* think I wanted you to kill our Ronnie, now, did you? By the Gods, child! That was the *best night’s sleep I’ve had in decades!* You’ll need to contact the doctor soon for more proper medication ... I do not like the injector. Something *mild* – I do not need to *force* sleep, and I’ll just have to forgo listening to everyone around me.”

Ai was still staring. Hadn’t she just been fired?

“There’s something *else* you and the other Ladies must teach our Ronnie, and rather *quickly*. Lili should have done so by now, but I gather from the video we watched that he finally reached *full* Senior status when he Healed Maya after he rescued her. He *appears*, however, to need train– What is *wrong*, child?”

“My – my Lady... Y-You’re *babbling*... Are you not well?”

Kita stared at her for another second before letting out a stream of chuckles that quickly died out.

“My dear Lady Ai, it is as if a great *weight* has been lifted from me. Aside from the aches and pains which will accompany me to my end, I feel a deep bond of gratitude to you ... although I fear I’ve left you with a bit of a mess which I will try to help guide you through.”

Fan, Xiu, and Molara entered without knocking and all gathered in a circle around Ai.

“My Ladies, after much heartfelt reflection, our Lady Ai has graciously accepted my resignation and would now assume my former position as Elder. I will remain for a time in consultation to ensure a smooth transition. Do any here say *otherwise*?”

As a group, they all knelt before Ai and pledged themselves to the new Elder.

“Lady Fan, you are Lady Ai’s number one,” Kita said. “Lady Xiu, you are number two. Molara, you are number three.”

After a moment’s pause...

“And our *fourth*, my Elder?” Fan asked of Ai.

“I am advised that Lady Trenka would be a suitable addition to our staff,” Ai said. “Subject to certain conditions of our living standards

being modified. Molara, you shared time with Lady Trenka on the trip out here. What did you make of her?"

As Ronnie would say, the question was ripe with many variables, but she gave the correct answer as requested while directing it at Kita.

"She is very skilled, my Elder, nearly as fast as I. Likewise, she has similar experiences. You could say you were adding another sword to your stable, my Elder."

Kita nodded, and then thought it was time.

"If I may, Ladies? There is one more *little* task to attend to, but it will not take long. Fan ... Xiu, please stand to either side of Ai. Molara, stand behind her."

Kita paused while she thought of all the hearsay the Elder's Council had produced for her regarding this next step. She hoped they'd pieced together the proper protocol from their ancient records. If not, it was something *else* for Ai to deal with over the next several hundred years or so...

Kita stood up and stretched wearily. Then she stepped over to Ai and looked up at her with a wide smile on her face.

"Child, give me your hands. My Ladies ... do not let her fall."

As soon as Kita took Ai's hands in hers, she dumped the *balance* of the job upon her shoulders.

Five minutes later, Ronnie was still outside and waiting patiently, when Molara opened the door and beckoned him in.

### ***Noon (Day 101) – Power Changes Hands***

Lili was shocked!

After Donnel had left, she'd worked all morning with her little blue Balese assistant and had just now brought her results to the Elder – only to hand them over to the new consultant, a *Mistress* Kita, who was assisting the *new* Elder in assuming her duties. This *Mistress* Kita looked remarkably like the old Elder Kita – except that this Kita was comfortable, smiling, and happy – and genuinely looked it.

"Lili, you have no idea what a *relief* this is! I am so sorry that it comes at such a time for you, though."

"If you felt the need, my Lady, then ... why, of course..."

"Ha! Do not worry. I have transferred all my information to Ai, and she assimilates it even now. By noon tomorrow, or perhaps by evening

at most, she should be ready to begin the second investigation. In a few days time we shall set things right — *finally* — but until then, we must keep close counsel. To take advantage of the time, I have a little task for you. *If*, of course, it pleases you, for I no longer command the office?”

“I — certainly, my El..”

“*Mistress*... I am just *Mistress Kita* now, my Lady Lili.”

Lili was somewhat reluctant to accept the inevitable, but mustered her courage and acquiesced with official recognition.

“Kita, I would hear of your request,” she said informally, while still finding it very difficult to minimize Kita from her former role.

“There is a certain elderly warrior who uses adrenalin, endorphins, and ambrosia to mollify his moods on a regular basis ... or sometimes something *more* serious. In addition, he has traveled a relatively short distance, but his paths were rather long and bumpy.”

Lili gave her a non-committal nod, while not exactly jumping to conclusions.

“That describes *many* men of my immediate knowledge, Kita.”

“Yes, one would think. Yet this one is cursed with one *other* little affliction. Nearly two decades ago, he became a Senior — a *true* Senior — but one without proper *training*.”

“You speak of Rondal.”

Kita was hard-pressed to suppress her snort.

“Yes, I speak of my Great-Grandson, Rondal. I had occasion to look within — you *must* remember last night? He was *wide open* and broadcasting himself to *all of us*. His feelings even penetrated his poor *Maya* while she lay in light sedation.” She frowned at that unpleasant memory before going on.

“Thanks to Lady Ai, I was not awake for the *other* half of our Rondal’s celebration with our sister Molara. I’m told it was much *relished* by those paying attention, although I caught a little reminder of it this morning.”

If Lili were younger, she might have blushed, but instead candidly acknowledged the event in question.

“Yes. I’m afraid I wore poor Spring Blossom out. And when *my* Kita arrived a little later, I wore *her* out as well. My poor husband did not fare well either, as he had both Mei-Mei and Yin-Yin to contend with at

the same time – although I understand he made a valiant effort. My sister-Wives were not displeased.”

Kita smiled while savoring memories from long ago, but got back on track and allowed her now *freely* expressive gestures to speak eloquently in association with her words.

“Lili, have you never had occasion to look *within* Rondal? *Really* look through him and see what he has *done* to himself? I did. He has the *tools*, but none of the *training*. You said so yourself. He has damaged himself, but instead of Healing himself, he has only masked many problems for later suffering.”

Lili had to agree with Kita’s assessment, but pointed out their recent discovery.

“On the recording we saw, he worked *wonders* with Maya after her rescue, did he not?”

“Yes, but that was by a leap of *faith*. For himself, he took all the *easy* paths ... just as you watched him do with Meela’s creature.” She paused while remembering that incident, and it *still* incensed her.

“He Heals *poorly*, Lili! He is too *mindful!* He often masks the hurt and uses other means to deal with the pain when it lashes out at him. You’ve seen his body, and it is *terribly* out of balance! If he did not self-mediate his pain, then he would suffer constantly, as do *I* ... so *foolishly* for the last half millennium, it would appear,” she added wryly, before reaching up to grasp Lili’s hands.

“It needs to be *corrected*, Lili. Rondal has to be taught to Heal others *properly* – but himself, *first*. Molara tells me there is a new scar on the back of his head from within a few weeks ago. *He put his own HEAD back together, Lili!* Flesh and bone – *and brain!* We CANNOT let this talent fall by the *wayside!*”

Strangely enough, Lili didn’t feel the fire radiating from Kita as she normally would, but still paused and considered how much training she could give him in such a short amount of time – if he was even allowed to live long enough to receive such. That was a problem to her, and she voiced it.

“What of his test? Should we begin now, or wait to see if he passes?”

The retired Elder tilted her head in consideration, before sharing her thoughts with her.

“I saw two paths to take, but I am no longer clear on either. Although I am now free of pain, I can no longer extend as I once could.

I can still Heal, but I am very limited now; little more than even young Amy from our Rondal's crew."

"What paths did you see, Kita?"

Kita got up and began pacing while describing her thoughts; her hands helping her words as she spoke.

"I saw Rondal going on as before – passing the test or not – and either becoming a further danger to himself and others, or having his efforts become ineffective to manage his pain. He fights, he feels no pain. He *loves*, he feels no pain. He *drinks*, he feels no pain, and Maya told me he often resorted to ambrosia when he felt the pain of *others* ... he is *that* sensitive. If he is drinking to block his *own* pain, then it is because he has repaired himself improperly."

She paused before her voice became more thoughtful.

"The *other* path ... perhaps he learns more about himself *and* pain – and how to *properly* deal with it. Hopefully, he achieves a better understanding of the entire aspect of life, and our relationship with it. Of course, he may *still* fail the test and the point becomes moot, but I can see where the time would be well spent if it instills within him a sense of belonging."

"*Belonging*, Kita?"

"Lili, do you not *realize*? Rondal is the first *male* Senior since the founding of the *Commonwealth*! If Maya will accept him once again, there is no telling the *advantage* this will give us over the Drecksl!"

This was news to Lili, as was the comment about Maya.

"Maya still does not accept him? She's talking again? How much does she remember?"

Kita waved a hand aimlessly.

"She remembers very little ... only that she had daughters ... *has* daughters in her mind. She does not know they are gone. All the *rest...*"

She threw up both hands and sighed deeply, while shaking her head slowly, before going on.

"She has blanked out all except the comforting memories of her daughters. It is how the brain deals with hurt of this kind, but – unlike our Rondal's *simple* method – this will take us more time to deal with. Unfortunately, given the proper stimuli, the Healing has brought *waking* nightmares of her Drecksl experience as well."

"So she does not know Rondal at all? She has no memory of him?"

Kita looked up at her and shook her head sadly.

"Rondal saw her very briefly this morning. It ... it did not go well."

"What happened?"

"Xiu was with her while the doctor and I watched over Ai. Molara received Rondal at the door, and accepted his paper concerning my ... *our* Lady Ai's office. As Molara brought the paper to me, Rondal looked in on Maya." Kita looked away while flashing back to the chaos of this morning before letting out another tiny sigh.

"She ... she started screaming again, and threw herself on the floor behind the bed to hide from him. It took Molara almost an hour to calm her down ... even with the good doctor's assistance. We had the doctor prepare another injector for her, and we keep it ready. Molara will use it as Rondal suggested, but only if really needed. He was unsure if it was just him alone or all men she objects to ... although I find my good doctor quite *charming*, now," she admitted with just the hint of a smile.

She closed her eyes while absently reaching up and rubbing the back of her head just behind her right ear with ease. It was still a novelty at this point, but was so much better since she'd finally accepted that generous allotment of pills Hifacious had been insisting she use.

She suddenly remembered Lili was standing there and considered – was that *my* lack of attention, or was it the *pills*? She decided to blame the pills, before continuing her tale.

"As for Rondal, I suggested Fan and Xiu offer him contentment in the other chamber, but he merely hugged and kissed them both before going back to his quarters, one supposes. We are not all raving maniacs, so one would assume he did not go to the *gym* this time. Of course, I am not currently able to *feel* such for..." she paused and looked at the ships timer, "...another eight hours, at least."

She glanced at the timer again and frowned at her chemically suppressed lack of Healer talent, then remembered Lili was still standing right there. She reached out and looped her arm in hers.

"Come – let us visit Maya. Perhaps you can look within and see what she has hidden in there? You might even provide another perspective on her memories. In fact, perhaps you may make connections which we would not recognize ... see faces that you know from *other* situations?"

"I will be glad to look, my ... Kita," Lili graciously allowed, triggering a smile from Kita in return.

They entered the chamber where Maya still lay. She was watching the monitor where the waves crashed monotonously over a distant seashore; the sounds of the water muted in the smaller room. Maya didn't note their presence, and Molara quietly sat nearby while reading from a data pad.

Lili stood there looking at the vapid shell that was her stepson's lover, and nearly wept at the sight. Steeling herself, she extended a probe and danced lightly through Maya's memories – quickly jumping past her experiences with the Drecks, and trying to take a closer look at the events leading up to it. She focused on Maya's immediate past, before joining the Ambassador's party, and saw...

*Visiting homes ... helping to prepare a meal ... Healing a cut ... Healing a broken arm ... eating a simple meal ... resting after a day helping her townspeople.*

Lili skipped rapidly over these and similar images until...

*Someone at the door ... a man ... two men ... a suggestion that the Ambassador would like to meet with her ... hands opening a message ... an invitation to a meeting with the Ambassador ... a man taking her to the meeting ... voices in consultation ... the Ambassador requesting that Maya find two more Healers to join their party...*

Lili stopped and looked back again....

*A man, two men suggesting that the Ambassador would like to meet with her...*

One of them looked familiar, but Lili broke out when Maya reached up and touched her.

"Janji? You ... you are not my Janji! Marta? Where is my Marta?" she asked, while looking around the room in confusion.

"Hello, Maya. I am called Lili. Your girls are resting now, Maya. They are safe now."

"*My babies? Where are my babies!*" She began to wail, and Molara rose up from her chair.

"Hush now, Maya. Shhhh... It is time to rest, Maya."

Molara tried to comfort her, and ran the fingers of one hand through her hair, while the injector rested out of sight in her other hand.

"*Aunt Molara? You're here? Where are my babies, Aunt Molara? Where are they?*" Maya was crying tears now.

"They rest now, little Maya. They rest now, and all is *well*, love. All is *well...*" she said, before gently kissing her cheek, then slowly tilting her head towards the monitor again.

"Oh look, Maya. Remember our visit to the *beach*? Look how *pretty* the waves are, Maya," she cooed while still petting and gliding her fingers through her hair.

"I ... I remember Aunt Molara ... it is ... so pretty ... Janji will need to learn how to swim ... Marta will teach her ... she swims so well ... my babies..."

"They rest now, Maya. All is well. All is safe..."

Lili had to leave the room.

She fell to her knees with tears streaming down her face and wept openly; her head cradled on a chair seat in the antechamber. Kita came over and crouched beside her, then laid a hand on her shoulder. She began rubbing her back; a novelty that it did not hurt to do so.

"It seems that my cynical Lady Lili *does* have a heart deep down inside of her," she said gently, and Lili turned and hugged her fiercely.

"Oh Kita! You never allowed me, *my* child, and ... and to *lose them as she has...*"

"And I have lost so many," Kita said, while smoothing Lili's hair, before pushing back to look directly at her.

"My sons ... my *Grandsons* ... my *Great-Grandsons...* Will you help save Ronnie for me, Lili? Save him for the Commonwealth?"

"But ... what if Maya does not accept him? What happens then?"

Kita moved to stand, but Lili still held her. A frown darkened Kita's face when she remembered the confused paths she'd envisioned of the future.

"Lili, those two pieces may still fit the same, but if not ... the surrounding pieces will shift unpredictably. As Lady Ai is still not ready to see their progression, I'd rather we focus on what pieces are in front of us."

"I promise I will try, Kita." Lili sniffed and wiped her eyes, while still clinging to her with one arm. "Oh ... *look at me!* First Wife of House Caldorous ... blubbering like a fresh Healer on her *first assignment!*"

Lili rose unsteadily to her feet, with Kita helping her as she could.

“Not just First Wife, Lili. You are my *finest sword* – better than *any* I’d ever placed in the field. Certainly sharper than those foolish girls I’d sent to manage the *Emperor!*”

“Ah! What news of the Emperor, Kita?”

Kita paused and considered the delicate timing involved. The issue had already been resolved, but now was obviously *not* the time to discuss it.

“That is something Elder Ai will reveal in due time. That piece may not even be part of this particular puzzle. It remains to be seen. Go get cleaned up, child. There is work to be done, and I must see to Lady Ai.”

“Lady Ai... She is not well?”

“She now knows my burden, Lili – *all of it*. Not a *bit* of which she had suspected. She will need to resolve this new information she has received, but she is strong, and I will guide her – I have time enough for *that*, at least.”

“I will do as you ... *suggest*, Kita,” Lili said, then bowed slightly.

“I have every confidence.”

Even as Lili turned to leave, Kita headed back to help the new Elder understand yet *another* facet of her new burden ... one that Kita was so *very* glad to be rid of.

“Gods grant she handles this mess better than I who *created* it,” she murmured, before stepping through the Elder’s chamber door to see Fan sitting with the still-mumbling Elder.

She was about to instruct Fan to notify the Elder’s Council that power had changed hands, but suddenly remembered she was no longer *in* power.

She would make a *suggestion*, instead. Perhaps they would even let her *compose* it...

### ***With Molara and Maya...***

Molara watched absently while Maya stared mindlessly at the image playing before her. What was on her mind, though, was the anguish Lili had just expressed.

After her outburst, she thought she’d sensed impressions regarding Lili’s *own* child in regards to Kita. She’d initially wondered what Lili could *possibly* have done to warrant preventing her from ever becoming pregnant. Then she’d caught the undertones of a pregnancy *terminated* rather than prevented.

She closed her eyes and shivered in revulsion. There were restrictions, certainly, but there should have been no cause to *deliberately* terminate the life of an unborn child – not if the mother intended to bring it to term. She could not imagine Lili being young and foolish enough to breed without permission – certainly not then becoming the Senior she is now. And she could *never* imagine an excuse serious enough to terminate a fetus unless it was *unbelievably* damaged by some severe genetic mutation of some sort.

Had Lili been raped, and then decided to *keep* the child against the Elder's wishes?

She could almost not believe it, but after having been advised of the existence of those who *truly* controlled the strings behind the Elder's Office, she decided it was an issue better left unsaid ... unless brought up by those above her.

She opened her eyes and looked over at her niece again. She was alive, healthy, and beautiful. Molara smiled as she watched Maya's eyes blink slowly as she slipped into sleep once again.

### **Noon +1 (Day 101) – Laisee Finds Music**

After visiting his compartment first, Laisee and Amy had gone to the gym, but Diane told them Ronnie hadn't been there. A visit to the con found him absent as well, and David had no idea where he was. Amy had a thought and quickly left, before David brought up a security monitor and flipped through all the public spaces available on the system.

After a quick search, a prone body was found to be the lone occupant of the Recreation Center. It appeared to be watching a reddish-tinted beachscape with rolling breakers. David turned up the audio, but instead of the sound of waves, a familiar plunking sound was heard – a lot like when Amy was still practicing her music lessons. Laisee's eyes lit up, and she turned and bolted from the con. David simply shrugged, and turned off the monitor.

Laisee nearly flew to the Recreation Center, before slowing to a fast walk that allowed her guard to catch up with her. As she approached the door, she paused to catch her breath and compose herself...

Lili had seen them earlier and told them she was searching for Ronnie. They'd immediately agreed to help, so they went to look for him. Now that she knew he was inside, Laisee stopped to consider if she would be bringing him welcome news or not.

She'd heard about yesterday from Amy, and knew he might be in a foul mood, but the Ronnie she knew always bounced back quickly.

Then she remembered he'd also suffered several recent setbacks that might have left him with some persistent frustrations. She decided to approach him quietly and see how he reacted...

Setting her shoulders, she pushed through the door and entered to see that it was, indeed, Ronnie stretched out on a platform. His eyes were closed, and he was listening to \*piano\* music as played by a single citizen! After a thorough glance inside, and recognizing Lord Rondal's profile, her guard pulled back and allowed the door to close softly behind her.

Laisee walked further in and selected a place on the floor – not facing Ronnie, but close enough for him to see her if he opened his eyes. She listened to the fading melody and let it sing to her. Then a new melody began.

It was a simple melody presented in a delicate syncopation. After a wandering meter in the first bar, it commenced a phrase that rolled over on itself twice, before transitioning to a more involved second phrase that also looped. Once completed, the second phrase dallied with part of the first phrase with an extended interpretation, followed by another matching bar, before transitioning to a more somber third phrase with a slower tempo. It also repeated itself while slowing even further during the second part of its loop.

The fourth and final phrase rose up stronger with a more positive attitude, then began its second pass in a somewhat brighter, but still somber tone, just as Amy was entering the Recreation Center dressed in her hard suit.

She walked up quietly and stood beside Ronnie, while the fourth phrase ran out, and the recording stopped. Amy recognized the music, if not the composer, then saw Ronnie's eyes notice her.

"\*Mexican Serenade\*?" she asked, and he nodded. "I forgot the name of the composer. Grandpa Walter liked me to play it for him, though."

Ronnie sat up and looked at them both.

"Scott Joplin. He also called it \*Solace.\*' He wrote it in 1909. Scott died with dementia caused by venereal disease. Probably got it when he worked at one of the bordellos trying to make enough money to survive on. Imagine what he could have accomplished if the proper medicine had been available at the time ... or a proper Healer."

He took a breath and sighed, just before Amy sat down next to him. As she did, she saw traces of tears on his face, and reached up with her sleeve to wipe them ...but stopped when she realized she was in her hard suit. Ronnie laughed and wiped his own face.

"Brings back memories. Sorry – guess I'm just an old softie."

"*You* knew Scott Joplin?" she asked with her eyes wide open.

"Ha! Oh no! I heard him *play* once or twice, though. He respected the music. He *honored* it. It just reminded me of Walter. He said he liked the music – liked it a *lot*. Said you learned to play a few selections just for him. He was very ... *proud* of you, Amy. You and Andrew both. He loved you a great deal."

That surprised Amy. *She* knew her Grandpa Walter loved his grandkids, but why did *Ronnie* know?

"Ronnie ... how come you know so much about Grandpa Walter?"

He thought briefly about burdening her youth with an even greater load, but decided that a polite fiction would have to do for now.

"Oh ... Walter and I used to talk a great deal when he would come visit us out at the camp. Get a little ambrosia into him, along with a little bit of Maya's *special* milkshakes, and he'd talk up a *storm!*" He laughed once, then shook his head and sighed.

"Your Grandpa Walter was a good man, Amy, a *very* good man, and Maya and I still miss him terribly." His eyes started watering, so he wiped them again. "At least *I* do. I don't know *what's* going on with Maya."

"Is she not getting better, my Lord Rondal," Laisee asked. "The Elder was certain the Healing would be good for her. Was it not?"

Ronnie's listless shrug wasn't all that promising.

"Well ... she takes comfort in Lady Molara's company ... but the sight of *me* still terrifies her."

"Hey! She'll turn around, Grandpa! You just gotta give her time."

Amy tried to give him a hard suit hug, but laughed and peeled out of it to hug him for real. Laisee shyly approached and finally gave in and hugged him as well.

"And how are my Healers-in-Training this day?" His smile was bright, and his spirits seemed to have risen a bit.

"They are *remiss* in reporting your whereabouts to *me*, apparently," a stern voice said from the door.

"My Lady Lili! How delightful to see you..." he paused, and quickly glanced at the compartment timer, "...this afternoon. How may I serve

you?" He'd asked this while managing to stand without tripping over the girls, before offering Lili a polite, informal bow.

"The office of the Elder advises me that *you* are in dire need of further *training!* As *they* are still busy with their investigation, they have delegated that task to *me*. We shall meet in your compartment at plus six, where I shall instruct you, with the assistance of Lady Diane," she ordered, before turning to Amy and Laisee.

"These two..." she said, indicating Laisee and Amy, "...shall be attending lessons with Lady Yin-Yin at the noon hour beginning tomorrow, along with Mistress Shay ... who has so far *escaped* my sight these last few days."

"Um, Lady Lili... Shay hasn't been feeling so good for a couple of days," Amy said. "Mom told her to take it easy and try to rest for a few more days."

"Ai-yah! Rondal, if you must *pretend* to be a Healer, then you must at least pretend to *act* like a Healer! Did you not even advise Lady Diane of the *physiology* of the women of Wilder?"

"I – uh, no..." He paused, while quickly racking his brain for the information Lili was referring to, but coming up blank. "No, I did not, my Lady. I will do so immediately," he said, then started gathering his things.

"No, Rondal. We will immediately go and *assess* Mistress Shay's needs! When Lady Diane is quit of her duty, *then* we will advise her of Mistress Shay's needs."

"Yes, my Lady Lili," he said contritely.

Ronnie and the girls stood there, waiting.

"Must I *repeat* myself?" she prompted them.

"No, my Lady," he said, and headed towards the door.

"It's close by my compartment, Lady Lili," Amy said, while gathering up her suit and clomping after Ronnie.

"If I may, my Lady Lili, may I please come to learn as well?" Laisee asked timidly, then joined the parade at Lili's impatient nod.

'NOW, *I remember why I did not WANT children!*' she thought furiously, but flashed back to less than an hour ago, when she'd chastened Kita about her own lost child. It was done with a very long time ago, but the memory of that day still stung at inopportune times. She cleared her head and headed out after her students.

They made it into the corridor, where they found three guards waiting for their charges, with another one just arriving dressed in a hard suit.

### ***In Andy and Shay's Compartment***

Shay wasn't feeling so well, and didn't know what was going on. She and Andy hadn't even played for the last couple of days – ever since the day of Maya's Healing. Although Diane was a nurse on her world, she couldn't offer any better advice than to eat well and keep resting.

Shay wondered if she'd caught something from Laisee? Maybe Laisee had given something to her *Andy*, and then he had given it to *her*? *Oh no!* What about Andy's little unborn baby *brother*?

This thought didn't help her any, and she *still* felt like there was some sort of craving she couldn't seem to fulfill. Thinking the rich foods brought in by House Caldarous might be to blame, she'd gone back to eating only ships gruel the day before. She would normally ask Maya, but she wasn't available. She couldn't think where to turn, and was becoming very frustrated by the time a knock came at the door.

Shay was both surprised and intimidated when first her crewmates and then Lady Lili entered the compartment. She hoped they were there to tell her good news about Maya, but their visit was about *her* instead.

"Mistress Shay, Lady Amy tells me you are not well. How are you feeling?" Lili asked her, even while extending herself and sweeping through her from head to toe. As a new Healer, Shay didn't notice the probe, but was confused at the sudden attention being given her by the First Wife.

"I – ah ... I do not know, Lady Lili. I do not feel ... fulfilled?" she suggested half-heartedly.

Lili considered this, while tilting her head in concentration. She seemed all right physically, but something was missing. Looking further inside, she determined the *baby* was also feeling somewhat undernourished, if only slightly. Her first impression indicated she was lacking in certain nutrients.

*Wilder ... Wilder ... seeded quite a while ago, but poorly ... acclimation by the seed stock from Cletus ... common foods ... nutrients...*

"Who *exactly* is the father of your child, Mistress Shay?"

"Um, my – my Lord David Andrew Lane se Earth, my Lady Lili."

*Earth ... sporadic seeding ... inconsistent results ... poor birth rates for crossbreeding, yet Shay has taken? – interesting ... common foods ... nutrients...*

Lili sighed and found a seat. Sitting down, she raised her arms to Shay, and said, “Come here, child.”

Shay slowly walked over and stood before her, while Lili reached out and placed her hands on her abdomen, then closed her eyes in concentration for a more *detailed* inspection. Shay felt this one as little tickles passing all over her body, and almost had to fight to keep herself from wiggling in response.

Rondal said they had all been on ships gruel for months, with the only *real* food just recently provided by their own staff. Likewise, the staff had remarked that – on the *whole* – Rondal’s crew seemed to draw from the platform sustenance system more often than the menu offerings. *Gods*, she could not *imagine*!

*“There! There is still a bit of it in her system. Eew!”*

Still, something was lacking ... something *vaguely* familiar...

“Shay, when did you start feeling poorly?”

Shay thought about it, and remembered first feeling “not right” later in the day of Maya’s Healing.

“I – it was ... the day when Lady Maya was Healed? I did not see Lady Maya that morning, and we were all so worried about her that I thought it must be making me not well. Today, I still do not feel well, and I still worry about Lady Maya. Do you think it is because Lady Maya is still not well?”

“We will see, little Shay, but first we will try something,” Lili assured her, before reaching out and probing the closest source.

“My Lady Amy, will you spare some *special* Healing for your fellow Student?”

“Um, yeah ... sure – um, Lady Lili. What do you want me to do?”

“Take this young Healer to her bed and *feed* her.” This brought a momentary look of confusion to Amy’s face, before she understood.

“That’s *all?* *Sure!* Com’ on, Shay! Larl will just hafta do without for a while,” she said, then grabbed Shay’s hand and dragged her over to the bed.

“Healer Rondal – Healer-in-Training Laisee ...go as well. You will attend and *observe*. Rondal, extend into Shay and feel her changes when she nurses from Amy. You should feel a positive response from

her. You will know it when you feel it, or I am mistaken, or Amy will not be able to provide for her. Laisee, sit close by Shay and hold her hand. That will help you to extend, and I will assist you – push you through if necessary. You *must* learn this as part of your training.”

As her new students took their places, Lili sat back and closed her eyes, while reaching out and waiting for the initial results of Shay’s feeding from Amy. She guided Ronnie into position for watching at the correct location, before pushing and prodding Laisee to the same place – a somewhat more difficult task because of her inexperience.

After letdown occurred, Amy’s limited supply of milk began to hit Shay’s digestive track. Her body let out a quiet shout of joy, and a minor party started once the milk passed through her stomach and into her intestines. Once there, the rare but *much-needed* nutrients began transferring into her bloodstream.

Within a very few minutes, a raging argument began ramping up between the demands of her body over the needs of the unborn child. Before the argument erupted into a violent explosion of flatulence, her subconscious won out, and the warring parties agreed to *share* the limited supply, now that someone had *finally* figured out what was missing from Shay’s diet.

Laisee – eyes closed and attentive – smiled delightedly at what she was perceiving, while Ronnie sat back in astonishment.

“Lili, please tell me that … I … did … not … hear … what I *thought* I just heard,” he said slowly.

“No, you did not. Mistress Shay, how long has Maya been sharing the bounty of her milk with you?”

“Ahh … every day since the day my Lord David planted his seed within me, my Lady.”

“And did she share with you on the morning of her Healing?”

“Oh no, my Lady! She was *much* too busy, but she is *sure* to make time for me–”

“Once she is feeling better again,” Lili muttered, while nodding as her suspicions were confirmed. “Maya has been providing you with the extra necessities for the health of you and your unborn child. Now that she is indisposed, you have been missing them. You will need to nurse from Lady Amy, and probably Lady Diane, as well … *every day*.”

“Um, Lady Lili? Was that really a … a *party* I was hearing when Shay was nursing from me?” Amy asked.

"Ah! You were paying *attention*, then? Excellent! And, *no*. That was a trick to help you learn *where* to look, and *what* to look for. I gave you all that perception, but look now and what do you see? *All of you...*"

They pushed back in, and all three of them saw increased activity in the area where the party had broken out – but now it was merely red blood cells moving around. No ... *more* red blood cells were moving around, and the increased flow was dragging the extra nutrients along with them.

"As Shay feeds, the body increases the flow of blood. The nutrients from the milk are extracted from it in the intestines and passed along. The more nutrients the body demands, the *harder* it works for them. Of course, this is a simplification. There are areas in Shay's brain that control what she craves, and then report by way of her feelings when she is lacking in certain nutrients. It is very complicated, but for the purpose of this lesson, it is sufficient that you recognize the process as it really is."

"My Lady, I doubt that I will *ever* forget it," Ronnie muttered.

"And *that* was the point of the exercise," she said smugly, before noticing Laisee looking sadly down at Shay.

"What brings such sadness, Mistress Laisee? Are you perhaps longing for a taste of Lady Amy as well?"

"Oh no, my Lady, but ... I could not see all that you wished us to without your help, my Lady. Do you think I will *ever* be able to do so on my own?"

Lili looked at her in surprise, but then stifled a laugh.

"Laisee, you have been in training for but a few *days*. Do not presume to *walk*, before you can *crawl*, child."

She held out her arms and drew Laisee in for a warm hug. Then she extended through *her*, as well.

"Hmmm ... Rondal, *this* little one could use your company tonight. Do you think you could spare an evening devoted to her contentment – *without the offer of my Gift, if you please?* We would *all* like to sleep soundly this evening."

Amy's mind flashed to several recent episodes where she'd become unreasonably horny, and Lili had just spoken like *Ronnie* was to blame for it. *Unbelievable!*

"If it would please Mistress Laisee, I would be *honored* for her presence at my side this evening – and she is welcome to stay until

breakfast..." he paused and looked at Laisee before adding, "... should she first ask permission from the Senior Student, Lady Diane."

"No – wait – I – *I couldn't* ... I – I mean..."

Lili smiled and nodded at her, and Laisee blushed a tiny bit before turning to look at him; the shy smile on her face showing that she'd made up her mind.

"I – I would *like* your company this evening, Lord Rondal ... if it is not too much of a bother? I will ask permission of Lady Diane at the change of the watch."

Lili thought of tonight's training session for Ronnie and Diane.

'*We will see just who gives contentment to whom this evening, my dear Rondal,*' she considered evilly, while grinning a thin and mirthless smile.

Amy felt a momentary flash of annoyance at her Grandpa's willing acceptance of his evening's assignation. Maya was still under treatment, and it just didn't seem right to her. Then she noticed Lili looking at her quizzically. She wasn't sure why, but for some reason, she thought she'd just earned a lecture from her, and hoped it wasn't a painful one.

"Lady Amy, it would appear that our Rondal has been lax in seeing to your *cultural* adaptation to the societal mores of Kantor. I will have the Lady Wives review them with *all* of you ... *particularly* in regards to the duties and responsibilities of a *Healer*."

"I ... thank you, Lady Lili," Amy said contritely, while still giving her that "deer in the headlights" stare.

### ***Noon +3 (Day 101) – The Eyes Get Some Freedom***

*A bleary eye opened and stared straight up at the ceiling. The other eye, a reluctant witness to the atrocities suffered by the first eye, joined it. Between the two of them, they checked the ceiling for cracks and chips, before wandering down the walls a bit until they reached their limits.*

*They could just make out the edges of the pillow, and the color of the blanket covering their host, along with the non-descript decorations on the walls located approximately higher than the surface their host was currently residing upon. They even took notice that their host's nose was still centered approximately between and slightly below them.*

*They could not see their host's feet, of course, but it didn't matter to them, since the feet worked for the Department of Transportation, while they worked for the Department of Senses over in the Visual Division.*

*They were relishing their relative autonomy for the moment. Not since before the birth of their host had they had so much freedom – except for that one time when she'd gotten wacked in the head while at play.*

*An independent motion on their visual background triggered an automatic sub-system, which sent a message to Central Control, which triggered a whole range of commands; not the least of which was the General Override from the Conscious Mind, and their temporary freedom was squelched.*

“How are you *feeling*, my Elder?”

The voice appeared to have originated in the vicinity of the wizened and white-haired figure that had stealthily approached and was now standing quietly by her side.

Her jaws unclenched with a smack before gagging slightly at the foul taste in her mouth. The tiny figure ... ‘Kana?’ ... ‘Kata?’ ... ‘Kita?’ ... stood by with a concerned look on her face before proffering a small cup of ... *something*...

Kita lifted the Elder’s head and helped her sip from the cup. It contained a portion of freshly harvested Maya, and in just seconds, she was gratified at the relief and gradual sense of recognition she was beginning to see in the Elder’s eyes.

“You evil – evil – *evil – old – bitch*,” the Elder murmured weakly, but winced as a stream of horrible memories wafted through her consciousness.

“Glad to see you, *too*,” the evil old bitch murmured with a smile.

Ai rolled her head haltingly and squinted her eyes. Then she stifled a moan when yet *another* travesty wandered by her mind’s eye. At least they’d slowed down from last month ... last *week*? Surely at least a *day* or so ago?

“You should be *grateful*, Elder. My predecessor had the misfortune to *die* unexpectedly, and I suffered a constant *stream* of nightmares for many years while assimilating their contents. And here you are – already talking after a mere ...*six hours? Remarkable!*” Kita said cheerfully.

The Elder’s rejoinder was cut off by the simple expedient of Kita pouring more of Maya’s milk into her mouth while holding her nose shut with her other hand. The ridiculousness of the situation

prompted Ai to swallow quickly before she could spray the contents out of her mouth with her laughter. It didn't stop the accusation in her voice, however.

"You *knew!* You *knew* this was going to happen to me!"

"I suspected. I was *hoping*, actually. I would not wish on anyone the years I spent becoming the Elder."

Ai stared at her, and in that moment, realized the *truth* of her statement. She reached out to Kita with a probe and discovered she was *completely* open to her – something *never* possible before. Her surprise registered on her face.

"Discovering some *new* talents, my Lady? Comes with the position. *Never documented. Never discussed.* More's the pity, that. It would have saved *centuries* of guesswork at how to transfer this position properly. It would have also saved me years of indecision when I'd first become cursed with the *rest* of it – much like I imagine *you're* experiencing right now?"

The Elder looked up at her, but blanked out when *another* memory flashed by her senses, and not of something she'd *personally* witnessed. She lurched upwards and opened her eyes in fright, but Kita rested her hand by the side of her cheek and smiled at her.

"Perhaps a *new* gift? Something seldom even *hinted* at ...although you may have had suspicions? More strength, more power – not to forget *precognition*. That's a very tricky one –precognition. You're never quite sure if the outcome you foresee is the one that will come to pass – or even if it is the one most *desired*. It is very *lonely* at the top, my dear," Kita said kindly.

"But ... you never *mentioned*..."

"And how *could* I? Would you consider me *mad* ... *confused* ... *senile* ... or perhaps simply *power-hungry*? Perhaps picking up the *male* tendencies for control, power, prestige, and sex? Although, I now see I should have relented about the *sex* – yes, a *long* time ago, I'm afraid. We are *still* human beings, are we not?" she said with a low chuckle.

Elder Ai settled back and started thinking. Even as more of her conscious mind became active, the memories from Kita were still running silently in the background. They were still flashing by rapidly but slowing as they came closer to the present.

"What has happened since you ... *assaulted* me, Kita?"

The elderly Mistress nearly laughed out loud, but instead kept it to a quiet smile.

"Oh, not much. Rondal stopped by with the paper from Doctor Riker. It appears to be a sound observation from an outsider. The references stand up to a proper causal search and coincide with perceptions which Fan, Xiu, and Molara have already voiced."

Kita paused for a moment before bringing up a more distasteful subject.

"Our Lady Lili presented us with another piece of the puzzle, and it might solve the mystery of our sister Yandi's unfortunate departure. Either accident or intentional, there was an *outside* cause. Fan and Xiu are working on the data, even as Molara watches over her niece. Lili also looked at the girl. When you examine her memories later, you may piece together more information that Fan and Xiu will not. Maya is still stuck in her past – the past *before* the Drecks. Perhaps you will be able to guide her beyond that area once you've traveled in her past as well – even if only to block her memories once again."

"*Kita!* It is *bad enough* that we suffer *Rondal* to live for what he did to Maya; yet you would–"

A flush of memories from Kita's past regarding incidents of similar incursions – the reasons for them, and their beneficial results – suddenly danced in her mind's eye, and she became even more aware of the *grayness* that now surrounded her world ... just like when she'd administered the dose that had knocked Kita out the other night. Or did it?

"Elder Ai, you seem ... *tense*? If you like, I could ask Lady Fan or Lady Xiu to see to your contentment? Or perhaps I could summon one of the guards? No.... According to Doctor Riker, that would *never* do. There is still time. Could I summon Lord *Rondal* to take care of your needs? I understand he is *very* accommodating, and it could possibly help you assimilate those annoying dreams much faster, my Elder."

Ai thought how inappropriate it sounded, even while smiling inwardly at the mere idea of it, but she'd also caught the conditional.

"There is *still* time? Is Lord *Rondal* *leaving* us?"

"Oh no, Elder. Just a little task ... a mere *suggestion* to Lady Lili. Since it appears you will not be ready for a few more days, I proposed that it would be of some benefit to Rondal if she would take it upon herself to give him some much-needed *training* – particularly at the more *advanced* levels. For *all* his efforts in self-learning, he lacks some very important skills."

"Ah ... yes ...self-control being *one* of them, I trust?" the Elder asked.

“Just so, my Lady.”

“Well then ... I suppose you may send Lady Fan or Lady Xiu to me. If it will help rid me of these nightmares sooner, then I suppose it must be done.” She let out a small sigh and settled into a more comfortable position.

“I will see to it, my Elder,” Kita said, then bowed and left the room – all the while knowing the nightmares had yet to even *begin*.

### ***Midnight –3 (Day 101) – Talking Shop***

“Kita, your Grandson cries like a *baby!* *Really*, after *all* the things he’d done to himself over the years, you’d think he’d be *used* to it by now.”

Kita poured Lili a small measure of Ronnie’s gift of ambrosia before sipping from her own cup of milk. The pill her good doctor had given her had worn off about an hour previously, and she needed to be pain-free before consulting with the Elder in a few minutes. There was still time enough to learn of Lili’s day, however.

“Did he learn anything *useful* this day, do you think?”

Lili smiled while musing over his agonies.

“Yes. He learned that if Lady Diane is holding his hands down while planted firmly on his chest, she can keep even the most *struggling* man securely captured while a few simple Healings are taking place.”

“Oh Lili. You *didn’t...*”

“What? Oh no, my dear Kita. Diane was merely sitting on his chest – *fully clothed* – and had both her knees *and* hands holding Rondal’s arms in place. I assured him the pain would soon fade away once he settled down and started mending the bones in his foot *properly*. I fear it took a little bit longer than he’d expected. He kept trying to take his little – I think he called them ‘short-cuts’ – and I had to keep *severing* his fixes and making him go back and do them *properly*.”

“Oh my... Well, my Lady, I hope he learned that one should *really* take the time to do it properly and without the benefit of adrenaline to mask his suffering. How was your other student this evening, the Lady Diane?” she asked, and smiled before sipping her milk.

“Ah! That one is *truly* a treasure among us! Were she not bonded to her David, I would claim her for the Royal family and put her to good use! She is *amazing*. Did you see the clear marks on Rondal’s arm? *She did that!* And she did it without even *realizing* she was doing it. She said it happened when he was teaching *her* lessons!”

"Interesting... And he made no mention of it?"

"None ... other than she glowed like a beacon above him, and where she was grasping him – she *Healed* him. And she is *fully* Earthborn, unlike so many others."

Kita hid her smile behind her cup before taking another sip while Lili continued.

"There was another issue. Mistress Shay carries Lord David's child, and both she and the baby were undernourished. Once I discovered this, I chastened our erstwhile baby Senior and took him and the rest of his baby Healers to look in on Mistress Shay.

"Mistress Shay was being fed by Maya on a daily basis until the morning of her Healing. I had Lady Amy provide for her, and Lady Diane did so later. I would like to have Shay receive a portion of Maya's bounty every morning should that provided by Amy and Diane prove to be insufficient."

Kita reached up with her pinky and scratched at her own eyebrow while considering Maya's current condition. She stopped and nodded her head slightly before looking up at Lili again.

"I do not see a problem with it, but perhaps there is an additional benefit. Shay is of an age where Maya might consider her one of her daughters, although I have no images of them myself to compare with. I will speak with Molara and see if it would be wise to introduce Shay as a needful client for Maya to serve. Perhaps it may help her; perhaps not."

Lili was quick to help out.

"From what I saw earlier, Shay does not favor *either* of her daughters, but if she would be helpful to Maya's recovery, then I will arrange for her to visit – upon Molara's approval, of course."

"Of course," Kita agreed before thinking of something else. "While you were in there, did you notice anything *else* of consequence? Anything *prior* to Maya's adventure with the Drecks?"

Lili sipped her drink and thought back to the morning ... there *was* something gnawing at her ... that familiar face...

"There was a period just before Maya accepted her assignment with the Ambassador. During *that* portion of her memories, I thought I saw a face that I recognized from somewhere. Exactly *where* escapes me, however. Do you suppose you could look into me and perhaps..."

"No longer, child. That part of my life is lost to me. Better that our *new* Elder takes a peek, for she has all of the information we've

gathered thus far..." 'Not to mention all of my memories, and those of my predecessors,' she kept to herself, "...and perhaps she may see a connection once you point out your suspicions. Will you come and greet your new Elder? I have a meeting with her, and a ...a paper to deliver from Rondal."

"A *paper*?" It was not unheard of, but paper was *extremely* rare – especially in space.

"A data tab, to be sure. His Mister Riker, a noted sociologist of the Commonwealth, I'm told, produced it for him. It outlines several failures I'd let slip into the office of the Elder in my quest to keep our efforts pure and focused."

"How *presumptuous!*"

"On the *contrary*, my Lady. From his outside viewpoint, he neatly outlined the gradual inefficiency and decay of this office right up to my resignation this morning. *Gods!* I feel so foolish now."

"You must *not*, Kita! You've managed well for over – over – well, *a very long time!*"

"Over a thousand years, Lili, and perhaps a thousand years *too* long, I'm afraid. If I'd managed better, then our Rondal's little Maya would not be laying in the other room and still grieving for her daughters. Come. Let us see the new Elder. She was already talking this afternoon."

Lili was momentarily stunned at hearing how Ai had been affected so harshly.

"Was it – was it very *difficult* for her, Kita?"

"Pish! It was but *child's play* for her," she lied easily, then patted her hand after Lili helped her from her chair. "I dare say *you* would have faired as well, but you are *truly* too valuable exactly where you are," she said before opening the door to Lady Ai's chamber.

### ***Midnight –1 (Day 101) – Ronnie and Laisee***

Ronnie was lying absolutely still while Laisee was still snuggled up against him.

She had one arm and one leg firmly wrapped around him. Being of the same relative height, her head didn't snuggle under his arm like Maya's did, but was turned towards him, and purred a similar snore into his left ear.

He still hurt. Well, not exactly hurt...

He *ached*...

*All – over – his – body.*

But as long as he didn't *move*...

'Augh!' he winced silently when Laisee squeezed him just a little bit tighter in her sleep.

Or if somebody didn't move *him*...

He almost longed for her to wake up and trigger another endorphin rush within him, but unfortunately the effects would only be temporary. Besides, the girl was still suffering from a bunch of emotional trauma that he just didn't feel like talking her through at the moment – not *again*.

A glance at the timer told him he'd gotten a good hour and a half of rest. Maybe even *two* hours, if he'd dropped off as quickly as he'd hoped. He'd like to get more sleep, though, and turned his head to glance at the cup containing that last swallow of ambrosia he'd been saving for *just* this situation.

Trapped as he was, though, it was currently *just* out of reach...

He'd certainly taken advantage of it *earlier*, as the amount of agony Lili had put him through was significant. And it was just like she'd said – old wounds Healed poorly were *painful* to fix, compared to new wounds that were Healed properly.

He didn't even *remember* breaking his, foot but Lili had shown him the bone scars hidden deep within it – and then she'd made *him* fix it ... *again ... and again ... and again ... until he finally got it right!*

Then there were dozens of *other* little insults inside his legs and upper body. Diane had followed along in rapt attention during every detail of his treatment, while Lili took almost *gleeful* delight in undoing his "temporary repairs" as she'd called them and made him fix them again the *correct* way.

She'd pushed through him, and as the list grew and grew, she'd wondered aloud that he'd survived at all during his "missing years" out at the Fringe. Many of the tissue memories had revealed *extreme* trauma to parts of his body – his foot being a prime example. For that particular fix, she'd shown Diane the internal areas that were "unmatched" to their surroundings, pointed each one of them out in detail, and then simply *pulled them apart with an effort of will!*

The resulting scream could be heard all the way out in the corridor.

Lili and Diane's guards had already been advised that some "unpleasant" noises might be occurring from within at times, but they were to ignore Lord Rondal's cries for help. Thinking it was a matter *totally* unrelated to reality, the guards merely shared a smirk at each scream, and wondered what delights the Lady and her assistant were sharing with the lucky platform master *that* time.

And the list went *on* and *on* and *on*...

Thankfully, Laisee's appearance at the minus four hour had signaled the end of his torment for the evening, and he'd relaxed in blissful relief when Diane and Lili ushered in a shy and hopeful Healer-in-Training for her evening assignation.

He'd hobbled up very carefully and greeted her warmly. Then he'd offered her a small measure of ambrosia, before pouring himself a *full* measure ... that Diane had come over and taken out of his hands before sipping at it daintily. She'd offered the balance to Lili, who'd sipped it as well, and then handed the *half* measure back to him – followed with a suggestion that he needed a *clear* head to attend to his guest's pleasure that evening.

Lili's comment had made it clear that *this* was his ration for the evening – *and that he'd better check with her in the morning, too!* He'd simply nodded his thanks, and she'd turned and reminded Laisee to pay careful attention to the lessons he was sure to teach her. Afterwards, they'd taken their leave.

Alone at last, he and Laisee sat, then got caught up with what each of them had been doing for the last several decades. It was useful, and allowed the ambrosia time to work through his system. As tempting as it was, he'd avoided changing himself back – having no doubts that Lili would detect it and make him fix it all over again – but as Laisee talked, he'd diverted a small portion of his attention and focused on what the ambrosia was *actually* doing to his body – particularly to his *pain* receptors.

To his delight, with a little effort, he'd found that he could duplicate the effect using very few traces of ambrosia in his system. From that helpful discovery, he'd determined that this evening might be successful after all, with *both* of them deriving a measure of contentment from their planned activities. Plus, he'd figured that once they began their activities, his endorphins would kick in and grant him some additional relief so he actually *could* focus on her pleasure.

He'd *hoped* so, anyway. They'd hobbled into the shower together, where she'd taken pity on him and helped to him bathe and dry, before walking back to bed and snuggling together. It'd not been a *total*

disaster, for Laisee had apparently been both very eager and very easy to please, but he'd still felt ashamed of his performance ... or lack thereof.

They'd managed intercourse, but the residuals of injuries that were now fresh in his legs and thighs had prevented him from maintaining a thorough experience for her. He'd managed to bring her over just once, before disengaging while she recovered. Forbidden from cheating by using the Gift, that left his lips and tongue. Fortunately, he'd never injured *either* of them to his knowledge – other than the occasional bite or two.

After teasing her and bringing her to a climax manually, he'd repositioned himself between her open thighs, and, much to her delight, *devoured* her. He'd spent a *lot* of time in study, as well as practice, and less than an hour later, she'd finally begged off, for she was getting very out of breath from all the excitement. Not to be cruel, but just from thorough workmanship, he'd brought her over twice more, before letting her rest all panting and sweaty on the bed.

He'd crawled slowly and painfully up alongside her and lain next to her, where – after a few minutes – she'd noticed he was still hard.

She'd played with him while smiling into his eyes, and he'd smiled back – hoping she didn't plan on *mounting* him, for he didn't think his body could take it. Fortunately, she was proud of her lessons in the oral arts, and settled down –head on his tummy – and proceeded to pleasure him ... occasionally asking how she was doing, and finally asking if there was something in particular he *really* liked.

Biting his tongue to keep from mentioning the Gift, he'd casually mentioned the technique Diane had taught to Shay, and she'd rapidly nodded her head – nearly scraping the skin off his shaft in the process. After his grunt and grimace, she'd settled in and began *her* version of the slow, deliberate oral pleasure he favored. In very little time, he'd finished up in her mouth, and she'd shyly turned around to face him with her mouth closed tightly, all the while trying to force a little smile without spilling a drop.

He'd smiled in turn and pulled her up to him, before forcing his tongue into her mouth, even as she'd pushed all of his seed into his. He'd held her tightly while the kiss deepened, and she'd forgotten all about his seed in the moment of their passion. After she'd slowly broken away, he was still licking at her lips, and placing little kisses on them, and her chin, and her cheeks. She'd looked at him and smiled ... before her face had suddenly scrunched up and broken into tears.

As confessions went, this one had been fairly fast. She'd lamented her torment at her mother's hands; the secret assignations with her

few men; the pleasure play with the servants; how she'd felt when she'd finally "turned on her Mother," and most *interestingly*, how Meela had suddenly "seen the light" and had told her to learn her lessons well and become the "*good*" of her.

What was *that* all about?

Relieved of her burden by passing it on to her childhood friend and taker of her virginity, she'd then fallen asleep.

Peaceful, restful, and *painless*, if not quite, *silent* sleep...

Ronnie looked over at his cup again and reconsidered the situation – not *quite* calmly.

He could reach over the edge of the bedside table by a mere hand's breadth, but the cup was over towards the other side of it. A glance at Laisee confirmed that she was a solid anchor at the moment, and he frowned while weighing his options.

Being so close, Kita might catch him ... except that Kita had just retired. Ai was the new Elder, but probably not up to speed yet. Waking up Laisee might involve another talkfest – or more play – *neither* of which he was up for at the moment. He decided to take a chance, then reached out for his cup by extending an *extra* effort, then began willing it slowly closer to his hand. It was *almost* at his fingertips when it tilted towards him and the remaining contents spilled onto the tabletop.

He thought he could hear a *familiar*, silent tittering in his head.

He pondered this frustrating situation for a few seconds, before resting his palm in the little puddle and concentrating *very* hard. The puddle became smaller and smaller ... finally drying up almost entirely where his hand rested on it.

'*Self-absorbed, am I?*' He silently chuckled at his cleverness, while distributing the chemical components of the ambrosia throughout the painful areas of his body. He hoped it would last long enough to let him fall asleep once it started working as advertised. Just before he dropped off, he thought he heard a silent '*Eew!*' echo in his mind.

### ***Noon –5 (Day 102) – Visiting Maya***

Shay's tummy did a tiny flip-flop, and she sat bolt upright. Her stomach then imitated an animal's hungry growl, and she looked over at the ships timer. She had an hour before Andy was due off watch and wanted to settle her stomach *before* he got back. She had *plans* for him. This would be the *third* day they hadn't played with each other and she was feeling *anxious*.

Amy's milk had helped, and just before Diane had gone off for lessons with Ronnie and Lili last night, her mom's milk had helped even more. Lili had contacted later in the evening and told her the Elder would expect her before the minus four hour to have her receive Maya's gift directly.

She scrambled out of her blanket and entered the shower for a quick wash, before dressing and heading to the Elder's compartment; her guard trailing along in a loose tail. Once there, Lady Molara greeted her warmly and drew her inside. She had her sit down for a bit so they could chat.

"Mistress Shay, we understand Maya has been providing for your needs, but no one was really aware of how important she was to your health, and to your child's health."

"Yes, Lady Molara, that is true. I did not think her absence would affect me like this – nor so soon." It felt strange speaking to this older version of Maya.

"Your diet is special to Wilder, and it is partly because of your shortened gestation cycle. What would not bother other human-standard women, affects you greatly when you are pregnant. I understand you were taken from your family at a very early age, so you were probably not aware of this?"

Having just brought up a very bad memory, Shay looked away for a moment, before facing Molara again.

"Yes, my Lady. I was the only child of my mother, and no other babies were quickened in my clan before ... before they were all – taken," she said sadly.

"I was sorry to learn of that, Shay," Molara said, and laid a palm against her cheek in comfort, before continuing. "I would have you know that Maya is not herself. We are hoping that you coming here for your nourishment – something you have done daily for months – will help bring her back to us."

"Oh, Lady Molara! That would be *wonderful!*" Shay's stomach took that moment to remind everyone why she was there by growling angrily. "Please excuse me, my Lady!" she said, then dropped her head as she circled her arms over her prominent abdomen.

"Maya still sleeps, but now is a good time for you, little Shay," Molara told her, and chuckled, then led her to the other room.

Maya lay sleeping with her head tilted towards the monitor displaying the constant seashore and rolling waves playing on it. Xiu was seated nearby and smiled at Shay's arrival. Molara drew Shay

close and sat her in a chair set low enough to allow her to nurse from Maya without bending over with difficulty. Pulling down Maya's cover, Shay could see her engorged breasts, and licked her lips in anticipation while Molara spoke to her very quietly.

"Shay, just nurse as you normally would. Be very gentle and do not be surprised if she calls you by another name such as Janji or Marta. She may not wake up at all, but if she does, do not argue with her – just smile and keep nursing. Perhaps she will be content with that alone."

Shay closed in and gently caressed Maya's breast, before pulling her nipple slightly; causing it to pucker and stiffen. She leaned forward and drew it between her lips – licking it slowly and firmly – before suckling with a gentle pressure. This soon caused a trickle of milk to flow. Her stomach rumbled appreciatively when the flow increased, and she reached across to Maya's other breast to pinch that nipple to keep it from leaking until she was done with this side.

As she nursed, Maya stirred a little and a sleepy smile came to her lips. Her hand came up behind Shay's head and held her firmly in place – letting one of her fingers twirl around a lock of Shay's hair in the process. After several minutes, Maya's other hand came up to join Shay's at her other breast and just held it there – rolling her fingers over Shay's – which were now just touching her nipple with teasing taps.

When the pressure dropped and the milk needed to be sucked out forcibly, Maya pushed Shay away and tried pulling her over to her other breast, but then rolled towards her and drew her to her full breast, so she could nurse from that one easily. She held Shay in place with two hands this time and caressed her hair and murmured unintelligibly to her.

Shay ran her arm over Maya and held her as she normally would in this position. From here, she gently rubbed her back while Maya continued to run her fingers through her hair.

Ai entered quietly and threw a gentle probe into Maya. She was trying to see what Maya was seeing while she nursed her young crewmate...

*A young girl ... two young girls ... a baby, one of her client's babies ... another client, a man this time, bleeding from a wound on his arm ... her daughter, Janji, helping to keep her milk production up ... Marta nursing on the other breast, helping as well ...another baby... another woman ...an older man ... a crying child ... a child ... an ugly child ... a - a Drecks child...*

Maya stiffened while Shay continued to nurse. Her hands tightened in Shay's hair and it began to hurt, but she kept nursing and rubbing Maya's back. Finally, it was too much and she let go of Maya's nipple and started to cry, while Maya started breathing heavily.

"Maya ... Maya please do not hurt me... Please, Maya, let go of my hair. Maya, it is Shay. Maya, I need your milk for my baby. Please help your student Shay."

Molara came over and tried to pry her hands loose from Shay's hair.

"Maya, let go of Shay now, love. You have to let go of Shay. You're hurting her," she said with quiet urgency, while pressing downward on the backs of her hands to force her to release Shay's hair.

The Elder pushed Maya's memories forward and showed her images from the last few months. She searched desperately for images of Shay, and Diane, and Amy, and finally found one where Maya was looking down at Shay cuddled beside her and nursing from her. Maya relaxed her hands and began petting Shay once again, before she pulled her back to her breast.

Shay reluctantly latched on again, but reached up and held Maya's hands in hers to stave off a repeat of the last few seconds.

"Umm, that feels good, Shay. That feels very good," Maya murmured. "You make me feel very good, Shay, and the milk is very good for you and your baby. You must come to me every morning so you stay healthy."

Shay continued to nurse until the milk stopped flowing readily. Then she drew in a full mouthful and let go of Maya's nipple. She brought her mouth up to Maya's and held her head firmly, while pushing her tongue into her mouth and transferring the fresh milk to her Teacher – just as she'd done every day for months.

Maya smiled with eyes barely open and looked at her contentedly.

"Thank you, Shay. You are my good girl. Go and play now and let Mommy rest."

The Elder dropped her head, as Shay bent to kiss Maya goodbye.

After thanking Maya with her kiss, Shay turned to Molara and shrugged her shoulders. They both turned to Ai, who was now shaking her head, before they watched her turn and leave the room.

Shay leaned down and kissed Maya once again, before following Lady Ai to the outer chamber. Molara brought the cover up over a now sleepy Maya, before joining them in the outer chamber.

"My Elder, what did you see?" Molara asked quietly.

"I saw ... memories of people and children Maya had nursed over her service. She seemed content until she reached the image of nursing the baby Dreck. That's when she started pulling Shay's hair. Are you all right, child?"

"Oh yes, my Lady – my *Elder!* I ... it just hurt a little. It surprised me, is all," she said, but turned to Molara.

"Lady Molara, why did she tell me to go and play? Why did she refer to herself as Mommy?"

Molara looked to the Elder, who reached out and drew Shay into her arms.

"Shay ... after she would not let go, I went back in and searched for memories of you or your crewmates where she was nursing them. I was hopeful she would equate your nursing to the memory and relax; perhaps begin to relate to you. Yours was the memory I found, but apparently she now thinks of you as her daughter. She is still very confused."

She leaned down to kiss Shay on the forehead, while Molara offered a comment.

"Still, my Elder, it is hopeful. She recognized Shay from her dream. When she was in twilight, she saw her and recognized her as well. This is very hopeful, my Elder."

Shay pushed back from Ai and looked over at Molara.

"Oh yes, Lady Molara! She has often called me a good girl! Maybe I should stay until she wakes? I have no other duties."

Molara gave it a thought, but considered this was enough for a while.

"Perhaps you can visit later – around plus four? She may be awake, and nursing again would be good for her, as well as you. Besides, you're growing a *life* within you. You need to *eat* now – *real food*."

"Oh yes, my Lady. I must eat," she said, and glanced at the ships timer. "And my Andy will be coming back soon. I must go and make ready for him. It has been nearly *three days!*"

"Then run along, little Shay. We'll watch over Maya," the Elder said.

"Yes, my Ladies. *Thank you*, my Ladies!" she said before turning to leave the compartment.

After she closed the door, Molara let out a great sigh.

"Only three days, and she *burns* with need. Did you *smell* her, my Lady?"

"Oh, to be certain, Molara, to be certain. Were *we* ever so young?"

"I have *vague* memories, my Lady ...recently refreshed by Lord Rondal. I shall have to petition for another visit with him – *soon*, I think. And *you* as well, my Lady. You've not had him, as yet."

"If Lili does not *kill* him in the process of *teaching* him. I understand she left him somewhat distressed last night just before young Laisee was to seek her contentment from him."

She closed her eyes before reaching out to poke and prod him. She danced easily through his memories and scanned down his body, while murmuring aloud as she reviewed his evening.

"His foot had been injured, and she made him fix it – from the surrounding stress, *several times* ... many cuts ... part of a burn ... Ah-ha! He violated the *law*, and Lili immediately *punished* him for it! Ah! That scoundrel found a way around *that*, as well." She shook her head and opened her eyes to look at Molara.

"Kita was right. Our dear Ronnie *is* a clever scamp and must be watched, lest he do something *unforgivable*."

Molara was startled for a moment. For just the barest second, Lady Ai had sounded very much like Mistress Kita. It was almost unnerving, and something the Elder noticed.

"Molara, there is not much I may tell you about the ... the transition. Suffice to say that I am now privy to *all* that has gone before under Mistress Kita's rule, and I may very well express myself in her terms. Please keep this to yourself. If approached by Fan or Xiu about it, please send them directly to me. And make no record of it."

"I hear and obey, my Elder," she replied formally, but perked up when Ai drew her into her arms and kissed her.

Instead of a cursory endeavor, the kiss lingered and became somewhat impassioned between the two of them, with Ai appearing needful, and Molara becoming more engaged as the seconds lingered on, before they finally separated.

"My Lady Molara, it has been a stressful morning, and we are *both* somewhat discontent. If you would care to share my bed with me for a little while, please alert the guard that we will be indisposed until further notice. That is, if you so *desire*, Molara," she said while smiling warmly.

“Do not start without me, my Lady!”

Molara was already turning to the compartment door as Ai headed to her chambers. She left word with the guard and closed the door, before extending in and ensuring that Maya was sound asleep.

‘Yes, *I predict there will be many changes*,’ she thought hopefully as she dropped her robes from her shoulders on the way to the Elder’s chambers.

#### ***Noon –4.1 (Day 102) – In Ronnie’s Compartment***

Ronnie was afraid to move.

Thankfully, Laisee had rolled away from him sometime during the night and relieved him from the extra pressure of her arm and leg – but took the blanket with her.

At the time, even *that* was a relief, since the cool air seemed to help his aching body. Now, however, he was just cold. He looked over at the compartment timer and discovered it was approaching minus four and nearly time to get moving.

Then he reconsidered. He didn’t *have* a job – he’d left that back on Earth. He’d been so caught up with his escape and the subsequent “rescue mission” that he’d not let up hardly a moment for *months*. Then, just when he was about to bring his tired and gruel-weary crew back from the depths of the Death Void, company had come calling.

A formal dinner, a formal inquisition, the loss of his love ... *probably*, and let’s not forget the *torture* session yesterday evening, followed by an ego-humbling contentment session – *most* of which was provided by his childhood playmate.

Now that he actually thought about it, he really *had* no more responsibilities. Therefore, he must be on *vacation*.

That was a pleasant thought ... if you didn’t include the intrusion of so many unexpected and undesired guests – not to mention the *next* torture session that was scheduled for plus six this evening.

Well, perhaps the Elder would find him sufficiently at fault for *something*, and he’d be “sanctioned most disagreeably.” At least then the *torture* sessions would cease – although it wasn’t beyond the Elder to have already *made* that determination and assigned that gruesome task to *Lili*.

It’d certainly felt like it last *night*, and she’d seemed so darned *gleeful* about it.

Laisee shifted, and an arm swiftly swung up and over while just missing his ribs; which had caused him to jerk aside painfully. He was just congratulating himself on moving so quickly, when she twisted the rest of her body around and tucked her knees up tightly – with one of them hitting him smack in the middle of his thigh and causing the most *amazingly* painful charley horse in his left leg.

Perhaps Lili was the merely the warm up and *Laisee* was the main event?

### ***Noon –3.1 (Day 102) – In Andy and Shay’s Compartment***

“Ahhh, my Lord Andrew, you are so *wonderful* to me,” Shay murmured contentedly, then glanced at the ships timer – almost minus three.

“I always try to please you, my love. And I’m really happy you’re feeling better, Shay.”

“Oh, my Andy! So am I! My Andy, are you *very* tired?” she asked softly while reaching down for him again and finding him already responding. “I will do *all* the work this time, my Andy, and you may simply relax.”

“Use me as you wish, my love. I obey, my Healer,” he said, then watched when she positioned her head towards his lap.

He’d thought she’d wanted more play from him, but she seemed determined to forcibly remove his semen with her mouth. That thought stopped when she sat up and turned away from him, only to back up until her bottom was poised over his firm shaft. He’d kept his legs apart when she kneeled facing away from him and she reached between her legs and positioned the head of his shaft just inside her opening.

“You lie back and *relax*, my Andy, and I will do *all* the work,” she murmured, before working herself down over him.

He looked down between his legs while watching her lower lips engulf him, over and over. He remembered the “training video” they’d watched, and then practiced once before. It had been very arousing *then*, too. He was *very* glad she was feeling so much better now.

### ***Noon –1 (Day 102) – A Visit to the Gym***

Ronnie entered the gym and greeted Diane, before going over and turning on the warm up program. He needed to work out a few kinks, before his next lesson, and the hot shower he’d crawled out of at minus three had reduced enough aches that he had much of his mobility back once again.

Interestingly enough, his foot felt just *fine* today.

It should. Lili had made him *fix* it enough times...

It had been a toss-up, whether it would be Laisee chasing him out of bed, or his full bladder. His bladder had won out – especially after her leg rose up and plopped a knee down atop it. He'd immediately bounced out of bed and winced his way to the facilities, before sitting down to fully relieve himself. A minute or so later, a naked Laisee had surprised him by staggering in with a lazy smile on her face. She'd bent down to share a morning breath kiss with him, before adjusting the temperature of the shower and stepping into it.

It felt strange, this casualness between them at such a time and place.

The Gods knew, Laisee wasn't the Earth-Mother type he'd heard about on Earth, but the feeling he was getting from her was the same feeling he shared with Maya – who'd thought nothing of entering their small bathroom and using the toilet, while he was in there brushing his teeth – or in the shower, which, he being an old warrior, was just fine with as long as she didn't *flush* the toilet. Likewise, Maya thought nothing of entering the occupied space – requesting a "courtesy flush" to reduce the smell – before continuing with brushing her teeth or whatever.

For some reason, with Laisee it already felt like they were an old couple, just as he and Maya were an old couple – comfortable with each other, even during nature's call. That thought caused him a bit of concern. Perhaps Laisee was planning to move in if Maya didn't recover? But Laisee hardly even *knew* him anymore.

After he was done, she'd called out to have him join her in the shower, and he did so – sharing the washing and scrubbing, with just a little bit of flirty groping as well. She'd asked him to help wash her hair, and he'd enjoyed that, too. Then she'd scrubbed his body – top to bottom, front to back – and made sure his backside was *really* clean.

Afterwards, they'd rinsed together and helped dry each other off. It'd felt frighteningly normal, and scared him to no end. It was almost like she was channeling Maya, and acting in her stead.

And *then* ... she'd gotten dressed, told him she'd had a wonderful time, and asked him to call on her anytime if he needed some companionship for a while. She'd paused for a moment, kissed him goodbye, and then left.

Come to think of it, he *thought* he remembered Maya talking to him – something about their future and including Laisee in it, but with all

the shenanigans going on aboard his platform, he'd immediately put it out of his mind. Maybe the ambrosia had something to do with it as well?

So he'd dressed, ate a light breakfast, made his rounds of the commons and the con, and then visited the Elder's compartment – where he'd been advised the Elder and staff were "indisposed" for a while – so he'd finally wandered over to the gym...

Since Lili had just barely started on both arms last night, he selected a staff exercise program and ran through it slowly for twenty minutes – not working up a sweat as such, but stretching and loosening up some tight spots here and there. When he finally stopped to rest, Diane came over to speak with him.

"So how'd it go last night? Laissee never made it back, so I figure at least *one* of you had a good time."

She smiled knowingly, and he forced himself not to grin back.

"Oh..." he paused to groan and twist carefully. "I did my level best after what you and Lili *did* to me last night."

"Hey! Don't blame that on *me*. Lili told you the techniques you've been using were poor at best. Aside from your foot, how does the *rest* of you feel?"

"My foot is the *only* thing that feels all right this morning. As for everything *else* – it just aches."

Diane nodded at his assessment. She'd been there to watch, and knew what Lili had put him through, which brought up a question for him.

"I'm still a bit unclear about things, so tell me, Ronnie, when Maya Healed my arm, the pain was gone almost *immediately*. Then ... then the Healing was ... well, it was *complete*. It was like it *never happened*. Why are *you* suffering if Lili was teaching you the *right* way to Heal yourself?"

He glared at her for a moment, but softened it to a slight frown.

"I will avoid saying something snarky about Lili teaching me a *lesson*, but the fact of the matter is, that I *did* Heal myself poorly. I worked in a hurry, and did sloppy work."

"But you Healed yourself, didn't you?"

"Yes, but ... well, if you take something apart and then glue it back together *crooked*, it will never be as strong as if the seams were perfectly aligned. Apparently, the human body works like any other

mechanical system. You can Heal something ‘off-center’ and it will still work – but it puts up a stress in the surrounding structures. It continues to build over time, until you get aches and pains that have no reasonable explanation.”

She looked at him thoughtfully for a moment, before nodding.

“So … that’s like when someone breaks an arm or a leg, and years later they feel a mystery ache in their arm or leg and they know it’s gonna rain?”

“Exactly! I did all these little imperfect repairs over the last eighteen decades, or so, and I set myself up for an old age of aches and pains. Sadly, I never saw it coming. I was usually so thrilled just keeping myself from *bleeding* to death that I never considered the finer aspects of the Healer’s art.”

“So, that must mean … when you reversed the Healing on *Maya*, she’s suffering from the injury to her *head*? Oh, that poor woman! It must hurt so *very much!*”

He watched when her eyes started changing from sympathy for Maya, to accusations towards him, and he moved to lessen it.

“Umm, no – not really. When I did *that* particular Healing … I wasn’t driving,” he murmured, but Diane gave him a confused look.

“Diane, the Healings – *proper* Healings – are only directed *generally*. We send the energy to the client, and the *client* is responsible for directing the results. In the *classical* sense, that is. When I worked on myself, I thought I knew what I was doing. I would go in and patch specific things, one-by-one, until I was all put back together. The problem was, that I was doing them consciously and not letting my *subconscious* do it. The subconscious knows *exactly* how everything is put together. My way was *quicker*, but doing it the *right* way makes it *correct*.”

She’d listened to him, but he didn’t really make that much sense. Injuries *never* healed perfectly – not on Earth, anyway – and yet here she’d seen cuts and such Healed perfectly – *without a trace*, outside or in. When he’d butchered her arm, Maya had made it like new. The same had happened with David’s hand.

“Ronnie, that just doesn’t make *sense*. How can your *mind* –”

“Diane, that’s why Healers are *special*,” he said, cutting her off abruptly. “Once you learn… Once you study, and practice, and *believe*, *then* comes the understanding of why things work the way they do. Sure, the body will try to do the best it can, but it needs a little outside

help. The flow of energy channeled by the Healer lets it work most efficiently.”

He turned away in embarrassment, before finally admitting his own limitations.

“Diane … by all accounts, I would appear to be a Healer,” he stated quietly, but glanced around at the otherwise empty gym, before going on. “And yes, I have some skills as a Senior. But I’m just a man. I can’t … women can do things *much* more quickly than I can simply because they *are* women. Men … let’s just say our focus is not on putting things back together. Not compared to a woman’s focus during Healing. Our *own* hubris tends to get in the way, and we don’t pull in *nearly* the amount of energy to conduct a Healing that someone like Lili can do – like those flash Healings. When a *man* pulls in energy, it tends to go astray.”

She looked at him strangely, while now feeling some concern about when he’d sliced her arm back on the ship.

“So you went ahead and tried to *chop my arm off...*”

“I would have *fixed* it, Diane! It just would have taken a bit *longer* … maybe ten or fifteen minutes – at *most!*” he assured her. “But I needed your buy-in. I needed you to *believe*. It … it was the only way I knew that would prove to you how serious our situation was.”

She continued to simmer for a bit while staring at the apologetic expression on his face, then decided to let it go … for now.

“So women are better at Healing than men? Then why didn’t you get a *woman* to patch you up?” she asked, but he looked away again.

“Like I said, I was able to get the job done quickly, even with the lumps and scars,” he murmured, before turning back to her. “And I was still alive at the end of the day. Vertical and *not* bleeding? It just meant I could go right back to work and not spend *hours* making the scars go away on my downtime.”

“So you *let yourself...*”

“Diane, I had absolutely *no* expectation of living past whatever encounter I was currently in,” he said stiffly. “I’d lost my ship, and my crew. I’d embarrassed House Caldarous, and failed my Emperor. Up until sixty years ago, I was *still* doing odd jobs as a merc. Then, I started working the Gleanings and found something *worthwhile* to do for a change.” He turned away while shaking his head at his own stupidity. “I *could* have spent the time, but I didn’t see the point any longer. Even after Maya…” he paused to wipe his eyes, before letting out a sigh.

Diane could almost feel his heartache, even though she knew he'd been visited by some of the Elder's staff. She decided to focus on the basics to see if it would get him out of his funk.

"So ... when we channel the *energy*..." she quietly tendered, and caught the tiny spasm of an aborted snort in his torso, before he turned around to face her.

He'd felt her ambivalence turn to concern, before she'd tossed him this line, and he silently thanked her for it, before proceeding.

"It triggers a *massive* response from the body's repair shop – like setting off a fire alarm. Instead of the paramedics coming out and slapping a band-aid on a broken bone, it wakes up the body's *internal* hospital administrator who checks the building plans and sends out *all* the troops to make things perfect once again..." he paused while thinking of the *one* perfect Healing he'd ever been party to.

"With Maya ... I'd never really had to deal with something *that* traumatic before. I was *terrified* ... terrified to try a Healing, and *more* terrified to simply try and bandage it up. I finally gave in, and *prayed* for a Healing," he said, then looked away in shame.

"It was almost like someone *else* was guiding me, Diane," he murmured. "Maybe it *was* Yandi come to make sure I didn't kill her Granddaughter. Maybe it was a gift from the Gods. I don't know. When I felt it was over, I opened my eyes and pulled my hands away. All that was left was a little scar – the only thing I really directed; the telltale scar for a later Healing. It wasn't until I saw the video the other night when I realized *that* was when I was blessed with the Seniors' gift. And now I have to learn it properly from Lili ... and hopefully from some of the Elder's staff, if they'll take the time to train me." He looked down at the floor and wiped his eyes with his fingertips again.

"And in the meantime, you get to practice on *yourself*," she reminded him.

"Oh yes, I'm so looking forward to that."

"Tell you what... I'll stay after Lili is done with you and give you a massage."

He looked at her and wondered if this was another ploy by Lili, but then figured not.

"I'm afraid I wouldn't be able to reciprocate ... at least not tonight."

"No, Ronnie. I mean a *real* massage. I put myself through college doing legitimate massage. I have a certificate and everything."

"Well ... I'll look forward to it, then."

### ***In the Lady Wives' Compartment***

Promptly at the noon hour, Amy, Laisee, and Shay reported for their lessons with Fourth Wife, and were greeted and ushered in to a room full of cushions.

Shay was worried. All of the cushions were clean, white, and *very* pristine. She hoped blood washed out of them easily.

### ***In the Elder's Compartment***

The Elder enjoyed a nice hot shower while accompanied by Mistress Kita. They'd taken the opportunity to share their closeness, even as their roles had reversed so dramatically.

They made an odd pair; the taller and matronly Elder being washed by the diminutive and quite elderly servitor, who, thanks to the medicine provided by the ships doctor, was feeling quite painless. Kita was enjoying the play of water over her body almost as much as the mutual soapy caresses from the Elder.

Ai got down on her knees and let Kita wash her hair, not quite totally gray at this point in her life – unlike the silvery-white mop that hung wetly about Kita's shoulders.

Once Ai's hair was rinsed, she returned the service, and lovingly washed Kita's hair while Kita held on to her waist for balance. After rinsing themselves thoroughly, they got out of the shower and Kita commenced drying Ai. She was actually relishing this simple task for a change while not having to worry about the welfare of the Commonwealth any longer.

As Kita was working on her, Ai thought back to the last few hours taken with Molara in mutual contentment. It had been quite a while for her, and her body had responded wonderfully. Best of all, the constant stream of information had dimmed to the minimum while she experienced the highly skilled efforts of Molara to push her excitement ever higher. She'd even provided her with a constant stream of peaks that caused her to lose coherent thought for many seconds at a time.

She'd served Molara equally as well, but was now intrigued by the comments Molara had made about "the Gift." She was considering asking Lili to share the Gift with her staff. It sounded like a very beneficial method for relieving *serious* episodes of stress.

While she was thinking about that, Kita guided her to a seat so she could dry her hair. Once seated, Kita stood behind her and began briskly rubbing Ai's hair with a towel. When she walked around to the

front, Ai opened her legs to let her get in closer. As she did so, Ai reached out and drew her into a hug.

"Oh, Kita! All these years, and I had no *idea* of how much you appreciated my efforts on your behalf," she said, then pulled back a bit and raised her hands up to cup Kita's almost non-existent breasts.

She ran her thumbs delicately over Kita's nipples, and they stood up proudly. Seeing this, she bent forward and suckled, first one and then the other; tonguing each one for several seconds. Kita laced her fingers together behind Ai's head and held her to her breasts, closing her eyes and enjoying the pleasure of lips suckling at her nipples.

"Indeed I did, my Lady," she murmured languidly. "I savored *each* of your ministrations to me. It eased my mind greatly to simply let myself go in your hands and not have to think about a *blessed thing* for even a *short* while." Ai hummed low as she kissed each nipple, before looking up at Kita.

"I should have done *more* for you, Kita; yet I did not wish to impose. If only I had known," she said, then rose up slightly and grasped Kita's head to pull her in for a kiss.

They stayed like that for most of a minute, with Ai still sitting and Kita still standing. They finally broke apart with their arms still around each other and stared at each other.

"My Lady Ai, perhaps you have a little bit more of need this morning? I would be pleased to *serve* you, my Lady?"

Ai smiled and looked tenderly into Kita's eyes.

"Let us go to my bed, Mistress Kita. I believe I *do* have a further need this morning. I believe I am *hungry* this morning and need something more to *nibble* upon before the midday meal."

So saying, Ai stood and guided Kita back to her chambers, where she helped the elderly Kita lay down, before spreading her thighs. Cupping her mound, Ai kissed her thoroughly and caressed her gently while sensing the rising of her arousal and gauging when the moment was just right.

When that occurred, Ai left Kita's mouth and joined her lips with Kita's lower pair – licking and kissing, before pressing her lips over them firmly and sucking strongly while pulling them into her mouth.

Pressing her hands around her mound and groin, Ai teased her tongue between her lips and began a loving set of strokes on her clitoris, while she sensed her continued arousal and eventual peak. She held her there for several seconds and then brought her over

again. Sensing there was a limit to the sensations her elderly companion could safely withstand, she finally let her ease off and relax.

Ai crawled up alongside the panting Kita and snuggled with her. Closing her eyes, she was surprised when the closeness with Kita triggered a memory from her that revealed what she had thought would be her final moments on the platform.

Her heart would fail during the stress of the trial...

Ai was stricken at the nearness of the event. She broached the subject with her, but was assured that, of all the paths before her, *this* one held constant for nearly all eventualities.

"Kita, this is *truly* what you saw?" Ai's voice sounded heart-broken.

Kita rolled onto her back and stared at the ceiling. Moisture wetted her eyes, and a tiny stream of tears rolled down the side of her face.

"Ai, for all my crimes, it is too easy a punishment, and yet I can think of no better way to end my service to the Commonwealth," she finally said, before rolling to her side and hugging her.

"What of the boy, Kita? What of *his* feelings?" Ai whispered.

"You need not tell him. He need not know. It will simply be an unfortunate byproduct of living to such an advanced age."

"Kita – he *will* need to know. Otherwise he will be *hurt*." The Elder closed her eyes for a moment and sought out the paths once again. "I will be with you. And Fan, and Xiu, and Molara. We will sustain you until it is finished. Then we will explain afterwards. I have foreseen it."

"Then justice will be done," Kita murmured, before snuggling closer to her Elder.

### ***Noon +2 (Day 102) – The Flight Simulator***

Andy met Larl at the simulator for some more training...

After the testimony, things had become pretty subdued for the men of Ronnie's crew. They'd learned things about their nominal leader that were both gratifying and frightening. Until the day of the testimony, David had told Andy *nothing* about his time in Vietnam. Afterwards, he'd finally shared a little of the experiences he'd had in combat to help his son put things into perspective regarding Ronnie.

Intellectually, Larl had known what Ronnie had been, but it was still a shock to see him in action, and know that it wasn't just a sequence from a Hollywood movie. The blood, guts, and deaths were

*very* real, as was Ronnie – the same person they shared meals, confidences, and the occasional ships holiday with...

Andy paused while he was setting in the next navigation problem.

"Um, Larl? That thing Ronnie did – driving *through* that asteroid – that isn't *normal*, is it?"

Larl suppressed a gasp while thinking of a practical answer for Andy.

"I wouldn't think so. No... Certainly not the kind of thing you'd want to do during a *check ride*," he finally said, and followed it with a chuckle.

Looking at his mate's little brother, he suddenly noticed the sleeves of Andy's jumpsuit were no longer rolled up. The same with his pant legs. In fact, they were getting a little short. Thinking back, he also remembered Andy seemed much *manlier* during the last ships holiday. Certainly more so than he was when he and Amy had walked in on Maya providing his contentment those few months ago back on the ship.

"Say, Andy, how's Shay feeling now?"

"Lots better now that Amy and Mom started feeding her. I heard Lady Lili beat up Ronnie pretty bad over it, too. The Elder let her nurse from Maya this morning. She thought it could help her."

"How's Maya? Is she talking yet? Did she know Shay?"

They'd all heard how poorly the Healing had gone for her, and that she was stuck somewhere in her past. Larl was just as concerned as they all were.

"Well, she seemed happy to feed Shay, but then she pulled her hair. Shay thinks the Elder was poking around in Maya's head and found a bad memory or somethin'." Andy paused while he thought about it some more. "She musta found a better one 'cause Maya let go and let her nurse some more. Then she called her by name, and told her to go out and play. I'm glad she did, 'cause I was about to ask Amy or Mom for some *play time!*'"

Larl laughed at that. He was *sure* his Amy would have welcomed the distraction. She was insatiable, and *quite* adventurous. He *still* couldn't believe she'd taken Andy's little hand up inside her during ships holiday that time – only it wasn't that little any more.

*All* the men of Ronnie's crew had a very good life, even out here in death space. All except Ronnie, it seemed.

Larl, for one, was glad the Elder's staff seemed to take a keen interest in Ronnie; keeping him apprised of Maya's condition and, if rumor was true, taking care of his physical needs as well. The exception was the lovely Lady Lili, whom Ronnie had not *quite* cursed openly during his late and very stiff walk around this morning.

It was now an open secret among his immediate crew that Ronnie had developed some extra talents over and above the minimal Healer skills he'd admitted to. It was also a fact that it was being kept secret from the rest of the platform.

He also wondered at the silence of Second Wife. She didn't seem that stable a person to begin with, and the testimony seemed to have pushed her over the edge. Maybe *that's* why the Elder had placed her under house arrest?

Shaking his head, he got back on track and checked over the navigation problem Andy had finished programming in. When they were both ready, they went ahead and ran it.

### ***In Meela's Compartment***

Tomar lay relaxed and well contented...

Meela was still under house arrest, so he'd brought food for her at dinner, before taking the used settings back to the commons.

On the way back, he'd stopped by the gym and observed Lord Calder going over his staff exercises from the doorway. It looked like the old man was still feeling the effects of the training accident the other day that had left him in a bloody heap on the floor. He didn't understand it. Meela was *terrified* of Lord Calder and was *sure* he was going to cause her downfall ... *someday*.

Upon his return, Meela had been needy once again, and lost herself in the passion he was giving her. It wasn't all one-sided, as she worked just hard at pleasing him, but it was as if she was trying to push an entire *lifetime* of living into the last few days, or so ... almost as if she really believed her time was getting short. Maybe it *was*, considering the reputation of the Elder, and the huge disfavor Meela had earned by her bad behavior.

Once they got back to home world, maybe things would be different. Meela would *still* be Second Wife, but could start fulfilling her duties once again and become a *proper* member of the Calderous household ... and perhaps he would be allowed as her personal consort? Certainly, it wasn't unheard of amongst the Royals.

Tomar wished things would hurry up and come to a conclusion so they could *all* go back to home world and get on with their lives.

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

*And the Fates, as usual, were **always** eager to please.*

### ***Noon +3 (Day 102) – Memories of the Past***

Lili waited patiently in the outer chamber.

She'd been summoned by the Elder, and hoped it was good news about Maya. When Ai entered, she quickly stood and greeted her.

"How may I serve you, my Elder?"

"Please sit, Lili. I am feeling *much* better than I was at our meeting yesterday. Mistress Kita – my consultant, Kita – has suggested that I now look into your memories and see if any of them match with those of Maya's. May I have your permission?"

This struck Lili as funny, since Kita had *never* considered the niceties when she wanted to know something.

"To be sure, I find now that, as the *Elder*, I am quite readily swamped with the surface thoughts of those around me – unless I make a special effort to block them out. However, you are of my office, Lili. I would ask permission from you *before* dancing through your memories. It is only *polite*, you see."

Lili blinked once, then embraced Ai before sitting down and relaxing comfortably.

"Please, my Elder. I am an open book to you," she said, then closed her eyes.

"Then ... please think of the images you saw that caught your attention," Ai instructed her.

As Lili thought back to Maya's memories, Ai tried to keep up with the descriptions orally.

"I see an invitation ... a man, no – *two* men ... you recognized which one of them? ... the dark-haired man ... please repeat the memory and look at the surroundings ... ah, about so high and with such a build ... nothing special of feature, except ... one crooked tooth ... he seems friendly enough ... I wonder if Maya was sensitive enough to catch side emanations ... but would she recognize them as such? Lili, do you have any idea of *where* you recognize this man from?"

"Truly, Elder ... I do not. I spend time on home world, and on assignment. Although I seem to feel it was on *home* world where I remember seeing him."

"Perhaps at court?" Ai suggested.

Lili considered that, and Ai caught flashes from court, but very few of them.

"No, my Lady. It would seem more recent than that – more ... *familiar* if you will. I've spent very little time at court." Lili stifled a snort that caused a questioning look from Ai, and a follow-up question.

"And ... why would that be?" she asked Lili.

"Through channels, the Emperor had asked that I *not* grace his court again – since the first week your *consultant*, Mistress Kita, assigned me to Lord Radatel. I seemed to have found *disfavor* with him for some reason."

"No doubt it had nothing to do with you *personally*, Lili. The Emperor did not think highly of Kita when she was Elder. Could your mystery man have been an *off-planet observance*, perhaps?"

Lili ran through a short list of off-planet assignments from the Elder's office, but could make no connection there, either.

"My Lady, I see *nothing* of this man," she finally said before letting out a frustrated sigh. "He does not seem to be familiar to me, except ... I'm *sure* I've seen him somewhere before."

"Lili, in your recollection, do you see him in different *clothing*, perhaps? Holding a package ... or baggage – as if a laborer?" Ai persisted, while continuing to search Lili's mind for a connection.

On a hunch, Ai sent a gentle probe into Maya, who was still resting in the other room. She quickly skipped to before Maya's hateful memories and looked at the man who Lili had described. She started searching further back in Maya's memories while looking for missing details – until finding one.

"Lili, was he wearing any special *jewelry*, perhaps? Or carrying a letter or folder?" she asked this time.

Lili was searching her more recent memories and thought she saw someone turning to glance at her – but he had much *lighter* hair. He smiled – *and there was the same crooked tooth!*

"My Lady..."

"I see him ... his hair is lighter, but the *tooth* is the same. The face is much the same, but the hair is styled differently. He's carrying a ... a folder? An *official* folder ... you are passing, and he turns to glance at you and smiles ... the signet ring of a courier is on his finger ... he is standing in a hallway outside a door ... he..."

"It is the Royal Homestead on *home world!* He is standing outside *Meela's door!* He has been escorted by – by *Captain Tomar. My Lady, we must push in this direction!*"

Ai needed to slow things down, before Lili's protective side came to the forefront and lives were needlessly lost.

"Lili, what do you know of Vitas Tomar," she asked calmly.

"*He ... he is part of our household guard, and I believe he was sent as part of the escort for Lady Peizhi during her transit from Loca to Kantor. I was there for neither her selection or for her arrival. He was assigned to the guard staff of Lady Meela upon their arrival, or shortly after.*"

Ai closed her eyes when another factoid pinged on her consciousness.

"Yes... I – I seem to remember something about it in your reports to the Elder," she said.

She wasn't quite lying about that, as the reports had gone through her hands at the time, but her memories were now those of Kita. "Captain Tomar is *Kantite* born and bred, this is true?"

"I believe that is so, but I will place a discreet inquiry with my own guard captain to confirm it, my Lady. My Lady, would you like me to—"

"Ahhh ... no, Lili. I fear Captain Tomar's sleep this evening will be troubled by memories of a crooked-toothed man bringing couriers to our Lady Meela. We might find it advantageous to question Lady Meela's staff, but it would probably prove fruitless. No doubt anything in those folders would have long ago been eliminated," Ai said, but then considered another factor. "Lili ... Meela is no *true Healer*. This is true?"

"No, my Lady. Other than minor talents to Heal a tiny cut or bruise, Lady Meela has not exhibited any particular skills in that regard. If Laisee is truthful, of which I have no personal doubt, then Meela was taught poorly by her mother – if at all. Apparently, the Healers seeded on Loca fared nearly as poorly as those seeded on Wilder."

"Ah..." the new Elder lamented quietly. "Yet *another* issue to be resolved at some point in my future. Perhaps the seeding programs should have been stopped when these results became evident."

"If I may be so bold, my Lady Elder. Your staff is rather small. A lesson from my Lord Husband has always resounded within me. He would suggest that you obtain the appropriate stewards of knowledge

to define a path to the goal. If that path becomes bumpy, allow them the leeway to redirect the path to a successful resolution.”

Ai paused in reflection while letting a tiny smirk grace her lips.

“I do not believe the Emperor has *traditionally* handled issues in like manner,” the Elder said wryly.

“No, he has not, my Lady. You will note, however, that my Lord Husband still managed the complex administrative duties of the Commonwealth – whether on Kantor, or on that primitive Class-Five world the Emperor sent him to.”

“Simply to watch over his ... *stepson*? ”

“Just so, my Lady. It was very strange.”

Ai thought it amusing that they *still* danced around Rondal’s antecedents; yet Radatel had been accommodating at the time, and not shown favoritism among the three young men in his household; more’s the pity for that because of Kita’s failure to recognize the impending crisis headed their way.

She also considered what she now knew, and what Lili had yet to discover. What anyone *outside* the shelter of the Elder’s Council had yet to be apprised of. She was tempted to tell her, but now was not the time.

“The Emperor had often exhibited strange behavior, Lili, but that puzzle is not on the table this afternoon. Tonight I will disturb Captain Tomar’s sleep and learn what there is to know from him. Should we require information from Lady Meela, I will so inform you. Out of respect for her position as Second Wife, you will request that she volunteer any information that I seek from her.”

Lili thought that over; already knowing how Meela was very reluctant to share.

“And if she does not, my Lady?”

“Then we will recover it from her – *personally*. ”

Lili suppressed a shudder. She’d once heard Kita say those very same words, and it wasn’t a pleasant outcome *then*, either.

### ***Midnight –4 (Day 102) – Happy Endings for Ronnie?***

He’d survived...

In addition to teaching him the *correct* way of dealing with more of his old injuries, Lili had let Diane work on him as well. Since Diane’s efforts didn’t hurt *nearly* as much, he’d sworn silently that Lili had

been *deliberately* going out of her way to hurt him. He'd kept his mouth shut anyway and soldiered on throughout the last two hours.

He could have rested then, except that Diane was bringing back a light supper for him composed of ships gruel, with some extra fruit, and some fresh water – *lots* of fresh water. She'd said he'd need it, and Lili had concurred after Diane explained what she intended to do to him. He didn't like the way Lili had tittered, though.

Just before she'd left, Lili had reminded him to be careful – ambrosia was too *precious* to spill – and he'd known right then that he hadn't spilled it himself. *She'd* caught him drawing the cup towards himself without touching it, and tipped it over *herself*. Yet *another* sin – like opening the lock on the Master's cabin door of his ship.

It just wasn't *fair!* They could do it, but not *him* – or any *other* man. *He* knew why the Healers were against such applications of the craft, but he'd always thought the punishment was *way* too severe!

'Wouldn't it be nice if only...'

He immediately squelched that thought, and began practicing the personal block Lili had been ordered to teach him after experiencing his debacle in the gym, and then later with Molara.

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

*The Fate on Duty shrugged and **ignored** that partially expressed silent opinion.*

*Not that it would have mattered, since the Fates were already putting all the pieces into play for Captain **Tomar's** request. Or **punishment**, depending on which side of the **blade** you were standing on.*

### ***In Ronnie's Compartment***

There was a knock at the door, and it opened to allow Diane's return, with Laisee following her in. Gods, he hoped they weren't *both* going to demand of him tonight. Seeing the containers in their hands, perhaps they *did* have other things in mind? He noted one of their guards putting a tray on the desk, before rendering him a polite bow and silently leaving the room.

"How are you feeling, Ronnie?" Diane asked him.

She set her bundle on the floor, while Laisee set hers on the desk. She and Laisee then started pushing the chairs and the sitting table out of the way to clear a space for them to work on him.

“I’m feeling better – better than *last* night, for sure. What in the world are you *doing*?”

“We’re going to lay down a couple layers of blankets, and then a sheet, so we can work on you.”

He looked at the floor, and then back at the other room where he slept.

“But – the *bed*...”

“The bed is *much* too soft to get anything done properly. Don’t worry, I’ve done this before,” she assured him.

They set the blankets and sheet in place, before wrapping a sheet around a pillow and setting it at one end. Diane grabbed another pillow from the bedroom and wrapped another sheet around it, before setting it aside.

“My Lord...”

“Laisee – we’re *behind* closed doors. *I’m* Diane. *He’s* Ronnie.”

“I – yes, my ... Diane. My ... Ronnie, do you wish to eat now?”

“If you’re hungry, have the gruel now and save the fruit for later,” Diane told him. “You’ll need the water afterwards to flush out your system. I’m surprised Maya didn’t teach any massage to us. Lili said it’s quite common on home world.”

“Oh, it is. It’s just labor intensive and time consuming,” he grumbled.

“With happy endings, I’ll bet!” Diane joked.

“Well, how many legitimate massage practices offer a ‘happy ending’ on Earth?” he countered.

“*Lots* ... but the one *I* worked at didn’t. Besides, that’s all you Galactics think of, anyway.”

“Not *all* the time. It does make you feel *relaxed*, though.”

“Yes, but this will make you feel *better*,” she stated firmly.

Ronnie stood to the side while he finished his gruel. Then he asked where she wanted him.

“Go pee. Then come back and lay down here on your back ... naked ... and raise your knees.”

When he came back, he settled comfortably on the floor as directed. Laisee positioned herself on one side of him, while Diane stationed

herself at his head. Diane pointed to his feet, and Laisee stuffed one pillow under his knees. When his legs were positioned properly, Diane pushed the other pillow under his head, but pretty much flattened it.

“My clients usually preferred a massage cream that washed right off afterwards, but all they had in the kitchen was this cooking oil. It’ll do nicely for a start, but you’ll need to shower afterwards.”

Laisee couldn’t help but stare at the burn scars all over the left side of his torso. When he’d been with her earlier, he’d either worn the upper half of his underwear, or she’d avoided looking at him when she could. Now that she was here with Diane, the brighter lights in the outer room forced her to actually *see* all the ripples in his flesh that she’d avoided by using a soapy washcloth cloth in the shower.

Lili had mentioned they were one of *many* issues they would be taught to deal with. She looked at Ronnie’s arms, which had *other* scars, but with lines of Healing running across them. Diane caught her gaze.

“*Healing sex*,” she explained quietly. “Sometimes it happens when you least expect it, but we’ll just stick with straight massage for now; starting with \*effleurage\*, \*petrissage\* and friction. That’s enough to start with for learning the basics.”

At Laisee’s blank stare, Diane stopped to define the unfamiliar Earth words for her, until she nodded her understanding.

“Most of my clients didn’t care much for \*tapotement\*. That’s kinda like tapping or chopping with your hands or fingertips. It’s good for muscle toning, but not always relaxing.

Dipping her fingers into a bowl of oil, she started on his head and scalp. Then she worked his face and did the upper part of his shoulders – all the while explaining what she was doing at each step and why. It surprised him when she raised his head a little and wrapped a towel underneath it, only to pull it backwards and put a stretching tension on his neck. It actually felt kind of good. Then she rotated his head slowly by simply raising alternate sides of the towel so that it rocked his head left and right a few times.

Done with that, she started on one side, and had Laisee work on the other. They worked on his hands, forearms, upper arms, and upper torso. Laisee seemed to be a quick study, although she’d probably had her share of massages in the Royal Household. They finished up with his abdomen, before starting on his thighs.

“You watch now while I work his \*quads\* – the muscles under his thigh,” Diane murmured.

She lifted his leg and rested it on her shoulder, before kneading the underside of this thigh. "You also stretch his leg at this point." She continued working there for several minutes, before setting his leg back down.

"Now you do that side. That's it, Laisee. Really *dig* in there and move his muscles. When we roll him over, we'll do it again."

They eventually worked their way down his legs to his feet, before having him roll over so they could continue while he was on his stomach. Diane kneeled close enough to rest one of his feet on her thigh so it was easier to work on, and watched approvingly when Laisee assumed the same position on his other side.

"Pay *real* good attention to the bottom of his feet, Laisee. He's on his feet a lot, and they take lots of abuse," she explained, while bending and twisting his ankle firmly before stretching his toes and working all the pads on his toes and foot.

"The back of his calf has lots of muscles. Warm them up with \*effleurage\* and then work them well with \*petrissage.\* Now that we have nothing but muscle back here, we can use *friction* to push all the excess debris we've loosened up towards his torso so it can be flushed out through his lymph system. Ronnie, don't forget you're gonna need to drink several glasses of water in the next couple of hours to flush out what we're doing to you."

"What if I fall asleep or forget?"

"Then you'll wake up with a *massive* headache – *believe me!* When I was in massage school, the first three sessions were the *worst*. We all felt great, but by the next morning, we all felt pretty lousy – especially the students who *didn't* drink enough water."

Working up to his thighs again, they had access to the majority of this muscle group and worked on it a lot, before using friction to end that part of his body work.

"Now this next part is *fun!* I *always* like to work on someone's butt! Think about it... An office worker sits on it most of their day, comes home and sits for dinner, then sits while watching entertainment or reading. Most of their day is spent sitting on their butt. I've never had *anyone* complain that I should hurry up and move on."

They all had a quiet laugh, while Diane continued with Laisee's instruction.

"The other way, Laisee. Push the waste towards the *heart*, not the legs. It's hard here because its round instead of long; like an arm or

leg. Just direct the waste towards the chest, and the lymphatic system will gather it up and flush it out – if he drinks enough water.”

They finished the lower part of his back with alternating cross-pulls – Diane from one side and Laisee from the other – before going back up to his head, where Diane gave the next demonstration.

“We warm up the muscles on the back *first* so it won’t hurt as much when we separate the scapula from his ribs,” she said casually, but Ronnie jerked up.

“What!”

“Oh, lie back *down*, you big baby! We’re just gonna loosen up your shoulder blades so we can work under the edge a little bit. There’s a row of muscles under there we can get to like that.”

So saying, she worked one side to the point where it was ready, then moved one of his arms into a lock position behind him, before carefully pushing up on his elbow. This shifted his scapula from its tucked-in position, and gave her room to work. After she finished her side, Laisee carefully duplicated her effort on the other.

Once they were done, Diane kneeled with his head between her thighs and began long, slow strokes down the middle of his back before pulling up along his sides, sliding over his shoulders, and ending up behind the ridge on the back of his head. Each pass ran down an overlapping range of muscles. Then she had Laisee duplicate this as well.

In another ten minutes, they heard quiet snores coming from Ronnie.

### ***In the Wives’ Compartment***

“Lili! You *never* told us they were being trained as *Combat-Healers!*” Yin-Yin complained bitterly. “Staff will *never* get those stains out of the cushions!”

“Under our little *Ronnie*’s direction?” Lili just laughed. “Would you expect them to be trained simply to give comfort and pleasure?”

“Yin-Yin, in all fairness, *you* were the one who asked them to show us what they had learned,” Mei-Mei reminded her. “It was remarkable, Lili. Shay and Amy are very fast.”

“And Laisee? How was she?”

"For someone who has spent her entire *life* in seclusion, she has finally come onto herself," Yin-Yin admitted. "She is not *nearly* as fast, but works *very* hard."

"Then it was all a matter of giving her a direction to focus her life on?"

Mei-Mei and Yin-Yin considered that thoughtfully, before Mei-Mei finally offered an opinion.

"I feel she has been searching for some *meaning* to her life ... perhaps as far back as when Meela chased our little Ronnie away from her? Maybe this will bring her fulfillment ... perhaps give her a sense of *purpose*?"

"And I still sense feelings of ... *want?* ... *desire?*" Yin-Yin suggested. "She perhaps seeks to reconnect with our Ronnie? I do not know what Maya will think about that."

"Maya is out of our hands for the time being, my Ladies," Lili reminded them. "Perhaps the Elder and her staff can help her, perhaps not. I would that her piece be made new and whole again – for our Ronnie's sake, if no other."

Both of the Ladies were very concerned over that prospect.

"Lili, what if Maya should *not* recover? What then for our Ronnie?" Yin-Yin asked.

Lili slowly walked over to a cabinet, where she drew out three crystal goblets and a bottle of ambrosia. The Ladies chilled at this foreboding. Handing out a round of measures, Lili sank onto a cushion and relaxed before sipping her drink.

"My Ladies, Elder Kita ... '*consultant*' Kita now, was having problems seeing the paths clearly," Lili said delicately. "Perhaps she could have redirected things long ago, but her body failed her and deprived her spirit of a stable working environment. When the new Elder, Lady Ai, fully assimilates the office of the Elder, she may see the paths that remained hidden from Kita, and perhaps find one that will lead us out of the impending darkness."

That was a sobering, if hopeful, thought. Yin-Yin had another one.

"What of Lady Meela?"

Lili sipped once again, before swirling the drink in her goblet while considering her answer.

"That piece may be damaged... It may have to be removed from the board," she finally said.

The import of that struck them both.

“Lili – *no!*” Mei-Mei said in shock.

Lili looked at them both, but took another tiny sip of her drink before responding.

“There *is* no divorce on Kantor ... *ever*,” she said quietly.

### ***In Ronnie’s Compartment***

“Oh dear. He’s fallen *asleep!* What shall we *do?*” Laisee asked her plaintively, but Diane stifled a laugh.

“Well, if I was Lili, I’d probably leave him here and let him sleep through the night ... but then he’d wake up with a headache and never let us practice on him again. And besides, you were planning on spending the night with him again, weren’t you?”

Laisee blushed and nodded, which prompted Diane to offer some gentle advice on the subject.

“You know he loves Maya, dearly, and she loves him. When Maya becomes well again, she will be back with Ronnie, and there may be no room for you with them.”

Laisee had already considered that, and knew she may not achieve her desires, but still wanted to make the offer. Besides, she’d already discussed the issue with Maya.

“I understand, Diane. Maya and I talked a great deal, more so than I would expect from a ...*a rival?* She ... she asked me if I could ever settle for being a Second or Third to Ronnie’s First Wife, and I told her yes. I realize we have not been together since we were first together as children, but I remember him very fondly, and he was always very kind to me.” She looked down at the sleeping Ronnie and smiled.

“He is *still* very kind to me, and to everyone else. I know him, and I know what he has done for much of his life. I admire him greatly, perhaps more so than his Maya does. I would be very proud to serve under our Lord Rondal, even as Second or Third Wife – *especially* if Maya were First Wife.”

Diane got up and stretched, before helping Laisee up as well. She brought her into the bedroom with her where they sat on the edge of the bed together. Laisee let out a sigh, before putting her arm around Diane’s waist and resting her head on her shoulder. They could both see the sleeping Ronnie through the open door to the outer room. Diane reached up and combed her fingers through Laisee’s hair, just

as she'd done with Amy when she'd turn introspective. As she did so, she thought aloud about the situation.

"You know ... Shay bonded herself to me and David the first day she met us," she said quietly. "She'd never seen us before, but when Maya told her he was a leader of law enforcement, she dropped to her knees before him and bonded with him – just like that," she said, then snapped her fingers, and laughed a quiet bark.

"Of course *we* didn't know what she'd done until much later, after David started yelling at Ronnie for *kidnapping* us! Then Shay thought he was going to ask for her as a *blood sacrifice*!"

"Oh no! Was he *really*?"

"No, silly girl," Diane said, and hugged her casually. "We just didn't know Shay's cultural background, and how she would see *our* behavior. Ronnie tried talking David through a ...a *forgiveness* ceremony? Something like that. Anyway, David accidentally kissed her *fingers*, and then *she* decided he wanted her to carry a *baby* from him! I tell you – it was a *mess* for a while, but we finally got it all figured out. Now Shay is nearly bonded with Andrew – and *she will* be once the baby is born."

Laisee thought about that for a bit while Diane continued caressing her hair.

"So, you are suggesting that – that my wanting Ronnie *now* may not be what I want in the *future*?" Laisee's murmured question came from her shoulder.

Diane thought carefully of what she could say as motherly advice to this woman over five times her age.

"What I am *suggesting* is that, even after *all* your years, you have lived a very *sheltered* life. To bind yourself so quickly to someone you have not lived with through pain and sorrow may lead you to much unhappiness if you later find it was not the *proper* path to take."

She hugged her again, while Laisee quivered a bit in her arms.

"Diane – what should I do?" she asked in a whisper.

"I would counsel that you look at the paths before you ... and avoid the ones with very *steep* sides," she said quietly, and hugged her closer to give her a kiss on the side of her head. "If you find that your chosen path makes you happy, and brings happiness to others, then it may be the *correct* path for you. If you find that your path brings neither you nor your traveling companions any happiness or joy, then it's probably the *wrong* path for you to take."

The sad memories of their last few months on Earth suddenly caught up with her.

“And whatever path you take, you must also remember that life is uncertain. No one knows what each day will reveal, or if a chosen companion will be there the next day. We say on Earth – cherish each day and each loved one, because all may be lost the next day. Too many of us forget that and take each other for granted.”

Diane rocked her on the edge of the bed for a while, before glancing at the ship's timer. Ronnie had napped long enough, and David was waiting for her.

“Let’s go get our sleeping leader up and in the shower – or at least get some *water* into him.”

They got Ronnie up, but he never made it to the shower.

They got as far as the toilet, where he chucked up the gruel he’d had earlier. Some of the fruit helped to settle his stomach, and he was able to brush his teeth only two cups of water later.

After another cup of water, Laisee and Diane helped him onto the fresh sheet on top of his bed, then slid another one over him, before Laisee stripped down and joined him.

“I will watch over him this night, Diane. And thank you for your counsel, my Teacher. I will try to choose my path in due time and with much deliberation.”

Diane bent down and kissed her goodnight, then left for her own compartment, while Laisee snuggled up next to Ronnie.

Sometime during the night, Ronnie got up to use the toilet, had another cup of water, and came back to snuggle next to Laisee. Her closeness and warm body caused him to react, and his hardness pressed into her backside. He was comfortable just being pressed up against her, but she sleepily rolled onto her back and raised her adjacent leg, before reaching down and guiding him into her body. Pushing in gently, he felt her arm reach out sideways to rest on his torso, and he began loving her slowly ...eliciting quiet moans from her, but making no effort to rush to a finish for either of them. Neither of them remembered when they fell back to sleep.

### ***Midnight (Day 103) – The Elder Probes Some Dreams***

Tomar was having a bad night. As if it was their last night together, Meela had once again used him completely, and he’d fallen into a deep sleep that had shifted into a restless slumber.

His dreams kept dancing around the same theme. He was on guard at Meela's door when the courier arrived. He verified the diplomatic pouch, announced him, then let him in. Sometimes he escorted the courier back to the entryway of the Homestead, and sometimes he met him there and escorted him to Meela's apartment.

'Does he never ask him for his name?' the Elder thought in frustration, while watching numerous scenes unravel through his memories. 'Ah! There - his name on the register ... Taldus ... Taldus Remy se Loca!'

She smiled grimly, before concentrating on the unfocused areas of the visitor log. Another name teased at the limits of Tomar's vision, but she was sure it was from Loca as well. She followed Tomar's memories again, now searching for anyone else visiting Meela under the guise of a courier.

'There - he was also a visitor to Maya on Cletus,' she thought fiercely. She followed Tomar back through his actions until this second visitor was at the logbook at the same time as Tomar.

*'Cleeve Dalis se Loca'*

Ai backed out of Tomar's memories and thought of taking a look into Meela's, but reconsidered. She'd already told Lili she would wait and let her have a chance to volunteer the information she was seeking. She'd promised nothing about *Laisee*, however, and promptly dove into her mind and started looking around.

*'Ah! Even in her sleep, she dreams of Ronnie? No, he really IS inside of her as she sleeps! No, she is in twilight, and appreciates his attention,'* she felt, and almost envied *Laisee*'s position.

Ai left that area, and browsed *Laisee*'s memories of home world, but they were terribly boring. She read - she watched entertainment - Ah! She played a musical instrument of some kind - how *marvelous* for her! But she had no memory of either of Meela's visitors, so she backed out silently and let *Laisee* continue with her sleepy, but sensual interaction with *Ronnie*.

The Elder lay quietly while considering her next action. On a hunch, she gently probed *Maya*'s mind and skipped back to the memory of the visitors who'd brought her the invitation from the Ambassador.

Yes - the second courier from Loca was there as well. Ai backed out and contemplated her next steps.

Her staff was already burdened, but she knew Lili would relish *any* involvement at this level. Lili had served Kita successfully for several

score of decades; yet it was late, so she would send for her in the morning ... or better yet...

*'Lili, may I interrupt you for a moment?'*

### ***In Lili's Compartment***

Lili lay alongside Spring Blossom while licking and gently biting at her nipple, but Spring Blossom was still soundly asleep.

*'My Elder, it appears that my companion for the evening has fallen asleep, so I would welcome your attention'*

Ai could feel the warmth flowing from Lili, and momentarily thought of asking her to visit personally, but the hour was very late.

*'Lili, I have two names for you; Cleeve Dalis se Loca and Taldus Remy se Loca. Both of these men were registered visitors to the apartment of Lady Meela on home world; Taldus Remy, the more frequent, and the one you recognized. They entered as couriers. I recognized Cleeve Dalis from Maya's mind as well'*

*'How may I serve you, my Elder?'*

*'I wish this information confirmed. If it were possible, I would like them recovered and brought before us, although we have little time for that. I wish to proceed at noon minus two the day after this'*

*'I will confer with my staff immediately regarding the former, my Elder, and I will see what steps may be taken about the latter'*

*'Kita's faith in you was well founded, Lili. Thank you'*

*'I live to serve, my Elder'*

*'I have every confidence'*

Lili lay there a moment longer while resting her head on Spring Blossom's breasts. Finally letting out a sigh, she kissed the closest nipple, before getting up. Stopping only to cover Lady Blossom with a sheet, she put on her robe and entered the outer chamber.

Crossing to the adjacent door, she first probed, and then opened the door to find Kita still up and working on one of her many projects.

*"Kita! Shame on you! How will you remain fresh for me if you consistently get little or no sleep?"*

Quite startled, Kita leapt out of her chair, turned, then bowed, before looking up with a very genuine smile on her face.

"How may I serve, my Lady?" she asked with a tiny glimmer of hope in her eyes.

Lili laughed quietly, before bringing Kita into a hug that pressed her head firmly between her breasts where she could *thoroughly* enjoy their warmth and softness. She slipped her arms around Lili and softly nuzzled into her cleavage.

"Alas, my poor little Kita, I have yet *more* work for you this night," she lamented with a sigh, then began outlining what she needed while still holding her in place.

Once explained, Kita squeezed her once, before backing off. Turning around, she sat down at her desk and brought up a window on her monitor. Her fingers flew furiously over a data pad, and produced lines of inquiries and additional notes.

"The first answers will be part of house records, my Lady," she said, while setting up a systems query for their secure home world data center to send back the requested records.

"We should have an answer in..." she paused while pressing a key, "...approximately half an hour - if the systems are up on home world. *Sectorus* is running another link for me now, so I know *that* part is up already. Do you wish the target quarters searched, my Lady?"

Lili thought it over, but decided against it for now.

"Not at this time, Kita."

"On the second matter, my Lady. What resources may I use? I currently have these agents available." Kita tilted the screen up for Lili to view.

Lili let out a low chuckle and pointed to a name.

"Most *fortunate* wouldn't you say, Kita?"

Kita thought for a moment, before nodding in agreement.

"Is the time limit very firm on this part, my Lady?"

"Sooner rather than later - but results will be useful, regardless."

Kita composed the instructions furiously, read them over carefully, then offered them to Lili - who merely waved her fingers at them. She trusted Kita completely in this matter. Just as her husband had always recommended - hire the appropriate stewards of knowledge to define the path, and allow them the leeway for a successful resolution. Kita was *very* good at what she did.

Kita stood and stretched, before turning and bowing to Lili.

"Will there be anything *else*, my Lady? I was just about to pursue a ... a small *diversion* to clear my mind," she suggested shamelessly.

"How very *fortunate*, Kita, for Lady Blossom has fallen asleep, and I fear I still have too much on *my* mind as well."

"Perhaps, my Lady, you will let me help you with *your* problem? And then perhaps you would please help me with *mine*?"

"That sounds like an *excellent* idea, my little Kita," Lili said, before drawing her over to her bed to commence some mind-clearing activities.

### ***ES Orca, On the Scent***

"One damn thing after another," one of Lili's most capable field agents muttered sullenly. She was a Senior whose exploits had begun over 250 years ago; broken by the birth of her only child at the youthful age of eighty-eight.

She was currently scouring transit records, but her mood was becoming increasingly foul as she tried to find traces of the two souls who appeared to have been found displeasing in the eyes of the Elder.

"Just a damn snatch and grab – probably lost the Elder's package, and she's peeved," she grumbled.

Sometime during the second hour, her search turned up a Taldus Remy se Loca currently in transit on a commercial carrier.

After a few quick communications to confirm the ship's current location and schedule, she alerted her crew of three for transition – thirty-seconds from now; duration eight minutes, three seconds.

Her constant traveling companion, Mistress Déjà, quickly popped a pill and webbed in securely. She hated these little jaunts Mommy put them through. The remaining crew, Endo and Gallus, simply strapped themselves in and waited stoically. Both of these giant worthies were used to it by now, and they never really ate that much while on board anyway – just in case Mother wished to go somewhere in a *hurry*.

### ***CPS Microcosmus, Midnight +5 (Day 103) – A Wakeup Call***

Ronnie woke up hard. He was still snuggled up against Laisee and enjoying her warmth, but the roundness of her bottom seemed to be calling to him. He glanced at the timer glowing dimly on the opposite wall, and sighed.

He dithered about introducing himself into her wetness once again, but the pressure from his bladder won out, so he quietly retreated to

the facilities to relieve himself of that particular problem. Once behind the closed door, he considered taking a shower, but instead settled for washing himself and drying, before finally creeping back into bed and snuggling with her again.

"Go drink some more water," she mumbled sleepily, before rolling over and pushing at his shoulder.

Surprised, he fumbled out of bed again, downed a cup of water, then, stood there looking down into Laisee's sleepy eyes. Then he noticed she was touching her thumb to each of her fingers in turn.

"Drink one more cup, and come back to me," she murmured.

He drank another cup, then got back into bed, where he closed up behind her, but she pushed him away, before rolling over and cuddling up to his back instead. She finished by wrapping an arm around his waist and slipping a leg over one of his, then sighed contentedly after tucking her head up close to his.

Her breath on the back of his neck was warm and somewhat comforting – after a fashion. He lay there for the better part of half an hour while letting his thoughts wander all over the place. He felt changes were coming, and wasn't too keen on what may lie ahead.

She eventually took a deep breath and slid her arm up from around his waist; pushing it up under his arm and over his chest, before finally pulling him back tightly against her breasts. When she relaxed her grip, her fingers made small swirls on his chest, just below his shoulder.

"Laisee, I – I don't..."

"...want to lead me on? You don't want to disappoint me? You can't love me because you already love Maya, and you don't have room in your heart for another?" She'd spoken quietly and unexcitedly.

He didn't speak, but his sigh spoke volumes.

"Ronnie, you were my first," she whispered, before kissing his ear lightly. "But that was a long time ago. We've both grown up since then, and I have no illusions where your heart lies." She squeezed him hard enough to press her breasts firmly against his back, before relaxing again.

"Maya and I had a lovely talk before ... before the Healing ... and Diane and I spoke last night. I don't know where my true path lies, but I am here with you ... right now ... because it feels right for me to *be* here ... right now. In time, my path will be wherever I am called – or sent to by the Seniors. I understand that, and understand that I may

not always have the freedom to choose. Right *now*, though, I choose to be here with you – because we *both* need it.” She pulled him tighter once again to kiss the side of his neck, before relaxing.

“Go back to sleep, Ronnie. You’ll be up again in two hours to pee, anyway.” She felt his body shake in silent laughter, while comfortably snuggling with him once again.

### ***Noon –5 (Day 103) – Shuffling the Data***

Lili quietly rose from their bed and bent down to kiss Kita lightly, before drifting over to the monitor.

She’d heard the quiet ping, and suspected she had an update for the Elder. Kita rose as well, then deftly maneuvered her way between Lili and the display, before furiously starting a sort and cross-reference routine that tidied things up nicely.

At a question from Lili, Kita accessed a database located much closer to them and ran another cross-reference. The product of that result was viewed by both, before being copied to a data tab and handed to her. Lili hugged her again, before leaving to get dressed. She would deliver these results to the Elder in person.

There was the issue of the agent for the other matter, and in *hindsight*, she probably should have asked the Elder’s permission beforehand, but it was too late now. Besides, it was better at times to beg forgiveness rather than ask for permission. She’d once heard that from Ronnie, if she wasn’t mistaken.

Also, there was the little issue of one of Ronnie’s *ex*-crewmen to consider...

### ***In Ronnie’s Compartment***

Ronnie woke up and glanced at the compartment timer across the room. As he worked to disentangle himself from her arms and legs, he figured that Laisee’s fingers had been remarkably accurate. It’d been precisely two hours since he’d returned to bed, and now he needed to get up for a return visit to the facilities.

Too early to be up, but too late to go back to bed, he wasn’t really surprised this time when Laisee came in and waited patiently for him to finish, before taking his place. Afterwards, she dragged him into the shower with her. After a relaxing shower – no groping or teasing this time – they got out, helped dry each other, then dressed ...all ready for the day ahead.

"Will you join me for breakfast, my Lord Ronnie? We may catch Lady Diane before she assumes her duty. I'm sure she would like to know how you're feeling."

The comment startled him. He felt ... all right ... *good*, even. He looked at the empty bowls from last night, and gathered them up.

"I believe I *will* join you, Mistress Laissee," he said, then joined her at the door, where she opened it for him. She greeted the morning guard, noting they'd managed to switch sometime during the night, before she and Ronnie headed to the commons.

#### ***Noon –4 (Day 103) – Advising the Elder***

"Lady Lili, how nice of you to join us. I hope I did not disturb your rest *too* much this morning?" Ai asked solicitously.

Lili approached and hugged the Elder, then exchanged kisses with her before separating and sitting across from each other.

"It was no bother, my Lady. I was able to give *my* Kita some little exercise with your tasks, and she performed excellently as usual." She'd pulled the data tab from her robes before sitting, and now held it in her open palm. "The records on this tab show the occurrences where the two Loca couriers visited the apartments of Lady Meela," she said, then reached over and handed it to the Elder.

"My little Kita also ran an occurrence graph showing the frequency of visits over the course of Lady Meela's residency. I noted strange coincidences comparing the frequency of visits to certain activities within the Commonwealth. No doubt some of them *are* mere coincidences, but some appear to be ... *not* so casual an observation. After looking at these records, and what my little Kita had done with them, I had her begin a search of *all* the times Lady Meela had been present at court against all the subsequent court decisions of the Emperor. It proved to be interesting."

"Very good, Lili. Very thorough. What of the other matter?"

"I sent one of my agents to locate and recover the two couriers and bring them here to us. She was currently between assignments and scheduled for some downtime, but I thought she might put forth a little extra effort into this particular task."

"She *does* know that we want them both alive?"

"Oh yes, my Lady. I received confirmation she had traced one already, and was attempting to intercept him in transit. I have also instructed her to relieve them of anything they may have secreted about themselves to remove them from this existence prematurely."

"Wise planning, Lili. You are truly a treasure among us," Ai said, then glanced at the timer on the wall. "Maya will be receiving young Shay in a little while. I have asked her to bring her young companion as well – the boy, Andrew?"

Lili thought that through for a moment.

"Is that wise, my Lady? Maya has not been comfortable with men around her of late. Although, Andrew is an Earth age of fourteen or so ... but looks much *older* to my eyes."

Ai took no time in understanding the circumstances and reached out to look within Andrew herself for several moments – which only confirmed her thinking.

"Ah! Just so. It appears that Maya was not fully aware of certain aspects of '*new*' Healer abilities. With Andrew exposed to his mother, his sister, and Shay ... well, he appears to be developing into the image of a young man who satisfies *their* general desires. Without their *conscious* effort, I'm sure."

Lili stifled her gasp at Maya's unintentional training failure – something a Senior would *never* fail to lecture about.

"Oh dear. My Lady, we *cannot* take it away from him. I will speak to Lady Diane and have Yin-Yin speak to Amy and Shay at her Noon lesson with them. It would not do to have Andrew grow up *too* quickly – especially if we were to try to reintroduce him back to his home on Earth. He would feel *terribly* out of place."

Ai's thin smile dangled close to the border of becoming a smirk.

"From the activities Andrew is involved in, I suspect taking him and his family back to Earth is the *furthest* thing on Lord Rondal's mind right now. Speaking of which..." Ai paused and looked at Lili appraisingly. "Lili ... you *have* addressed the issue of control with Lord Rondal? We would not want another repeat of that *last* unfortunate episode."

"Yes, my Elder. I have located for him the appropriate areas that must be blocked within, and exercised them with him. He seems apt at performing that minor task ... even for a *man*."

"Very well, then. I leave that to your good judgment." The Elder paused to glance at the timer again. "We will observe Maya this morning and see what she makes of Andrew. If she can accept Andrew, then we can introduce David and see if she recognizes him without our help."

Ai had another observation to make, but it wasn't a happy one.

"Lili, for all the distractions you and the Ladies have been providing Lord Rondal, I fear that he still dwells too much on the prospect of Maya refusing him once she recovers. His piece in this puzzle is almost in place, but his position in the *next* puzzle is in constant flux, and I cannot fix on the outcome."

Lili tilted her head for a moment, before making a suggestion.

"Would it matter if I diverted my agent and have her wait a bit before recovering the couriers?" she asked.

The Elder closed her eyes and sat absolutely still for more than a few minutes, before opening them and shaking her head sadly.

"There are just too many paths at this point, Lili. Much depends on Maya and Rondal, and the results of tomorrow's testimony. For this testimony, the witnesses will be exclusive to the Royals and their families. Your engineers and my mercenaries will not be privy to the testimony."

"I will so inform my engineers, Captain Riker, the Lanes, and Mistress Shay, my Lady."

The Elder looked at her strangely.

"No, Lili. The Royals ... *and their families* ... will be the *sole witnesses*," the Elder repeated. "You were not *aware*?"

Lili hesitated for just a moment.

"I was ... apparently *not*, my Lady," Lili said tactfully. "The Royals *and* their families will all be present as sole witnesses. I believe I understand, my Lady Elder," she said, then bowed her head respectfully.

She needed to speak with Ronnie – *right away*.

There was a knock at the door, and they both looked towards it, before Lili rose to answer it.

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

Ronnie and Laisee had indeed found Diane finishing her breakfast. She'd asked how he felt, and he'd admitted that he felt much better than expected. Then she'd admonished him to eat *extremely* well because tonight they would start rebuilding his *torso*. After hearing his loud groan and laughing at him, she'd dashed off to relieve Amy, who was still on watch in the gym.

"You're *enjoying* this, aren't you?" he asked, while Laisee was just finishing her plate.

"Lady Diane tells me you are a *wonderful* provider and protector, but she was informed by Lady Lili that you are also an excellent example of a Healer who severely lacks proper *training!*"

He looked around quickly, but no one was nearby to hear them.

"Oh, I checked first, my Lord Rondal. We mustn't reveal *all* your secrets now, must we?"

"And what secrets might they *be*, I'm wondering?" came from behind Ronnie's head, before Donnel stepped to the side and joined them at their table.

"Good morning, Mistress Laisee – my Lord Rondal. Might I have a moment of your *time*, Sir?" Donnel asked lightly, and Laisee took that as her cue.

"Good to see you again, Mister Ardan," she said, while smiling widely. "My Lord, I must be on my way ... but I'll be by for tonight's *lesson*," she whispered loudly, before grinning mischievously, standing, then taking her tray with her.

"Proper girl, that. Doesn't put on airs," Donnel said quietly, while watching her bus her own dishes.

Ronnie looked down at Donnel's full tray and gestured for him to join him – a little late, perhaps.

"What brings you around, Mister Ardan? Programming in *more* tricks for me to stumble across?" he asked, saying it not *quite* harshly.

"Ahhh ... *that*, I understand, was perhaps the result of not paying *attention*, my Lord? But it shouldn't have tried to remove your *upper* half from your *lower* half. A minor bit of tweaking, and I'll be on it this morning, to be sure. But the *other* enhancements – don't it get the *fire* in your veins *flowin'*, Sir?"

"Aye, Donnel, it does at that. What *other* mischief do you have planned for the *Kraken's Child*?"

"Well, Sir, I've been thinkin' that just adding more swords be too simple and not really ... *realistic* I think would be the word. I'm inclined to change level thirteen back to just two swords, but leave in all the nasty banter. Then bring in a *second* player at level fourteen with *one* sword apiece. And then have *those* two players at level fifteen with *two* swords apiece."

Ronnie looked at him in astonishment.

"You *are* trying to kill me, aren't you?"

“Oh no, my Lord! It’s just getting harder to *challenge* you, is all!”

Ronnie sat there and stared at him for a few seconds, before breaking into quiet chuckles, which soon had Donnel laughing as well. Then Donnel leaned in and spoke quietly.

“One other thing, my Lord. The ship’s transmitter’s been ‘a humming all night long. Mistress Kita – Lili’s young lady – she’s been monopolizing communications, and not just routine coms. The ‘special’ codes went out as well, and that bodes no joy for any living creature. Can’t break ‘em, and the Gods know I wouldn’t dare to try ... but things be *hoppin’* my Lord, and not just in the *gym*.’”

Ronnie took a breath, before nodding his head.

“Noted, Mister Ardan,” he said quietly, while wondering what mischief Lili was up to on behalf of the Elder.

### ***At the Elder’s Compartment***

Shay and Andy were at the door. He was looking a little tired, but they were both ready to visit Maya.

“Please come in, children,” Lili said, and brought them both forward to the still-seated Elder.

“Mistress Shay, Master Andrew – may I present the Elder, Lady Ai.”

They both politely bowed their heads, but other than a quiet, “My Lady,” they both remained reserved.

“The former Elder, Mistress Kita, had served for many years, but she has decided to retire at this point in time,” Ai said, before standing to greet them properly. “It is by her desire that I replace her as Elder and assume all of her duties while she remains in an advisory capacity until the current issues are resolved.”

“Uh ... congratulations? My Lady Elder?” Andy said warily.

“Thank you, young man,” Ai said, and smiled at his politeness. “Now let us go visit with your Maya and see how she is today, shall we?” At her gesture, they turned to the side door Lili was just opening for them to enter.

### ***ES Orca, Mistress Filose, Front and Center***

They hung motionless in space near a major node point, and waited.

The Senior had configured their shield and cloaking to present themselves as a common shuttle, and that was how she was going to get Mistress Déjà aboard the transport carrying target one.

She'd already communicated with the transport line and arranged a short layover for a passenger transfer – a young Mistress Filose, who was free from her studies in the local system and now on her way to meet her family. How fortunate that a transport was headed that way, and she would not incur any additional expense for accommodations while waiting for the next one. The expected rendezvous was in less than an hour, and Mistress Filose was the only passenger for transfer.

While they waited, the Senior contemplated target two. There appeared to be no records of him on Loca; no birth records, accommodation records, transit records – *nothing*. He either did not exist, or traveled under another name, and if he traveled under another name, *that* was a matter she was very interested in. Perhaps this was a matter more serious than a missing package?

Not one to speculate idly – except for her own “special project” – the Senior waited patiently, and was eventually rewarded with a ping from the console announcing the arrival of their target's transport.

Announcing their false identification and recognition codes, they reached an accord and managed to maneuver alongside the transport. One of her crewmen launched a line to the transport, and Déjà was sent over by being pulled along on a carabineer, while wearing a ship suit. Her luggage would take a moment to attach and transport, while Mistress Filose was getting settled ... and hopefully finding target one and neutralizing him quietly.

Déjà was greeted at the lock, before being led inside, where it was suggested she could change out of her ship suit and travel more comfortably in regular clothing. She asserted that her clothes were on the way over, but she wanted to see where she would be sitting, so the cabin attendant escorted her to her seat.

Along the way, she casually glanced at the other passengers while searching for target one. They had no real image, but the one the Senior had received, which had been a hand-drawn representation from someone's memory. She searched as casually as possible, while keeping the tiny injector palmed and hidden in her hand.

*'Not him ... not him ... definitely not her ... not him ... no, wait – his smile – the tooth'*

As she passed his seat, she stumbled and literally fell into his lap. As Mistress Filose appeared no more than the age of her late teens, this presented few problems for this type of operation. So far, it has worked every time.

"Oh! My, *Lord*, please forgive my clumsiness! Mistress Filose *begs* your forgiveness, my Lord ... my Lord..."

"Remy, Mistress... Taldus Remy, Mistress Filose," he said while smiling and trying to help her back up, but not without a little subtle fondling around her breasts. "And no Lord am I, Mistress. I'm merely a courier," he said, and showed her his ring.

"Oh, how *pretty!*" she gushed while taking his hand in hers and firing the injector.

She chattered away at him for the next five or six seconds until his eyes looked at her in panic, before turning blank and lifeless. Déjà stood up and called the attendant over; touching her in the process and directing her attention to the small Imperial crest she held palmed in her hand.

"This passenger does not seem *well*," she said loudly. "We must remove him from the ship and transport him planet-side quickly for treatment. I will go with him to make sure he is well taken care of."

By that time, Endo had arrived in the lock with her one piece of luggage that contained only one item in it – an emergency evacuation vacuum bag. He set it down, came forward, easily picked up target one, and brought him back to the lock, where he quickly searched him, before bagging him for transfer.

Déjà and the attendant had followed along, before speaking quietly in the privacy just outside the lock.

"Please extend the thanks of the Crown to the Captain for your cooperation. Speculation, however, would not be appreciated," Déjà warned her obliquely.

"As my Lady commands," the attendant said with a smile. Her pulse was *racing*, but not for the recent unfortunate transfer of a sick passenger. Mistress Déjà radiated emanations that were very much in demand by *both* sexes.

#### ***CPS Microcosmus, Noon –2 (Day 103) – A Surprise Report***

"Well... That was encouraging. She didn't jump up screaming this time," Molara said flatly.

"Yes," Lili agreed, "but she didn't remember Andrew's name – not right away."

The Elder was still sitting and reviewing Maya's memories; finding that she seemed much more stable today.

"She was in her current memory stream. It's almost as if she were avoiding her bad memories altogether – much like Rondal had originally accomplished," she finally said.

"That's the mind's normal protection mechanism," Molara said. "She blocks off the offending memory to protect herself."

"Yes," Lili agreed quietly, "but those memories are free to be released when the person feels safe and secure; the mind knowing that others are around to protect and comfort it. I had hoped your being here would have helped her to recover." This last was directed at Molara.

"It has been a very short time, Lili. Even by *our* standards," Ai pointed out.

"Yes, my Lady Elder. But this puzzle rushes to completion," Molara reminded her. "If we lose one piece, we may very well lose the other."

"Losing one or two pieces is *nothing* compared to dropping the entire puzzle to the *floor!*" Ai said in frustration, before pressing her palms to her forehead.

"My Lady, are you not well?" Lili could feel the swirling overtones from the Elder's mind slowly settle, before resting altogether.

"Forgive me, my Ladies. I complain, yet Kita tells me it took *years* for her to become an effective Elder ... and we have so little time."

"Then we will simply have to do the best we can with what we have," Lili suggested, sharing looks between Molara and Lady Ai before they reluctantly nodded in agreement.

A knock was heard at the outer door, before it opened slightly to allow the voice of one of the Elder's guards to pass through.

"I beg pardon, my Ladies. Mistress Kita of Lady Lili's party is here with an urgent message for the office, my Ladies," he said.

Kita could be seen anxiously bouncing on her tiptoes behind him.

"Send her in, please," Ai said.

Kita quickly pushed by the guard and shut the door in his face, before he even got in a "By your leave."

"My Ladies!" Kita stopped and bowed. "A report from the *field!* Target one has been *acquired!*"

Both Ai and Molara looked confused, so Lili quickly spoke up.

"Taldus Remy se Loca was designated target one for communication purposes," she explained, before turning to Kita. "There were no complications?"

"None whatever, my Lady. The Senior found no items of self-destruction on his person, but they did disable two items that would automatically send out an alert signal should they have been casually removed from the target. They have been neutralized, and now reside in a fully shielded box. The person himself has been stripped and restrained – fully paralyzed, but not otherwise sedated. The Senior thus listens to his surface thoughts and gains clues for more information."

"And the status of target two?"

"Ahh ... that is a matter more serious in nature, my Ladies. It appears that target two – one Cleeve Dalis se Loca – does not exist as such. He has no transport record, no accommodation record, nor even a birth record on Loca. The Senior has access to the same sources we do, my Ladies, yet she has acquired one more – target one. She requests permission to probe him regarding the method of contact, his probable location, and any other information regarding target two. She promises to be very careful."

Lili gave her a skeptical look...

"*This time,*" Kita quickly added.

The Elder blanched at that remark, but then remembered the kinds of things Lili asked of her agents. She caught Lili's eye and nodded her permission.

"Kita, you may advise the Senior that she may probe – *very gently* – and acquire information related *only* to the location of target two," Lili instructed her, even as Kita began beating a rapid tattoo on her data pad. "Other than the paralysis agent, she is not to drug him. His mind and recollection must not be distorted. She should find a clear image of target two in his memory. Remind her that she must not take any action against target one or target two *at all*. We want them here intact and somewhat cooperative."

Kita delayed three more seconds before pausing the abusive assault on her data pad, to ask, "A new time limit in the search for target two, my Lady?"

Lili turned to the Elder, and asked, "How much time would you need to question either of these two persons, my Elder?"

Ai thought for just a moment, before nodding.

"No later than Noon minus six tomorrow, Lili. Two would be desirable. If only one were available, it would still greatly help us in our deliberations."

Lili nodded and turned to Kita. "Kita, please advise the Senior accordingly."

With a quick, "By your leave, my Ladies," Kita spun and left the room.

As the door closed, Molara was still staring at it in shock. Lili's staff was *very* efficient!

"By the Gods, Lili, how do you inspire such *passion*?"

"I expect *much* from my staff, Molara, and I reward them *greatly* for it," Lili explained simply, while her lips were slowly graced by a demure smile.

Molara shook her head, then sat back before continuing to make notes on her data pad. The office of the Elder didn't run nearly as efficiently itself, but Lili's methods brought *impressive* results. She added a few more notes to inquire of more qualified help, and in what capacity – plus possible rewards.

"She sounds very well trained, Lili," Ai said. "And your Senior, as well. Have I met her?"

"Most likely not, my Elder. Most of her time is spent on assignment, as are the rest of my agents. In between times, they are constantly learning new techniques. This *particular* Senior even spent some time out at the Fringe learning the tactics of the '*Madman of the Fringe*' as he was called."

"This Senior of yours, is she as motivated as your little Kita?"

"I imagine so, my Elder. She was the *actual* target of the recent complaint from the Drecks. It was her pod of four, fully-capable Galaxy-class tanks that the Drecks were complaining about, but she arrived on scene shortly *after* Ronnie had already made off with Maya."

Molara had been perusing a file on her data pad while the conversation swirled around her unnoticed – until that last caused her to stop and stare at Lili in shock.

"Did they engage the Drecks?" the Elder asked.

"*Almost*, but the Senior felt that Maya had already been spirited away, so they harried the Drecks in the opposite direction for a while

before jumping out ... some twenty minutes away. Did it in formation, too. She seemed quite *proud* of it at the time.”

“Lili ... you *didn’t!*” an astonished Molara muttered.

“Why, Molara, you know I always use the *sharpest* tool for the job.”

“Oh... No! ... You – you don’t *understand!* ... And she’s coming *here!* ... Oh, Lili – *we have to talk!*” Molara said disjointedly, before starting to laugh nervously.

Twenty panic-filled minutes later, they had a tentative plan in place to rein in the “*Dragon Lady*.” Hopefully, the bloodshed would be kept to a minimum. If not, well ... they had *lots* of Healers and Seniors on board.

### ***Noon +5 (Day 103) – A Few Questions for Diane***

Diane had just finished her evening meal and gone to her compartment to clean up for Ronnie’s Healing session that night. After getting out of the shower, she contemplated jumping David’s bones before she had to leave, but he was still on the bridge with Larl, going over some details about the platform systems or something. As she was drying off, a knock came at her door. The guard announced that Lady Lili was requesting an audience, so she hurriedly put on a robe and greeted her at the door to usher her in.

“Please come in, Lady Lili,” she said, and brought her over to a pair of chairs, where they could sit across from each other at a small table. “How may I help you, Lady Lili? Do you want to go over Ronnie’s treatment for this evening?”

“Actually, Diane, I wanted to talk to *you*. Do you have a moment or two?”

“Certainly, Lady Lili. I am always—”

“Please Diane, we are as family now. You may call me Lili – certainly while we are alone ... or with Rondal,” she said with a smile.

“Thank you, Lili. What would you like to talk about?”

“Well ... you have a *gift*, Diane. A gift that is extremely *rare* for someone of Earth. I am very curious if somewhere in your past there is a connection between our worlds. What can you tell me of your father?”

Diane’s eyes opened wide, but then she just laughed.

"My father? I've never *met* my father. My mother met him only once, and she didn't remember all that much about him – except that he was tall and had a good pick-up line. Or it was the drugs."

At Lili's quizzical look, she continued.

"Ahhh ... my mother was a child of the 'free love' generation. They took mind-altering drugs, and engaged in sex with whoever happened to be there at the time. I almost ended up growing up in a \*commune\* – that's a place with a bunch of people who have the same non-goals, and mostly lie around having sex and getting \*stoned\*."

Diane considered that for a moment, and compared it to here.

"When you think about it, it's a lot like here – without the mind-altering drug part."

Lili frowned but nodded; remembering some of the history she'd read this just afternoon regarding Diane's potential background and location of birth – that last part gotten from her husband.

"So, where did you go after you were born in San Francisco?"

Diane tensed in surprise, until Lili said "David," and then relaxed.

"Mom stayed in the city for a while, and then she met this kinda nice guy. She dated him, and he was nice to her – nice to me, too. He couldn't have kids, and he was fine that she already had one. And he wasn't a \*weirdo\* either ... someone who takes advantage of children for their *own* gratification," she added at Lili's tilted head.

Only moments later, Lili nodded in understanding.

"That is something frowned upon among our people, as well. *Teaching* our children is one thing, and only approached with the child's curiosity and permission. Taking advantage is not tolerated among most of the Commonwealth. I understand Wilder and Loca are two that do *not* adhere to our restrictions."

"Shay and Laisee being prime examples," Diane muttered, before continuing. "So anyway, this guy gets us a home and makes us a family. Mom is off the drugs, and happy ... *really* happy for the first time I can remember. Then they're both killed in a stupid accident while I'm still in high school. I moved in with his brother – *not* so nice a guy – and he let me finish high school. Then I entered nursing school, but before I'd graduated from nursing school, he'd stolen the balance of my inheritance, and left me with nothing but my clothes and my car." Diane stared off for a moment; remembering that bad part of her life.

"I had to work in a massage parlor just to pay my bills. After graduation, I was accepted at the Veteran's Hospital in Arizona. That's where I met David. We got married, had Amy and Andrew – and got \*shanghaied\* way out here."

She finished her tale with a shrug of her shoulders.

"Well, that will certainly be an interesting story to tell your great-great-great-grandchildren someday."

"Ha! I don't know about *that*. At the rate *we're* going, I'll be lucky to see Amy's baby girl grow up."

"Oh, I don't know. Barring accident, you should live well for the next several hundred years or so," Lili murmured.

Diane looked both shocked and hopeful, while Lili watched her emotions play across her face.

Maya had told them, and even *demonstrated* it to them, but explained that it had to be taught by a Senior to be effective. Lili smiled when she peeked in and listened to Diane's internal dialogue.

"Diane, how old do I look – Earth normal for your society?"

"Oh ... maybe a 'hot' fifty ... fifty-five-year-old? Maybe?"

"I take that as a compliment, Diane. I was born in ... 1423 in your years. I could have chosen to look younger, but after you reach a certain position in society, it becomes ... *inappropriate?* ... *tasteless?* Unless you *have* no social position you are worried about."

Lili closed her eyes for a moment while remembering the relatively recent past – for *her*.

"Spring Blossom readily froze her age when we acquired her, yet she is Rondal's mother, and was born in ... 1-7-6-7 ... 1767 your years. She was brought to us two years after the birth of Rondal, and her age was stopped in her early twenties. If she had stopped when she first arrived, she would look nineteen years old – in *your* years."

The implications made Diane's mind dizzy, but there was a question that bothered her.

"So what's the story with Ronnie, then? Why does *he* look so old?"

Lili looked away while contemplating her answer. The truth was usually the best answer ... but a *partial* truth would have to do for the moment.

"Ronnie... Rondal was always trying to put forth his best efforts for his Grandfather, the Emperor Rakel Timorous, and Rakel doted on the boy. Rondal tried very hard to emulate Rakel through action and deed.

"He joined the service in ground troops, and won advancement after advancement, until finally he was in charge of this platform – which became his first real failure. And a spectacular failure it was, too. Because Rondal failed to reduce the Drecks home world, we're *still* having to deal with the problem nearly two hundred years after the fact."

"Can't you simply go back and try again?"

"It was a one-time opportunity, Diane. Clever distractions drew their forces off in all directions until their home world lay virtually defenseless. That was when Rondal was supposed to strike. The inquiry never even broached the subject. He failed – he was cashiered. No excuses."

"And the opportunity will never arise again, I suppose?"

"Not unless there is a way to make their sun go *nova* – no. And even then, they've been spreading themselves onto compatible worlds for over a hundred years now. At least the cross-Fringe raids have gotten under control – largely due to Rondal's efforts."

"That still doesn't explain why Ronnie looks so old."

Lili looked away guiltily – not that she could have done anything about it without making things worse for Rondal at the time. She really didn't like to beat dusty linens like this, but Diane needed to know. She turned back with a grim smile on her face.

"Sorry. Rondal felt ... guilty. Guilty for his *failure* ... and guilty for losing the faith and confidence of the Emperor. *That's* why he ran off to the Fringe. Then eight years later, a new treaty was in place, and the cross-raids slowed down drastically. Rondal came home, but the Emperor *still* would not see him. And Radatel ... he still blamed him for the deaths of his sons." She closed her eyes in memory of that difficult week of chaos.

"So, he loaded up a shuttle and took off to spend the rest of his days here with his Yandi. It was during that time he let control of his aging lapse, and just ...aged. Looking into his body, you can see it, Diane. If he didn't have any Healer's skills at all, he would be completely dependent upon medical painkillers instead of ambrosia.

"In fact, during his first night here with Laisee, he figured out how ambrosia interferes with his pain receptors and was able to duplicate

the effect with very few molecules of ambrosia in his system. He later attempted to boost his molecule count, but tried to cheat by drawing his cup to himself without touching it.”

The blank stare by Diane was followed by her question.

“What do you mean?”

Lili looked around and saw a book on a sideboard.

“Diane, this is frowned upon *greatly* and forbidden to *all males* – most *dire* consequences apply if it becomes generally known,” she said, before holding out her hand.

Lili closed her eyes for a moment, nodded her head slowly, then opened them again. The book quickly flew from the tabletop and smacked into her palm. A tiny bit of sweat dripped from her upper lip.

“It is also very draining – for *females*. I show this to you only as an example of what is *not* expected from any of the Commonwealth. For us, it is frowned upon ... *greatly*. The Elder *already* knows I have done it and why. For men, it puts their *very lives* at stake. Rondal’s life was *already* forfeit for his opening the latch on his cabin door while you were still in transit. The Elder is *very* aware of all that goes on around her, yet she sometimes shows leniency under *certain* circumstances.”

And that was yet *another* mystery to be explained, but probably never would be.

“What he did to Maya could also be considered a reason to be sanctioned most disagreeably. The fact that he saved her life undoubtedly moderated her judgment. As for the *ambrosia...*” Lili dipped her head while letting a smile crinkle her cheeks for a moment. “I tilted the cup before it could reach him ... but then he did the most *disgusting thing*,” she added with a shiver.

“What? What did he *do?*”

Lili leaned forward and whispered into her ear.

“*Eew!*” Diane squealed.

“*Exactly!*” Lili agreed, and they both shared a laugh.

Diane checked the compartment timer, then excused herself to dress by simply grabbing her clothes and changing in front of Lili. That didn’t stop her questions, though.

“So after Ronnie spent all that time out here alone, he gets all fired up and decides to rejoin civilization, and stops aging again?”

"That is *precisely* what he did – only now he's stuck. You can stop your age, continue your age, or age in stages appropriate to your position. That is why I look the way I do."

Diane stopped to look at her with a more appraising eye, but couldn't find fault with her mature beauty.

"You look like a hot Mimi Rogers – tall, voluptuous, sexy. All the things my David *likes* in a woman," Diane admitted, and Lili chuckled quietly while also feeling the undercurrents from Diane as well, but the time was getting late.

"Diane, what do you *really* think of Rondal?"

The look in Lili's eyes was both steady and a little intimidating. Diane got the impression the question was a bit more serious than initially suggested, and decided to go with first impressions.

"Well, at first we thought he was *insane* – but he got us this far, so I guess he's just your average ... *alien*?"

"*Hardly* average, I'd say. For *us*, anyway. I notice he gets along well with your children. They call him Grandfather upon occasion."

"Yeah. Well, their *real* Grandfather – Walter – was killed in an accident several months ago, and they both miss him a lot. Ronnie just seems to be the Grandfather type, and they gravitated towards him, I guess."

"And David ... how does *he* feel about Rondal?"

"David? I guess he's all right with Ronnie. They spend some guy time together in the gym sometimes. When he cut his hand off, Ronnie was there to pull him out of a vacuum and into the ship..." Diane paused for a few moments while thinking back to that event. "Hey, if Ronnie's such a hot Healer, then why didn't *he* fix David's hand when it was cut off?"

Lili considered her answer while thinking of Rondal – the Rondal of the *combat* platform insuring the lives and safety of his crew.

"Diane – what was the result of Rondal's ... *inaction*?"

"Well, he just sat there with David and got the both of them drunk. When we showed up, Maya had to take charge and made us ... she ... she made us *all* practice Healing David's hand," she said slowly.

"So Rondal stabilized David, took away his pain, and then stayed by his side until his Healer arrived with her trainees and performed a long and delicate repair to David's hand. All the while knowing that Maya

could have Healed it in just a few minutes – or that *he* could have Healed it adequately, but perhaps taken a bit *longer* if he'd really applied himself?"

Diane ran that event in her mind again while including what she now knew about Ronnie.

"He – he was *training* us, wasn't he? He didn't *need* anybody there! He could have taken care of it *himself*," she said with some irritation, but then considered another angle. "You don't think he let David cut off his hand on *purpose*, do you?"

Lili laughed out loud at the thought of it.

"No, Diane. Our men are *quite* capable of doing stupid things all by themselves."

Diane was thinking back some more, and then remembered the incident in the gym the first time Ronnie and David went to play.

"Lili, Ronnie hurt his head in the gym a few weeks ago. He said it was just a scratch. It wasn't just a scratch, was it?" Lili considered telling her, but decided to let her find out "accidently."

"Well, perhaps we can look at it this evening. You now know what to look for, and perhaps you will be able to determine what happened originally – and what he did to *fix* it – and we can work with him to fix it again *properly*. It shouldn't hurt that much since it happened so recently."

Lili decided to probe just a little bit more while watching Diane finish dressing.

"So... Diane... Overall, would you say that you and your family have accepted our Rondal as an honorable person? Would he be suitable as a substitute Grandfather, or perhaps Great-Grandfather to you and David ... and Amy, and Andrew, of course?"

Diane looked at her and tried to figure out what she was getting at.

"Is Ronnie gonna try to adopt us? Is *that* what this is all about? I mean, Ronnie's been really – well, *crazy* comes to mind, and he's been good to us as well, but he doesn't have to adopt us. Larl is still trying to figure out a way to keep us in the Commonwealth with our limited skill set. I mean – Amy and I are being trained as Healers, and I have no idea of what that skill is worth, but David was in law enforcement. As for Andy ... well, Ronnie's got Larl teaching him all sorts of things about ships and navigation. Is *that* what this is all about?"

Lili decided she could probably cover the basics in twenty minutes, or so – just enough time. Then Diane could talk to Ronnie herself.

"Diane – did Ronnie ever mention anything to you about 'seeding' missions? Particularly about seeding *women*? By visitors to *Earth*?"

### ***Midnight –5 (Day 103) – Family Ties***

Earlier that evening, Lili had had a very quiet conversation with one of the mercenaries in the commons before giving him a few data tabs. Once she'd continued to Ronnie's compartment, *that* particular mercenary had swiftly made his way back to his temporary quarters aboard *ES Shining Light* and hunkered down for the duration.

Arriving at Ronnie's compartment at the bottom of the day, Lili started discussing with Diane what needed to be done just to *start* the reconstruction of his torso, but before beginning that, she made a "discovery" and pointed out the recent poorly Healed area on the back of his head.

Rather than let Diane fiddle with his skull and brain matter at this level of her training, Ronnie promised to fix it later if he survived the next few days. Lili assured him that if *he* didn't do it, then she would have *all* of his student Healers take a turn at it, which prompted an *enthusiastic* promise to deal with it himself.

She and Diane then started on his torso rebuild list before proceeding to work on some of the underlying layers that left him very uncomfortable and stiff by the end of the shortened session. With lots of work left to do, Lili finally left them there and bid them a productive remainder of the evening.

Aside from feeling achy and sore all around his torso, Ronnie wasn't feeling so enthusiastic with the news that testimony would begin again tomorrow – this time rehashing the events leading up to the loss of the platform. That was a whole *other* can of worms he'd hoped would've stayed buried and out of sight – not only for *himself*, but for his entire family. He had no doubt it was going to cause his stepfather even *more* grief.

That was in addition to the *grilling* Lili had given him earlier in the day about his "extended" family.

Diane had another set of issues she was working on and just couldn't focus on what she was doing. She finally stopped Healing, and started clearing the floor, before laying down blankets to give Ronnie another massage.

"What's going on, Diane?"

"My heart's just not into this tonight, Ronnie. Maya always told us if we couldn't focus on the task properly, then it was better to let it wait

if it wasn't life-threatening. You've had these scars for nearly three lifetimes – they can wait another day or two."

"Um, okay."

Diane finished setting up the massage area, before pulling out the oils and some towels. She looked around at the room and sighed lightly while contemplating what Lili had told her earlier. Then she got out a couple of cups and poured them both some ambrosia.

Ronnie looked at it skeptically.

"It's okay, Ronnie. This isn't to mask your pain. Let's just relax tonight and let me work on you. You got any music?"

"Sure," he said, then took a sip. "What would you like?"

"Anything that goes good with massage."

"Uhh, Debussy then," he said, and called out, "Monitor-Music"

"Selections"

"Debussy."

"*Seven in catalog*"

"Play all," he said, and they were rewarded by the opening phrases of *La Mer*.

"Monitor-Sound"

"*Higher/Lower/Off*"

"Lower."

Diane had been watching him and finally tsked.

"I don't know what's worse – *talking* to the wall, or having a pile of remote controls."

"Granted, the remotes are good for some things, but the voice interface is nice, too," he said, then asked about the melody after it started. "Do you like it?"

"Umm, yeah," she said, then looked around at the room. "Monitor-Lights," she added.

"*Higher/Lower/Off*"

"Lower."

She smiled at the sudden intimacy of the room lighting, then sipped a bit of ambrosia before getting down to business.

Diane worked on his face, before heading down his body to work over some of the keloid tissue around his torso. She remembered working on a guy who'd been cut pretty badly in his youth. She'd spent six months reducing that scar until it was the same height as the rest of his skin; even if it *was* a different color. If she did it all by hand, Ronnie's scars would take her a *lifetime* to reduce. She left his torso and worked her way down to his thighs, where she lifted them up to work the quads, while asking about the new investigation.

"So ... what are they gonna dredge up at the testimony tomorrow?" she asked, but was rewarded with a disgusted grunt in response.

"Oh, probably just all the *juicy* details of how I fucked up," he said bitterly. "Probably nothing that I haven't already told David and Larl. I understand Lady Meela will be taking *particular* delight in the proceedings. I gather she intends to prove somehow that I was responsible for the deaths of her sons."

"Were you?"

"Oh, certainly. I got them here, and here's where they died. Sure, I lost over six-hundred warriors and *crew*, but *she*'s gonna focus on her two, misguided spawn from hell," he muttered irritably, before dampening his anger. "No, that's not fair. Radatel had little to do with their upbringing. That's the sad fate of being the Emperor's whipping boy."

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"Radatel. He's the Emperor's sole living direct heir, yet old Rakel Timorous treats him like *dirt*. Not only is he not a blooded warrior, he never *could* be... Just doesn't have the heart for it, Gods bless him."

She worked her way down to his feet and started on stretches and rotations, before asking, "So why is that bad in the Emperor's eyes?"

"Rakel rules by the edge of his *sword*, and for the better part of thirty years, I'd tried to live my life the same way. Impress the old boy, and maybe he'd grant me a title or something ... maybe some land."

"You have a title – Lord Caldar."

"Ha! That's not a title; that's an *accommodation*. It's even allowed to the bastard-son of a woman *married* into Royalty," he muttered darkly. "It was granted upon my promotion to Captain of this platform, but it means *nothing*. It certainly meant nothing to my *stepbrothers*," he added, with an edge.

"So ... you had problems with your stepbrothers?"

Ronnie thought of how to describe it so he wouldn't come out all whiney.

"What if – what if *everything* you tried to do was constantly put down by your '*bettters*'? And what if everything you did was consistently *better* done by you, rather than by your '*bettters*'?"

"I would imagine it would cause quite a bit of anger and resentment."

"You have *no* idea. I even tried to help them, but they wouldn't take lessons from a mere *Earth*-bastard ... no matter that I was better than the sword master of the *house* at the time," he said, while tensing up in frustrated memory.

"How about you roll over now?" she suggested, so he wiggled onto his side before stopping to sip his drink. She poured a little bit more for him, and he nodded gratefully before rolling onto his stomach.

"That's very pretty. What is it?"

"Ahh ... '*Prelude A L'Apres-Midi D'un Faune*'," he said in crappy French. "The \*Afternoon of a Faun\*. It wasn't well received when he first performed it back in ... 1890 or something. It got better with age, though ... like a *lot* of things."

"Like *you*?" she teased him, and he just groaned.

"In *hindsight*, I can appreciate the fact that I should *not* have spent twenty years out here by myself. It got incredibly lonely after a while."

She switched to his other foot, and asked, "How are Andy's lessons going?"

"Larl *swears* Andrew is gonna be a fine navigator in time – real *soon* time. Like *months*. And it seems like he's gotten so *big* all the sudden. You guys notice it?"

"Ahhh ... *yes*. As a matter of fact, Lili told me what was causing it, and she told the girls as well. Apparently, Maya never had to teach beginning Healers in our relative age group, before with constant access to a young adolescent. It seems our desire for a lover who is taller, broader of shoulder, and larger of penis had unexpected consequences. Lili gauges his relative age between sixteen and seventeen years, *Earth* normal."

"Oops!"

"Yes, oops! How about the rest of his studies? He and Shay are still working on them, aren't they?" she asked him.

Ronnie stretched his neck while she started working on his legs again.

"Yes, they are. I've been keeping track of their progress. In relative terms – aside from some fluff courses like the humanities and psychology – they'll both be able to pass most Commonwealth test exams for Shay's age group against other Class-Three or maybe even Class-Two citizens in about another ten weeks or so. Andrew would have to brush up on U.S. History, of course, and Civics, and Government – do they even still *teach* Government? If he were to return to *Earth*, that is. He seems to *write* well – nothing at all like he *speaks*."

Diane let out a short sequence of chuckles at that observation.

"Yes, we had quite a bit of a problem about that with both him *and* Amy in school. We finally resolved it when they had them write essays in class without books or other reference material. They both write at a college level, except Andy needs to look up words in a dictionary more often than Amy does."

"Hey, that's what "spell check\*" is for. Besides, Hemingway wrote at the third grade level himself. I mean, he wrote so that any third grader could read most of his work."

Diane continued to work on his thighs, before working herself up to his butt.

"You are just a constant *font* of trivia, Ronnie. You fascinate me sometimes."

"I'm good at *other* things, too," he said with a sly chuckle, which earned him a slap on his backside.

"Okay! Okay, I'll be good!" he said, but chuckled again.

She eventually finished with his butt, before starting her cross-pulls – working slowly up from his waist to his neck from his left side, before switching to his right and repeating. She finished up and sat back, while letting out a quiet sigh. She was still working up to it, so she poured more ambrosia for both of them. He sat up as they sipped and looked at each other in the dim light.

"You and Walter must have spent a lot of time together. Did he ever talk about his brother?" she asked.

"Wellford? Sure. They got along fine as far as I know," he said, before putting down his cup and lying back down. Diane repositioned herself with his head between her thighs so she could work from his head down to his back.

"It must have been hard growing up on the Reservation like that," she said, while starting the long strokes down his back and up along his sides.

"It wasn't *that* bad. It's a shame Walter never got to meet old *Jebediah*, though. He was a real *hoot*," he said into the pillow.

"*Jebediah*?"

"*Andrew Jebediah Lane*. He died the year after Walter was born. *Gods*, he was a randy old guy. He was in his *eighties* when Cooing Dove got pregnant with Wellford and Walter."

Diane paused for a moment while thinking of what Lili had told her, before adding a comment.

"I hear it wasn't common back then – a white man marrying an Indian girl."

"*Jebediah? White?* Not *hardly*. *Jebediah* was born of Gentle Spring and Elijah Lane back in, oh ... 1835 or so, maybe 1839? And Elijah was the son of Deborah Ann Lane and my stepbrother, Yellow Feather. Yellow Feather picked her up in a raid and brought her home. I think Elijah was born about 1800. Course, mom and I were *long* gone by then. Seems it was okay back then to take a *white* woman and breed with her, but not the other way around. Mom told me we got out just in time, or they were gonna *stone* her or something like that."

"So ... we're *really* related? Way back in the *distant* past?"

Ronnie held his breath for a second – not quite believing he'd been stupid enough to have blathered this all out *now*.

"Well ... yes. I suppose we are, Diane... Are... are you comfortable with that?" he asked quietly.

She made another pass or two before saying, "I suppose it woulda freaked me out before ... before all *this*," she said, while waving her hands expansively, even though he couldn't see them. "Now it just seems ... *comfortable*. It's *nice* having family, Ronnie. Even *distant* family ... like you and your Mom."

She worked on him a bit more, before continuing.

"Lili was telling me about some of the social programs the Commonwealth monitors."

"Oh? Like what?"

"You know ... the distribution of Healers ... although I don't like the idea of being assigned to a certain person for the rest of my *life*."

"Well, you married David. *That's* a lifetime commitment, isn't it?"

"Yes, but *I* made the choice. She also told me a little more about the Gleanings and such, rescuing seed stock, transplanting people, and ... and sometimes seeding them directly."

The music stopped. Diane thought for a moment, before calling out, "Monitor-Music."

"*Selections*"

"Scott Joplin"

"*Twenty-seven in catalog*"

"*\*Solace\**," she said, and the tentative opening bar of "*Mexican Serenade*" began to play.

"Amy learned to play this for Walter," she murmured.

"I ... ah ... yeah ... Walter told me," he said quietly.

"He really loved the melody," she murmured.

Ronnie started taking deeper breaths and began to quiver a tiny bit.

"They played it at their wedding... Walter and Bessie," he murmured. "He gave her a music box that played the first few bars."

He'd picked it out for Walter to give to Bessie ... him just a casual bystander in the music store making a suggestion.

"They played it at their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary, too," he added, with his voice starting to waver.

Walter had also had it played at her funeral service in 1972. He'd missed it by chance; just hearing about it a few years later while checking up on his family.

"Roses... Bessie always loved roses," he whispered.

Diane bent down and hugged Ronnie's back.

"I'm sure Bessie would have loved *you*, Ronnie ... just for being the father of her Walter. And I love you, too, Grandfather," she said quietly.

"Oh *Gods*," he muttered, while his body began shaking and his eyes streamed tears into the pillow covering.

"Come on, Ronnie. Come on. Sit up. I can't hug you properly like this."

She got him mostly vertical from the waist up, and then hugged him fiercely while flooding him with her love; holding and rocking him until the final strains of music faded out and he began to relax. She finally pushed him back and looked at him with concern in her eyes.

"You look *terrible*, Ronnie. Have you lost *weight*?"

The offhand comment made him laugh involuntarily, and he hugged her briefly once again.

"Does David know? How about the kids?"

"The kids pretty much consider you their Grandpa already. David – I don't think so, but Lili tells me the testimony tomorrow is strictly for the Elder's staff and family. She *specifically* included me, David, Amy, and Andrew. According to Lili, by extension, that also includes Larl and Shay. If Maya were up, she'd be included as well. She'd thought it best that we found out now before tomorrow ... at least David and I," she said, then glanced at the compartment timer.

"Ronnie, I can stay with you tonight if you like," she offered. "Just let me go tell David," she added, then started to get up.

Ronnie looked at the timer.

"I appreciate it, Diane, but in about three ... two ... one..."

A knock came at the door.

"My companion for the evening has arrived," he said wryly.

"*Alas!*" she cried theatrically while pressing a hand to her breast, "*My loss!*"

"No, Diane. Truly it's *my loss* ... but thank you for the kind offer," he said, before struggling to his feet while Diane opened the door to see an anxiously waiting Laisee.

Laisee came in and saw Ronnie heading to the bedroom while Diane turned and began picking up the loose bedding, but Laisee stopped her.

"Diane," she whispered, "Lili asked me to leave you two alone until minus four. Is everything all right?"

"Oh sure. Ronnie and I just needed to talk is all."

They both bent to the task of picking up the oily sheets and bedding. Then Laisee quickly stripped off her clothes, and stopped to kiss Diane goodnight, before slipping into the facilities to shower with Ronnie.

*'Girl's got a one-track mind,'* she thought, while gathering up her stuff and leaving to meet with her David to break the news to him.

### ***ES Orca, Target Two is on the Move***

"*Got you!*" she muttered to herself. The Senior was feeling almost gleeful while programming in the next three jumps that would take them right to the edge of the Fringe.

Once she had permission to peel, she'd gone in with muted vengeance and wormed out target two's contact scheme and probable locations from target one. It was only by accident she'd stumbled onto a memory of him meeting with a young and naïve Healer to offer her a position on an Ambassadorial staff headed into enemy territory.

That had fired her anger even higher, and she'd dug *deeper* into the memories of target one – eventually revealing the name Cleda Malia se Krux as a potential alias of Cleeve Dalis se Loca.

With this new information at hand, she'd fired off a query to one of her contacts on the Fringe, who in turn queried the data bases on Krux; discovering a set of birth records for Cleda Malia, as well as recent transport traces. There was some concern those records appeared false, but she went with the transport hit nonetheless.

Target two was on the move and heading outbound from Krux.

"Transition in thirty seconds; three hops ... total duration about five minutes," she said through the intercom.

She'd shoot for the far side of his path and see if she could intercept him in transit; tricky, but not impossible for a long time student of the Madman!

### ***Midnight -3 (Day 103) – David Gets a New Thrill***

Diane had carefully arranged the dropping of this little bomb by sharing a shower with David, before becoming sexually aggressive with him afterwards. She was currently horizontally atop him and riding him slowly, while holding his wrists to his side.

She made sure she had a good grip on him when she whispered into his ear, "Sweetie, did you know that Ronnie was Walter's *real* father?"

"He's *WHAT?*" A startled David tried to buck her off, but she slid up and pressed her breasts into his face until he stopped struggling.

"Now *David*, just settle *down*," she said calmly, before sliding back down again. "This is not altogether a *bad* thing, sweetheart. It just

means we have a little more *family*, is all," she added, before pressing down *really* hard while sliding her mound on his groin.

"Wait! How – how did he—"

"The *usual* way, sweetie ... *probably*," she said, while still grinding herself atop him. "Lili said sometimes they send out men to 'seed' the more primitive planets to see if a more evolved human could be born. It's their way of getting humanity to merge together – all part of the *master plan*, my darling," she explained, while reaching down to reinsert him before starting to pump again.

"Umm, you're really *hard* tonight, David," she cooed as he wavered below her. The feelings she was forcing on him were pushing aside his emotions, and he was facing a losing battle.

"Then ... *oh* ... then he really *is* Amy and Andy's ... *umm* ... Grandfather?" he moaned.

"Um-hum, sweetheart. And he'd be related to the kids *anyway* ... since his mother had another son as well. Ronnie's ... stepbrother back on Earth," she said haltingly. "That brother ... had a son with a white woman ... named Lane, and he became ... your great-grandfather Elijah. Elijah had a son with ... an Indian woman, and they ... named him Andrew. He was your ... Uncle *Wellford*'s father ... but Ronnie was *Walter's* father."

"I can't ... *believe* that ... Ronnie ... slept with ... Grandpa Andrew's ... *wife*."

"Well, sweetheart, Andrew ... *was* in his eighties ... by then, and ... your Grandmother was ... *still* ... very young," she said, but slowed her movements down so they could carry on their conversation more easily. "And you know how *nice* Ronnie can be," she teased him, while wiggling atop his groin just a tiny bit.

David lay there beneath her and considered that image.

"I saw a picture of them one time – an old tintype. Grandpa Andrew was *really* old and Cooing Dove was ... well, she looked no older than Amy or Shay."

He looked up at her worriedly, then forced his hands away from her grip, only to reach up and hug her to him.

"Diane ... you'd *tell* me ... Right? ... You'd *tell* me if you wanted to have kids with someone else, wouldn't you? I mean, *you* know, after I get old and gray and decrepit, and you're still young and pretty and – and ... *fertile*."

She sat upright and looked down at him.

“Whatever are you *talking* about, sweetie?”

He looked up at her with sadness in his eyes and sighed.

“You know. The *Healer* thing,” he said as if it explained everything. “You being a Healer, you’re never gonna have to *get* old, while I … I’m gonna be *long* gone.”

Diane looked down at him with astonishment, but then laughed and bent down to kiss him lovingly.

“Sweetie, Lili explained *everything* to me,” she said with a twinkle in her eyes. “We don’t *have* to grow old anymore – not if we don’t *want* to. Lili told me the *secret*,” she said in a whisper.

“What do we have to do?” he asked; now whispering himself.

“Just *this*,” she said with a big smile, before rapidly hunching up and down on him. As excited as she was, it didn’t take but a minute before she managed to push herself into a little climax.

“Ahhh! … that was *nice*,” she said with a silly grin, and leaned down to snuggle on top of him again, while still raising and lowering herself over his hardness, but at a much slower and more sensual pace.

“What? Just *this*? ”

“Yes Sir, Sheriff Lane. It’s your basic affirmation of life. It may vary among individuals, but the *more* you love, the longer you *live*. It makes sense, really. Ronnie is younger than Radatel, but he looks so much older ‘cause he spent twenty extra years out here all by himself with nobody to love.”

“But – but all those young looking … *old people*? They’re… They’re...”

“Yes, dear. They’re \*boinking\* *somebody* who cares about them as often as necessary to stay young and healthy.” She giggled, before adding, “And they don’t have to be ‘*in love*’ for it to work. It just needs the necessary level of ‘*caring*’ is how she explained it. That might explain why there are so many Healers, wouldn’t it?”

“So Ronnie had *all* of you trained to be Healers just so he could...”

She suddenly stopped, and sat straight up again.

“No, David. Not even *close*. Ronnie had us all trained to help save our *lives* – *all* our lives. You weren’t in there when Ronnie tested us that day back on the ship. Shay passed, but Amy and I didn’t … mostly because we didn’t *believe*,” she said, while remembering the horror and excitement of that moment. “Anyway, Ronnie made *true believers* out of

us then, and that's when Maya *really* started to teach us what a Healer did for a living. It's much more than just sex, David. *It's life itself!*"

He reached up to hug her and began kissing her, then finally clutched her tightly and rolled them over, which ended up with him on top.

"So all I have to do to stay young is *this?*" he asked, while starting to thrust into her deeply while speeding up.

"Oh *yes*, David! That's just what you have to *do!*" she said, then closed her eyes languidly. "And I just ... have ... to ... do ... *this!*" she added, then flashed just a tiny bit, which flipped several molecules within David's cellular structure and stopped several aging triggers.

"Whoa! What was *that*? That felt *great!*" he said, while speeding up even faster.

"*That ... that's ... oh, David!* ... *That's the other part of the secret!*" she shouted, just before clamping around him tightly once again.

The sudden tightness increased his sensitivity even more, which pushed him over the edge as well.

It would be just a little while longer before she could work on staving off his retirement for another few days or so. After the baby was born, they could both start working on *hers*.

### ***Midnight –I (Day 103) – Maya Wakes Up***

The Elder's new consultant was sitting with Maya, while the other Seniors relaxed for the evening...

She'd worked with Ai for the last two days while helping her resolve what she'd *thought* she'd known, with what she was finally discovering. It'd been both very hard and very awkward for the new Elder to try and separate, and yet merge the two situations. She thought Ai had managed very well, for the most part.

For Kita herself, the stress of the job had effectively left her. That alone probably helped almost as much to relieve her aches and pains as the milk from Maya, or the pills from Commander Woldron. She was even more relaxed than usual after Hifacius, perhaps having fond memories of a much older lady acquaintance, had finally talked her into sharing his bed for a few hours of pleasure earlier in the evening.

Thinking about that brought a smile to her lips, and she momentarily thought of simply quitting entirely and leaving with the doctor, but there were *far* too many issues left to deal with, and she knew that her place was here – right up until the end...

Maya stirred and stretched. Then she rolled over and looked at her. Her face frowned for a moment, before it brightened with a smile.

“Elder Kita? My Lady? Where is everyone?” she asked, then tried to sit up, but fumbled weakly.

“Don’t try to get up, child. Just lay there and we’ll talk for a while, if you like. It’s very late, Maya. You should be resting.”

“I do not feel...” she stopped to yawn and stretch, “...very tired. Oh ... I feel very *stiff*, though. Is my Healing all done now, my Elder?”

“Maya ... tell me what you remember about your shuttle accident,” Kita asked softly, while Maya looked at her in confusion.

“Elder? That happened *years* ago. My daughters and I were on a shuttle, and it was damaged. I was hurt, but everyone else was killed. My daughters ... they died as well. My Ronnie was on another ship. The crewmen saved me, and Ronnie watched over me while I got better. You already know this, my Elder.”

Maya looked down at herself, and again at her surroundings.

“My Elder, where am I? Where is my Ronnie?”

“It is late, Maya. You just stay right here and I will fetch Molara. She will sit with you for a while. Stay right here, Maya. I command it.”

“Yes, my Elder,” Maya said in confusion, but lay back down before Kita left the room.

Kita quickly knocked on both of the other doors of the suite, and the new Elder and her staff soon answered her summons.

“My Ladies, Maya is awake, but appears to have lost her memory of the Healing. She speaks of remembering the shuttle accident, but not of her experience among the Drecks. I - I can no longer see within. Please look within and see what has happened to the child.”

Molara rushed to sit with her niece, while Ai, Fan, and Xiu stole looks within Maya’s confused mind. It didn’t take long to determine that Maya’s mind had acted in self-defense this time, but leapt upon the false memory Ronnie had implanted in her that Kita had neglected to have them remove at the time of her Healing. Kita fell to her knees in sorrow when it was relayed to her and framed in those words.

“Gods forgive me once again. I’ve failed the Commonwealth, and now I’ve failed that poor *child*.”

Ai knelt down beside her and hugged her shoulders.

"No, Kita. We *all* failed her. *None* of us here should have missed that. That memory should have been removed as soon as we had what we needed from her, but we all forgot." As Ai helped her up, Fan brought up a new issue.

"The question now is, what is the kindest thing for the child? Do we block the false memory and risk having her lost in her terrors once again, or do we simply let her go on as she is and remove all memory of her time among the Dreck?"

"Yes, my Lady Ai," Xiu said. "If we remove the memory of the Dreck, then she will never be prey to its terrors. And if she is never aware that her memory was changed, her advancement and service as a Senior should not be shadowed by that terrible portion of her life."

Ai sat down to think it over. She closed her eyes and searched out the possible realities for a true path, but it seemed that even *more* variables were in the mix now. She opened her eyes and stood up.

"Kita, I would consult with you in my chambers. Fan, Xiu – arrange that Maya is not left alone. Specifically, she is *not* to leave these chambers," she ordered, before turning to her own room, with Kita following and closing the door behind them.

"Well," Xiu murmured, "we appear to have our orders." Fan nodded, before they both stepped in to visit with Maya.

### ***ES Orca, Getting Closer to Target Two***

The Senior held her ship stationary in space. It would normally be foolhardy to plant yourself within the boundaries of a transit node while remaining silent and invisible, but *realistically*, the odds at being missed entirely were greatly in their favor.

As they had an estimated two hours to kill, Déjà decided to play with Endo and Gallus for a bit in the hopes that all three of them could finish before Mommy flung them across to the next transit node. After all, a girl such as she didn't stay young with just *beauty* sleep.

From her position up forward, the Senior could vicariously feel a limited thread of Déjà's passions flow. She was torn between joining in or stoically waiting it out at the con to take her pleasure later – *after* the capture of target two. She tended to have a one-track mind about her job that, unfortunately, kept her from monitoring her apparent age on a regular basis. Yet *another* task to schedule in her line of work, it seemed.

At the approximate estimated time, the transport finally arrived and paused while their navigation system calculated the next leg of their journey. There were several lines out of this node, and she wanted to

see which direction they went. Depending on which line they took, she would modify her plans accordingly.

With sensors out to the fullest, she waited patiently until the target's ship jumped to the next transition node. As she'd suspected, it didn't match a line to the registered destination point. She had the new line, though, and extrapolated it out from here.

This promised to be even *more* entertaining than expected, and she started running calculations through the navigation system without consideration of whether or not Déjà and the boys had finished before triggering the jump.

### ***CS Microcosmus, Midnight –1 (Day 103) – Meela Worries***

"My Lady, you must try to *sleep*."

Meela rolled over to face him with her face damp from tears.

"Vitas, I am frightened. The testimony is in the morning, and I fear it will not go well."

"Meela ... Lord Calder will be found either guilty of special neglect, and you will be avenged upon him, or he will go free. There is nothing else to worry about," he assured her, then drew her close enough that he felt her shivers beneath his arms. "Do you wish contentment once again, my Lady?"

She looked into his eyes, smiled weakly, then kissed him gently.

"No, my brave Vitas. Just ... *please hold me, Vitas! Hold me and never let me go!*"

He snuggled her even closer while she tried to find comfort within his arms.

### ***Midnight (Day 104) – Seeing the Darkness***

"The paths are so *many ... much* more confusing than before. What is *happening*, Kita? What does it *mean*?"

Sitting by her side, Kita thought back to her moments of like confusion...

It had taken *years* of Healing and instruction by the Elder's Council of Cletus to restore her sanity. The constant chaos of visions running uncontrollably through her mind had finally been brought under control during the sixth year of their treatment, and with the approval of the Council, she'd finally ascended to the Elder's position.

Unfortunately, no one on the Council had ever experienced the Visions *themselves*, and they had only *hearsay* from the previous Elders to guide them. Kita had, through years and years of effort, developed a tentative technique of viewing the Visions, before attempting to utilize these tiny snippets of future possibilities to the Commonwealth's advantage. It had worked rather well ... up until the Dreck had become a problem...

"My Lady, the best I can tell you is that it means a change is nearly upon us. The future is in flux. It always is, but the paths we take can direct it somewhat. Unfortunately, I am a poor example of late," she pointed out wryly.

"But the paths are so *many*, and they are not clear to me. How do they get in such a way, Kita?"

"Truthfully, my Lady? I don't know. But I failed to look closely at things that were closest to me. I did not pay attention to simple details, nor remove problem pieces that are now much *larger* problems ... especially when the solution to the puzzle is supposed to be getting much clearer."

Kita held her frustration in check, but sympathized with Ai's situation. At least she'd been here to assure the new Elder that she'd not gone *mad*.

"For example, I knew the Emperor was failing to maintain his portion of our arrangement. I let him do as he pleased, because I was more interested in the paths of the *Drecks*, rather than seeing how our paths could be adjusted by monitoring and influencing the path of the *Emperor*. The result of that rests upon our ship even now."

Her expression indicated dismay at the end result of that pathway, before she turned to the next one.

"At our Rondal's birth, his path showed clear and straight for several years; yet I ignored the subsequent bends and twists that developed over time. I was looking at the *entire* puzzle, but not how the fit of a handful of pieces may affect the outcome so severely. As for now, there are only a few things we know about that may change the course of history. This business between Rondal and Maya is but one. Once we had her memories, I'd hoped the paths would become clearer, but you say they are worse. Other forces may be at work as well – most likely also close to us. That is my experience, my Lady."

"Rondal's transgressions! Were they not a *warning*, Kita? Should he not have been sanctioned *already*?"

"My Lady, as difficult as it is to believe, his transgressions *smoothed* his path, and the paths of those around him. It is almost as if they

were *supposed* to have happened. One could say it was a *necessary* part of his path – helping to forge him into the tool he could become. That would be *my* interpretation, my Lady.”

“So you let him *live*. What was the path if his piece had been removed?”

Kita remained silent for a long while before she spoke to her quietly.

“My Lady ... enter the Visions and concentrate on an existence *without* our Ronnie in it from this moment forward.”

The Elder looked at her sourly before closing her eyes. She waited ... and waited ... and the paths began to clear ... but then began to *disappear* one-by-one until they were nearly all gone ... except for the *one* path remaining...

“*By ... the ... Gods...*” she whispered fearfully.

### ***ES Orca, Vengeance***

Déjà glanced at the ships timer when she joined the Senior at the con. This would be close.

“How shall we play this, Mommy?”

The Senior had thought very hard about this next encounter. Their target was on a ship headed *outside* the Fringe and was about to cross the demarcation line. The ship wasn’t running particularly quietly, nor did it appear to be trying to sneak into enemy territory. Presumably, they were expected – and it would be a *shame* to disappoint them.

“Tell Gallus and Endo that Trux and Varx se Zarox will be making an appearance in thirty minutes!”

“Oh, *Mommy!* Will they be fully *dressed* for this?” she asked excitedly.

“Do not smell up my con with your *juices*, Déjà,” she said in mock irritation. “They will need only the armor and helmet of the picket guard. One will go aboard and inspect the ‘fresh meat.’ He will bring me back target two.”

She turned and grasped Déjà firmly between her legs, before pushing a flush of energetic excitement through her genitals. Déjà reached down with both hands and grasped her wrist; holding it tightly against her mound while the intimate embrace first excited her, and then pushed her to extreme heights of unresolved pleasure.

“*Oh ... Oh! Mommy!* Ahhhh ... Mommy ... you take unfair *advantage* of me yet again,” she said, then sighed while the sudden rush slowly

tapered off. "Will we have time for *your* pleasure, Mommy, or will you make me wait for you *again?*" she pouted, before leaning in and kissing her passionately.

The Senior relaxed and enjoyed the kiss for a moment, before reluctantly pushing her away.

"Time enough for play *after* we deliver our cargo, my eager girl!" she said, then swatted Déjà firmly on her butt. "Go tell the boys to get ready. A picket of the line will be making a routine boarding for inspection of contraband and spies. I trust they will find me something useful."

"I *obey*, Mommy!" Déjà said eagerly, then turned and nearly skipped back to the boy's compartment. The Senior watched her leave while shaking her head slowly.

'And THAT'S what comes of being raped by a Drecks?' she wondered silently before remembering that it was Déjà who did the raping in situations of like nature.

Sai Maya Kao Tal se Cletus turned back to her board and carefully checked their position once again. She wasn't Lili's sharpest field blade for nothing.

If the transport followed protocol – and this close to the border, it would be fatal *not* to – it should pop into this space within the next hour. They would make their move then, and if successful, they would deliver their cargo to Lady Lili way out in the middle of ...a *Death Void*.

That was a long hop – thirty-eight minutes or more – and she would skip outside the boundary until reaching the entry coordinates Lili had sent her.

"Who ever heard of a tunnel into a *Death Void*?" she muttered irritatedly.

Once dropping off the walking cargo, she should then have leave to pursue her personal goal of the last fifteen years – tracking down the Lordling who'd scrambled her daughter's brains, and then *killing him!*

"\*Vengeance pursues!\*" she muttered viciously in Drecks.

### ***Midnight +5 (Day 104) – New Arrivals***

Andy had been studiously waiting since being alerted by Lady Lili's personal assistant. Her guests should be arriving within the hour, and his instructions were to make sure they were received quickly, quietly, and sent *directly* to the additional suite of compartments just assigned to them in the Elder's corridor.

Above all, he was “*Not to wake Lord Caldar!*” – this being “*Strictly Elder’s business!*” he’d been instructed.

“*Microcosmus, this is Sectorus. Andy, you still awake over there?*” a voice said from the com.

“I’m right here, Jes … um, *Sectorus*. I thought I saw some movement on the far side of *Shining Light* just a minute ago. Is that Lady Lili’s guests?”

“*Right you are, Andy. We’re sending over her six, plus six more for security, and four more for transport detail,*” the *Sectorus’* night watch reported.

“Transport detail? The Lady has a lot of baggage?”

“*Ahh, the Senior Lady is bringing two walking cargo – only they aren’t currently walking.*”

“Oh… Understood, *Sectorus*. Anything else I should know?”

“*Yes. The Lady brings her personal assistant, and two personal …giants. And WHATEVER you do, don’t piss off the Lady. I understand she’s a lot like Lady Lili in that respect – only MORE so,*” he warned him.

“I, uhh … I believe I understand what you mean, Jes. Thanks for the warning. *Microcosmus out.*”

“*Sectorus out.*”

Andy sat in thought for a moment.

Lili’s guards would be escorting her guests to quarters, so all he had to do was make sure the doors opened, and the security systems worked as they were supposed to. Right now, those compartment doors were unlocked, and their door codes were flushed and ready to accept new ones. Lili’s guards would set up access for their guests locally.

He enabled security monitors along the corridors from the entryway, all the way through to the Elder’s new guest’s compartment, then waited for the procession to arrive. It wasn’t long in coming.

First, two guards, then a very young lady, and then a very stern-looking older lady walked into view. Two of the *hugest* men he’d ever seen followed them. They both must have been nearly *eight feet tall!* They were followed by two sets of stretcher-bearers with hooded walking cargo strapped to the stretchers.

From what Andy could see, those two weren’t going anywhere on their own. The rest of the guards fell in behind, with a few stewards

trailing along, until the last man of the guard turned and sent them away. Apparently, the relatively small bundles on the backs of the two giants were all the Senior Lady's party needed in personal effects.

He watched them pass through the corridors until they reached the suite of four rooms that shared a single entry chamber. As she passed by the last camera along the way, the Senior looked up and smiled grimly at it, followed by the very young lady who looked up and pursed her lips at it. His mind heard an echo of a chuckle, and he jerked back.

The pair of stretcher-bearers went in next, followed by the two giants. The last two guards took up positions on either side of the entry door. After a while, the four stretcher-bearers came back out with their stretchers and escorts, but no cargo.

He logged the activity in the platform's log before sitting back and wondering what was up this time. He got a clue thirty minutes later when Lady Lili escorted the Elder and three of her staff into the suite, followed shortly by the Senior Lady rushing out and being escorted back down the corridor to ...yes, from another camera she could be seen entering the Elder's compartment.

She'd looked up at that camera as well, and frowned. She also looked vaguely familiar somehow.

#### ***Midnight +5.6 (Day 104) – Mother and Child Reunited***

After she burst into her room, Molara had been barely able to keep Sai from grabbing her sleeping daughter and squeezing her to death. As it was, Maya only stirred uneasily before settling back down, while Molara pushed Sai from the room and into the outer chamber so they could talk.

Nearly an hour later, they'd still been talking, and somewhat more civilly than at their first meeting. After watching selected recordings of the testimony, Sai Tal had decided to grant Lord Calder a stay of execution for the time being – *subject to revision!* Without the Elder's intervention, it was the best offer Molara could wrest from her.

With the ground rules established, they finally went back in together. Sai sat in the seat nearest her daughter and held Maya's hand while looking her over. Extending into her, she danced lightly around her sleeping mind and looked over the area the Elder's staff had spent so many hours repairing.

In there she picked out the memories of her capture and subsequent rescue by the Calder creature ...from *Maya's* point of view. She could certainly understand Maya's reaction to seeing this "Ronnie" character after her Healing.

Maya had been out of her mind at the time, and it *did* look like he'd killed one of her daughters, although watching the video with her battle-honed eye, she'd seen the body go still and head slump in death just moments before he was actually in motion to save Maya. Of course, his subsequent rush to intervene between Gagsa and her daughter adequately proved his intent.

Seeing that once was enough, and she followed Maya's memory back to the time of the invitation letter, which confirmed in her mind that she'd picked up the proper targets. She did not envy target *two*'s interview with the Elder. Cleda Malia se Krux *ne Zarox* would probably not survive long after it.

She sighed and relaxed a bit before darting forward into Maya's more recent memories. What had this Calder person done to her daughter to keep her away from Cletus? Perhaps there was something *else* in there worthy of taking his head? She poked and prodded, but search as she might, there was just nothing in there that cried out for the taking of his life.

For the last fifteen years, he'd honored her, respected her, and treated her like the precious gift that she was; except for that early business about Yandi, and then later on during their transit out on the ship.

How horrible it must have been for her little Maya to hear him go on and on about Yandi and how he'd thought she'd come back to him in Maya. Did he *really* love Maya, or just the memory of *Yandi* that she provided him? Perhaps the Elder would let her have his head over *that*?

And he'd embarrassed her in front of her *students!* How *rude!* And then he'd gone out on a dangerous space walk to save them once again, and she's *still* in love with this – this *old man!*

She watched vicariously through scattered bits of vivid memories over the last month on the platform; Maya teaching, Maya talking, Maya loving. Even Maya interviewing this Laisee girl for a *Second Wife* position with her and her Ronnie?

She could *not!* Not *her* daughter ... married to this – this half-breed *Earthling*? With her eyes still closed, she didn't see Maya's face, but felt her hand tighten, and heard her voice.

"Aunt Molara? Mom ... Mommy? *MOMMY!*"

All other considerations vanished when mother and daughter embraced after nearly thirty years of separation.

### **Noon –5 (Day 104) – A Sudden Awakening**

Ronnie suddenly jerked awake before sitting up. He looked around, but saw and heard nothing to account for his rude awakening. Laissee stirred beside him, mumbling, “What is it, Rondal?”

“\*I felt a great disturbance in the *force*,\* young Healer,” he murmured mostly in English.

“Huh?”

“Nothing, Laissee. It ... it’s time to get up. Big day, today,” he muttered, before rolling out of bed and heading to the facilities.

Laissee rolled her neck and stretched, thus giving him a head start and allowing him plenty of time to warm up the toilet seat. She glanced at the compartment timer and sighed. Not enough time...

She’d spent the last few evenings with Ronnie while considering the conversation she’d had with Maya about becoming Second Wife – once Maya had been fully Healed and bonded with their Ronnie. She had warm memories of the meeting she’d had with Maya in the Recreation Center.

Maya had told her about her and Ronnie, and what her hopes and dreams were with him. Then she’d let her play with her as well. Those memories *alone* were enough to get her excitement going ... but then she heard the toilet flush...

With a great sigh, she got up and trotted to the toilet before it cooled down. It seemed chilly this morning.

Ronnie was still wondering what he’d felt that had woken him up, but Laissee had been asleep, and the Elder’s staff stood watch over Maya around the clock. He shrugged and let it pass, before turning on the water to let it warm the shower. After several seconds, he checked the faucet settings. It seemed like it was taking longer than usual...

If he’d been alerted to the early morning arrival of Lili’s guests, he might have associated it with the combined emphatic waves coming from Sai, Maya, and Molara during the emotional reunion of mother and daughter. However, at *that* particular moment, they would probably have been overwhelmed by the agonizingly panicked silent scream radiating from the mind of the Drecks agent when the Elder peeled open his mind for her and her staff’s edification ... if Lili hadn’t been blanketing his emanations so thoroughly, that is.

What had *actually* awoken him was the panic radiating from Andy’s mind when he’d noted one of the platform power indicators changing from green to amber, followed a little bit later by an associated beeping just before David entered the bridge.

### **Noon –4.9 (Day 104) – A Problem on the Bridge**

“When did this happen?” David asked him again, as he sat down at the con and started pulling up monitor screens and tracing power sources.

“Just about three seconds before you walked in... I swear to the Gods, Dad. How bad is it?” Andy asked anxiously.

Larl had followed David to talk with him about another matter, but caught that last comment from Andy just as he entered the bridge. David was still running through monitor screens and working his way down to their fuel resources, until he discovered what could be the problem.

“Well, either somebody left the shower running or we’ve got a leak in the main reaction mass tank – or it’s frozen solid,” he said, before bringing up the status screen for that particular sub-system. “Nope. The heater’s on and the temperature’s normal. It’s just ... *low*.” He sat there nodding, his head slowly. “Yeah. It’s low ... *really* low. It was low when we got here, but ... oh my...”

“What? What is it? Will it be all right?” Andy asked, but David’s face didn’t look all that positive at the moment.

“Well, when there was just the *eight* of us, we had enough fuel to last us for months ... probably a couple of *years* or more if we’d gone to emergency conservation like we did on the ship. *Now* ... with all the guests, staff, and all... The kitchen *alone* probably uses enough water every meal to keep the platform going for a *month*. With all the guests getting squeaky clean every morning, and flushing the toilets a couple hundred times a day... Man! We need to fuel up!”

“How? Where we gonna get water out *here*?” Andy asked plaintively. “How about *Sectorus*? They use water as fuel *too*, don’t they?”

“Like most military vessels, they probably go on water-hours right out of port,” Larl said, which confused Andy but got a nod from David.

“Water-hours?” Andy murmured.

“Yes,” David said. “They’d have limited space for luxuries, and most resources would be restricted to sustaining the ship in combat. Small ships back on Earth suffer the same indignity. Of course, they have evaporators and can *make* fresh water out of seawater. That’s *it!* We just need to find a planet with a water-based ocean and transfer ... if we had a *tanker*, that is. *Damn!*” David smacked the seat’s arms, before sitting back in frustration.

"Well, how about ice? You guys were planning to set us down on the ice pack and get more fuel, weren't you?" Andy reminded Larl.

"We go someplace that has ice, and ... oh," David said at a look from Larl. "We can't move this thing, and it can't land anywhere."

Andy glanced at the ships timer. "We'd better let Ronnie know."

"Yeah," Larl agreed, and David selected a direct com link to Ronnie's compartment.

"Ronnie, this is David, Larl, and Andy at the con. Please respond."

There was a short delay, before they heard his chattering voice.

*"Ronnie h-here ... j-just got out of the s-shower. Does it seem c-cold up there to y-you?"*

"Funny you should ask. We got a little problem with our fuel situation. You should probably come and take a look at it. Dress warmly."

"Aww, C-C-Crap! Ahh... I'll be r-right up!"

### ***In Sai's Compartment***

The initial interrogation Sai had conducted was *nothing* compared to what target one and target two were currently going through. They were both gagged, blindfolded, and restrained.

As the Ladies had planned, their initial interrogation was conducted by inference and subterfuge. They would orally comment about a situation, then read the surface impressions of the prisoners for their reaction. That way they only had to *suggest* a question or make a statement, and the silent reaction would deliver *volumes* of information they were then able to pick through.

The Drecks "Master Spy," as Lili had labeled target one, revealed a great deal about the *covert* interventions to thwart the goals of the Commonwealth starting some three centuries ago. Lili wished her little Kita were a Senior as well, instead of just being extremely talented. Then *she* would be the one taking notes on her data pad instead of her.

It was very fortunate that Sai and Molara were dealing with Maya at the moment. Surely this spy would be dead in mere seconds were they to learn what he'd been up to in the *recent* past. It was terribly unfortunate for *Meela*, however.

Personally, Lili didn't believe Meela was that smart. Perhaps her involvement was merely as an intermediary – passing along information and putting whispers into the appropriate ears. Lili had

extended her an open hand, but she'd been refused. That was a pity, given her recent apparent misgivings about her past. At least Laisee would not be splashed with the same blood as her mother. Meela had freed her of *that*; but as for *treason* ... treason has its *own* reward.

Target one's terror ramped up with every muttered word by his interrogators about target one's involvement with the plot against the Crown and Commonwealth, or rather, not *against* the Commonwealth – just the *Crown*. In truth, there *was* some cause for his involvement, and the Elder considered his potential usefulness in the future – should she decide to let him *live*. And wonder of wonders, that stupid one *still* did not know he was being fed credits and information from an agent of the *Drecks!* Xiu made additional notes to investigate target one's reactionary cell and see how far it went. She was *sure* they would have full cooperation – *provided*, of course, that he still lived.

Fan silently asked the Elder to pause for a moment and go back just a bit.

That business about Lord Gagsa was interesting. He'd fallen out of favor because of the disastrous dinner party broken up by Ronnie and his mercenaries so many years ago. The raid led by Sai and her pod of four tanks had never landed, but testimony by the surviving dinner guests refuted Gagsa's claims to the contrary and gotten him censured.

In essence, Lord Gagsa had been cashiered much like Ronnie had – except it had included his *entire family and household!* He'd effectively dropped out of sight, until that fateful attack on Earth a few months ago. Then he'd suddenly reappeared while claiming a minor triumph by accomplishing the death of Lord Calder.

However, that did *nothing* to mitigate the fact that he'd allowed three Commonwealth witches to reside *within* the Diplomatic Outpost, knowing full well they would then be free to weave spells that could bring down the *mightiest* of warriors.

Fan had to stifle a laugh. Drecks minds were as alien to them as those of a *worm*. They were much too different to read, and barely able to even *feel* unless a great deal of emotion was involved. She sighed wearily. If *only* it were that easy. This was all silent to the prisoners, of course, which kept them at a distinct disadvantage. She indicated that she was ready, and the peeling continued.

The Elder suppressed a killing rage when the agent revealed his part in the infiltration of *another* Commonwealth protectorate – *Earth*. Somehow, they'd gotten information that a portion of the Emperor's *family* was residing on Earth, and had gone searching for them.

It was common knowledge that Lord Caldorous was Ambassador to Earth, but ... no, it was *another* family member ... *Rondal* ... but they couldn't *find* him. They'd found his son, though, and managed to kill him alongside the road on a moonlit night.

How? *Meela!* ... Meela had overheard her servants talking about Lady Blossom mentioning that her Grandchild had been Healed by Rondal's Healer, and that he still lived near where she was born so many years ago. Meela had put it together, before foolishly passing it along. The Elder smiled, thinking she could give Rondal the satisfaction of *personally* carrying out whatever sentence she passed on Lady Meela se Loca ... *ne Zarox!*

So many *names* ... The Earth names and places she would have Lili send off to the acting Ambassador. They would either be picked up, or *eliminated* depending on Lili's wishes. Either way, they would be *silenced*. As for the *rest* ... they would be tracked down and dealt with – *one-by-one, if necessary*. If unredeemable, *they* would be eliminated as well!

The Elder suddenly became still after she'd momentarily shocked herself.

As most Senior of *all* the Healers, she knew this was *not* the Healers' way – but then thought of the gray fog she now chose to live within before considering the alternatives. The sudden memory of the paths disappearing broke her concentration, and she staggered for a moment before sitting down.

Everyone froze. Even the targets sensed a change in the atmosphere. In particular, Target two was terrified they were done with them.

"My Elder, are you not well?" Fan asked her.

Target two began shaking in his restraints, while Target one merely wetted the cloth covering his mid-section, so great was his terror now knowing that this interview was being conducted at the absolute *highest* level in the Commonwealth.

Ai closed her eyes and shook her head slowly, while trying to think of something useful to say.

"I do not care for the outcome of these proceedings," she lamented quietly. "*This* one follows the orders of its *masters*," she said while pointing to target two, "knowing nothing other than what it was taught since birth. It has been commended several times for the *excellence* of its plans and results. Indeed, were it one of *our* creatures, we would reward it in kind."

She pointed at target one and shook her head sadly.

*"That one, however, openly plots against* the Crown in a misguided effort to effect change within the Commonwealth. Indeed, it may even have been involved in the plot to *murder* Lady Sharla Peizhi se Loca so that her *daughter* could be convinced to take her place and be part of their conspiracy."

That unfortunate soul was *not*, in fact, cognizant of *that* bit of speculation until just now. He'd been told the *Royals* had killed Sharla Peizhi, and that he was merely to get Meela to take her place and be their contact from then on. If he'd had any more left in him, that wet spot would have gotten bigger.

"In truth... I would rather find some reason to keep all *three* of them alive and find them *useful* tasks within the Commonwealth," she said, before sighing loudly. "Alas, I do not see how that is currently *possible*."

Mistress Déjà was fairly bouncing on her toes, while her level of bloodthirstiness was rising rapidly. Before she could open her mouth to speak, Lili reached out and smacked the back of her head ...sending a tangible message for her to remain silent.

Déjà made a pouty face at Lili, but nodded her head in silent acceptance of her rebuke. Then she fluttered her eyelashes at her and grinned lasciviously, before slipping her tongue out and touching the bridge of her own nose with it. Lili merely rolled her eyes, before paying attention to the Elder once again.

During that pregnant pause, the room monitor pinged, before it began a low beeping. Lili strode over and read the display.

"What is it, my Lady?" Endo asked while drawing his ever present blade. Gallus quickly followed suit. "Are we under *attack*?"

Target two momentarily rejoiced ... but then remembered the *Drecks* protocol for captured prisoners when a station was under attack.

"It appears that Lord Caldar has put us under ... *water hours*?"

"Ay-yah! I was so looking forward to a hot shower with the boys for a change," Déjà whined but suddenly remembered not only where she was but *who* she was with. "*I beg your pardon, my Ladies!*" she said quickly then dropped to the floor with her head down.

The Elder rose silently and looked down at her.

"Lili? *This* is what the Dragon Lady chooses to consort with?" she asked somewhat dubiously.

Lili silently sought a private audience to confer with the Elder in flashing thoughts while trying to restrain her laughter.

"Yes, my Lady Elder," Lili sighed loudly. "But I understand that she no longer eats *living* flesh. The Dragon Lady broke her of that habit a while ago – or so I'm told."

Endo and Gallus had spent too many years with Sai not to pick up on a straight line like that, and Endo began his part as if on cue.

"The truth be known, my Ladies, we *did* catch her snacking on the last spy we caught. We *tried* to save him, but..."

"...once she took a bite out of the *heart*..." Gallus chimed in reluctantly, "...well, you *know* how hard they are to come by in transit."

Lili had to admit it – their deadpan deliveries were *perfect*, right down to the reluctant sighs at the end.

"Um, my – my *Ladies*," Déjà said in a loud whisper, "If ... ahh, if you should change your *minds* about them ... or even just *one* of them later on ... I - I just get so *hungry* at times."

Now *that* was over the top, but both targets were so terrified at this point that it wasn't noticed. The Elder looked around her, skimmed the surface of their prisoner's minds one more time, and nodded.

"Very well, then. Take *this* one and separate it from *that* one," she told Sai's staff. "And *one* of you stays with this child at all times. I will have more questions to ask later, and I want them *both* alive to answer them."

"Yes, my Lady Elder," Endo said before, easily picking up target one and carrying him out of the room, with Déjà following him and chatting away persistently.

"Just a *finger* ... or *two*," she pleaded. "Surely he can still talk missing just a *finger*."

"No. Besides, the toes are fatter."

"Oh, *really*? How about a couple of *toes* then?" she begged.

"No."

"No?"

"*No!*" he said firmly before shutting the door behind them and dropping his package on the transport platform.

Gallus made sure target two was still secure in his restraints, before leaving the room with the Ladies and closing the door behind him.

“Begging your pardon, my Ladies?” he asked quietly, his deep voice surprisingly soft and resonant.

“Yes, Gallus,” the Elder said.

“Um, my Lady... That wasn’t quite true about Mistress Déjà. It wasn’t a spy – it was a Drecks we’d come across that she hadn’t quite killed all the way. Of course, he was dead by the time she cut his heart out ... before she even took the first bite.”

The Elder froze, but Lili continued the conversation.

“I’m curious, Gallus. What *does* fresh Drecks taste like?”

“Not bad, actually. It’s not ‘gamey’ like a herbivore, my Lady. You’d probably like it better as a roast, though.”

Lili blinked, tilted her head a fraction, then nodded in agreement.

“No doubt, Gallus.” She smiled and reached up to pat his forearm – it being at just about eye-level for her. “Carry on here ... and keep an eye on Déjà lest she slip,” she said lightly while just managing to stifle her laughter.

“Will do, my Lady. The Gods’ grace on *all* of you,” he said, then bowed as they entered the corridor.

Xiu and Fan suppressed shudders, while the Elder was in a quandary.

“Lili ... no doubt there is an interesting story associated with Mistress Déjà?” she asked delicately, while they proceeded to the Elder’s compartment.

“Oh, it’s absolutely *fascinating*, my Elder. You simply *must* hear it from Lady Sai’s lips to receive the full impact of it. It is, you see, *her* story to tell.”

“Ahh ... noted.”

Just before they reached their destination, Ai wondered what *other* little tidbits of Kita’s memories were lurking about for her to ‘assimilate’. When they paused outside the door, she asked, “Would you care to visit with Lady Sai, Lili?”

Lili quickly probed, but felt the multiple conflicts within the Elder’s compartment, before sharing a little bit of them with the Elder, and her staff.

"As you see, my Elder ... my Ladies, this appears to be an *inauspicious* moment to reacquaint myself with the Dragon Lady in person. Perhaps in a *year* or two..."

They all chuckled at that, before parting company. Lili was escorted back to her compartment by her guard, who she noticed was dressed somewhat more warmly than before.

'Is it getting colder in here?' she wondered.

### **Noon -3 (Day 104) – Running Out of Fuel**

While not exactly sentient, the platform had other means to make its wishes known. In the case of inattentive con crews, and dwindling supplies, it knew – or at least its programmers knew – that turning down the heat was sure to pique *someone's* interest when fuel was running low.

"Well, that's it, then," Ronnie said. "We can maybe gather enough hose to route these two other reserve tanks to feed the main lines, but that won't help us out for more than a couple of weeks – or maybe *less*. It's my *own* damn fault for not physically checking the tank's integrity after things settled down. What we really *should* do is get rid of all these extra *bodies*."

"Don't think the Elder's gonna let us do that," Larl pointed out.

"Um, Ronnie... I thought the platform had a huge recycling system in it and we just, you know, kept reusing the same water – like on the ship?" Andy asked him, but got an amused smile in return.

"You remember when we had to flush the filters on the way out here? They were clogged from just a decade or so of being parked in a hanger. *This* thing has been sitting idle for the better part of a century and a half." He let out a sigh, and shook his head. "The recycling systems are just a *bit* out of maintenance. When it was just the eight of us, we were doing all right, but with all the extra *overhead*..."

Ronnie shrugged and shook his head again.

"I seriously doubt your stepfather will be staying without his staff, either," David contributed.

"Now *that's* a comforting thought," Ronnie grumbled. "If we knew how long we had to remain here... This could go on for *weeks* at this rate."

"What? Our supplies?" David asked.

"No! This silly *inquisition!*" he said in frustration, then sat back and rubbed his hands on his face.

"Hey, Ronnie ... just relax," David said calmly. "This isn't your fault. You didn't used to have to *worry* about this stuff. That's what *staff* is for. We should have been monitoring this from day *one* – day one when the *first* ship showed up, anyway."

"He's right, Ronnie," Larl added. "We've had so much shit thrown in our faces that ... well, some of the details were *bound* to be overlooked. When we got *this* far, we were so thankful at having reaction mass again that it pushed everything else out of our minds. Who would've thought your whole *family* would come calling? With *staff*. And the *Elder*. And even *this* isn't a total disaster ... not as long as we can leave in a week or so."

"Yes, but if the platform shuts down completely, then we'd need *depot* service to fire it up again."

"Well, unless we can find a supply of *fuel* ... if we had a *tanker*," David suggested. "Or a big chunk of *ice*. Maybe even some *real* staff who knew how all this stuff *really* worked," he added, pushing him a tiny bit, just as Larl had suggested.

Ronnie sat back and muttered aloud while thinking about it.

"Ice ... there's several systems just *sitting* there in jump range. One of them *must* have ice. Where would I find *staff*...?"

He suddenly sat upright, and opened the coms to *Sectorus*.

"*Sectorus*, this is *Microcosmus One*. Secure to *Sectorus One*, slightly below immediate," he teased.

Only moments later.

"*Microcosmus One*, this is *Sectorus One*, secure. What's up, Ronnie?"

"Captain Talon! My great true friend and stalwart companion! Follower of Commonwealth Naval procedures and protocols! How have your *system* surveys been proceeding?"

"Uhhh ... my – my surveys? Of the local systems? Ohh ... they've been proceeding ... normally. Why? Are you looking for something in particular?" he asked warily, although they could hear whispers in the background and a flurry of activity.

"Ahh ... about half a cubic kilometer of ice would do nicely. You catch anything out there in that spectrum with your sensors?" Ronnie asked.

"Damn!" Talon muttered quietly, but it was still transmitted clearly.

"What was that, Karl? Considering the joy of having Lord Caldarous' family and staff re-embarking for the *remainder* of your visit, perhaps?"

*"Caught me with my pants down, Ronnie. It was nice while it lasted."* They could clearly hear his loud sigh over the coms. *"We've been on water-hours since the week before we arrived. We have five of the six local suns surveyed, and two of them look to be in the approximate stage to support hydrogen and oxygen on their planets – if they have any. Their planets would likely have something like you're looking for. Want us to bring you back a couple of extra chunks?"*

"Wait a minute. You have the only effective meteor shield in the system, and you gotta stay here and guard the Royals. Just send me the coordinates, and I'll pop out and take a look. Should be easy enough to carve out a few chunks."

*"I don't suppose you'd care to share? At a nominal exchange rate, of course,"* Talon suggested.

Ronnie started to laugh, before saying, "Let's talk..."

### ***Noon –2 (Day 104) – Making a Decision***

The Elder was furious, but her consultant suggested that she take a moment in conference with her in her inner chamber. Once there, she was calmly advised to look and see if any paths stood out from another. Not surprisingly, Kita was right once again.

The paths seemed to be clearer, but the clearest ones of all seemed to involve Lady Sai Tal acting with Ronnie in some capacity. Following several of those paths down to their end showed many of them ending in the same darkness she'd previously seen – and some not. Eliminating Lady Tal from the equation brought back the overall darkness, only much earlier. She opened her eyes and looked at Kita longingly, but her consultant merely reached into her robes and held up her packet of pain pills, while shaking her head slowly.

"Tell me, Ai. Tell me what you see. Then let us look at it dispassionately, such that its secrets may be revealed."

"A thousand years, and you quote the basics to *me*?"

"The basics are where we *begin*, child ... and where we ultimately end. What did you see?" Kita pressed gently.

Ai took a breath, before relaxing and staring at the wall, then closed her eyes while beginning her recollection.

"I saw ... fewer paths than before. I saw several bright paths. The *brightest* paths showed Sai Tal's participation. Some of them ended in disaster. One or two of them ended well. I ... I removed Lady Tal from

the future and the paths all disappeared – leaving darkness the only path left.”

“Interesting,” Kita murmured, but said nothing more. She was proud of her protégé for having taken the extra step to eliminate the Tal variable.

“I believe Lady Tal is important to this immediate future for us. Her involvement is *necessary* … somehow,” Ai ventured while glancing at Kita obliquely.

“Interesting,” Kita allowed once again, before throwing her a line. Looking away, she said, “I wonder in what capacity Lady Tal *improves* our Ronnie’s longevity?”

Ai stifled a frustrated sigh, before closing her eyes again and studying those two prominent paths in more detail for several minutes. She finally sat up and nodded her head.

“I believe I shall advise Lady Tal that she would enjoy a sort trip with her prospective son-in-law while he searches for ice to feed his platform,” she said decisively, but bit the inside of her lip when she thought of the other scenarios involving the both of them together. “It is either that, or she will track him down and try to kill him – and either do so or lose her life in the effort. Either way, our Ronnie would fall, and along with him, the Commonwealth.”

“And such are the lessons the Visions give to us,” Kita said to her, before leaning forward and kissing Ai on her forehead.

#### ***CS Odontoceti, Noon (Day 104) – Goin’ Ice Minin’***

Overall, Ronnie thought he’d gotten the better part of the deal – right up until the *other* slipper dropped.

Talon would keep the platform secure with his meteor shield, while he took a few jaunts to hunt down some ice. In the meantime, Arden, Deltec, and Tannis were temporarily made part of his crew and would oversee the work to re-plumb the feed lines using additional engineers from *Sectorus*. They would be paid, of course, but out of the Kraken Collective’s accounts.

If he were successful in recovering ice, Talon would provide the additional manpower to break it into chunks small enough to be warmed and processed into fuel, and – once the platform’s tanks were full – *Sectorus* would have his tanks topped off as well.

The only tiny bit of *bad* news was that he’d have to take Maya’s *mother* with him. *That* order had come from the Elder through Lady Lili, and he wasn’t particularly happy about the prospect. He’d planned

on taking Andy and David with him; Andy to work on his navigation skills, and David on his piloting. Lili had squashed that as well. She'd said it'd be good for him to bond with his future mother-in-law.

Quite frankly, he was *terrified*...

He'd managed to dodge several direct meetings with her at the Fringe when she'd begun nosing around, looking for the "Madman." In the few years she and her crew had actually *served* with his loose squadron of raiders, they'd crossed paths only fleetingly, and only by audio communications and code. Hints of her connections to the Elder's staff were only *one* reason.

One of his own crewmen had *personal* reasons to avoid her. Four had been closed-mouth about it, and he *still* didn't know what it was all about, other than Four didn't sleep particularly well until they'd broken up the squadron after the treaty signing and everyone had finally gone their own separate ways.

He remembered Sai Tal, though. She was a skilled and dangerous pilot, and he'd been glad she was on *their* side and not the Dreck's. She'd had a few problems fitting in as a tank commander with one of his pods – *and* in following orders – but her contributions helped force the two opposing cultures to the bargaining table.

Larl was on his way with her right now, but maybe he'd get lucky and she'd fall out the port? That happy thought was trampled when he heard the lock cycle and the inner door opened...

"Hey, Ronnie! Brought you a co-pilot!" Larl called out cheerfully.

Ronnie looked back from the console and frowned at his crewmate. The lock cycled again, and out stepped a figure that filled a ship suit just like his Maya. He stood up and walked back while raising his hand with fingers spread. Lady Tal dropped her collar shield and approached somewhat stiffly, before stopping just within range to touch gloved fingertips with him.

"Welcome, Sai Maya Kao Tal se Cletus," he said in greeting. "I am pleased to have you aboard *CS Odontoceti*."

"My Lady Tal, may I present Lord Rondal Calder sai Caldorous se Earth ne Kantor," Larl said formally, and waited for her acknowledgement of his introduction. It seemed to drag on while she contemplated the old man standing before her.

"I find that I am to accompany you on your ice finding mission, Lord Caldar ... by order of the Elder," she finally said in a voice devoid of emotion.

“As my Lady Lili so orders me, Lady Tal,” he said politely.

Ronnie dropped his hand and then looked over her suit – and her *collar* in particular.

“We have Mark seventeen chargers aboard. I’m not familiar with the model you’re wearing. If you wish, you may use one of our suits from that cabinet,” he said, and pointed to the suit locker.

“My own suit should do nicely, Lord Caldar,” she said formally while standing there stiffly. The silence screamed wildly at all three of them.

“Uh, *here* Ronnie – coordinates for the two most likely sources,” Larl said, and handed over a data tab. “Good hunting,” he added, before cycling out the lock.

Ronnie turned back to Sai.

“How is our ... how is Maya? Does she still know you?”

She looked at him with dark clouds in her eyes.

“And why would a *daughter* forget the loving face of her *mother*?”

“Uhhh, right. She wouldn’t. She remembered Molara right away,” he said nervously, then looked away. “Forward cabin toilet to your rear ... that door on the right leads to the showers and rear cabins. We have four rooms; one double, two suites, plus one bunk room in the current configuration. We’re fully loaded, but all we have to eat is ships gruel and it’s ... relatively fresh.”

She looked around, but wasn’t very impressed.

“Very *opulent* for a Galaxy-class, my Lord,” she muttered derisively. “What are its armaments?”

“Armaments?” he asked lightly, before turning and heading to the console.

“Armaments ... those things you *point* at people and push a button to *kill them with!*” she said tersely, and followed it with a frown he didn’t see. “You do have *some* weapons aboard, don’t you?”

“Ahh ... no,” he said while still not facing her. “Well ... I *do* have a couple of power swords tucked away in the back – some place. Just souvenirs, of course,” he said appealingly, while pointing his thumb back over his shoulder in her general direction.

“You’re going out *ice mining*, and you have *no way* to harvest the ice, nor anyway to bring it *back*? Just how do you plan to *accomplish* all this, Lord Caldar?”

He turned and looked at her expressionlessly.

“Well ... that pretty much depends on what we find when we *get* there, doesn’t it?”

He turned to inslot the data tab, and loaded the navigational data into the system, before plopping into the right hand seat and bringing up the drives. He quickly ran through his checklist, then pulled up the com.

“Ronnie to platform.”

“*David here, Ronnie. You all set?*”

“\*Open the pod bay doors, please, HAL,\*” he said in English.

He missed the confused look on Sai’s face, but the speaker rippled with laughter as the doors opened in front of them and finally allowed a feeble bit of starlight to shine through. A straight path looked clear, but he still brought up his sensors and swept out at least a kilometer to make sure.

“Looks clear, David. Can I bring you back anything?”

“\*Well ... I want a hamburger – no, I want a CHEESEBURGER, some French fries for Amy, and a pony for Andrew,\*” David ordered in English.

Ronnie laughed loudly, before finally catching his voice.

“I – I’ll see what I can find,” he said with a low chuckle.

He raised the ship slightly and secured the landing struts, before continuing with a slow departure from the platform. They approached the meteor shield, but instead of slowing or calling *Sectorus* to drop it, he simply synced his shield to match it and wafted on through like it wasn’t there. Lady Tal entirely missed that nice bit of tradecraft, while she remained standing where he’d left her.

“See you on the way back. And ... we be gone. Ronnie out.”

“Platform out.”

He brought up the navigation chart on the front display, and looked at the two most probable areas, before refining the fractional jump numbers a tiny bit. Then he turned back to his reluctant co-pilot.

“You may join me at the console, Sai, or pick a seat back there.”

She bristled at his familiarity, but he’d already turned back to his displays.

"I will join you at the navigator's station, *Lord Caldar*," she said stiffly, and sat down next to him.

"Look, Sai ... *my* ship, *my* rules. My name is *Ronnie*. You wanna get formal, call me *Rondal*. In the *meantime*, strap in and pick a number between zero and three."

"Zero and three?" she asked, while fastening her belts snugly.

"No, *between* zero and three. Pick either one or two."

"One or—"

"One it is," he said, then transitioned them.

She'd barely caught her breath before he savagely swiveled the ship around and began running sensors out to the maximum. Once it settled down, he sat there quietly checking the sensor readings.

"What ... What are you *doing*?"

"I'm scanning for water sources in this system, Sai. We're supposed to be *ice* mining, remember? Gotta find water to find ice," he said, while continuing to monitor the sensor readings.

"But ... but ... where *are we*?"

"We're at the system you picked."

He almost turned to look at her, but kept his eyes locked to the screen instead. He suddenly smacked himself in the head, before programming in a trigger search and initiating it. Then he began unbuckling his belts.

"Well... Who knew ice mining was such thirsty work? Would you like something to drink? I'm getting a little hungry, too. I missed dinner."

He got up and walked back towards the kitchen, but stopped to rearrange the two rear seats on either side into dining seats. Once adjusted, he drew a portion of fresh gruel from the system.

After a careful sniff – thank the *Gods*, the girls remembered to purge all that nasty coconut flavor out of the system – he got a couple of cups and dug out a bottle of ambrosia.

"Sai ... you hungry?" he asked politely.

### ***CPS Microcosmus, Noon + 0.1 (Day 104) – Back on the Microcosmus***

"Are they safely away, Captain Talon?" Lili asked curiously.

*“My Lady ... they were away before we realized Lord Calder had snuck through our meteor shield. We saw him approach, and then he went right on through.”*

Lili nodded and stretched out her senses once again. She'd felt Sai and Ronnie close by, then felt Sai's sudden flash of anger before it went away.

*“My Lady ... they appear to be gone.”*

*“Very well, Captain. Please monitor those two stars and report any ... explosions ... or something.”*

*“As you command, my Lady. By your leave, my Lady. Sectorus out.”*

*‘Well, he’s either killed HER and we’re lost, or she’s killed HIM and we’re lost, or ... knowing Ronnie, he’s probably getting her drunk and talking her INTO it,’ she considered thoughtfully.*

She left the bridge while humming a cheery tune and hoping for the last.

### ***In the Elder’s Compartment***

“Aunt Molara, do you *really* think it was a good idea to send Mother out with Ronnie?” she asked once again. “You *know* how she gets sometimes.”

“Maya, your mother is a *professional*. If the Elder says, ‘Do NOT kill Lord Calder,’ I’m almost *certain* she’ll wait for permission.”

“But you *know* how Ronnie is!”

“Yes, child. I know *all* about our Ronnie. He should be just *fine*. After all, he sort of *grows* on you, like ... like a *fungus*.”

“Yes,” Maya agreed miserably, while Molara sat there nodding her head consolingly.

### ***In the Antechamber...***

Monitoring remotely, the Elder almost spit out her mouthful of ambrosia, but swallowed it with difficulty instead ...then promptly began choking on it.

Kita jumped up and took the cup from her hand, while Fan and Xiu held her bent over, and began pounding on her back.

### ***In Sai's Compartment***

Déjà was disturbed. Mommy had left, and it was unlike her to leave without taking them with her. She'd watched her dress and head out the door, and all she'd said was to be a good girl until she got back...

Déjà had watched on remote monitors when Mommy entered Lord Caldar's ship, and then when it rose and drifted out of the lock. She'd seen it shimmer slightly when it passed through *Sectorus'* meteor shield, before it just disappeared. For the time being, Déjà was stuck here on the platform.

True to the Elder's orders, neither Endo nor Gallus had left her alone for a *moment* – not that it really would have mattered, for she'd pretty much lost her taste for human flesh *years* ago. Still, having them sit inside the facilities with her while she was voiding her waste was a bit much. The boys didn't seem to mind, though...

She had a sudden thought, and leapt up to check the monitor for their compartment.

*Yes!* Their water allowance was coming up in a few *minutes!* Time for her and the boys to take that *shower!*

### ***CS Odontoceti, Noon +2 (Day 104) – Looking for Water***

Ronnie was working on the search problem remotely while sitting at the dining tables he'd set up earlier. That was *after* Sai had gotten over her initial flush of anger at his surprise transition without warning.

She'd accepted a cup of ambrosia and tossed it back, before holding it out for another ... one of *several...*

This system had five planets, and three of them had water – or something *like* water.

The first one was just too damn close to the primary. What little water it had was held in vapor. The second was a little further out and had actual oceans, or at least small seas. No ice packs, though. He was running some calculations based on its orbital plane, orbit eccentricity, and axial tilt, while Sai was standing nearby and watching somewhat unsteadily over his shoulder.

"What in the *hell* are you doing now?" she grumbled.

"I'm trying to determine the likelihood of finding ice down there, and – ah-ha!"

He sat up quickly and almost knocked her down. Since she was still standing, he turned back to point at his data pad.

"Ice is possible – in about another three billion years. Hey Sai ... you'd better sit down," he said, and patted the seat next to him.

"Not on your *LIFE*, Rondal! I've heard *ALL ABOUT YOU!*"

"Aww ... *Sai*. You can't believe *everything* you've heard about me. I've never even *met* you before! Come on. Sit down before you *fall* down," he insisted, so she finally sat next to him, before leaning into him heavily.

"By the *Gods*, you're old. What the *hell* does my daughter *see* in you, anyway? And you're *fat*, too!" she said while poking him in the belly.

This just tickled him to no end. He sat there, jiggling in his seat while suppressing his joy at discovering the hidden *human* side of Senior Sai Tal. It wasn't that Lady Tal couldn't hold her liquor – Gods' own truth he'd heard reports she could drink with the best of them – but Ronnie's stash of ambrosia had been sitting undisturbed for the better part of nearly two *centuries*. It was a *sippin'* liquor, not a *sluggin'* liquor.

"So – no ice. What about the *next one?*" she asked.

"Now wait ... this isn't a *total* loss. At least it's *got* water."

"Yeah, but you can't get it back to the platform," she argued.

"Oh, I can think of a couple of ways," he mused, while looking off in the distance.

"Yeah? Name *one!*"

"Well ... we *could* borrow the Elder's ship and open all the outer hatches, dip it into the sea until it filled up, and then fly it back heavy..."

She sat there and stared at him for several seconds, until bursting into a fit of giggles. This eventually transformed into laughter, which finally degraded into belly laughs. Somehow, she ended up with her head lying across his lap, facing up, with bleary-eyes staring up at him, and a silly grin on her face. She blinked her eyes slowly, before taking a breath and letting it out noisily.

"You know what, Rondal? At first I thought you were a *weakling*. Then Molara told me *you* were the one brought my baby girl back, and I just – I just don't see the same man I'm laying on here ... going 'ice mining' with."

She stopped to giggle, while he ran his fingers through her hair and smiled down at her.

“And now?”

“Well, I thought—” She stopped to yawn, then stretched in the process ... losing whatever she’d been about to say. “But now ... now I think ... you’re just a mad man,” she murmured softly, before falling asleep on his lap.

He sat there quietly while stroking her slightly graying hair. Her closing comment brought a memory to his mind, and he shook his head a tiny bit.

“Well ... that’s what they *used* to call me,” he murmured.

He started to move her, but then thought better of it and simply held her there while he took readings on the third planet.

#### ***CPS Microcosmus, Noon +4 (Day 104) – Messages from Space***

“Your pardon, my Lady,” Kita said. “Message from Lord Caldar, relayed by Captain Talon.”

“Secure message, Kita?”

“No, my Lady, but Karl – *Captain* Talon says only a few have knowledge of its contents, and they will remain silent,” she said while kicking herself mentally.

“And how is ... *Karl* this day, Kita?” Lili’s smile brought a blush to her assistant’s cheeks.

“He is *well*, my Lady.”

“Good. Please read me the message, Kita.”

“Ahh ... yes, my Lady. Message reads, ‘First system found with five planets; three with water traces; one with liquid, but no ice on any of them. Could recover sufficient water if Elder would consent the loan of her ship for a week or so. Getting along good with Lady Tal. She’s taking a nap right now. I’ll call you later. Probably tomorrow. Rondal Caldar sai Caldarous se...’”

“That will be fine, Kita.” Lili said with a giggle. “Taking a nap? Or sleeping it off, one is hopeful. Gods, I hope he didn’t *hit* her.”

“Oh, *no*, my Lady. Our Ronnie wouldn’t do *that*, would he?”

Lili didn’t quite flinch at that. Considering how well Karl liked his former Captain, and how much time Kita had spent with him on the trip out here, she shouldn’t have been surprised, though.

“Kita, what is the status of our pending projects?” she asked, and listened to the latest run down.

“Very well, Kita. It is already plus four, and I do not foresee any need for your services before noon minus four tomorrow.”

“I – *thank* you, my Lady. By your leave, my Lady,” she said with a big smile, and turned to leave.

“Oh, Kita? Bring your *own* toothbrush. I understand they sometimes have to scrub the floors with *theirs*.” Lili teased her.

“I obey, my Lady!” Kita laughed, before ducking into her own room to pack a few things.

*‘Ahh, it was too good to last anyway. I wonder if Laisee still has her heart set on being with Maya and Ronnie?’* she thought wistfully, before opening the latest reports for reading.

### ***Midnight –5 (Day 104) – Going for a Walk***

“Please, Aunt Molara … I need to *change!*” Maya insisted, while she continued walking down the corridor to her and Ronnie’s compartment.

“We could have gotten Shay or Amy to bring clothing to you. You’ve been off your feet for several days now, and you’re still weak, my girl.”

“All the *more* reason for me to be walking around, Aunt Molara.”

She got as far as Shay and Andy’s door, before stopping and knocking on it by herself; bypassing the guards stationed outside.

“Why are you stopping, Maya? Your room is—”

“First you want me to stop, and when I do, all you do is *complain* about—”

“*Maya!*” Shay cried, with Laisee moving up right behind her.

“Hello Shay, I have come to feed you,” Maya said, while still slightly out of breath. “Hello Laisee.”

“Girls, Maya needs to lie down, please,” Molara suggested.

“Yes, my Lady,” Laisee said. “Come with us, Maya. Come lie down.”

They all gathered around her and kept her from falling, while guiding her to the bed and getting her horizontal. Once she was down, she greeted everyone properly, before presenting her aunt.

“Everyone, this is my Aunt Molara … *Lady* Molara of the staff of the Elder,” she said proudly, but then remembered. “Oh, but you already know that. It has been only a few days, and I am still a little confused.”

"That is all right, Maya," Shay said. "We're just glad to see you up and around again. Just do not over-extend yourself, all right?"

"Yes, Maya. You must take care of yourself so you can continue to teach us," Laisee said.

"What have all you been doing since I have not been ... available?"

They looked at each other, but Laisee spoke first.

"Lady Lili sends us to learn with Mei-Mei and Yin-Yin at the noon hour. We study with them for two hours, and then practice for two hours until Amy has to go on watch."

Maya nodded agreeably, before turning to Shay.

"Shay, where is your Andrew?" she asked her.

"He is with Larl, Teacher. There is something going on with the platform power. Ronnie has hired his friends to work for him and repair the platform while he is out hunting for more fuel—"

She stopped, not knowing if Maya knew he was gone or not.

"Ah! *That* is my Ronnie! Even now, he searches for ice with my Mother. I hope they do not *kill* each other," she said lightly.

Everyone became silent, before Molara laughed heartily.

"I'm told by competent sources the odds are highly in favor of Ronnie. The Elder *herself* sent them off together, and I'd wager he's either going to get her drunk, or seduce her – *or both!*"

That got them all laughing, and it warmed Molara greatly to see her niece smiling again.

"Laisee, have you been taking good care of our Ronnie?" Maya asked her after things settled down.

"Ee – y-yes. I have tried very hard to be pleasing to him, Maya," she said tactfully, but Maya merely smiled at her, so she continued. "Lady Lili has had me and Diane – well, mostly Diane, working on Ronnie for the last several evenings starting at the bottom hour for two hours. He has had no *real* training, so she takes apart his Healings and makes him put them back together *properly*."

"Oh, and many of them are so very *old*." Maya sighed sadly, while shaking her head. "Was it very *bad* for him?"

"Did you know that he broke his *foot*?" Laisee asked. At the negative shake of Maya's head, she continued. "Well, neither did *Ronnie*, but Lili took it apart several times until he put it back together the *right* way.

She had Diane sitting on top of him and holding him down until he did it *right!*" she exclaimed which brought another round of titters from the girls.

Maya looked up at her students ... her *friends* ... and her heart felt very light and cheerful. She reached out her arms, and they both came to her and lay with her – one on either side. She sighed in contentment at being with one of her closest friends once again, and with her *new friend* ... and possible *co-wife*.

Molara found a comfortable chair and settled in to let the girls talk. She kept a tentative probe going just to monitor things, though, and updated the Elder of their current location. So far, she was good with it.

"Oh Shay, I almost forgot. You must *feed* from me," Maya said, and pulled open the top of her jumpsuit to expose her breasts. She reached her hand out and guided Shay's head towards her nipple, then began stroking her hair after she latched on.

"Umm, that feels *very* good, Shay. I am very *full*," she murmured, before turning to Laisee. "So Laisee ... has our Ronnie shared the Gift of the First Wife with *you*, as yet?"

"Umm ... no, Maya. Not yet. Lady Lili directed me to share the night with Ronnie, but he was ordered *not* to use the Gift on me."

"I wonder why she would refuse him to grant the Gift to *you*?" Maya wondered aloud.

"I think I know why," Molara said. "As yet, Ronnie is still learning control. When he shared the Gift with me, he shared it with *all* the Seniors on the platform. I'm told that even Lady Trenka on the *Elder's* ship felt its effects. It even disturbed *your* sleep, Maya," she added with a smile.

"Really?" she asked, while running her hands idly through both Shay's and Laisee's hair now.

"Oh, yes. The Elder *herself* lay beside you and saw to your contentment until you fell asleep. Then she had to rush to join Lady Xiu and Lady Fan, because our Ronnie was still not done with *me*." Molara smiled warmly in memory of that evening.

Maya's grip on Shay's head became a little firmer and held her tighter to her breast. She was also exerting gentle pressure on Laisee while slowly directing her lips down to her other nipple. She was finally rewarded when Laisee latched on and began nursing as well.

“Umm,” she moaned after both Laisee and Shay reached up and began gently massaging her breasts.

Molara could feel Maya’s desire becoming prominent, but waited for a moment to see if she would ask. Maya stared into her eyes and finally gave in.

“Aunt Molara, it seems that … my need is … great upon me,” she said with tiny breaths. “Would you … please help me … achieve my contentment?”

“I will do my very best,” Molara said quietly.

She stood and dropped her robes before joining them at the bed and removing the remainder of Maya’s jumpsuit from her. She gently separated her thighs before crawling up between them to begin the gentle strokes that would bring her up and over just as many times as she wished.

#### ***Midnight –4 (Day 104) – Andy Meets More Aliens***

Andy arrived at his compartment, counted the number of guards, then wisely turned around and headed back to the commons to grab a bite to eat. Afterwards, he thought to go to the Recreation Center and see what offerings were there that he hadn’t already discovered. He only had four hours to kill before his watch, anyway.

Once he got there, he found no one inside. That meant he could watch whatever he wanted.

He pulled up a selection from one of the monitors and started browsing the list of titles that were available. Lots of them weren’t familiar, but he knew several of them by heart. There were lots of animated movies, as well as some of the older classic movies he knew his Mom and Dad liked to watch.

One of them caught his eye – “*The Crimson Pirate*.” He smiled and selected it, before discovering it had subtitles added to it in a variety of languages – one of which included Commonwealth Standard.

Just for fun, he started it with Standard subtitles, but English language audio. He *almost* settled in to enjoy the film, but remembered to call the bridge and let them know where he was. The *last* time he’d tried to watch this movie, he’d fallen asleep.

He was ten minutes into the film and thinking it would be nice to have some popcorn, when the young girl who’d arrived last night came in, trailed by one of the giants.

“Program-Pause,” he said, then got up to greet them.

“Andrew Walter Lane se Earth,” he said, while holding up his hand with his fingers spread wide.

Déjà approached, raised her hand, spread her fingers, and delicately touched his.

“Mistress Déjà ne Sai Maya Kao Tal se Cletus.”

The giant approached and held his hand up – or *down* in this case – and Andy touched fingers with him and introduced himself again.

“Endo ne Sai Maya Kao Tal se Cletus,” Endo said in a deep, bass voice.

Andy smiled openly, while processing the naming sequence.

“So ... you’ve both sworn your loyalty directly to ... our Maya’s *mother*? I didn’t know you could *do* that!”

Déjà smiled at his naivety, but she’d been told to be a “good girl”, so she decided to see how this encounter went.

“You are ... very *young*, aren’t you?” she asked softly, before sitting down close to where he’d been sitting.

“Yes. Fourteen Earth years ... but I’ve been among new Healers, and they’ve accidentally aged me. Lady Lili said I’m around sixteen or seventeen now – Standard,” he explained, before sitting back down.

“What do you do here?” she asked politely.

“Oh, I’m a Spacer Third. I’m part of Lord Caldar’s crew, along with my sister, my mom and dad, my girl, and Captain Riker. And *Maya*, of course. And Mistress Laisee Peizhi. Lady Lili just assigned her to our crew for training, but mostly to get her away from her mother, I think.”

“Peizhi? That would be Lady Sharla Meili Peizhi se *Loca*?” she asked sweetly.

“Yep,” he said, and nodded his head. “That would be her. She first got here; she was out of her *mind*. She used to abuse Laisee a lot – take advantage of her selfishly, I mean. Well, she even *hit* her a couple of times, and that’s when Grandpa and the rest of us got involved and offered Laisee a spot on our crew.”

She gave him a funny look.

“Oh, Ronnie’s ... Lord Caldar ... he’s not *really* my Grandfather. He just seems like one to us. Me and Amy got comfortable calling him that. Amy’s my sister. So, I got about four hours left before I go on watch at the con. You guys are welcome to watch this movie with me, or select something else from the monitor. I’m just killing time here. If

you guys wanna play, there's controls to setup seats and platforms to get comfortable on. There's even a drawer full of toys to play with if you'd like."

Déjà was amused at openness of this very young human. She was tempted to suggest something more interesting, but Endo beat her to it.

"What are you watching," he asked curiously, while staring at the frozen image of a sailing galleon on a bright, blue sea.

Andy glanced at the screen, and tried to explain it to him.

"Well, it's an Earth movie about a pirate. It's sort of an action movie that's also a comedy. It has subtitles in Standard. I turned those on just to see how well the translation between \*English\* and Standard is. We're still picking through differences between the two languages. Most of us have only been speaking it for a couple of months."

"Do you *still* have pirates on Earth?" Déjà asked.

"Well, not *these* kinds of pirates. This is called a \*period-piece,\*" he explained poorly. "I think this one takes place about two or three hundred years ago. Supposedly."

Déjà and Endo looked at each other, and it was Déjà who spoke this time.

"I believe I would like to watch this \*period-piece\* with you," she said, and Endo nodded.

"Great, pull up a seat ... I mean, please find some place comfortable to sit. It's that whole language adaptation thing," he said in a loud whisper that got him a smile from Déjà.

He showed them the seating controls and managed to arrange comfortable seating for Endo, while Déjà indicated she would share the same seat with him.

After they got settled, he called out, "Program-Reset, Program-Begin," and the copyright credits rolled again, before the opening lines of the title started scrolling up the wall display.

### ***CS Odontoceti, Midnight –4 (Day 104) – Putting Sai Away***

The sensor readings for the third water-bearing planet looked promising. He decided to take a closer look, but was hampered by Sai, who was still resting in his lap.

He thought for a second, before accessing the console remotely to set the internal gravity down to ten percent. That made it much easier

for him to maneuver, and he was able to slide out from under her without waking her up.

Strike that – in her current condition, he could drive through a small *moon* and it wouldn’t wake her up. Shaking his head at the thought, he hefted the now much lighter body of his sweetheart’s mother over his shoulder and looked around for a place to stash her. He had a sudden evil thought and – nodding his head *gleefully* – carried her back to his cabin, where he stripped her down and stuffed her under the blankets on his bed, before webbing her in place.

Catching a whiff of her suit, he tossed it on the bed and then peeled out of his own suit. He pulled both collars and compared them, before finally determining they should be a match and fit his chargers.

After setting them aside, he bundled the suits together and turned to leave, but stopped and pulled out Maya’s spare jumpsuit and left it sitting neatly at the edge of the bed. He paused, then pulled out a couple of towels and left them alongside as well.

Heading out in his underwear, he stuffed the suits into the wash and grabbed the collars before wandering forward to top them off. Then he sat down at the con to make his approach to the third planet.

He knew there was water in there *somewhere*; it was just a matter of *finding* it.

### ***CPS Microcosmus, Midnight –1 (Day 104) – Finding Andy***

The closing credits had just finished when Shay found Andy in the Recreation Center, with a young pretty girl sitting on one side of him, and a giant sitting nearby on another seat. She smiled and went to greet them.

“Hello! I am Shay Daishi se Wilder, Healer-in-Training,” she said, then held up her hand with spread fingers. “And I see you have found my lost *Andy!*”

They quickly went through the greeting ceremony and became acquainted formally, before Shay directed her attention back to Andy again.

“My *Andy*, we did not hear you at the door. Did you not wish to come in and *join us?*”

“Uh-uh. I saw Lady Molara’s guard outside the door, and thought I’d better stay out of range. Is everything okay?”

“Oh, but my *Andy!* You missed seeing *Maya!* She is walking around now, and she seems so much *happier!*”

"Wow! I guess I should have stopped in then. How is she? Is she, you know, *okay* now?"

Shay looked at him, but darted her eyes sideways for a moment, before she spoke.

"She is still very tired, my Andy, and she will be staying with the Elder for a little while longer. She came with Lady Molara to get some clean clothes, and they stopped to see us. Amy already went on watch, so she missed her. Did you remember to *eat*, my Andy?"

Andy just laughed.

"I'm not always thinking with my stomach, unlike *some* young Healers I know," he teased her while patting the obvious bulge over her midsection, but quickly drew back his hand, before reaching out to touch her again.

"He *kicked* me! My little brother *kicked* me! Does Mom know?"

"No. He has never done *that* before! We must go tell Lady Diane and Lord David! Right away!"

Andy reached out and hugged her, but pushed her away a bit after glancing up at the ships timer.

"Tell you what. You go tell Mom and Dad, and I'll go on watch," he said, but noticed the strange expression on Déjà's face.

"Déjà? Is something wrong?"

Déjà had avoided looking at Shay's prominent belly since the moment she'd entered the room, but the conversation about a "little brother" kicking inside her had drawn her attention, and she was now focused on Shay's stomach. Her hand reached out a bit and hesitated, before she quickly drew it back.

"It is all right, Déjà," Shay said softly. "Come ... you may feel my baby kick if you wish," she offered, and held out her hand.

Déjà put her hand in Shay's and let her draw it close to rest it on her tummy. In just a few moments, the baby kicked again, and Shay smiled.

"He seems to be a *strong* little baby, this new son of my Lord David," she said quietly.

Déjà produced a quivery smile, before breaking down in tears. These were followed by sobs when she turned to hug Endo fiercely. He held up one hand to show that he had her, before escorting her from the

room. They could hear her cries in the hallway just before the door closed.

Andy was very confused. "What was *that* all about?" he muttered, but Shay already knew – yet another gift of the Healers.

"Oh, poor Déjà. My Andy ... Déjà cannot *have* a child of her own."

He'd watched them arrive the night before, and had an idea of what they did for a living.

"She ships with Endo and Gallus ... *and* Lady Sai Tal. Besides, she shouldn't be *having* kids if she's working for the Elder."

"My Andy, she is *beyond* her child-bearing years. She will have no children of her own," she said, and hugged him tightly.

After he shut down the Recreation Center, she walked with him to the bridge and stayed for the first two hours of his watch, before heading back to rest.

#### ***CS Odontoceti, Midnight +5 (Day 105) – Sai Wakes Up***

Quickly and silently, Sai woke up in a room shadowed in dimmed lighting. She opened her eyes just a tiny bit, but saw nothing out of the ordinary. Extending herself, she expanded her senses until she detected the slight enjoyment of someone ... someone taking a shower and ... and *whistling*?

She tried to sit up, but was restrained. Instead of struggling, she felt around and realized she was underneath a blanket held down by zero-gee webbing. She slid her arms up from under the blanket and got them free, before cautiously reaching out and around herself to find a knob just above and behind her head.

At a twist, the lights in the room brightened.

Now that there was enough light to see by, she found the webbing release and got herself loose. When she sat up, the first thing she noticed was that she was *naked*.

"Oh, no ... I *didn't*..."

#### ***In the Facilities...***

Gaily whistling away in the shower, Ronnie smiled when he felt the momentary panic from his co-pilot. Nothing like waking up *naked* in a man's bed to put a woman at a disadvantage ... especially if she remembers *nothing* about the night before.

### ***In the Master's Cabin***

Sai reached down between her legs and felt herself, inside and out. Nothing gooey or messy, but still kind of smelly just the same. She *might* have... After searching in a minor panic, she couldn't find her ship suit anywhere, just a neatly folded jumpsuit and a couple of towels. The situation – and the image it presented – finally caused her eyes to roll.

Definitely not a prude, but still utterly embarrassed by her obvious lack of control last night, she grabbed the towels and made her way to the facilities, where she slid open the door to a steam-filled room. Looking closely, she could see his outline in the shower curtain – a relatively *big* shower for such a tiny ship – then located the toilets. Figuring to make herself just a *little* bit more comfortable, she sat down on one of them and relieved herself of her fluid build up from last night; finding that she currently had nothing else to offer that orifice at the moment. Apparently, she'd passed on eating and stuck with *drinking* last night.

Steeling her nerves, she hung her towels and approached the running shower, while hoping to startle this rude character. When she opened the curtain, he quickly turned and greeted her warmly.

“Ah! Good *morning*, my Lady Tal!” he greeted her happily, then drew her into a wet embrace. “Oh, I *do* hope you slept as well as I did last night! I feel *great* this morning! *Come on in!* The water is *hot*, and it’s just the *two of us!*”

When he tugged her under the flowing water, he could see her eyes averting from his. She sputtered a bit until she got her head out from under the faucet, but then she was faced with him lathering her all over with soap. She quickly turned away from him, so he began lathering her hair, before working it in briskly.

“My Lady ... last night I saw a side of you that, well, I dare say, *no one* has seen in a long time. You know, Sai, your daughter is wonderful, but *last night...* Ahh, Sai – last night you were *magnificent!*”

He added a little more soap to her back, before pulling her under the showerhead to rinse her off. She sputtered a bit more and escaped his arms, only to cower in the corner of the shower with her hands raised defensively. Even with her eyes zeroed in above his shoulder line, she could barely see him for the foggy steam.

He simply turned around, applied soap to his head, and continued whistling “\*Singing in the Rain\*” while scrubbing his hair. As he rinsed himself off, he began talking again, while letting the water bubble over his lips.

"You know, Sai, I never ... ever ... thought I'd see anyone do it – but you did! You tossed back *four full cups of aged-ambrosia* and remained standing for ... oh, *quite a while* – right up until you *fell into my arms*," he said with a bubbly sigh.

She flinched and turned pale before sadly dropping her head to her chest and letting out a deep sigh. She turned away from him to gather her dignity before rinsing herself while facing the corner of the shower. As she did so, Ronnie waited for her to finish before turning off the water. Then, without protest, he drew her into his arms, with her back to his front and his arms around her waist, while the warmth of the fog surrounded them both.

"Ah, Sai ... you were just *marvelous!* Right up until you started *drooling* in my lap. Then I decided that – as *comfortable* as I felt with you keeping me company – we'd *both* be better off with you back in my *bed*," he said silkily, then gave her a tiny squeeze.

Letting her go, he turned his back on her and stepped out of the shower before blindly handing her a towel and grabbing his own. She stepped out and moved carefully in the small space while avoiding looking at his nakedness as he was wiping himself down. With her back still turned to him, she began drying herself as well.

Just before she was going to reach for it, he grabbed her second towel, turned, and began drying her hair. She continued to face away from him while he deftly worked her hair to capture most of the moisture.

"You know, when I was in service, I kept my hair short. After I was cashiered, I kinda let it go long. It's much easier to wash when it's short, so I cut it one time, but Maya got mad at me. Apparently, she *likes* me with longer hair." He continued for a few more moments before handing her the towel.

"If you need more towels, there's more in my room – *your* room, now. I popped your suit in the wash with mine; it was getting a bit ripe. It's hung up in one of the lockers in *your* room. Your collar is in one of the suit locker chargers up front..." he paused while yawning mightily and covering his mouth with the back of his hand. "Oh ... sorry ... long night," he said sheepishly, but yawned again while turning away in the still foggy room.

She stared listlessly at the empty shower stall – still wondering how big a fool she'd made of herself last night.

"Lord Calder ... Rondal ... last night ... we didn't..."

"My Lady Tal, a gentleman never tells ... and a gentleman *never* takes advantage," he said quietly, before stepping back, resting his

hands on her shoulders, and feeling her flinch slightly. "However, as the Mother of my beloved Maya, should you desire contentment, then I am at your service," he added, then kissed the back of her head lightly before turning to leave the room; the steamy fog swirling in his passage.

She turned slightly and caught a quick glance of him; finally noticing something in the thinning atmosphere when she stopped avoiding the sight of his nakedness.

There was something horribly *wrong* with his upper body; something *distorted*.

#### ***CPS Microcosmus, Noon –5 (Day 105) – Out Taking a Walk***

Maya had awoken early and found she'd been left alone. She didn't feel like lying around any longer, so she got up, got dressed, and decided to take another walk. Leaving the bedchamber, she discovered the outer chamber was also unoccupied, so she simply walked out the door. Her guard greeted her warmly and asked about her wellness. As he'd had no instructions to the contrary, after her brief assurances that she was feeling much better, he walked her back to her regular accommodations.

Upon entering the compartment she and Ronnie shared, she looked around fondly. She'd missed it greatly for being gone for such a short length of time, and wandered around the outer room, and looked at and touched her few personal things. Then she entered the bedchamber and looked through the drawers and cabinets, but didn't find anything of a woman's that was not her own. She shook her head sadly for her Ronnie, but knew how very stubborn he was about some things.

She sat, and then flopped back on the bed. Rolling herself over, she could smell Ronnie on the pillows, some of herself, and a bit of Laisee as well. She thought again how Laisee could be a good match for the two of them, and that she could provide Ronnie with a child as well. That might help him overcome the loss of his son, Walter, and it might even help *her* come to terms with the loss of her daughters in that shuttle accident.

She stretched in place, before getting up and going to her shelf of books, where she took one down and opened it to read. She was thinking of what else to teach her students when she continued her lessons with them.

### ***CS Odontoceti, Noon –5 (Day 105) – A Snowball in Space***

They'd had an early breakfast of gruel and some fresh (more or less) fruit that he'd picked up from the commons before they'd left. Then he'd put away their bowls and sat at the dinette, before bringing up the monitor again to begin scanning the planet they were currently orbiting...

There was, indeed, water on the last planet in the other system. Unfortunately, it was buried under forty kilometers of rock, and even the 'Ceti had his limits. After a short transition from their previous location, he'd found that *this* planet – fourth out of six – was a frozen ice ball in space. It had a trace atmosphere, a solid rock core, and layers of ice all *over* it...

Ronnie set up another sensor trigger, and sat back, while Sai looked at the settings curiously, but shook her head.

"Why are you scanning for life signs? That thing's a frozen snowball." Her comment caused him to look up at her.

"You'd be surprised. On Earth, we still have things living in boiling water at the bottom of the oceans, or out on the frozen polar wastelands at over a hundred degrees below freezing. The platform's filters are a couple of hundred years out of maintenance. I'd hate to introduce an organism that could multiply and take it over before anyone noticed. It's too bad we can't take a big chunk of this somewhere, boil it off to vapor, and ... then ... refreeze ... it..." he said slowly before turning to start working furiously on the shield system parameters, but dejectedly sat back after only a few minutes.

"Nope! Can't do it with this system, but I bet *Donnel* could come up with something for me if I asked him nicely," he considered while nodding his assurances in Mister Ardan's capabilities.

"What? What are you talking about *now*?" she asked in frustration, and he looked at her as if she should already know.

"Well, we take a *big* chunk of ice and tow it somewhere *really* hot, let it *vaporize*, and then let it cool off. Kills all the bugs, and gets us some pretty fresh water in the process."

"Where are you going to find enough heat to vaporize that much ice?" she asked smugly.

"Well," he said, then pointed towards the front display. "That's pretty hot. It'd probably work all right – long as we didn't go *through* a flare."

The current view was of this planet's primary in all its finery, and Sai began to sputter.

"You're ... you're not *seriously* thinking of taking this little ship of yours through a – a *star*, are you?"

"Oh no! *Nooo – no – no – no – no.* Way too hot. We'd be vaporized, and then they'd run out of water on the platform. We'd need a double-shield anyway, and the '*Ceti* isn't rigged like that. Maybe ... I could distort the field a little?" he muttered, then started running through more calculations before sitting back again.

"Nope! It might work, but the odds aren't good – only one in ten," he said dejectedly.

"What? One in ten that it'd work?"

"One in ten we'd survive."

As she was contemplating *that* tidbit of information, the system pinged, and Ronnie smiled.

"*Ha!* No detectable life signs. Go grab your stuff and suit up!" He got up himself and stepped over to the suit locker.

"What are we going to do?" she asked warily, while he rummaged around in the locker. He finally got out two collars and handed one of them to her.

"We be goin' *ice minin'*," he said with a grin. "Go get suited up. I'd like to get back before tomorrow."

She took her collar and went back to put her suit on. Ronnie grabbed his suit from the locker and put it on with his collar. Then he went all around the cabin and closed every cabinet tightly, folded down the tabletops, relocated the seats, and made sure *everything* was put away securely. It wouldn't do to have anything loose for what he had in mind.

### ***CPS Microcosmus, Noon –4 (Day 105) – Watching Some Videos***

Maya became bored with her reading and decided to watch some of the few recordings they'd made over the years. She really missed her Ronnie and wanted so much just to be with him again. She brought up a recording they'd made when they had a going away party for one particular group of campers. She remembered that party fondly. Especially their own *private* party afterwards.

### ***CS Odontoceti, Noon –4 (Day 105) – How to Harvest Ice***

"Whoa! Where are we *now?*" she asked after returning forward, now dressed in her clean ship suit.

The forward display showed a vast expanse of white with edges of sky showing all around it. This was the viewpoint of them facing straight down towards the planet.

"We are twenty-thousand kilometers above a ten-kilometer thick ice shelf that extends for about a hundred kilometers in every direction," he muttered distractedly.

He'd been working at the navigation system and just finished up plotting some extremely short segments, and convoluted ship rotations. Looking it over, he nodded before shifting to the pilot's seat.

"Would you care to join me, Sai?" he asked politely.

She sat down and watched when he started strapping himself in, and then tightened all the straps.

She started strapping in as well, but noticed him making some fine adjustments to the shield settings, before checking the navigation settings once again from the pilot's seat. All the while, his head seemed to be bobbing along to some silent song. When he finally locked everything down, he set the gravity to ten percent, and she suddenly felt much lighter.

"Trigger your collar now, please," he said, and pushed his own collar button. His face shield activated, and his suit began conforming to his body. His head was still bopping, and now he was humming along quietly.

Sai reached up and activated her collar. Her vision tinted blue when the suit shield activated, and her suit tightened up around her.

He glanced her way, then stared down at her chest, his eyes widening in appreciation.

*"It'd be better if you held on tightly to your harness like this,"* he said through his com channel, then wrapped his hands around the seat straps dropping down over his shoulders.

*"And remember kids, don't try this at home – I'm a professional!"*

Halfway to grabbing her harness, she suddenly figured out what he was going to do.

*"NO! RONNIE, YOU CA–"*

*"ICE-PICK ONE! – RUN!"*

### ***CPS Microcosmus, Noon –3.85 (Day 105) – Going for a Ride***

Maya was suddenly swept up in a severe case of vertigo and fell backwards onto the bed with her head and vision swirling. She felt very

lightheaded and tried to get up, but found that she had no balance at all and fell to the bed again. She decided to wait and see if it went away before starting to panic. Then she thought she heard a very familiar maniacal laughter echoing through her head – along with screaming that was *also* somehow familiar.

She lay back comfortably and smiled. Apparently, Ronnie and her Mother were having a good time together, then wondered if Mother had experienced the Gift yet.

### ***CS Odontoceti, Noon –3.8 (Day 105) – The Ride is Over***

Ronnie *was*, in fact, laughing maniacally. He'd not had *this* much fun since that roller coaster ride back on Coney Island in the late 1920's. Of course, in *this* case, the '*Ceti*' was following a more or less precise set of instructions to section chunks out of the ice shelf in a regular pattern that extended in a five-kilometer cube horizontally and vertically. If he'd had more time, he could've made it a *lot* more fun.

Sai wasn't having all that much fun, however. After the first few minutes of screaming, her shouts had turned into rants, raves, threats, and finally some of the *foulest* language ever heard out of the mouth of a Lady. She'd kept it up *constantly*; right up until the '*Ceti*' launched itself vertically and swept up several thousand meters above the ice field, before halting and rotating itself – ending up pointing straight down once again...

Ronnie was still sitting there giggling to himself while Sai was sweating and panting. In the relative calm of their current position, several little splashes of drool were starting to pool on the inside of her face shield.

He relaxed his grip and checked his readings, while glancing at great clouds of ice crystals hanging over a thirty-square kilometer area of the ice shelf with a little self-satisfied smile gracing his lips. He watched for a moment longer, before making a few more calculations, checking his power levels, and fine-tuning the shield adjustments. As he was doing this, he let out a great sigh.

"Ahhh ... You know, *Sai*, sometimes I just LOVE this job! Days like this just don't come along often enough for me. How about ... what?" he asked, turning and seeing her hooded eyes. "You wanna go again?"

She suddenly lunged at him, but her seat straps held her in place.

"*You – You –YOU!*"

"*Me – me – me,*" he answered calmly. "*What – what – what?*"

*"You ... you ... are you trying to KILL US? You're a MADMAN, Caldar! A MADMAN!"*

*"I... Yes. We ... pretty much established that LAST night, I believe,"* he said reasonably.

Sai said nothing, but if looks could kill...

*"What? It's just a little ICE, Sai. Look – ICE CUBES!"* he said cheerfully and pointed to the screen.

Instead of a smooth expanse of ice shelf, there was a jumbled mass of ice blocks a hundred feet or more on a side.

*"Now we just run down and grab some so we can take them back. ICE-PICK TWO! – RUN!"*

Sai desperately grabbed at her harness but Ronnie just calmly sat there while the 'Ceti dropped gracefully and finally penetrated the ice shelf in the center of the blocks ... slipping in smoothly without the slightest shudder. By the readings, it was set to stop precisely at two point five kilometers below the surface.

This time Sai could see the ice actually move out of the way when the 'Ceti slowly pushed through it. After a while, the slow motion travel had a calming effect and she began to relax. She was almost calm enough to carry on a conversation again by the time they stopped.

*"Well ... we're here,"* he murmured, while looking at the display.

He expanded the shields a bit so there was a void in front of them, then waited until the exterior camera cleared. Once it did, the ice was highlighted by the forward running lights and sparkled in all its fractured splendor. She was entranced by the sight, but still pretty pissed at him.

*"When did you come up with THIS plan of yours, Rondal?"* she asked stiffly.

*"Oh, around midnight plus four,"* he said, before stifling another yawn and cutting the shield. They could immediately hear clunking outside when the rough blocks of ice settled against the hull.

*"You were sleeping so nicely, I figured I'd stay up a bit and poke around a little. Hopped over to THIS system. This is the fourth planet. LOTS of water and it's ALL solid."*

She looked at the front display, but wasn't exactly sure what he was planning to do – certainly not on a ship *this* small.

*"How do you plan to get it all back to the platform?"* she finally asked.

*"Well, we're gonna see if all that money I paid for my shield was worth it – and if David's SHIELD REPAIR holds up,"* he said, while changing the shield to a two point five-kilometer sphere and activating it.

The ship shuddered and the ice around them shifted slightly.

*"Hmmm ... ahh,"* he murmured, while programming a sixty-second, one-hundred meter flutter in the shield diameter, before triggering it.

*"That should have loosened us from the ice a bit,"* he muttered, after it cut off. *"Now let's see if my engines can lift this mass."*

He carefully watched his power consumption and temperature gauges, while applying a vertical vector to the ice pack trapped within his shield, but turned it back down after several seconds.

*"Well ... damn... That converter and drive unit came out of a commercial carrier, too,"* he said, before cutting the shield and resetting it to a two-kilometer diameter, but the process repeated without success.

He sat there in his seat and drummed the console a bit before starting to draw circles in the air with his fingers and tilting his head while occasionally nodding. After repeating his last somatic manipulations, he suddenly hunched his shoulders in embarrassment.

*"My bad,"* he mumbled, then raised the ship to point five-kilometers below the surface and set up the two point five-kilometer shield sphere once again before fluttering it.

This time, when he applied power, the ship lifted slowly but smoothly.

*"What was wrong?"* she asked. She was totally amazed they were moving at all with this much mass attached to them.

*"I ... I guess I'm just a little tired,"* he admitted, then yawned awkwardly. *"I broke up the ice down to five kilos, then went right to the center of it. I figured we could lift the weight, but forgot there were ANOTHER couple of kilos on top of us."*

*"So now we just transition back – like this? Can your ship even DO that?"*

*"Don't really know. Theoretically, anything inside the shield should go with us, but my shield theory is fuzzy when I get anywhere past a few dozen meters outside the surface effect fields. We might lose just some of it, or maybe all of it ... or it just might rip us all to pieces."*

He started working on a calculation, but then yawned again before violently shaking his head to drive it away. That convinced him it was time to consult the expert; so he composed a message to Donnel. He read it over twice, ran some more calculations, added the specifications for his modified shield to remind Donnel of it, then fed it to the com and sent it.

He checked over the systems again, and once they were clear of the ice pack, quickly brought them back to orbit and pointed them towards the platform. He set up a gentle acceleration in that direction, then almost locked the board, but reconsidered and popped his collar shield to speak directly with Lady Tal.

“Sai, this is a modified Galaxy-Class tank. It’s a lot like the one you used out at the Fringe before the cross-border raids were resolved. The shields are a little tighter, the nav’s a little better, we use water instead of hydrazine for fuel, and it’s got a commercial exciter, converter, and engine down below, plus a great big whopping mass tank. The *major* conversion is that everything can be run from almost anywhere in the ship, but piloting – *detailed* piloting – still has to be run from the right-hand seat. Everything else is either commercial grade, or Imperial standard.” He looked down at the console and checked the com settings once again.

“I’ve asked Mister Ardan to look into our little mass-shield-transition problem and get back to us. Next beep from the com should be from him. I’m gonna go back and take a nap. You got the con.” He got up and headed aft, only getting as far as the door before she spoke.

“Hey, Rondal … what makes you think I was at the Fringe?”

He stopped and considered lying to her, but there really was no point any longer.

“The Madman would never forget anyone from one of his squadrons, Sai. Certainly not the Dragon Lady,” he said, before turning and sliding the door shut behind him.

### ***CPS Microcosmus, Noon –2 (Day 105) – Interviewing the Spy***

This morning’s investigation was being conducted without paralysis or a gag. The Elder wanted to sample some of the subject’s verbal answers and compare them against his own memories of them.

“Taldus … Remy … se Loca,” the Elder said slowly. “Or is it … Taldus Remy se Loca … ne Zarox!”

“Oh *no!* *No,* my *Lady!* *No!* *Please,* my *Lady!* I am loyal to the Commonwealth, my *Lady!*”

Ai turned and stepped away slowly, while running down a list of charges.

“Sedition … treason … perhaps even … *murder*? What of Lady Sharla Meili Peizhi se Loca? Were you not involved in *her* murder? Was she not *compliant* with your wishes, so she had to be *killed* in order to keep her quiet?”

She, of course, already knew the answer to that, but he didn’t know what she knew. For a concerned member of the Commonwealth, he was incredibly naïve about certain things – Healers, Seniors, and the *Elder* to name just a few...

The Elder was finding this interview almost relaxing after the flurry of activity triggered by this morning’s suddenly missing Maya.

The fact that Maya’s thoughts had been sufficiently confused by her ordeal to prevent locating her that way was but a minor issue for the moment. Ai diverted part of her attention to Molara, who was still talking to Maya’s guard outside of Maya and Ronnie’s compartment. Then she seeped inside a moment later and tapped into Laisee’s thoughts as well.

Laisee had found Maya first this morning; figuring correctly that she was headed back to her and Ronnie’s compartment for some reason or other. She ended up staying with her to keep her company. With the situation still stable, Ai backed out and focused on her current project once again...

“Murder most foul is *my* understanding, Taldus Remy. That poor woman was promised a *marriage* into the Royal House of Kantor, but then she was *murdered* after she found out what her part was to be in your plan. Oh, you were so devilishly *clever*, Taldus Remy … but *WE* have you now – *the master mind of a plot to destroy the Commonwealth!*”

“*NO! No, my Lady! Please! I wasn’t… I didn’t… I was just to deliver MESSAGES to Lady Peizhi once she became Second Wife, my Lady!*”

Ai swiveled to face him with a frown on her face, then turned to Endo.

“Endo, this one makes *too* much noise. It *hurts* my ears,” she said to the giant standing nearby. “Would you please *silence it?*” She waved her hand vaguely, and turned her back on Remy.

Having voided himself when she’d first entered the room, there was nothing left in him when the giant slowly approached with a knotted-cloth twisting in his hands. As he was strapped to a vertically

configured transport, he couldn't move much more than an inch in any direction, but ... but he *wasn't* to be strangled! Endo merely stuffed the knot in his mouth and tied it in place – *painfully* so.

When his cries became muffled, the Elder turned back around.

"Ah, that is *much* better, Endo. You may invite the rest of my staff inside. There is much we must go over, and this one will need to consider its answers *carefully* before we let it speak again."

"Yes, my Lady."

"Oh, Endo ... has Mistress Déjà *eaten* yet this morning?"

He paused for the appropriate amount of consideration, making sure his face was visible to the prisoner before shaking his head slowly.

"Ahh ... I do not *believe* so, my Lady. I believe she was hoping you would soon be done with..." he paused another moment, then tilted his head towards the prisoner.

Ai tilted her head in thought for a moment, but nodded – reluctantly, it would seem.

"Perhaps you had better see that she goes to eat then, Endo. I do not think we will have any problems with – *it*," she said, while darting her eyes to the prisoner.

"I will see to it personally, my Lady. Should you need anything, Gallus is right outside the door. By your leave, my Lady," he said, then bowed his head before leaving the room.

The Elder sighed, as the list was long. Fortunately, they wouldn't need verbal confirmation from the prisoner. As soon as any question was raised, his thoughts would be plucked like fresh fruit. He wouldn't be able to help himself.

### ***CS Odontoceti, Noon (Day 105) – Tracks for Home***

The com beeped at her, startling Sai out of a light doze. She received the message as a video, along with an attached data packet. Once saving it to storage, she played it back.

"*Aye, Ronnie mah laddie. Ye aye fin' somethin' intristin' fur me tae wirk oan, dinnae ye,*" the image on the screen mumbled unintelligently – one Donnel Arden if the header was to be believed. "*Th' fact is, Ronnie, it ne'er cam up afore, bit ah think if ye tak' paukit steps ye shuid be a' richt.*"

She wondered what language he was speaking.

*"I took the calculated mass of a solid ice hemisphere two and a half kilometers in diameter, reduced it by your final offset, added your calculated mass for the ship, and produced the chart in the data packet."*

Interestingly, she found *this* part to be absolutely clear.

*"Thare is a paukit safety factor in thare, mah laddie, bit dinnae be playing fancy wi' it. Come hame fur breakfast if ye hae tae. Dinnae be pushing it or ye'll be spreading yer atoms ower th' neist twa starn systems 'n' th' guid Lady Lili wull be huvin mah baws fur breakfast!"* he said in yet another round of gibberish.

*"Aboot yer ither kinch. Dinnae think th' shield wid haud – need tae double it up lik' ye thought. Ah gie ye mibbie twelve percent as is. Nae worth it, laddie,"* he gibbered some more. *"Gods watch ower ye, Ronnie,"* he added and the video ended.

She sat there, bemused for a moment, before pulling up the data packet.

Now *this* was interesting. It included detailed shield settings, with mass/diameter calculations on a graph that cross-referenced jump factors and total elapsed transit times from six to sixteen hours. As expected, the lower the total mass and shield diameter, the quicker the total transit would be. It also showed – graphically and in color – the dangerous combination of settings that were expected to cause failures of a catastrophic nature.

She took another look at the jump settings – the *fractional* jump settings. She'd never seen settings that fine on *any* ship. He'd have to extrapolate most of those settings, and even then, some of them were so close between life and death that she didn't see how he could manage it.

She sat back in thought, before bringing up the navigation system.

"Gross – Normal – Fine and ... what's this? F.T.O.?" she muttered aloud.

Being no stranger to the Galaxy-Class, she called up the ship's manuals and searched for the navigation system records, but found no reference to F.T.O. in anything related to the navigation system.

Failing that, she queried the entire ship's manual base, but found nothing there, either. Then she started variations with the initials, but still came up with nothing.

Apparently, Lord Caldar still kept a few secrets ... secret. Fortunately, she was smart enough to not mess with someone else's ship, and decided to wait for him to wake up.

Besides, that wasn't the *only* question she had for the Madman.

### ***CPS Microcosmus, Noon (Day 105) – Taldus Spills All***

It'd been a long two hours for Taldus Remy. He'd sweated over every comment the Elder and her staff made about him, while they'd ignored his grunts and the negating shakes of his head as they went down the list of his suspected crimes.

They already knew of his involvement with the Ambassadorial invitation to Maya, but he'd been visiting Meela for much longer than that, so they'd started from before Meela joined the household.

They'd quickly established that:

*No*, he did *not* know for a fact that Sharla Peizhi was murdered; only that it was terribly inconvenient she was out of the picture.

Yes, they had plans for Sharla Peizhi that she may or may not have been in agreement with.

Yes, he'd been told by *another* conspirator that the daughter, *Meili* Peizhi, would be groomed to take her place.

Yes, the means and method of converting her into a willing accomplice was presented to him, and he'd simply followed instructions to the letter.

*No*, he had *no* idea of how a lowly and marginally effective Healer family from way out on Loca had even stood a *chance* of being selected as Royal consort material.

Yes, he'd been the *primary* courier and go-between from his group to Lady Peizhi for all those years.

Yes, he'd presented requests for information on Crown private considerations to Lady Peizhi.

Yes, he'd received information about Crown private activities from Lady Peizhi.

Yes, he'd presented suggestions for Lady Peizhi to present at court.

Yes, he'd received confirmation from Lady Peizhi of which recommendations were accepted and which not; and she'd also made suggestions on other issues that might be helpful to the conspirators.

*No, he had no idea why anyone in their right mind would send Healers along on an Ambassadorial mission into Drecks territory.*

*Yes, he'd presented the invitation personally, along with Cleeve Dalis.*

*No, he didn't know Cleeve Dalis was not really from Loca.*

*No, he didn't know that Cleeve Dalis se Loca was only an alias of Cleda Malia se Krux ... ne Zarox. He'd nearly gone into convulsions when that part of the conversation occurred. He'd no idea that his little group's funding and direction was being hosted by a Drecks agent.*

*No, he wasn't privy to the communications Cleeve Dalis delivered or picked up from Lady Peizhi.*

*No, he really, really didn't want to die.*

*Yes, he really, really supported the Commonwealth and only wanted to protect and serve it.*

*Yes, in hindsight, he thought it was pretty stupid to have taken this incredibly complex and dangerous path towards correcting things that he now realized were completely out of his control, and please, please, OH, PLEASE DON'T FEED ME TO THE LITTLE GIRL!*

*Apparently, his only concern was in ridding the Commonwealth of – to his little reactionary group – the stupid and erratically ineffective Emperor and putting either their selected family on the throne, or any other Royal family on the throne.*

*All things considered, he was very lucky the Emperor wasn't currently in a position to learn of his duplicity.*

*"Ahh ... my Ladies. I tire of this. Do we have any more questions we wish it to consider?" Ai asked wearily, while looking around at her staff.*

*They already knew they were finished for the time being.*

*"Well, if there is nothing else, I suppose we could just feed it..." she paused to yawn daintily while watching and sensing his reaction – perfect!*

*"I beg your pardon, my Ladies. Lady Xiu, please see that it is fed."*

*The prisoner sagged in his restraints.*

*"Ships gruel is sufficient for now. We will reserve better rations for later – either way our decision goes," she added, before standing stiffly and leaving the room.*

Lady Xiu came before him and removed his gag.

"I will send Mistress Déjà in to *feed* you. *Behave yourself!*" she admonished him, before leaving with Lady Fan.

### **Noon +2 (Day 105) – Cold Cuts**

The late dinner meal had been uninspiring.

Lili had considered reprimanding the kitchen staff, but recalled the current situation was primarily due to their customary excess – as *her* Kita had carefully pointed out. Then she'd silently chastened herself. She should've known better, having spent her share of time aboard combat vessels in the past.

Instead, she'd commended the clever way the kitchen had prepared a cold meal of sandwiches, with meats and vegetables appropriate to the occasion. She'd also asked Kita to extend her *personal* appreciation and apology to Karl for all the trouble he'd gone through during the very difficult business of conveying the Royal family with all its attendant staff and demands upon his time and resources.

Before Kita left, her data pad beeped at her, and she quickly read through the messages. She flagged several, but presented the most immediate to Lili first.

"My Lady, a message from *Sectorus*. Donnel Ardan reports contact with Lord Rondal ... one-sided, apparently. Lord Rondal requested detailed information on transition capability for his ship with a load of ice attached. Since he'd not heard back from him, he assumed that he was ...napping? He suggests that Lord Rondal would most likely have been up since departure and only called when he needed something. He suspects that he is simply sleeping, and we are not to worry. He sends along their last reported position."

"That was very considerate of Mister Ardan, Kita," Lili commented, before shifting focus. "How did your evening go with Captain Talon, my dear?"

"Um, it went ... *well*, my Lady. He is *very* skilled," she said, then flushed just a tiny bit.

Lili considered her answer.

"Well then, Kita, we shall hope that our business is concluded in due time. Then perhaps our Lord Rondal will be pleased to declare a ships holiday before we leave." In a lower voice, she added, "I understand that Mister Ardan has hidden talents to his nature as *well*."

Kita considered this with a tilted head. She'd undoubtedly find reason to visit *Sectorus* again, or he the platform con, since Donnel was now contracted to Ronnie for the time being.

All these surface thoughts were evident to Lili, and she relished the youthful enthusiasm behind them. Then she detected a bit of dark cloud amongst the wistful thinking.

"Do you have anything else for me, Kita?"

"Oh! Oh yes, my Lady," she said, having been both startled and sidetracked by Lili's question about Karl. "Lord Caldarous' message traffic, my Lady. Inbound."

This was unpleasant. Kita had standing orders to review and categorize the First Lord's inbound and outbound communications. It was not because he was incompetent – very far from it – but because the Elder and her staff needed to be kept aware of certain day-to-day affairs of the First Lord in regards to management of the Commonwealth and affairs of the Crown.

Apparently, there was an issue.

"How bad is it, Kita?" she asked with a sigh.

"I would not presume to assign a value to it, my Lady," Kita said diplomatically, while handing over her data pad.

Lili scrolled down the message and came across the offending passage in the third paragraph.

This could become *beyond* unpleasant, and the Elder was already busy with the other matter. Still, the engines of the Commonwealth turned slowly, and – as things go – this wasn't a disaster as yet ... just a harbinger of things to come.

"Kita, we will consult with my Lord Husband at his earliest convenience to consider our options. In the meantime, once our Ronnie brings home his ice, let us hope the Elder resolves her current issues quickly."

While Kita whisked herself away to schedule a meeting with the First Lord, Lili wished for a long, hot bath, but all that was available were showers, and *they* were currently rather tepid.

Instead, she settled for a modest amount of ambrosia while thinking of that Earth saying Ronnie had told her...

*'Life is like a big fan, and sometimes the feces strike it inauspiciously.'*

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

*The Fate on Duty quickly searched, but – while there were plenty of **feces** around – there just wasn't a big enough **fan** available.*

*She added it to the list, however, right underneath, “**Drecks, one or more,**” which, curiously enough, had a **check** mark next to it.*

### **CS Odontoceti, Noon +4 (Day 105) – Mayhem is Considered**

Four hours ago, Sai had confirmed the sensors and autopilot were set for tracking and avoidance, but despite the kilometer or more of ice surrounding them, she was still able to push sensors outside their relative external environment and determined that setting detection alarms at the most distant range would allow at least several more minutes to take evasive action at their current speed. Then she'd cut the acceleration, and they drifted at a constant velocity towards the platform.

Now she looked down at the sleeping Lordling stretched out in the dimly lit room. She considered this – the end of her search – simply lying defenselessly in front of her. He'd been in the back of her mind for nearly fifteen years...

First, there was that business with Maya being offered an Ambassadorial staff position on a mission to the *Drecks*. That had been *unbelievable* in itself, and she'd never forgiven Lili for letting that happen.

Then they'd lost contact with her daughter for two weeks while the Commonwealth sat on their hands and did *nothing*. She'd felt her daughter's anguish and immediately broken off from her current assignment, while dragging the rest of her pod with her to try to rescue Maya; or at least avenge her death if they'd gotten there too late.

They'd come in right through the demarcation line traveling hot and fast, which had apparently alerted every Drecks picket for a diameter or so, since they all seemed to be surrounding the Diplomatic Outpost and waiting for them. Initially, Maya's shock and pain could be felt, but then she lost contact with her. She was just about to order an attack when she felt Maya's life rapidly moving away in the opposite direction of their approach.

Something had tickled the Dragon Lady's senses, and she made the instant decision to harass the pickets and draw them *away* from Maya's receding essence. Once back over the demarcation line, she'd set off with her pod and searched in vain for whatever transport contained her daughter, but had never caught up with it. She'd never even found a *trace* of it.

After much anguish and ranting, nearly a month later, she'd received word from Molara that Maya had been retrieved and was recovering nicely on some back-system planet under the care of one of the children of the First Lord. That had settled her down a bit – right up until several months later when she'd discovered that *this* particular child was the architect of the Zarox disaster and had been cashiered by the *Emperor himself!*

Not satisfied with getting her *Mother* killed on his watch, now he had his evil hands all over her *daughter* and wouldn't let her return to her people – *her own family!*

Since Maya's recovery, she'd lived for nothing other than tracking him down, confronting him, and then *killing him!* Unfortunately, her assignments interfered with the search for his location – almost as if Lili or even the Elder *herself* were preventing her from finding him.

On top of all this, something had happened to her daughter that prevented her from even *feeling* her any longer – no doubt the fault of this *Lordling...*

*'By the GODS! This man DESERVES to die!'* she fumed silently.

"There's a power sword in the bottom right drawer under the bed," he mumbled groggily while still half asleep. "Or you can use a knife from the kitchen."

He rolled over onto his stomach while wrapping himself in his blanket and stretching under the covers, following with a wide yawn.

"Donnel ever call back?" he muttered, even as he was still catching all the surface thoughts Sai was casting so loudly ... hate ... confusion ... anger ... joy? Apparently, she really *would* like to kill him? They peaked for a moment before tapering off.

"He ... ahh ... he got back to us a few hours ago," she murmured, while thinking to herself, '*This can't ... this CAN'T be the Madman. The Madman was horribly scar-*'

He sat upright and turned the lights up before dropping the blanket to his waist. Then he stretched out his arms before rubbing his hands over his face to help wake himself up.

"Shoulda woke me up," he said while looking blearily at the ships timer.

He patted around for his underwear and jumpsuit, but they'd fallen to the deck. She came forward and squatted down, and then handed them to him. He could see that her eyes were locked on his chest and side.

“Oxidizer-fueled fire. The heat goes *right* through a hard suit. Then someone tried to *poison* me, but killed your Mother instead. Apparently, there were a few in my crew who didn’t care for my leadership skills,” he muttered, before accepting his clothes from her.

He turned sideways and slipped on his underwear before getting up and wiggling into his jumpsuit. He followed that with another stretch to settle things into place.

“So,” he said, then tried to stifle yet another yawn. “You get the data we need to get back?”

“Uhhh … yeah. Your Mister Ardan said something in a video, but he also sent a chart of acceptable values for transition and shield settings.”

“Well … *good!* How soon we getting back?” he asked her. He was feeling somewhat more animated now that she seemed temporarily distracted from killing him outright.

“I, ah… I didn’t try to change any of the settings. Your navigation system is a little different from what I’m accustomed to. There’s an extra setting … F.T.O.?”

“Fine Transition Override?” He looked surprised, then chagrined.

“Oh, yeah … yeah … sorry. That’s a little thing I worked out back when I was freelancing. I needed a way to make *really* short jumps, but the stock nav system doesn’t tune finely enough for that. Let’s go see what Donnel gave us to work with,” he said, and led her back to the con.

### ***CPS Microcosmus, Noon +5 (Day 105) – Updates to the Elder***

“Welcome Lady Lili, please come in. I will announce you to the Elder,” the Elder’s Mistress Kita said.

“Thank you, Kita. How is our Lady Maya?”

“Oh, she had a *marvelous* adventure, my Lady. She snuck out of our rooms and made her way to her old compartment. Then she spent the day there with Mistress Laisee. Molara stood by and listened for a while, but everything seemed to be well with her.”

Kita could almost feel Lili’s next question.

“Does she remember?”

Kita gave her the tiniest shake of her head before confirming Lili’s concern.

"No, my Lady. It would appear that she has blocked it out entirely. Perhaps it's for the best. Besides, we now have *two* conspirators from her past who are very anxious to tell the Elder *everything* they know!"

She laughed once before turning to knock on the Elder's door.

"Oh, Kita ... you can no longer..."

She pulled a packet of pills from her robes and dangled them at Lili.

"Not quite as satisfying as Maya's gift, but they last *much* longer, even as I am deafened to those around me," she said. She was still smiling when the inner door opened and the Elder strode out to hug Kita and then Lili.

"Good news, I would hope? Both Sai and Rondal have survived their ordeal and returning with enough fuel to heat the water once again?"

Lili smiled at the Elder's anticipatory demeanor.

"It would appear so, my Lady Elder. He reports they are on their way by use of very tiny transitions. They expect to return between midnight plus one or plus two, followed by a probable delay after that to figure out what to do with all the ice once it is here."

"A delay? How much ice is he bringing back, Lili? His ship is very small, is it not?"

"If Mister Ardan is to be believed, our Ronnie is bringing back a sphere of ice nearly two kilometers in diameter – with his ship in the middle of it," she said. Her eyes twinkled at Ai's amazement. "It would appear that he wanted to make sure the Elder and her guests were permitted the luxury of hot showers for the next several years ... or perhaps *decades*," she added teasingly.

"Remarkable, Lili." Ai murmured, then asked, "Did he plan this in advance?"

"Our Ronnie? One could very well ask does he plan *anything* in advance. But he is *very* good at what he does, my Lady."

"Indeed," the Elder mused.

She *must* take another look at the Visions, even if Kita had advised her to limit perusing them too frequently lest she get caught up in their attraction.

"Perhaps we could review those records you are interested in after a late supper, my Lady?" Kita suggested, while watching Ai's face carefully.

*'By the Gods... Even with her talents suppressed, Kita is as sharp as ever,'* Ai's thoughts reminded her, before she went on.

"Very true, my Kita. After a late supper. Perhaps a ... a *warm soup?*"

"To be sure, my Lady," Kita said with a chuckle, "To be sure."

### ***CS Odontoceti, Midnight –3 (Day 105) – Bonding***

Ronnie had taken the information Ardan had transmitted and downloaded it into his nav system. Then he'd driven his ship into the approximate center of the ice bowl and began shrinking his shield to draw all the ice into a tight fit around them – transforming the bowl of ice into a giant snowball. Once locked in place by the shield, they were on their way back to the platform while traveling at a modest transition rate.

Over a bottle of ambrosia, Sai and Ronnie spent the next several hours talking and laughing about their adventures out at the Fringe. Sai revealed that she'd been Lady Lili's spy sent to find out who the Madman was, and Ronnie admitted that she'd looked a little familiar when he'd seen her in a little mercenary port at the Fringe.

The one time she'd actually *seen* him, she never connected the long hair and scarred body with the clean cut image of Lord Caldar, while he'd seen traces of his Yandi in Sai's face, even with the moniker of Dragon Lady.

The fact that he'd signed her on to his squadron and they'd worked and fought in ships alongside each other gave them a great deal in common. In talking to her now, though, something still confused him.

"Sai, you worked in my squadron for nearly eight years. Why'd you never turn me in?"

She sipped her ambrosia ... *slowly* this time ... while considering it for several seconds.

"I *thought* about it," she finally said. "You and your men were mercenaries conducting unauthorized raids into the Hegemony. We were *technically* still in a state of war, but ... what would be the *point*? We were getting the job done. You were getting the job done. How many lives did the Emperor spend on his 'retribution' strikes against the Drecks, huh? How many innocent people died at – at *your* hands, because the Emperor *ordered* it?"

"Sai... I..."

"No, Ronnie! It's not your *fault!* It's a big damn universe, but it's worth *nothing* to kill innocent people and expect anyone to back down from it!"

Her body had stiffened, then began quivering. She was very angry at something inside herself, and sipped a little more ambrosia to help stem the tide, before finally calming down a bit and speaking more somberly.

"I watched you, Ronnie. You never targeted *anyone* but the raiders. You even threatened old Haldas when he was about to go after that transport. You even let some raiders go when they turned tail and ran."

She watched him pick up his cup and sip from it before clearing his throat.

"Well ... the Emperor and I have a somewhat *different* opinion about warfare – ever since Zarox," he murmured, before looking away.

"Yeah," she said, then sipped her drink once again. "We know the Emperor's opinion... 'Stand off and vaporize them from orbit. That's the *only* way to make sure,'" she said sullenly, causing him to turn back and face her.

"There is a certain finality to that," he said to her angry look, but raised his hands placatingly. "There is a creature on Earth – a \*wasp\*. It's a *stinging* insect. It lives in a round nest. To kill the nest, you must destroy it *completely*. If you merely annoy it, then they *all* come out to defend." He paused and took another sip of his drink before going on.

"The only problem is – there's always *another* nest somewhere else. You must learn to be judicious in which nests you manage, and which ones you leave alone. Thus, on Earth, mankind lives in *harmony* with the \*wasp\* ... for the *most* part," he said, which triggered a snort from her.

"Too bad the Emperor didn't spend some time on Earth. How'd you end up on the Fringe, anyway?" she asked, which triggered a short burst of chuckles from him.

"Oh, you know the military ... work hard, save up a thousand 'Atta-boys' ... but it only takes *one* 'Aw-shit' to wipe them all out," he said flippantly, and got a giggle from her in response. He shook his head in disgust while thinking of all the self-serving decisions he'd made in his past, but shrugged. "Then ... it was out to the Fringe to see if I could earn some of them back. We did *good* out there, Sai. We got the Hegemony and the Commonwealth back to the tables again, and they widened the borders. That was a *good* thing, wasn't it?"

Sai looked at his expression, wondering if he was really as altruistic as he seemed, but considered that it really didn't matter at this point, and said, "I think it was. That's where I found Déjà."

“Who’s that?”

“Oh … companion … Healer … *lover*,” she said dreamily. “The boys are all right, but sometimes it’s nice to have a *woman’s touch*.”

“The boys … you still ship out with those two—”

“Be *nice*, Ronnie. We worked it all out *before*, remember?”

“Sai, you *know* what they—”

“Yes! And so do *you!* Look, Ronnie, they’ve been loyal to me since the Fringe. They’ve hauled me out of more trouble than you’ve ever *thought* of, and we’ve taken good care of each other all these years.”

“Nurture and not nature, then?”

“Love and not *hate*, Ronnie. Look at *you!* You’re the one that always says let the enemy go when they don’t wanna fight no more!”

He held up his hands in appeasement.

“All right – all right. It seems to be working for you. Gods grant that it could work for *everyone* in the universe,” he said, but then wondered if...

“*Lili* doesn’t know, does she?”

“Ha! Not a *chance!* And you’re not gonna *tell her, either!*”

“Not *me!* No *way*. She ever found out I knew one of her Seniors is working with two *Drec- OW!*”

“And *that* is a word we do *not* mention in regard to *my boys – ever!*” she said fiercely, while slowly pulling back her hand.

“Yes, my Lady Tal. I obey, my Healer.”

He sat and rubbed the side of his head where she’d slapped it, but thought of something else. He leaned in closer, and dropped his voice to a loud whisper.

“So, umm, *tell* me, Sai, is it *true* what they say about … *big hands* and … *big feet?*”

She let out a disgusted sigh while rolling her eyes.

“Yes, it’s true … *big gloves* and *big boots!*”

She snickered, then started to giggle, which finally got them both laughing, and they were friends once again. For some reason, Sai started thinking about the testimony she’d seen … almost unbelievable from her point of view.

"Ronnie, Molara made me watch part of a video – the testimony from your interview. It seems almost impossible, but ... did you *truly* Heal my little girl?"

"Really? No... I don't think so," he said, which got him a dirty look. "No ... here ... give me your hand," he said, and grasped one of her hands and placed it on the back of his head. "There ... feel that scar? Now extend in there and tell me what you think."

She extended in and felt around, frowned a bit, and then poked around some more, before pulling away.

"Well, what do you think?"

"I think you're lucky your *brains* don't fall out. Whoever worked on you did a lousy job."

"Yeah, that's what Lili said ... though not in so many words. That was *me*. Took a whack from the *Kraken's Child*, and had to fix it in a hurry before Maya caught me. I'm not sure if she remembers or not – the stuff that came out during the testimony. Kita lied by omission and she was *awake* the whole time. I hear she slid back and ... and blocked out all those memories. On her *own* this time..."

"Well, if you fixed her like you fixed *yourself*–"

"No! That's just *it!* I *didn't* fix her! I ... I think somebody *else* did, and I was just the messenger," he said, but took another sip of ambrosia before explaining himself.

"Sai, I really think it was the *spirit* of Yandi," he said, then bowed his head while speaking to the tabletop. "I think *she* was Healing our Maya that day."

Sai remained silent at that. It wasn't something most rational people often thought of as being possible, although the more spiritual types tended to suggest otherwise.

"But Molara said you really *were* a Healer – in a Man-child's body."

He looked up at her before pulling out his knife. She backed away on the seat, but he simply rolled up a sleeve and sliced a long, deep gash in his arm, then put the knife away and sat there watching it bleed.

Sai reached out to Heal it but he stopped her and closed his eyes. She watched in fascination as the bleeding slowly stopped and the blood withdrew into the wound. She extended just a bit and watched as veins, muscles, and skin knitted themselves back together while

this baby Healer – this baby *Senior*, from the glow of him – put his arm back together perfectly. It took less than fifty seconds.

“*Gods...*” she said in a whisper, “You’re incredibly *SLOW*.”

“Well, yeah. I coulda just *flashed* it, but then I leave all them little scars behind. Lili’s been working with me to undo all my past sins and fix them correctly. Oh, looky *here*,” he said, and rolled up both sleeves before pointing to the clear finger marks on both upper arms. “Those Healed marks are from one of my baby Healers ... Lady Diane,” he said proudly. “She’s in training under Maya. Diane did that to me when she came to me for training in *contentment*.”

“How long has Maya been training her?” she asked in amazement.

“She did this after less than a *month*,” he said, grinning like a proud Grandfather.

“Wild talent?”

“Oh, you have *no idea*,” he beamed. “And her daughter is also very skilled. We also have an ex-slave from Wilder, our Mistress Shay, who is in training as well.”

“And *Maya*’s been training them?” He just nodded.

“How long?”

“About two months total ... *tops!*”

“And *Maya*’s ... no, you’re training them, *too?*” she asked, but he shook his head.

“I give them contentment techniques and general play. *Maya* is teaching them to be Healers. Well, *Maya* *does* teach them contentment techniques, too, but *all* of us lend a hand for that.”

“But that’s ... those are ... your Healers can do that as *well?*” she asked while pointing to his arm. He just nodded again.

“Those are *Combat-Healer* skills, Ronnie! Why do they need—”

“To *survive*, Sai! They needed to learn quickly in order to survive. Perhaps we should start this puzzle from the beginning so you can see how the pieces all fit together ... up to this point.”

Sai slowly grinned before breaking into a wide smile. She hadn’t gotten back to basics in a *very* long time.

### ***IRS Sectorus, Midnight +2 (Day 106) – Bringing Home the Ice***

“*IRS Sectorus*, this is CS Odontoceti, watch to watch. Please respond.”

"Hello 'Ceti. I just poured some drinks, Ronnie," Captain Talon responded. "I hear you brought the ice."

*"Ha! I thought this was way past your bedtime, Karl!"*

"Well, let's just say my little blue flyer told me you'd be coming."

Ronnie conveyed a chuckle before continuing.

*"I got a load of ice, but then I got to thinkin' ... is this much mass gonna give us an orbital problem?"*

"It shouldn't be a problem. Just don't be dropping it right in our laps. Ahh, where *exactly* are you? I don't have a fix on your ship."

*"We're currently right in the center of this thing ... but I'll think of something,"* Ronnie assured him while sending out his location.

"Yes... I know how you think. How about you think about it a hundred kilometers *away* from here, and let us know how it turns out?"

*"I am wounded, Sir! ... but ... ahh ... yeah, good point. Okay then. If you see a bright burst of ice, then something might've gone wrong ... or not. I think I got an idea. I'll let you know. Odontoceti out"*

"We'll be watching. *Sectorus* out," Karl said, before turning to his con crew. "Officer of the Deck! Keep a sensor out in the direction of *Odontoceti*'s approach. In particular, watch for loose pieces of *ice*," he ordered.

"Or ship," he added in a mutter while shaking his head slowly.

### ***CS Odontoceti, Midnight +2.1 (Day 106) – Dumping the Ball***

"Well, fearless leader, how are you gonna pull us out of this ice ball without losing all the pieces?" Sai chided him lightly...

They'd spent the remainder of the trip with Ronnie bringing her up to speed on his life; hitting the highlights of his time on the platform after returning from the Fringe, some of his work as a mercenary, his refugee training and recovery efforts on Earth, the rescue of Maya and how they'd all ended up out here, *yet again*, with enough animation and detail to keep them both awake until their arrival. They'd eaten, but tempered their ambrosia consumption just to make sure of it. They both wanted to sleep on the platform tonight...

"What I plan to do is drive right out the center of the ball," he assured her.

“Ronnie, the ice is packed *tight*. How you gonna do that without scattering it all over the place?”

He just looked at her.

“Have you learned *nothing*, young \*grasshopper\*?” he asked her, but then had to explain what a grasshopper was and what it meant in this context.

“Okay, suppose you explain to this young \*grasshopper\* what you’re gonna do,” she finally said.

“Well, *first* we put away the dishes and the cups...”

### ***IRS Sectorus, Midnight +2.5 (Day 106) – Delivering the Ball***

“Uhhh, Captain ... you’re gonna want to see this,” the Officer of the Deck called to him.

“Put it up on the big screen, please.”

They saw very little from a hundred kilometers out until the image was zoomed to fill the screen. What they then saw was an ice ball shaking itself in space. As it continued to shake, it seemed to expand. The image was zoomed out until the ice ball had finally expanded to nearly three times its original size before the shaking stopped.

They could still see movement of the ice as it continued to expand, but now it seemed to be constrained within a globe. When the relative motions of the individual ice blocks seemed to slow down, a tiny black dot emerged from the near side of the ice ball and headed in their direction for a little bit before it stopped.

In just a few minutes, it started coming towards them again, but the ice ball seemed to flatten out into a disk shape behind it. At some point, it could be seen that the dot appeared to be dragging a huge disk of ice behind it, and it was headed their way.

“How fast?” Talon asked nervously.

“Ah, still accelerating, Sir.”

“Oh Ronnie, you clever, *clever* devil,” Talon muttered. “Let me know when he approaches fifty-kilometers.”

“Aye, Sir!”

About an hour later, the watch spoke up again.

“Sir, target is decelerating ... no ... sorry, Sir, target is ... coasting.”

“Distance?”

“Ah, fifty-five kilometers, Sir”

“Zoom in on the image, if you please. This should be interesting.”

It may not have been interesting, but it was fascinating watching a nearly three-kilometer diameter ice disk swing about slowly on the tiny pivot point represented by Ronnie’s ship as it continued heading their way. As it turned, they could see it now resembled a shallow bowl that was rotating to face them. Once realigned, it was traveling bottom side forward now.

Talon thought about the vectors involved and didn’t know whether Ronnie was that good or his navigation system was that special. Probably *both* knowing Ronnie as he did.

“Target is slowing, Sir... Consistent with an estimated stopping distance just outside our meteor shield.”

“Well, just for *fun* this time let’s *drop* our shield when Lord Caldar’s ship makes his return, shall we?” Talon suggested pointedly.

Word of *that* little bit of tradecraft had been passed from watch to watch, with the section on duty for that event getting quite a bit of hazing about it.

### ***CS Odontoceti, Midnight +5 (Day 106) – A Position Clarified***

“Home a-gain, home a-gain ... something, something, something,” he sang quietly.

“Huh?”

“Sorry ... doesn’t translate all the way.”

The ship settled on its struts and he started matching the ships gravity to platform local before cutting it off altogether.

“Ronnie to platform, you can close the door now, Andy”

“Will do, Grandpa. Welcome home, and thanks for all the ice. Platform out.”

“Ceti out”

“Ahhhh, to sleep in my own \*bed\* again ... bed,” he corrected himself.

“I’ve heard of that word. Lots of words are getting mixed in. It’s just a matter of time until we absorb *all* the human worlds and assimilate them, too,” she said, while shutting down the navigation system before she began unstrapping her seat harness.

She'd strapped herself in securely against the possibility that he'd "think of something else" without mentioning it to her. At least freeing themselves from the ice ball hadn't been as bumpy as harvesting it.

"Just as long as they want to," he said while beginning the main shutdown sequence.

"Agreed ... but there's safety in numbers," she pointed out.

He thought of the complexity of his birth world while he continued with his shutdown tasks.

"Did you know that there are over two *hundred* separate nations on Earth, with over thirty *times* that many different spoken languages?"

Sai paused from getting up to stare at him in astonishment.

"How do they get anything *done*?"

"Most often they don't. I can't imagine them joining us. Not unless something *desperate* happened to make them *want* to join."

"Like a Dreck's cruiser firing on the Ambassador's personal shuttle?"

He stopped what he was doing and thought about it for a whole second.

"Yeah ... that *might* do it – if anyone ever found *out* about it."

She shook her head while stepping away from the con. Meanwhile, Ronnie checked that the trickle feeders on both converters were still working properly before killing the primary converter and exciter mains. The display told him the mains were safely down, which left only the internal systems running.

That accomplished, he finally started unstrapping himself and took up the conversation where he'd left off.

"That might make a *few* of them consider it, but it still wouldn't book consensus with the whole world. Unfortunately, they still live in the *dark* times – power without guidance or enlightenment. They can grow and be successful, or grow just a little bit more and blow themselves up. They've just turned *Class-Four*," he said, before standing up to follow her back.

"Ahhh ... a difficult time to be sure. And that's *your* home world?"

"Truly."

"And yet you've climbed so *high* – the Emperor's *Grandchild*."

"Step-Grandchild ... except he *fired* me."

Sai got out two cups and a bottle before pouring them both a small measure.

"I understand the Emperor has not been himself of late," she murmured.

"I'd say the last three hundred *years* or so," he muttered bitterly as she handed him his cup. They both sipped contemplatively before she offered him another viewpoint.

"That is what the *Elder* must deal with, Ronnie. The rest of us just *serve*. And now *you* will, as well," she said cheerfully.

He looked at her, but his voice turned harsh in that moment.

"Understand me, Sai. I serve my *family*, and *then* the Commonwealth. Should those areas coincide, then I serve them *both*. If Maya still seeks bonding with me, then I will serve *her* faithfully and follow *her* instructions. Otherwise, I will do what *I* feel is necessary to protect my *family* – and *then* the Commonwealth!"

She was struck by the anger in his words, but tried not to let them visibly affect her. She could still feel the confused emotions roiling off this baby Senior, even after she'd finished her cup, rinsed, and put it away. Then she turned and contemplated his current political stance before offering a neutral comment.

"A hard line to follow, my Lord Caldar," she said, remaining calm even while reading the conflicted emotions he was radiating. "But I can understand your feelings. I'm in a similar situation."

He slowly nodded in agreement with her assessment before offering up a grim smile. Then he finished his cup and dealt with it. When he turned back, he faced her and contemplated the future.

"And we are to be *family*, Sai ... hopefully. Then your boys become *my* boys as well. And also for your companion." He paused for several seconds before making up his mind. "For what we've shared today and back at the Fringe ... *even* if Maya turns me away ... you are as *family* to me," he said, then reached out and hugged her tightly before she leaned back and tilted her head up to kiss him lightly.

"Thank you, my Ronnie. Thank you for your trust, and thank you for my daughter's life," she said softly, then gently pushed him away while yawning. "Now let's go get some *sleep!*"

They secured the rest of the ship and headed back to their compartments, while Andy watched remotely to make sure they safely made it into pressurized spaces.

### ***Noon –4 (Day 106) – The Investigation Comes for Ronnie***

Lady Molara approached Lady Lili's compartment with a message, but doubted it would be well received. Today was the day.

#### ***In Ronnie's Compartment***

It seemed like he'd just laid down to sleep and someone was *already* knocking at his door! He looked over for his bed companion, but she was already headed to answer it...

Maya had spent the night with Shay while Andy was on watch, but Laisee had learned Ronnie was coming back. She had been waiting for him in his compartment and made sure he went right to sleep for a change. In the morning, she left Ronnie groaning on the bed, and got up quickly to answer the door; only to discover Lady Molara was there with a message. Today was the day.

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All throughout the platform, members of the Caldorous family were being awoken and informed that the second testimony would take place inside the Recreation Center today at Noon plus two. *All* family would attend – *no exceptions*.

Effective immediately, all family watch standers were relieved by their counter parts from *Sectorus* or *Shining Light* for however many days it may take until the end of the testimony. Unless the platform came under attack or it suffered a complete power failure, one way or another, the second testimony would be taken.

Noon +1 (Day 106) – Meeting as Witnesses

The family began gathering in the Recreation Center one hour before the scheduled time. They stood about nervously while waiting for Larl to set up comfortable seating facing one end of the room. Several physical chairs were already in place for the Elder and her staff who would be conducting the investigation.

Two horizontal wheeled-platforms were located towards the rear of the group. Each held the shrouded body of a person who remained still, save for the faint movement of their breathing. Sai's two giant guardsmen stood nearby, giving every appearance of being stone statues guarding dead bodies. Seated between them was the lovely young girl who'd arrived with Lady Sai Tal just a few days earlier.

Save for the sound of moving bodies, the room was absolutely silent. They'd all been instructed there would be *no talking* before, during, or after the proceedings until they left the room. Afterwards, no mention was to be made of the events unfolding within unless specifically authorized by the Elder or her staff.

Molara was arranging seating for the Caldorous family, with Meela having a prominent place in the front row alongside Ronnie. Behind each of them were arrayed their immediate family, which for Ronnie included all of his crew.

When the remainder of the family arrived, Ronnie was excited to see Maya walk in with her mother. Sai was quietly telling her something and Maya was apparently questioning her while Sai kept nodding her head and smiling. Once she saw Ronnie, Maya broke away and swiftly walked over to hug him tightly, while he clung to her as well. Neither of them spoke, but they continued to hold each other and shared gentle caresses on their backs, shoulders, and hair. Sai came up and was seated alongside Ronnie's crew, but Maya was pulled away from Ronnie by Molara and seated next to her mother.

A curiosity occurred when Molara called from the doorway and brought Vitas Tomar in to sit behind Meela on the Caldorous side of the grouping. Meela looked back at him pleadingly, but he simply shook his head and shrugged his shoulders. He reached out one hand to grasp hers in companionship before letting go and settling back in his seat.

Precisely at the appointed hour, Molara opened the door and the Elder's staff and consultant walked in, followed by the Elder. The entire room rose in respect. The Elder and her staff arranged themselves in front of their chairs, save for Molara, who stepped forward to address the room.

"My Lords and Ladies, Gentlemen and Gentlewomen... These proceedings are of a personal and private nature, and yet may extend to issues of the Crown and Commonwealth. No physical records will be made of these proceedings; nor shall any of you speak about them to each other or *any* other during the course of these proceedings, however long they take. After a resolution is found and a final determination is reached, you may *still* be required to maintain your silence unto the end of your lives for what is about to occur within these walls for the duration of these proceedings. This investigation is conducted by the office of the Elder under full authority from the Crown and Commonwealth," she concluded.

Molara then stepped back and gave her full name and position, followed by Lady Xiu, Lady Fan, Mistress Kita, and finally the Elder, Lady Ai.

After pausing for a moment more, Fan spoke up loudly.

"LADY MEILI TUNG-MEI PEIZHI SE LOCA ... YOU MAY STAND."

Meela fairly shrank into her seat, but was prompted forward by her loyal Tomar, and stood shakily.

"Lady Peizhi... Inquiries have been made by you or by another on your behalf. An accounting must be taken," Xiu said. "At this time, do you wish to make a statement?"

Meela was frozen to the spot and literally could not speak.

"We will take that as a 'no.' You may sit down."

With a great deal of relief, Meela took her seat once again.

"LORD RONDAL CALDAR SAI CALDAROUS SE EARTH NE KANTOR ... YOU MAY STAND," Fan said, and Ronnie stood up ... as did the Elder.

"The wheels of justice grind slowly but surely, TS'ILSQQSÉ BIYIGÉ se Calderous," Elder Ai said. "We have been watching you since *birth*. We have observed your transgressions and counted them *against you* ... even to the unlocking of a door. We knew where you were. We have been observant, and now we are nearing the final judgment. We have taken evidence, and we will take more this day. You will answer *truthfully*, and if warranted – you will be *sanctioned most disagreeably*."

Ai smiled grimly and resumed her seat.

"At this time, do you wish to make a statement?" Xiu asked.

Ronnie caught just the tiniest shake of Kita's head, but it still didn't stop him.

"My Ladies, at this time ... I would not know *what* to say," he said truthfully, while carefully avoiding any trace of guile or humor.

There was a pause while all five of them glared at him, with Kita adding a frown for good measure.

"Noted ... Lord Caldar," Fan muttered slowly.

He was *not* invited to sit down...

His full name given, the particulars of his birth, repeated once more – just for *fun*, apparently – and many of the same questions he'd been asked and answered previously were gotten out of the way. He'd caught but made no mention of his native Earth name 'se Calderous' used during the Elder's opening statement. He figured they'd tell him all about it when they got around to it...

"Lord Caldar, you were the *last* Commander of *CPS Microcosmus* during the 22nd Battle of Dreck, which was deemed – *indecisive*. This is true?" Fan asked.

“Yes, it is, my Lady.”

“What was your total ship complement – including crew, warriors, and Healers,” Xiu asked.

“Seven-hundred twelve total, my Lady.”

“How many survived the battle?” Fan asked.

“Thirty-eight, my Lady.”

“How many were returned to the Commonwealth after your ... sojourn here?” Xiu asked.

“Eighteen, my Lady.”

“That is not a very good accomplishment for someone of your previously sterling record, Lord Caldar,” Fan said.

He didn’t hear a question in there and wasn’t about to bite.

“Your record indicates that you excelled in armed combat. This is true?” Xiu asked.

“Yes, my Lady.”

“Your record also indicates that you excelled in *armored* combat and contributed significantly to the improvement of techniques and capabilities of armored combat to the point that many of your techniques became textbook standards for armored battle squadrons. This is true?” Fan asked.

“Yes, my Lady.”

“Your record *also* indicates that you excelled in your previous position as executive officer on a similar Commonwealth Planetary Striker. In fact, *that* commanding officer had written a glowing reference for you indicating his delight that you’d been considered for command of your *own* Planetary Striker. A copy of that letter was found in your service record. This is true?” Xiu asked.

“It was my understanding that such a letter was placed in my service record, my Lady.”

“Indeed. It should be noted that a copy was *also* filed with the Emperor’s records on home world, along with *his* letter thanking the Commander for his assessment of your capabilities. Subsequent interviews with Commander Dansanti confirmed both the sending and receiving of these letters,” Xiu said.

‘Crap, they’re digging this hole even deeper,’ he thought.

'Just tell the truth, Rondal!' a voice echoed inside his head.

Forcing himself to remain perfectly still, he searched the eyes looking at him, but recognized nothing to indicate where it had come from. It sounded familiar, though.

Fan took a single step forward but glanced down at her data pad before looking up at him intently.

"One has to wonder... Lord Caldar – with all of your esteemed talents, at the very *prime* of your young life, and finding yourself in charge of an *extremely* well-trained and motivated crew – just how *did* you manage to prosecute the attack on Zarox with such *catastrophic* results?" she asked him cavalierly.

'Aw, crap! ... Is she wondering, or did she ask the question,' he thought.

'Just tell the truth, Rondal. Just ... tell ... the ... truth!' the familiar voice echoed in his head.

He blinked once and looked down for a moment before meeting her eyes again.

"I failed ... to countermand ... an unauthorized order," he finally said.

"Did we understand you *correctly*, Lord Caldar? You said you 'failed to countermand an unauthorized order.' This is true?" Xiu asked with a tilt to her head.

"Yes, my Lady," he said quietly, then noticed Fan checking something on her data pad.

"We wonder who might have *given* the unauthorized order to begin with and how it caused your attack to fail," Fan said.

Molara handed Xiu a data pad that she quickly scanned before taking a step towards him as well.

"Our research has recovered an interesting order from that event, Lord Caldar, but for the sake of clearness ... what was your *intended* prosecution of the attack on Zarox?" Xiu asked.

He stared at her blankly for a moment while his brain dug up those events from so long ago – not that he'd ever really forgotten them.

"Ahh ... based on the available intelligence at the time, my plan was to jump to close coordinates with the prime target – Zarox – and launch our attack from there. With an estimated total attack time of ten minutes, we should have been able to get off two or possibly three solid shots and split the planet open. As it was, we got off one weak

shot before a planetary siege platform rose past the planetary eclipse and fired upon us. It's first shot knocked down many of our systems and we were forced to retreat."

"We are curious, Lord Caldar. Was your attack plan *unanimously* agreed upon by all among your crew?" Fan asked.

"It was agreed upon by all in the proper chain of command, my Lady."

"*THAT DOES NOT ANSWER OUR QUESTION!*" Ai's pronouncement echoed in the large room.

The silence following that statement was quite ...*silent*.

"No, my Lady. It was not unanimous."

"Lord Caldar, what were the names of the dissenters?" Xiu asked.

'*Radatel, forgive me,*' he thought before his shoulders slumped in defeat.

"Lord Caldar?"

"The two dissenters were Felis and Talis Caldorous," he said quietly.

"By any chance, Lord Caldar, would they..."

"They were the sons of Lord Radatel Caldorous and Lady Sharla Peizhi," he said huskily.

"*YOU WILL NOT ANTICIPATE OUR QUESTIONS!*"

It was amazing how quiet people can become even *quieter* at times.

"No, my Lady."

"By any chance, Lord Caldar, would they have presented an *alternate* plan instead of the one you'd chosen?" Fan asked; now able to finish this time.

He took a breath and let it out slowly.

"They presented a *different* plan that – in *my* determination – would have cost us too much time and present an unfavorable risk to the safety of my crew and the platform."

"Briefly, Lord Caldar, what did their plan entail?" Xiu asked.

"Ahh ... their plan would have us first attack the staging bases on Zarox's two moons such that our withdrawal would not be impeded. With knowing neither the exact placement of the moon bases nor the current position of the moons in relative position to the primary target,

I deemed it a wasteful expense of time, and a foolish risk to my crew and platform."

"Lord Caldar, I have here a record of one Talis Caldorous giving an order to attack secondary target one followed by secondary target two. It was initially protested, but then backed up by Felis Caldorous using *your* authorization. Where, exactly, were *you* at the time these orders were given?" Fan asked.

He rolled his eyes and then sighed.

"I believe I was on the *toilet*, my Lady."

To his great relief, not a sound was heard ... except for a tiny echo of laughter in his head.

"Interestingly enough, Lord Caldar, your ship suit tracking records indicate that you *were*, in fact, in the facilities *adjacent* to the battle center at the time those orders were given. Tell me, Lord Caldar, did you *allow* Felis Caldorous to use your authorization?" Xiu asked.

"*Never*, my Lady. That is an extreme violation of protocol."

"And in this case it appears to have been a *deadly* violation of protocol as well. Lord Caldar, was this the *first* time Felis Caldorous or Talis Caldorous used your authorization ... for any purpose at *all*?" Fan asked, then waited patiently for him to respond.

"I ... *no*, my Lady," he admitted after several seconds.

Fan let the seconds tick out while contemplating the *obvious* solution to this relatively simple problem.

"One would assume that a *change* in authorization codes would become necessary, Lord Caldar. Was this not done?" she asked, then had to wait again while Ronnie forced down his own frustration over the same issue.

"Several times, my Lady," he admitted without further explanation.

"I see," Xiu murmured. "As *junior* officers under your command, what steps did you take regarding *previous* violations of like protocols?" she pressed.

"Official reprimands were issued and negative performance evaluations were submitted regarding such behavior for each violation, my Lady."

Xiu's eyes never left his face when she added, "And *after* your retreat?"

There was a wait of several more seconds while he dredged those memories up from his distant past.

“Ahh, given that we’d been reduced to survival mode, the crew was focused on living each day and working on the next. We experienced very few problems during the several years we were working to come home.”

Fan looked down at her pad for a moment, nodded, then looked up at him.

“Lord Calder was this *usual* behavior for junior officers, this failure to follow proper protocol and established procedures?” she asked curiously.

He paused before saying, “No … it was not usual, my Lady.”

“Please explain, Lord Calder.”

Ronnie took a breath while recalling his first few months on the platform and how he and Yandi had managed during those early days.

“There was a short shakedown period where the Senior and I worked very hard on building a cohesive crew. Disciplinary incidents among junior officers dropped from a very small rate to nearly zero over the course of two months after I’d arrived and was placed in command.”

“Was this *before* your stepbrothers arrived for duty?” Xiu asked.

“Yes, my Lady.”

“When did your stepbrothers arrive for duty, Lord Calder?” Fan asked.

“Approximately eight months after I took command, my Lady.”

“What happened then, Lord Calder?” Xiu asked.

“There was a short rise in misbehavior among the junior officers, but it was dealt with by me or the Senior. My established crew settled back down within a month, my Lady.”

“So, your crew – your *established* crew – returned to proper behavior. What about your stepbrothers, Lord Calder? Did their behavior improve?” Fan asked.

He looked down before quietly responding, “No, it did not, my Lady.”

“How so, Lord Calder?” Xiu asked, drawing his attention to her this time.

“They still responded ... *poorly* to command. They seemed to lack motivation. They did not seem to find military life to their liking, my Lady.”

Fan and Xiu first looked at each other, then down at their data pads again.

Fan in particular seemed intent on reading something on hers as her eyes could be seen darting about the screen in her hands. She reviewed the information on her data pad for several more seconds before asking her next question.

“We have reports and signed affidavits from the survivors that state that both Felis and Talis Caldarous would ‘*complain bitterly*’ about their being placed under the command of the ‘*Earthling half-breed*’, that they were ‘*true Kantite-born Lords*’ and ‘*deserving of command*’, that ‘*the Commander will bring you all to ruin*’,” she read aloud, and then looked up at him. “Lord Caldar ... it would appear that they made every effort by behavior and word of mouth to *undermine* your authority and disrupt your command. Why did you not *do* something about this behavior?” she asked.

“As I stated, my Lady, I issued official reprimands and submitted negative performance evaluations for each violation.”

“Lord Caldar, why did you not request that they be *removed* from your command as a disruptive influence?” Xiu asked, which seemed to catch him off guard for a moment.

“We ... we were at *war*, my Lady. Such trivial issues as sibling rivalry are not to be taken seriously. What they were doing was nothing more than what I’d lived with while growing up with them.”

The quiet gasp from Fan drew his attention to the look of sheer indignation on her face.

“Lord Caldar, you kept them on your platform *despite* their constant efforts to *bring your command down around you!* Their actions bordered on *sedition!* Why did you *tolerate* this behavior?” she asked him harshly.

He looked down at the floor, then glanced over at Radatel before looking down again.

“Lord Caldar?” she asked again impatiently. “Lord Caldar, *why—*”

“Because I ... I was *trying to save their lives!*” he exclaimed loudly, but cringed at his own outburst. “I – I beg your pardon, my Lady.”

The room remained silent for several seconds until Xiu calmly continued with, “Lord Caldar, we would like an explanation, please.”

He paused, took a breath, and collected himself before going on.

“Felis and Talis … never really accepted me. They couldn’t tolerate the ‘Earth-spawn’ who was so much better at certain things than they were. I accepted it and lived with it. I thought I’d left it all behind once I was in service. I was initially glad they’d been assigned to me. I’d thought perhaps they’d finally grown up a bit, but … they resented that I was now in charge of *them*, and old habits … well, things just returned to normal between us.”

He paused to compose himself for what was coming.

“I knew what was going on – I’d be a fool *not* to – but I kept *hoping*… I kept hoping my stepfather had sent them to me so they could grow up, or perhaps *Grandfather* had sent them for that purpose. I don’t know. But I *did* know that if I kept them with me, they would be safer than anywhere else in the fleet.”

He stopped, but was prompted once again.

“Lord Caldar, why would they be safer with you?” Fan asked gently, which triggered a quiet sigh from him before he spoke again.

“In time of war, my Lady, certain laws and punishments change. What passes for misbehavior in peacetime would mean a simple expulsion from the service. As you pointed out, it was a time of war, my Lady. Their actions bordered on sedition much of the time. Sedition during a time of war is a *capital* offense, my Lady. And like it or not … they were *family*.”

He bowed his head and stood there; silently wiping his eyes until Xiu cleared her throat and drew his attention.

“Lord Caldar, you had testified previously that you would defend your family with your *life*. Apparently, in *this* case, you defended your stepbrothers with the lives of nearly *seven-hundred innocent victims!* … I wonder that you sleep well at night,” she said stiffly.

“In truth, my Lady … m-many times I do not.”

The Elder and her staff took a silent conference, after which Molara turned to address the gathering.

“We will take a short recess. Facilities are behind the adjacent doors. There will be *no discussion*,” she warned them before pointing in the general direction of the facilities.

Ronnie was still standing there and wiping his eyes when Maya came up and hugged him tightly. He wrapped his arms around her and rested his chin on top of her head. Radatel worked his way over and –

although he wasn't allowed to speak – managed to say volumes with his eyes. Then he hugged him as well before kissing him on the cheek and leaving him with his Maya. Ronnie managed to back up to his chair with Maya by his side.

Once sitting down, he was surprised when Meela got up and stood in front of him with tears streaming down her face. With quivering lips and stifled sobs, she finally dropped to her knees in front of him and placed her head to his feet with her hair falling around them. Tomar stood helplessly beside her, shrugged, and shook his head, which was repeated by Ronnie.

Tomar finally squatted down and got Meela back to her feet. Before leaving him, she reached out and touched the side of Ronnie's face with a light caress, then turned and was escorted to the facilities by Tomar.

The testimony resumed a few minutes later, and Ronnie returned to his place of honor...

"Lord Calder, it is our understanding that you were the *only* reason the platform sustained such limited damage – if we may *consider* it so – with as many survivors as there were. How was that possible?" Fan asked.

He stared at her while refreshing the chaos of that day in his mind. Then he glanced at Ai and the rest of her staff before going on.

"Ahh ... after our first strike against Zarox, our weapons needed extra time to charge as they'd previously been expended on the secondary targets. As we were waiting, the hidden siege platform came over the planetary horizon and got a good shot at us. After the second shot, we were *severely* damaged and I was attempting to retreat to our staging area. We didn't have a clear jump path, so I tried a technique I'd used before in tank combat. I somehow picked *these* coordinates and ended up on this *side* of the spiral arm and well away from *everything*."

He looked down at the floor while shaking his head at that incredible combination of blunder and luck.

"I *still* don't know how I picked these particular coordinates, but we were safe. We were safely out of combat, but didn't know at the time how much damage we'd sustained, or that we'd blown out most of our hardware either during or just after the jump. The platform arrived here pretty much as you see it today. We had no long-range communications, no propulsion; the majority of our crew and nearly all of our warriors were gone, and we had only two Healers. We lost one the first day we here, with a few more crewmen as well."

"Lord Caldar, interviews with the survivors indicate that you did everything humanly possible to insure the survival of your crew – including some rather *extreme* measures. What were they?" Xiu asked.

He started with a slow shake of his head before saying, "My Lady, I don't really know what would be called extreme in those circumstances. With no outer hull, we had no armor. Everyone was required to wear ship suits at all times unless in environmentally protected compartments. We went through our food stores by equitable rationing. We lived on ships gruel for *many* years. We gathered all we could and assessed our available resources. I put the crew to work and kept them occupied and engaged."

He paused in sad memory before continuing.

"The surviving Healer, Senior Yandi Tal, was restricted to her compartment for the majority of the time. At her suggestion, I instituted a ships holiday every eight days for the purpose of maintaining moral."

"Lord Caldar, what was your crew's attitude during this time period?" Fan asked.

"Ahh, for the most part we worked hard, we played hard, and the Senior and I did everything we could think of to sustain the attitude of the crew. It appeared to be working. There was very little dissent until we reached year five."

"What happened in year five, Lord Caldar," Xiu asked.

"My ... ah, my stepbrothers had been pretty compliant up until then, but they started acting out again. We had just one more ship to rebuild – another tank outfitted with extra fuel tanks for distance – and we were training pilots and navigators as well."

He paused for a moment while remembering those dark days leading up to year six.

"Anyway, the closer we got to finishing the last tank, they seemed to become more ... more *uncomfortable* about it ... almost about *leaving* here."

Fan looked down at her data pad and nodded once.

"Lord Caldar, we have been reading reports by some of your surviving crewmen about the unfortunate accident that occurred with the fourth tank. Please describe it," she asked.

He closed his eyes and swallowed once. He'd been hoping they'd simply gloss over that horrible day.

"Ahh, there was a fueling incident ... an incident with the fourth tank, my Lady. A hose fell off during fueling and it sprayed fuel all over the tank and one of the crewmen."

"Captain Riker? Item twenty-seven?" Molara called out.

The screen behind the Elder showed a several-times life-size overhead image of a crewman on a Healer's platform with the better portion of the left side of his torso burned away through his body and along most of his left lung within his rib cage. It was a moving image, and the soft raspiness of the crewman's breathing was easily heard over the gasps and suppressed retching of the unwilling audience. A lot of his left arm was burned, along with part of his lower neck, part of the right side of his chest, and some portions of his right arm as well. Portions of the armored hard suit were still on him and being savagely cut off by the Senior and her volunteer helpers.

"Lord Calder, is *this* what you term a 'fueling incident'? Are there no *safe guards* during oxidizer-based fueling that must be in place *before* a pump may be activated?" Xiu asked.

"I – y-yes, my Lady. The connection m-must be made secure and the locks activated p-properly before the p-pump will e-engage," he said with difficulty while watching the video in horrid fascination.

"Lord Calder ... Lord Calder, do you remember this *particular* incident?" Fan asked, but it took several seconds before he could rip his eyes away from the image and respond.

"Yes, my Lady. I remember it," he said bitterly.

"What happened that day, Lord Calder?" Xiu asked, triggering another delay until he gathered himself again.

"I ... I was ... helping out in the tank bay ... during the fueling. We were short a man that day. I was ... I was supervising two other crewmen during the fueling. I watched them attach the hose and lock it in place. Then one of them called me over to ask a question about something, but then he was called back across the bay for ... I don't remember ... *some* reason. The other crewman started the pump, and the hose just popped off the fitting right next to him. I jumped forward and pushed him out of the way, but then ... then the fuel ignited and bur—" he stopped abruptly.

The helmet of the man on the screen had finally been removed revealing the face of a young Commander Rondal Calder, before a respirator mask was strapped over his nose and mouth.

"Lord Calder, please indulge us. Please remove your upper clothing," Fan asked.

He just stared at her.

“Please, my Lord.”

He numbly unsealed his jumpsuit and pulled it down around his waist. Then he opened his underwear and pulled it down as well. The lights seemed a bit brighter now.

“Lord Caldar, please forgive us but ... would you turn slowly for the witnesses?” Xiu asked.

He made two slow rotations ... letting everyone see the aftermath of an oxidizer-fueled fire aboard ship.

“Thank you, my Lord. You seem to have recovered quite a bit from that ordeal,” Fan said.

“My Healers and Seniors have been most generous with their time, my Lady,” he said in a near whisper, before pulling his underwear and jumpsuit back up and sealing it.

Once he was ready again, Xiu led off this time.

“Lord Caldar, the suit tracking record shows your suit in the tank bay at the time of the fire. They also show crewmen Felis and Talis Caldarois in the tank bay at the same time. Were they involved in the fueling operation with you, Lord Caldar?” she asked.

“Yes, they were, my Lady. But it was an accident ... somehow...”

“Captain Riker, item twenty-eight,” Molara said.

An audio recording of a suit conversation started:

“Did you fix it?”

“Yeah, it should pop right off”

“Well, do it quick before he walks back!”

“It’s on – get out of the way!”

“Augh! You stupid asshole!”

It looped:

“Did you fix it?”

“Yeah, it should pop right off”

“Well, do it quick before he walks back!”

“It’s on – get out of the way!”

“Augh! You stupid asshole!”

It looped again:

“Did you fix it?”

“Yeah, it should pop right off”

“Well, do it quick before he walks back!”

“It’s on – get out of the way!”

“Augh! You stupid asshole!”

“That’s enough, Captain Riker,” Molara said.

Ronnie was staring at his image on the screen while his body was quivering just the tiniest bit. Sounds of soft whimpering came from Meela.

“Lord Caldar, do you recognize either of those two voices?” Fan asked.

“Yes... Yes, I do. One is ... one is Felis ... and the other is Talis.”

“Lord Caldar, those suit collar recordings took place at the same time the fire broke out in the tank service bay. The timer on the recordings matches the timer on the fire detection equipment for the tank service bay,” Fan stipulated in detail.

Meela’s whimpers turned to sobs once she finally realized her sons’ attempted murder of their stepbrother. The Elder silently contacted Molara, who went over to Meela and pressed something against her neck, then triggered it.

Meela quickly calmed down and relaxed enough so that Tomar had to sit with her to hold her in place. Molara waved a finger at him and pressed it against her lips before returning to her place. As the sedative was rather mild, Meela remained awake and able to watch the proceedings but was no longer reacting to them.

“It would appear, Lord Caldar, that your *stepbrothers* had determined you would not be going home with them ... perhaps to report their disobedience to orders that resulted in the near complete destruction of this platform and the deaths of nearly all its crew,” Xiu suggested quietly.

“I ... I would not care to ...s-speculate ... my Lady,” he whispered.

“Lord Caldar, you were fortunate indeed that Senior Yandi had survived the initial attack and the subsequent five years while you and your crew were basically constructing star transports out of scrap

parts to get your surviving crew safely back home,” Fan said. “Lady Lili’s assessment of your injuries matched those of Senior Yandi’s.

“Approximately three days after initial treatment by Senior Yandi, you would have been ambulatory once again and just need sufficient food for your body to rebuild itself under her care and guidance. If you’d had to rely on a ship doc, you probably would have died.”

He didn’t hear a question in there, so he remained silent.

“Lord Caldar, even though you had sufficient food, and Senior Yandi was one of our very best Healers, you did not rebuild your body while on the platform. Why is that?” Xiu asked, but saw him close his eyes in pain this time before tilting his head down.

“Senior Yandi … she … she died … sometime between my initial Healing and the time I woke up three days later,” he said quietly before looking up at her with a blank expression on his face.

Xiu shook her head in sadness, even as her lips pressed tightly together at the loss of the remaining Healer. She let out a resigned sigh before continuing with their findings.

“Lord Caldar, we knew where *you* were during that time, but we were curious and had additional records pulled. The suit logs show that Talis Caldorous, or his suit, had paused at Senior Yandi’s quarters during the morning of your *third* day under the Senior’s care.”

He shot her a look of incredulous disbelief. Yandi had been poisoned, and his *stepbrother* was implicated? While he was trying to absorb that revelation, Fan continued with their findings.

“A search of the records for the platform’s ship doc shows various medications that could be supplied to an injured crewman should a Healer no longer be available. Some of those medications had extreme warnings about dosage … some even being capable of causing *death*. Of course, those drugs used to grant *Grace* were present as well.”

Xiu caught sight of some confusion among the witnesses, so she raised her hand for attention.

“For those of you not aware, should an injury be deemed too severe to treat, and survival a virtual impossibility, each warship such as this one carries Grace drugs to relieve the dying of their pain and suffering. They are carefully monitored. Lord Caldar, how many Grace doses were used under your command?” she asked.

He stared at Fan for a moment, but turned back to Xiu when the pieces started falling into place.

"I ... I think ... f-four, my Lady," he said very quietly. "I administered them myself. They were only available by my authorization through the ship's security system."

Xiu tapped her data pad, then looked up at him.

"Our investigation shows a total of ninety doses out of one hundred were still in stock, Lord Calder. That would mean six doses were missing. By a strange coincidence, the toxicology reports from Doctor Woldron aboard *Shining Star* indicates the approximate dosage of Grace drugs found in the tissue residue and blood of our sister, Senior Yandi, to be between four and six times that normally issued to end the life of a suffering crewman."

She paused to glance over at Meela for a moment before going on.

"Additional suit logs show Felis Calderous and Talis Calderous merging close by in the corridor outside Senior Yandi's quarters where you were being treated, Lord Calder," Xiu said, but turned away while shaking her head and letting Fan bring it home.

"Based on the *circumstantial* evidence thus far, it is the suggestion of this investigation that Felis Calderous performed an unauthorized access of the ship doc security system, took six doses of Grace drugs, met his brother Talis Calderous in the hallway outside Senior Yandi's quarters, and then drugged a food tray that Talis Calderous had *apparently* – again from suit logs – carried from the commons to just outside her quarters. From there, he apparently passed it to Senior Yandi in anticipation that the meal had been prepared for *your* consumption," Fan said, then paused for several seconds before going on with, "We simply *cannot* conceive of a situation where anyone would *deliberately murder their only remaining Healer!*"

Fan's voice had risen sharply, but she turned away before Xiu stepped forward again.

"That breakfast tray was indeed *ordered* by Senior Yandi – again by records recovered during our investigation of the ships logs – but was intended for *her* consumption. Senior Yandi's records of your treatment clearly indicated that she expected you to wake up *later* in the day – which you *did* ... only to find her dead body lying on the floor at your feet," she said.

Ronnie was empty. He'd cried over this too many times and it was just ... *enough* for now. The Elder sensed this and conferred silently with her staff again. They had just a few more items to cover.

"Lord Calder, immediately after your awakening, what did you do?" Fan asked.

"I - I called my S-Second-in-Command at the time ... L-Lida. I had her give me a status report ... an update of the d-damage, how long to repair, status of the o-other crew in the fire. She was pretty ... tight-lipped about e-everything. She, ahh ... she invoked r-regulations for an incapacitated o-officer, and relieved me of command until ... until I'd had a c-chance to recover a little l-longer ... and to ... to grieve. S-She said not to worry ... she'd take care of e-everything."

"We did not find her on a list of survivors. What happened to crewman Lida?" Xiu asked.

"S-She... She was the first crewman I ... I granted Grace for. It was s-several days after. She was injured in the tank bay by a departing tank, and it ...it had c-cut her nearly in two. S-She was screaming so *loud* ... there was so much *b-blood*. Her suit had clamped down, but ... but there was n-nothing the ship doc could do with just her u-upper half... I - I h-helped her the only way I could," he said in tears.

Fan waited for a few minutes until he got control of himself again before asking, "Why was the tank leaving?"

"It was ... Felis and Talis. They'd taken some food and a tank... Thought they were going home all by themselves, I guess. My new Second promptly relieved me from command and had me carried back to quarters. I later learned that they'd taken a tank without much fuel and no air. On top of that, they blew out the exciter so they weren't going anywhere, anyway. A tank was prepped and sent out a few days later to see if they could salvage it. Found them about a week later ...suffocated. Their bodies are down with all the others, somewhere; it's recorded in the ships log. I found out about it after they'd brought them back."

The Elder once again conferred with her Seniors, and this time data pads were involved, with Fan and Xiu both scanning up and down lists while glancing at the Elder. Molara came forward and pointed to something on her data pad, then handed it to Fan and backed away.

"Lord Caldar, we have one more question before we render a decision. Why did you not bring up the issue of your stepbrothers actions against you and your crew at your original debriefing and trial?" Fan asked.

He thought about that; remembering his anger and disappointment at having his ship and crew disrupted by the actions of his duplicitous stepbrothers, along with his *own* failure to keep them under control. Then he thought back to his reasoning at the time, and glanced over at Radatel for a moment.

"My Ladies, my Lady Elder... It would serve no purpose other than to further embarrass the House of Caldorous, as has been done this day. I stand by my conviction. I was solely responsible for the actions and behavior of my stepbrothers. I allowed the failure of command and control that caused the failure of my mission, the destruction of this platform, and the deaths of my crewmates. I ask that you let my conviction stand and announce no further dishonor on the House of Caldorous ... if only for the sake of the stability of the Crown and Commonwealth, my Ladies."

The Ladies sat very still and looked at him – in *depth*. The Elder finally spoke.

"Noted ... Lord Caldar."

At a glance from the Elder, Molara came forward once again.

"We will take a very short break once again. There will be *no* discussion while the Elder and her Staff confer."

Everyone relaxed again, and several breaths were let out. Ronnie felt for his seat, then sat down, and was quickly joined by Maya, who sat next to him and curled herself under his arm.

Meela was starting to look livelier. She shook her head slightly, then clutched Tomar's arm where he sat next to her.

The First Lord and Lady looked drained. Lili was worried about the outcome, along with the emotional turmoil that Radatel was experiencing. On some level, he'd known the hell Ronnie had been put through while growing up, but his duties to the Crown and Commonwealth had left very little time for the development of adequate parenting skills. Now he felt deeply guilty for letting it go on as he had.

David and Diane were both wondering what Ronnie had to worry about. The issue was a done deal and had happened nearly two-hundred years ago. What mattered who did what, and to who when he'd already been punished, fired, and cast aside by what little family he had left? If what they'd seen of Ronnie's *friends* was any indication, then to *hell* with the Royal family – he was better off *without* them.

Larl and Amy sat together quietly, but Larl had spent years on the space lanes and knew quite a bit of law. He didn't see what Ronnie had to worry about. Amy was just worried about her Grandpa, as was Andy. Shay was cuddled up to Andy and wrapped around one of his arms. Her belly occasionally prodded his arm when his little brother kicked randomly. Laisee was holding a hand alongside to feel it as well, along with wondering if there were going to be children in her future.

The rest of the Wives were very optimistic, but Spring Blossom was still chanting Apache prayers in her head for the safety of her little TS'ILSQQSÉ BIYIGÉ.

With the Elder and Her Staff...

'Kita, are you well?' the Elder asked her.

'I'm just tired, child. Maya sustains me a while longer'

'My Ladies, I'm of a mind to press him completely; yet the question remains – will he stand by his convictions?' the Elder asked them.

'We all, with the exception of you and our Kita, are biased, my Lady, and we have not known him long enough to form an opinion' Xiu commented.

'Kita, he has been watched by you for decades. Have you anything to suggest?' the Elder asked her.

'Yes. He is a clever little Man-child and easily misplaced, it appears' she shared and almost chuckled 'But there is one among us who worked with him at the Fringe for eight years. If anyone knows the character of our Ronnie, it would be she'

'Ladies, comments ... complaints?'

'He has changed from his service mentality, my Elder' Xiu suggested.

'The few words I spoke with her say he was much the same then, as now, my Elder' Fan offered.

'Then we will ask'

'Lady Sai Tal, a moment of your time, please' the Elder called to her.

Sai blinked in surprise, then faced the Elder from where she was sitting.

'I am yours to command, my Elder'

'We seek your opinion of Lord Caldar's character' she asked her.

'My Elder, I was with him but a day or two at most'

'We refer to your eight-year association with him at the Fringe' the Elder revised her parameters.

There was a momentary flash of anger from Sai to Ronnie, who ducked his head and looked around warily.

'Sai ... we knew it then as we know it now. We commend you on your work with the Madman, but we ask about his character. Do you feel it has changed since then?' the Elder asked again.

'My Lady Elder ... the Madman is still ... mad ... yet his character is still pure. The only thing of note is his loyalty to family. He now places that above the Commonwealth ... and places no consideration on the Crown' she offered.

'He is disloyal to the Crown?' Fan asked.

'No, my Lady. He merely regards the Crown as least important of the three'

'You say his character is pure, Sai. What prompts this observation?' the Elder asked.

'He had every opportunity, and yet did not try to take advantage of me. And ... whether or not Maya accepts his bonding, he has accepted me and mine as his family ... regardless'

'He accepts Déjà, Endo, and Gallus as FAMILY?' Fan projected with some amusement. 'Is he aware that she is a cannibal, and your boys are really—'

'Lady Fan! We will maintain the polite fiction until such time as Lady Sai willingly bares her confession for our review. Your opinion, Sai – would you trust him as family?' the Elder pressed her, and had to wait an incredibly long two seconds for her to respond.

'Yes, my Lady Elder. I trust him with my life' Sai replied, but was now very much confused about what few secrets she still had left to her life.

'Very few secrets in the service of the Elder' echoed a small and elderly voice. *'Thank you, child'* it finished politely, before her head became silent once again.

A Decision is Made...

Molara stepped forward and made her announcement.

"We will resume. Lord Caldar, come forward and stand for your rendering."

'Crap, she didn't have to say it THAT way!' he thought as he stepped forward and stood as before, while having the vision of a huge pot of boiling oil in his mind now.

The Elder stood and Ronnie awaited the voice of doom once more.

"Lord Rondal TSILSQQSÉ BIYIGÉ Caldar sai Caldarous se Earth ne Kantor ... it is the finding of this investigation that you are, in fact, *fully* responsible for the failure of your mission to reduce the Drecks home world of Zarox; the subsequent attack on your ship; the subsequent damage to said ship; the subsequent loss of life to said crewmen of said ship, and the loss of the life of our sister – Yandi Sai Maya Tal se Cletus. Do you agree with the findings of this investigation and agree to abide by its findings now and hereafter?"

He hesitated only a moment before accepting this foregone conclusion.

"Yes, my Elder. I agree with the findings and I will abide now and hereafter to its findings," he said clearly. "However short that may be," he muttered to himself.

The Elder nodded at Molara once again, then turned to face Meela this time.

"Lady Meili Peizhi, come forward and stand before us," Molara said.

Meela stumbled upon getting up and had to be helped by Tomar, who was stopped at the edge of the standing area again by the pointing finger of Molara. He meekly stepped back, while the Elder turned to face Meela.

"Lady Meili Tung-Mei Peizhi se Loca... Do you agree with the findings of this investigation and agree to abide by its findings now and hereafter?"

"I – yes! Yes, my Elder! I agree with the findings and I will abide by its findings now and hereafter!" she said gratefully, then nearly made a move to her seat, but was frozen by a glance from Molara. She decided it was safer to simply stand still and bow from the waist until she was told otherwise.

The Elder made her way back to her seat and sat down before addressing Ronnie.

"Now hear *our* judgment. Lord Caldar, the status of your dismissal from military service has *not* changed. You are not accorded any special status, nor provided any pay or allowances for broken military service. In addition, in the *future* you will not provide any Commonwealth military services unless you are accepted and authorized at the *Emperor's* level to perform such under the conditions that *he sets forth*. *Is this understood?*"

"Yes, my Lady Elder," he said quickly.

She paused for a moment to let him relax – for just a moment.

“Lord Caldar, it is our observation that your *fanatical* devotion to family honor overruled your *reported* capacity for *common sense!* In your future endeavors it would serve you well to carefully *balance* your sense of family honor against *practical* considerations – for those *around* you; for those you *serve*; for those who serve *you*, and for the overall consideration of the Commonwealth as a *whole*. In this way we feel that your place in our society of the Commonwealth would best be served. Do you have any questions or comments, Lord Caldar?”

“Ahh, no, my Lady Elder. Thank you, my Lady Elder ... my Ladies,” he said, and bowed to them all.

The Elder nodded her head before turning to look at Meela, who was still locked at the waist.

“Lady Peizhi, you may return to your seat – for now,” she directed.

“Thank you, my Lady Elder,” Meela said softly and backed away carefully before finding Tomar’s arms to guide her to her seat.

Noon +3.5 (Day 106) – The Investigation Comes for Meela

Molara came forward once again.

“My Lords and Ladies, Gentlemen and Gentlewomen ... this portion of this investigation has now concluded. At this time, you may not speak of *any* matters discussed within these proceedings, except among *yourselves* ... and if you do, you will do so *quietly*. These are – *by nature* – *Royal family matters* and will be *treated as such*. With the exception of the names I will now call, you will all be allowed to leave. Those remaining will help us resolve yet another tiny issue.”

She stopped to check her data pad, then commenced to read from it.

“As I call your name, please come forward; Lord Radatel Caldorous, Lord Rondal Caldar, Lady Liling Song, Lady Sai Tal, Lady Maya Tal, Lady Meili Peizhi, Captain Vitas Tomar, Mistress Déjà ne Sai Tal, Endo ne Sai Tal and Gallus ne Sai Tal.”

She looked up to address everyone else.

“The rest of you will *leave*. Oh ... not *you*, Captain Riker. I have *another* data tab for you,” she said, and grinned when he came forward and took the new tab in exchange for the old one. “Might we have a more *intimate* gathering for this group?” she asked him quietly. “They will all need to see the screen, but it would be nice to be able to *look at* one another as well.”

"I'll see what is offered, my Lady," he said quietly, and quickly ran the numbers across his fingertips before walking over to check the monitor.

He came back and made a few suggestions, to which she nodded her approval.

The final arrangement was a half-circle of sorts, with Endo, Déjà, and Gallus making their own half-circle just outside and behind the main one.

Being the considerate person that he was, Larl also made their seats quite a bit higher, bigger, and more comfortable.

Molara made the interior seating arrangements – placing Ronnie and Meela side by side, with Meela in the middle, followed on Meela's side by Tomar, Lili, and Radatel.

On Ronnie's side were Maya and her mother, Sai.

Arranged in a half-circle in front of them were the Elder and her staff, with the exception of Molara. She'd taken a seat close to the display controls next to Captain Riker and sat there with a data pad in hand.

When all were situated, the Elder began rather quietly but still loud enough to be heard by all while she addressed Ronnie.

"My dear Lord Rondal, as with your *previous* testimony, the seeking of the truth is often a long and painstaking undertaking ... yet in the end the truth can be its *own* reward and many hidden mysteries may be resolved upon the finding of these truths. As we found today, the truth that was hidden so long ago can sometimes reveal things about ourselves that even *we* did not wish to believe were true – but still caused disaster in a much wider expanse that we may have ever anticipated."

Then she looked up to encompass all of them.

"You are all here in this room because you are all of the Royals, or of very close family association with the Royals. I am informed today that Endo, Gallus, and Mistress Déjà have been accepted by Lord Calder as members of his family, even as he has accepted Lady Sai Tal as a member of his family regardless of any current or future association with Lady Maya Tal."

Then she turned to Tomar.

"As for *you*, Captain Vitas Tomar... You are named *Vitas* after your paternal Grandfather, Hamas Vitas Tomar; a nobleman of a lesser

rank, to be sure, but a Royal, just the same. In addition, I'm told you have accepted an *informal* relationship with Lady Meela to your mutual benefit. In this we are pleased, as it seems to have *moderated* her moods, somewhat," the Elder said, pausing to let her comments sink in for several seconds while she reviewed the data pad in her lap.

While Ai was so engaged, everyone was looking around at each other...

Radatel was somewhat confused, while Lili had a sad sort of smile on her face.

Tomar appeared to be surprised, while Meela was blushing.

Ronnie ... he didn't really care because *his* head was off the chopping block for the time being, while Maya was beaming at her Ronnie for essentially adopting his potential mother-in-law and her rather large and bulky family.

Sai was thinking that something nasty was going to happen to *somebody* real soon now, while Endo, Gallus and Déjà were waiting for someone to make the *wrong* move.

Molara and Larl were murmuring inaudibly over by the control station and smiling at each other. If one had to guess, it appeared they were making an assignation with each other for later...

"And now to the issue at hand," the Elder began again, and looked up at them. "As it happens, quite a while ago – at a time *well* before you were born, Lord Calder – things within the Commonwealth were turning *sour*. Several small issues kept coming up that *seemed* unrelated at the time, and our office was hard pressed to determine the *direction* these events were taking the Commonwealth. Finally, another event happened just a few years before you were born that *also* seemed relatively innocent at the time. And yet, here we are – sorting out the debris from that event over two-hundred years later."

Then the Elder focused on Meela.

"Lady Peizhi, it is my understanding that in recent days, Lady Song had offered her hand to you in *friendship*, and offered counsel and advice for *whatever* troubled your heart ... and yet you turned her *down*. We wish you would have taken her hand in friendship and accepted her offer of help ... at that *time*."

Meela began quivering and started turning very pale.

"We *also* note that in recent days you seem to have developed a measure of *humanity*. Again, we hoped you would have changed your mind and sought out Lady Song, but ... again, you did *not*."

As the Elder continued to speak, Meela was beginning to sweat profusely.

“My Lady Peizhi, I am of two minds about this. On the one hand, we have spent a great deal of time and effort digging out little tiny bits of fact and placing the pieces on the table; turning, twisting, finding partial matches, *overlooking* pieces at times ... and finding that some pieces originally thought to be *gold* were now turning *blue*... Or sometimes ... *yellow*.”

The primary colors of gold for the Royal House of Kantor, blue for the planetary system of Loca, and yellow for the Hegemony, was not lost on several of the Elder’s guests – Meela herself included.

“I would very much like to have each piece of our puzzle verified – one piece at a time – but the formal method we would use would be either too time consuming ... or *extremely* painful.”

The Elder handed her data pad to Fan and folded her hands in her lap before continuing.

“The other method would be to simply list a set of charges and have the responsible person pick and choose those charges that he ... or *she* ... will admit to. Then we can quickly go on from there. However, it would not be right to suggest that whatever resolution is settled upon would be any more or any less severe or permanent for *either* of the methods we had chosen.”

Ai rose from her chair and stepped forward slowly while gesturing lightly with her hands as she spoke.

“I will say that I – *personally* – would be inclined to be *kinder* to the person or persons who selected the quicker and *easier* method – if only to ease their final moments a bit,” she offered.

She’d been looking around at all of them, but this last comment was directed specifically at Meela. Then she approached her ... stopping a mere pace away from her while staring *directly* into her eyes.

“Lady Peizhi ... is there something you wish to discuss with us ... at *this time*?” she asked sweetly.

Meela swallowed with difficulty and began to rise, but Tomar placed his hand on her shoulder and held her down.

“No, Meela, do not speak!” he whispered loudly.

“Captain Tomar, I was not addressing *you*,” the Elder said coldly.

"My Lady Elder ... *Please!* My Lady Meela does not know the laws regarding sedition and ... and treason. She may unfairly prejudice herself in your eyes," Tomar pleaded on her behalf.

Ai was surprised at the response from Meela's champion, but took it in stride and proceeded to allow him his due.

"Very well, Captain Tomar," she said calmly, before directing a thought at Molara.

Molara conferred with Larl, and the screen behind the Elder lit up with text in characters high enough to be seen from the back of the room.

Ai turned and calmly read them aloud.

"SEDITION:

"The Commonwealth of Planets defines sedition as the stirring up of rebellion against the government or military authority in power or control. Sedition is encouraging one's fellow citizens or military personnel to rebel against their state or constituted and authorized authority. No person shall be convicted of sedition, unless on the testimony of two witnesses to the same overt act, or on confession in open court. This offense is punishable by imprisonment; with a death option should lives have been taken in the course of the act. Terrorism may or may not be included depending on the circumstances and evidentiary results of the terrorist act."

Ai turned back to Tomar and bowed her head slightly.

"I see your *point*, Captain Tomar, although the list of charges I am contemplating does not exactly fall under *this* particular category of crimes."

'Molara'

The text was replaced with another section that she also read aloud.

"TREASON:

"The Commonwealth of Planets defines treason as the unlawful betrayal, treachery, or breach of allegiance against the Commonwealth, not only in levying war against the Commonwealth but includes adhering to Commonwealth enemies, giving them aid or comfort. This offense is punished with death. By the same article of the Commonwealth, no person shall be convicted of treason, unless on the testimony of two witnesses to the same overt act, or on confession in open court."

Ai turned back to Tomar again, but smiled widely this time.

“Captain Tomar, this is *much* more succinct in its meaning, and more declarative in its punishment; yet how the conviction shall be resolved remains much easier.”

She turned to the rest of the observers.

“For the edification of this investigation, I will mention two names ... or rather, two names and an *alias*...” she paused before turning to Meela.

“Taldus Remy se Loca,” she said while watching Meela’s reaction and skimming her mind. “And Cleeve Dalis se Loca. Or rather, he is also known as Cleda Malia se Krux ... *ne Zarox!*”

Meela’s heart skipped *more* than a couple of beats and she was on the verge of having a heart attack, even at such a young age. On top of that, she began keening in the most pitiable way while her mouth forced itself into a wide-open grimace that scrunched her eyes up painfully.

The Elder turned and returned to her seat, where she sat decorously while waiting for things to settle.

Tomar was beside himself, trying to figure out a way to save his beloved Meela. Right now, he couldn’t even stop her from crying. What was more amazing was Ronnie sitting next to her; also crying silently and shaking his head slowly while asking Maya to bring a few towels from the facilities for Meela.

Once he had towels in hand, Ronnie brought Meela into his arms and began wiping her face – blotting all the wet spots and getting her to blow her nose as if she were a little child. Then he sat there rocking her as if she were his own daughter, with Maya sitting on her other side and rubbing her back while whispering to her.

Meela began nodding nervously while Ronnie continued speaking to her. Then he sat her back in her own seat before turning to the Elder and her staff.

“My Lady Elder, may I please address you and your staff?”

The Elder looked at him warily, but felt nothing from him at all.

“Very well, Lord Calder.”

“It would appear that you *believe* you have sufficient evidence for a conviction of treason against one or more persons here in this room.”

He pointedly ignored Meela as the potential target, and the Elder remained silent about the issue.

"I would submit that it is a foregone conclusion at this point and the only matters at issue are how fast or slow the end process will be for you and your staff. Captain Tomar has advised Lady Peizhi not to speak so that she may not admit to treason during this investigation which – although it is not a *formal* court, open or otherwise – holds the same judicial presence recognized by both the Crown and the Commonwealth as a function of your office."

He paused, but Ai remained silent.

"Therefore, whether she speaks or not is irrelevant to this investigation, as – at *this* point in time – you only seek the *truth*. Likewise, it would appear from Lady Peizhi's reaction to the names you just mentioned that she may or may *not* be fully aware of *any* possibility of her participation in *any* act of treason against the Crown or the Commonwealth ... which is what this investigation is proposed to determine."

His lips thinned at the Elder's continued silence.

"I would suggest that – at *this* time – we simply go down the list of charges. I'm sure you'll be able to determine not only the factuality but also the *degree* of complicity that any person or persons within this room are culpable in the eyes of the office of the Elder. In the interests of *expediency*, my Lady Elder, my Ladies," he added, then waited patiently.

The Elder and her staff conferred quickly, but the Elder had one more remark to say afterwards.

"You do realize, Lord Calder, that should you pursue this effort, there may be things revealed which will be painful to any or *all* of your immediate family?" she asked stiffly, while darting a glance at Maya.

'That, too, was a foregone conclusion, my Lady Elder, and I am aware of a great many things that I had not been previously. Likewise, I already know the desired outcome of these proceedings and the executioner you have chosen for the task' he projected neutrally.

To several of the witnesses nothing had happened ...other than the Elder's eyes flashed dangerously, and her nostrils flared briefly.

"Very well, Lord Calder. Let us begin," she said frostily.

Noon +5.5 (Day 106) – Andy and David Wonder

"Dad, what do you thinks going on down there?"

David checked the display that monitored the ice-crushing operation remotely. He was distracted by Andy's question, but more so by his own concerns.

"I don't know, Andy, and I don't think we *want* to know. There's all the Seniors, and the First and Second Wife involved – and I don't think *Lili*'s in trouble. Let's just drop it, son."

"Okay, Dad."

They continued watching the ice processing system set up by Donnel and his gang of machinists. The blocks, most of them a hundred feet or so across, were brought in by a small shuttle using modified shield fields and staged outside a large rectangular space they'd fabbed in just twenty-four hours.

When David had asked what the rush was all about, he'd been told that Ronnie had gone out to get some ice and said he'd be right back. Less than two days later, there was a two-kilometer chunk of ice standing off-station big enough that – if it had enough *mass* – they could orbit it. Enough ice to last ... well, a *long* time.

Noon +6 (Day 106) – Continuing the Defense

Ronnie rose once again to face the Elder and her staff.

"My Lady Elder, you have presented an amazingly *detailed* list of crimes against House Caldorous – *involving* House Caldorous, house Caldar, the Clan Tal se Cletus, and numerous other entities potentially involving Lady Peizhi's activities for the last two-hundred eighteen years – approximately.

"With exquisite details, you've shown that Lady Peizhi's activities in influencing the Crown in the person of the Emperor exceeded even the efforts of your *own* office, whose responsibility it is to pull the Emperor's strings—"

"**LORD CALDAR!** That will be *QUITE* enough of *THAT!*" Fan shouted.

Ronnie looked suitably shocked.

"Ahh ... I beg your pardon, my Lady Fan. I shall rephrase that ... let us see ... *yes!* Your office, no doubt, through some *administrative* mix-up, had unfortunately been inadequately informed of the Emperor's *receptiveness* to undue influence from an unauthorized source?"

Fan didn't say anything further, but fumed quite a bit as he continued.

"Much was made of the communications between Lady Peizhi and her sons while they were aboard this platform. I do not find it unusual that a mother would be interested in her sons' welfare during a time of war.

"As for the combat simulation program dubbed the *Kraken's Child* being *specifically* installed to cause me bodily harm... Well, most every new program has a *few* bugs in it, and the records show that Felis entered the program *several times* while making corrections to the programming. This was presumably to repair some of the bugs that, unfortunately, remained troublesome up until our Mister Ardan arrived and finally *fixed* them – and then made vast *improvements* to the program as well – which is only to be expected because, unlike Felis, Mister Ardan is an *established* expert in his field.

"I should also point out the program in question was utilized by several other crewmen of the *Microcosmus* with a similar history of injury associated with that use. For myself, it allowed me to maintain a fine edge in my swordsmanship. As a matter of fact, we are currently pursuing ideas to market it *commercially*."

Molara rolled her eyes at that, while the other Ladies simmered quietly.

"On the issue of Felis and Talis 'picking on me.' That is a matter between siblings, and – *yes* – perhaps *adult* supervision could have helped the situation, but there were *five* Wives involved in the household, but only *one* husband. In addition, as far as preferential treatment ... the Emperor *himself* accorded me *extra-special* treatment to the exclusion of my stepbrothers – I, a mere half-breed Earthling – even as *they* were ignored by their paternal Grandfather. That was simply *scandalous*!"

"Rondal, you go too far," Lili murmured.

'Don't stop me now, Lili. I'm on a roll' he pressed back silently.

"And regarding any animosity that Lady Peizhi held toward me *personally*? I account for that to the fact she was raised in a relatively *unenlightened* environment on Loca – a place where Healers were *not* celebrated and accorded the social standing they were accustomed to on other, more *evolved* planets. Likewise, finding that my stepsister and I had become *intimate* probably did not help my relationship with her, as those sorts of behaviors were *not* tolerated on Loca where she was raised.

"And finally, what mother would not wish the very *best* for her children, and find great exception to the fact that her *own* children – fathered by the First Lord *himself* – were not accorded the *same* privilege and respect I had managed to garner during my formative years?"

He slowly paced in a small circle while preparing his next set of arguments in his mind.

"On the issue of the attempts on my life while in service on this platform... We can find no *credible* evidence relating to Lady Peizhi's *suspected* push for her sons to either take my life or even damage my credibility. I'm afraid we must leave that up to my – unfortunately – very unwise and very dead stepbrothers. Besides that, earlier this very day, we'd already established that the entire episode aboard this platform was *my fault*."

When he stopped, he was facing Maya, but slowly turned back to face the Elder and her Staff before speaking more softly.

"Now, I find there is an issue that we must dance around very carefully regarding a certain diplomatic mission into Dreck's territory. Once again, a certain amount of 'lack of oversight' regarding those *personally* involved must be factored in to this particularly disastrous event – detailed facts of which not *all* of us in this room are currently privy to ... nor do they *need be*," he suggested while sparing a cautious glance in Maya's direction.

He'd managed to squelch details of that machination nearly an hour earlier, when the Elder had acquiesced after glancing at Maya herself.

"Suffice to say that any diplomatic mission into Dreck's territory comes under the control of the Diplomatic Counselor Office of the Commonwealth. That office reports in a *direct line* to the Emperor's staff and – once *again* – I submit that a mission of *this* much delicacy, with *this* much potential danger, and *this* much capacity for political mishap could not *possibly* have merely *slipped through the cracks* of administrative processing without *someone* – ANYONE – taking notice of it at an appropriate level."

He paused and turned to the witnesses before saying, "Yet, the Lady Elder would choose to believe that Lady Peizhi's *natural* charm and beauty were sufficient to cause the Emperor to accede to her *alleged* request for him to sponsor this mission out of her home planet of *Loca* – a planet with virtually *no* ties with any other planet to this date, save for *commercial* ones."

Having pronounced all this, he raised his hands and hunched his shoulders in a "What the *fuck*?" gesture before slowly turning back to face the Elder as he went on.

"Interestingly enough, the Elder's research indicates that several of the Ambassador's staff were, *themselves*, supposedly agents of the Dreck's – yet they ended up becoming 'non-functional' along with the rest of the mission."

He held his breath for a moment, but caught nothing from Maya, so he relaxed and continued.

"Now ... let's get to the part that I'm sure my Lady Elder assumed would render me *apoplectic* – the issue of my son's apparent murder on Earth. For those of you who are not aware, I was requested to perform a seeding mission, and produced a son from a lower, related member of my mother's family line.

"This young man grew up, married, and had a son who is currently aboard this platform with his wife and children. His name is David Lane se Earth and he is married to Diane Lane se Earth. He has two children, Amy and Andrew Lane, also of Earth," he said, and smiled proudly while catching his breath.

"As it turns out, Diane is pregnant once again with David's child – another daughter – and David is also having a child with their assistant and Healer-in-Training – Shay Daishi se Wilder. Also... Young Amy is with child by ... some *scoundrel* of Earth, I'm told, but she is the intended bond-mate of my pilot – Captain Karl Riker se Tyler.

"Not to be left out, Andrew, so far as anyone knows, has not gotten *anyone* pregnant ... but not for lack of *trying*. He *is*, however, the intended bond-mate for Shay Daishi ... once her duty to his parents is resolved."

There was a mixture of smiles as that last went around the room. Maya tilted her head as if in thought for a moment, but whatever had tickled her memory disappeared, so she returned to being merely attentive.

"My point in all this is that – *yes* – I *have* lost a son. Two of my stepmothers have lost their previous *husbands*. The Emperor has outlived *all* of his wives. Both life and death *happen*. We *rejoice* in life ... and we grieve in death. I grieved for my son's death earlier this year, but it was through the fortunate intervention of Lady Maya Tal that he managed to live the additional *ten years* he'd not originally been allotted."

He paused and closed his eyes before bringing up a hand to wipe their edges for a moment. Afterwards, he let out a sigh and continued.

"If Lady Peizhi had conveyed a *rumor*, which was repeated by a *housemaid*, as told by *another* housemaid, who overheard the comment by my Mother that I had a living son on Earth and he could be found near a place my Mother had *previously* lived on Earth ... then *anyone* searching within the historical public records of House Caldarous could discover approximately where that was. The question remains – who do we blame? Do we blame the housemaids? Do we blame my

Mother? Do we blame Lady Maya Tal for allowing my son to live *long* enough to become of interest to the affairs of the Drecks?"

He paused and turned to face his family sitting behind him before pointing to himself.

"Or do we blame *me*? Me ... who failed to reduce the planet Zarox so many years ago and must *still* live with the debris from that failure?" he said, then let that sink in while turning around to face the Elder again.

"As for other agents on Earth ... or Zarox ... Loca ... Kantor... There are agents all *over* the place, and they're *bound* to trip over one another once in a while, and no doubt get into mischief upon occasion.

"My Lady Elder, in my rather *short* career as commander of this platform, I destroyed the lives of *millions* and *millions* of Drecks military and *civilian* populations, plus whatever subject species were planet-side during my attacks. I *personally* reduced several mixed-company moon installations ... and a few planets.

"My Lady Elder, my Ladies ... I do not see satisfaction in the *cold-blooded killing* of *ONE HUMAN FEMALE*, compared to the *TREMENDOUS loss of life already expended during the events as depicted here this evening!*"

He paused and shook his head slowly, which allowed Ai the opportunity to inject her piece.

"My Lord Caldar, you've spoken quite eloquently and at great length concerning the issues presented during this investigation ... *but the fact remains that treason has been committed, and a life is forfeit to complete the sentence!*"

He paced for about a minute while thinking and looking up at the screen with the definition of treason on it. He finally stopped and stared at it – reading and rereading it several times.

'Give it up, child. There is blood pooling on the floor, and the valaets are pacing'

'Patience, Grandmother. This is a sword that merely needs straightening'

He smiled at Kita's taunting, now that he knew it was *she* who was guiding him earlier. Now that she'd broken his concentration, another fresh glance at the screen seemed to offer him an edge, and he looked directly at Ai.

"My Lady Elder, your case rests on the assertion that Lady Peizhi was 'adhering' to Commonwealth enemies; giving them aid or comfort. This is true, yes?" he asked quickly.

Ai tried to extend within him, but he was still blocked from her.

"Yes... Within the wide context of the act," she said tentatively.

"My Lady, the act is *not* that wide," he asserted while waving an arm towards the screen. "It is, in fact, very *short and concise*," he added, before looking up and reading a portion of it aloud.

"In the first sentence; '*UNLAWFUL betrayal, treachery, or breach of allegiance against the Commonwealth*'... That portion of the sentence alone conveys that '*betrayal, treachery, or breach of allegiance*' may in fact *be* lawful in one or more regards."

He turned away and looked over at Meela when he continued.

"Could *any* of the things Lady Peizhi and her brood are suspected of doing be truthfully considered 'betrayal, treachery, or a breach of allegiance against the Commonwealth'? I think *not*. For the most part, their efforts seemed to be focused primarily upon me *personally*, and thus by extension, *not unlawful under the act!*"

Seeming to find his stride, he turned and looked up at the screen again.

"To continue with the first sentence; '*not only in levying war against the Commonwealth*'... Certainly we were involved with *internal* struggles, but *again, not with the Commonwealth!*"

"Again we continue; '*includes adhering to Commonwealth enemies, giving them aid or comfort*'... Doctor Riker, if I may... in this phrase the word, '*adhering*,' is used in what context? Can you put it up on the screen, please?"

The text moved up slightly, and a dictionary opened up below, which was then searched for the word 'adhering.'

"There it is, Lord Caldar."

The screen displayed it, and Ronnie read it aloud.

" '*To remain devoted to or be in support of something*'."

"Thank you, Doctor. My Ladies, in this context we see that if Lady Peizhi were to be '*adhering to Commonwealth enemies*' – in this case presumably the *Drecks* – she would in effect be '*devoted to or in support of the Drecks*'. My Ladies ... *REALLY?* I've known this woman nearly all my *life* and the *ONLY* thing she's ever been devoted to has been

HERSELF – until she recently discovered that she shares the *HEALER'S BOND* with Vitas *TOMAR!*”

There were several gasps from the Elder's staff. Apparently, Lili had not briefed them of this particular development.

“Now – two more separate issues regarding Commonwealth enemies – ‘*giving them aid or comfort*’...” he paused and paced once again before finally stopping in front of Sai Tal.

“My Lady Sai Tal... Approximately a year after I was cashiered from the Emperor’s service, I understand you were attached to a mercenary group located out on the Fringe. This is true?”

She looked around warily before responding to him.

“Assignments of the Elder’s office are not permitted to be discussed with unauthorized personnel.”

Ronnie looked around as well, before turning back to her.

“My Lady Tal, the only persons here who do not have *intimate* knowledge of your activities during that time period are the First Lord, your daughter, and Lady Peizhi and her consort,” he said before turning to the Elder. “My Lady Elder, does this line of questioning find disfavor with you?”

“Lord Calder, your comments over the last *hour* have found disfavor with us,” she said while frowning. “But we will allow it – within limits.”

“I thank you, my Lady Elder,” he said, then bowed before turning back to Sai.

“Lady Sai Tal?”

“Yes, I was attached to a mercenary group ... out on the Fringe.”

‘*I will get you for this*’ she thought furiously at him.

‘*Hey, wanna go ice minin’ again?*’ he pushed, causing her to nearly choke on her own spit.

“Lady Tal, we will not delve into the *reasons* you were associating yourself with a band of low-life mercenaries. However, in the course of your *unnamed* activities, I understand that you had occasion to observe certain *treasonous* behaviors exhibited by the mercenary group you had attached yourself to. Would you care to enlighten us as to their specifics?”

At this, she was truly puzzled, and called him on it.

“Treason? I never saw *anyone* commit treason!”

“Lady Tal? Treasonous acts? Acts of ‘aiding the enemy’ or perhaps ... ‘rendering them comfort’? Surely you must have witnessed at least one or two examples of these treasonous acts committed during your stint with the mercenary group?”

“I do not recall any specific acts of treason committed by any of the mercenary groups I frequented with out on the Fringe,” she said firmly, while glaring back at his disbelieving gaze.

“My Lady Tal, are you telling me that never – *not once* – did *any* of the ships in your group break off an attack because the enemy ship *REFUSED to engage in combat?*”

‘*Oh you bastard!*’ She silently fumed for a moment before making the admission.

“Yes ... I remember. There were *occasions* when commands were issued to break off attacks against non-combative ... combatants.”

He nodded his head and backed away a step before turning away from her and continuing.

“*Delicately put*, my Lady Tal. In point of fact, if I recall *hearing* about it correctly, this was a *standing order*. That, and the standing order stating common Drecks transports were *not* to be fired upon. There was a near *incident* regarding that issue, was there not? A *mercenary* pilot nearly shot out of space by his *own* group commander for attempting to shoot an *unarmed Drecks transport?*” he asked, before turning back to look at her again.

“Yes, I was in that group at the time of the ‘near incident’,” she said through gritted teeth.

Ronnie nodded, then slowly paced away from her while continuing somewhat airily. “Letting enemies of the Commonwealth *go*, thereby *aiding them* in their escape from certain destruction. *Not* shooting at unarmed transports... I imagine the Drecks *passengers* felt quite a bit of comfort over *that*.”

He inscribed a small circle as he turned back in her direction.

“Tell me, Lady Tal. How many did you arrest for treason? Just a round number ... about how many?”

“None,” she said sullenly.

“Oh ... I understand. The parameters of your assignment prevented an *overt* display of your identity. Ahh ... how many were arrested due to your frequent reports back to the *Elder’s office*; listing their names, ship numbers, and such? About how many?”

“None,” she said quietly.

“Lady Tal?”

“None!”

“None? Out of *ALL the acts of treason* you witnessed and reported, *NONE* of them resulted in any *arrests*?”

“*I – DIDN’T – REPORT – ANYTHING!*”

“Oh … my…” Ronnie said softly, then backed away and turned around to look at everyone.

“In accordance with Commonwealth military and political records, an *active* state of war existed between the Hegemony and the Commonwealth up until the signing of the armistice between them that occurred approximately sixteen years *after* my failure over Zarox. Technically, we were *still* in an active state of war with the Dreckss during the incidents at the Fringe – as just *admitted* to by Lady Sai Tal.”

He turned to the Elder and slowly stepped towards her while shaking his head sadly.

“My Lady Elder … I am so sorry,” he said regretfully. “It appears that your unfortunate Lady Sai Tal has admitted to committing *treason in an open court!* … or at least during an official investigation that holds the same judicial presence recognized by both the Crown and the Commonwealth. Since it appears that *she* is now subject to a *mandatory death penalty*, I’m afraid that I will have to suffice in the role of *executioner*. I’m rather *busy* tomorrow morning, but I’ll have some time after *lunch*,” he said, then turned back to Sai.

“Can you *wait ‘til then?*”

Lili dropped her head and covered her eyes, while Sai sat there in shock – for about *three seconds* – before launching herself at him with a loud shriek. The boys almost got up, but Déjà placed her hands on their knees and pressed down. She liked to watch Mommy in action.

Considering *her* apparent and real age against *his* apparent and real age, they were somewhat evenly matched – except that she still did this for a living while he did it only as an exercise. Still, he managed to hold his own for a time.

‘*After lunch not good for you? How about the day after?*’

‘*You’re dead, Calder, DEAD!*’

‘*Aw, come on, Sai. Let’s not fight in front of the kids*’

'LEAVE MY CHILDREN OUT OF THIS!'

'*Sai, really – you gotta watch your blood pressure*'

'*I'll kill you, Calder ... I'll kill ... STAND STILL, DAMNIT!*'

'*You know, Sai, you keep frowning like that, you'll NEVER get rid of those wrinkles'*

"AAAAIIIIIIHHHHH!"

She finally managed to take him down, but they continued to struggle in the middle of their observers.

"OOOOFFF!" he whooshed when she got a leg lock around his mid-section. "Damn, you're a tough old bird," he grunted, then locked his stomach muscles.

He kept reaching out for her. She already had one of his hands and he was trying to deliver his other one to her as well. He needed contact with *two* ...and then he finally *got it*.

"I'll kill you Calder ... I'll ... I ... oh ... Oh ... OH! ... AIEEEEE!" she squealed, and her legs unlocked from his mid-section, which let him take a deep breath. He worked his way out from between her legs before hitting her again.

"Calder, what are you ... oh ... oh, no! ... Don't ... Please no! ... Oh ... AH! ... AIEEEEE!" she squealed once again.

'*By the Gods, she's a SQUEALER! Thank the Gods, MAYA doesn't take after her*'

'YOU LEAVE MY DAUGHTER OUT OF THIS!'

'*You wanna go again?*'

'*NO! No ... no ... I'm done ... I'm done, you bastard!*'

'*Undoubtedly, Healer Tal*'

Except for the last several seconds, the fight had been relatively quiet – except for those sensitive enough to hear them. They remained on the floor, staring at each other, with Ronnie still holding her hands, but loosely now.

'*Sai, I need the mother. If we destroy the mother, then the daughter will be lost and we will lose a valuable tool*'

'*Meela DIES, Calder! She's the REASON Maya was nearly killed by the Drecks!*'

'Yandi SAVED Maya, Sai. Yandi saved her for a REASON, and it was NOT to come here and watch us put a woman to death for being INCREDIBLY STUPID!'

'They ate my GRANDCHILDREN, Calder! THE DRECKS ATE MY GRANDCHILDREN, AND THEY ALMOST ATE MAYA. THE PEIZHI BITCH DIES!'

The last two emanations from Lady Sai were nearly loud enough to be heard by the First Lord and Captain Tomar. As it was, all they felt was a tingling inside their heads.

The rest of the Seniors had heard everything perfectly, from Ronnie's offer to wait for '*the day after*' to Sai's demand that the '*Peizhi bitch dies.*'

This included Maya.

"Mother, what are you saying about my babies?"

At hearing her voice, both Ronnie and Sai looked up, then broke away from each other before sitting up.

"M-Mommy, d-did the Drecks eat my b-babies?" Maya asked. Her voice was already quaking before she started to rise.

Ronnie and Sai helped each other up, then came to her side.

"Maya, sweetheart, it's all right now," Ronnie said calmly and hugged her gently. At least she didn't flinch away from him this time.

"Maya, we love you and we ... we just worry about you," her mother told her. "This trial ... investigation ... it just made us a little *crazy* is all, sweetheart."

"No, Mother. You s-said the Drecks ate my b-babies. How did the Drecks eat my b-babies? Ronnie, w-what is Mother t-talking about?"

He focused as tightly as he could to just the Elder and her Staff.

'I feel it inside her. She still senses it. We either take it out completely and never mention it again, or we tell her the truth – just her mother and me'

Ai didn't hesitate.

'On your heads, be it. We will retire for this evening and continue this discussion at some convenient time tomorrow'

'Please close these proceedings for today, my Lady Elder' he asked.

'Very well'

"In view of the lateness of the hour, we now close these discussions and investigative procedures until they are called again ... presumably sometime tomorrow," Ai said wearily.

"Thank you, my Lady Elder," Ronnie said, then turned to Tomar. "Captain Tomar, escort your Lady Meela to supper. Make sure that she eats well. I want her well fed and refreshed for tomorrow. Then see to her contentment until her *exhaustion*. I want her to be *dreamless* this night," he ordered him.

"I will do my very best, my Lord."

"I have every confidence."

Stifling her outrage at being ignored, the Elder stood there, glaring at Ronnie, but he was completely focused on Maya. They broke up the party, and everyone wandered out until the only ones left were the Elder and her staff ...and her trembling consultant.

"Kita, how are you holding up?" Ai asked her.

"I believe I shall take one of these pills now," she said weakly, then sat down hard in her chair. She popped a pill dry, and Molara ran to get her some water from the fountain.

While Fan and Xiu watched silently, Kita grabbed the Elder's hand and held it tightly. Molara came back with a cup from the fountain and had her drink.

"Thank you, child. That is very kind of you," Kita said weakly, but slumped back in her seat. Her head slowly rolled from side to side and her eyes closed.

"Ai, listen carefully. The boy feels things and *knows* more than anyone suspects. He sees a *need* for the life of Meela, and his arguments are persuasive."

"Kita, his arguments are *hollow*. She has *clearly* committed treason and must *die*. The law is *absolute* on this."

Kita opened her eyes and struggled to sit up.

"You silly *child!*" she said, then slapped her across the cheek. "Did I choose *POORLY* after all? There *IS* no black and white – there is only *gray*, and *SHADES THEREOF!* Play to his *STRENGTHS*, Ai. He has a *PLAN* – yet he knows it not just yet. Remember the lesson of the *ice mining*. He went out there just to *look*, and *then* determined how to recover the ice once he had seen the possibilities. Do the *same*, Ai – don't throw away *potential tools* just because 'the law is *absolute*.' The written law is a *guideline* to follow, but it is not *rigid*. *YOU ARE NOW*

THE LAW! Make it *WORK* for you," she wheezed, before leaning back and closing her eyes.

"Ai – Ai, do you hear me?"

"Yes Kita, I am right here."

"The *Visions*, Ai. Observe carefully. Put pieces in. Take pieces out. Find the *best fit!* Watch over the boy. Take his lead if you must, for he leads true now that he's all grown..."

"Kita. Kita are you all right?"

She seemed to be deflating right in front of them, and her voice turned very quiet, even as a smile formed on her lips.

"Yandi? ... I was *right* ... wasn't I? Maya ... had to go ... to Loca ... so she ... would find ... her Ronnie..."

"Kita. Lady Kita?"

Nearby, A Welcoming

'Welcome pretty one' '?' said.

'Where am I' '?' asked.

'You are with us now' '?' explained.

'Where are we ... oh, how pretty' '?' exclaimed.

'Do not get too close' '?' warned.

'What are they?' '?' asked.

'They bring the Fire' '?' offered.

'I ... I know them – oh, where did they go?' '?' wondered.

'We move around' '?' advised.

'We might be back' '?' considered.

'What shall we do?' '?' asked.

'Why don't we show you around' '?' suggested.

And they were gone.

Midnight –5 (Day 106) – A Somber Passing

Lili lay grieving.

Her friend, confidant, manager, and ruler for over five-hundred years was dead. So close was their relationship that she had felt her passing almost immediately. Even in Kita's later years, no matter

where she was, if Lili tried *really* hard, she could reach her and give her immediate updates on her assignments.

Lili felt lost. Even with her sister Wives around her, she felt very lonely.

'I wonder if this is what Kita felt when she was taking those pills?' she thought.

For just a tiny moment, she thought she could hear her laughter once again.

Midnight -4 (Day 106) – Maya and the Truth

After arriving at Ronnie's compartment, Sai had contacted her kids to let them know she was spending the night with her daughter.

Déjà had been ready to explode with excitement at the prospects of a threesome with Mother and daughter, but Sai had instructed them to watch over the prisoners and make sure they were fed and watered ...and allowed to *bathe*. They were getting quite ripe – especially target one. They were still to remain separated – *zero* communication – not even to *look* at each other, but perhaps Déjà could play with either of them if she liked.

Play only ... no eating!

Ronnie had wondered why a representative from the Elder hadn't come pounding on his door wanting to recover their patient for the night, but he'd apparently pissed them off enough that they didn't want to bother with him this evening. As it was, he and Sai were left alone to deal with Maya's memories – a process that had begun nearly two hours ago...

She'd demanded to know the truth – the *real* truth this time – and they'd decided that the video – as *harsh* as it was – provided the only unbiased reality they could offer her. Before taking that rather drastic step, he and Sai had fortified her with food and ambrosia. He'd even considered calling for an injector from the doctor, but Sai had negated that action.

They had first reviewed the facts, as they'd known them; of her selection to the Ambassador's mission, and her subsequent residence, capture, and near death at the hands of the Drecks. Ronnie had then brought up the video. It was a first for Sai as well, since Molara had only let her view the scene of him Healing her and a short segment of him rushing to save her from imminent death. He'd made sure the audio was muted.

They'd watched it together, with each sitting on either side of her. Maya watched it all from start to finish and then a *second* time – stopping it frequently while she asked questions of him.

Her Ronnie. Not the '*killer of her daughters*', Ronnie. This went a long way in explaining the strange dreams she'd been having in the Elder's suite...

Maya was still staring at the screen.

They were currently paused on the image of Janji's face. It was tilted towards the camera on Ronnie's armor just before the light left her eyes. In the silence, tears streamed from Maya's eyes ... then she started it again to the point where he was trying to block the blow that would have removed her head.

She paused it once again – clearly seeing that he'd *not* been trying to kill her, but only trying to save her life.

'You were slow, Man-child! You were out of position, as well!'

'The footing was poor, and she was a long way from the door'

'You should have used a beamer'

'And risk getting jostled or blowing out a pressure seal?'

'You carried rescue bags'

'And she could have died in the confusion!'

'YOU TWO STOP IT!'

They were both startled by that silent outburst from Maya, coupled with the clenching of their hands by hers.

"Maya ... I'm sorry, dear," her mother said.

"I will *not* have the two most important people in my life arguing like ... like ... like an old *married couple!*"

"My love ... your mother and I ... by the *Gods*, she's right, Sai," he said, then leaned across Maya's lap to grab hold of Sai and kiss her.

Their anger dissipated in the rising passion of the kiss until they broke away on even terms. Then he turned and kissed Maya, as well and just as thoroughly. After a few long seconds, Maya pushed him away but was mollified only slightly. She then turned back to the video and watched as Ronnie neatly – and *literally* – disarmed Lord Gagsa.

'Nice back swing'

'I was going for his heart, but his arm was in the way'

'You should have taken his head'

'Almost... He still has that scar across his eye'

'At least they don't have Healers'

'Yeah, can you imagine a Drecks society ... with ... Healers...?'

Maya gripped their hands *painfully* this time while still furious at the two of them.

"Mother ... Ronnie ... I ... I need an affirmation of *life*. I wish *contentment* ... if you *both* can spare the time?"

They spent the next two hours bonding as a family in numerous configurations; Ronnie not using the Gift until Sai asked for another demonstration of it now that they were in *suitable* surroundings.

This time Lady Lili's lessons held true as the only other person affected was Maya, who'd held her strong bond with her Mother and felt everything Sai was feeling all during and right up to the end when she'd squeezed out Ronnie's last drop of passion.

The three of them finally lay there, exhausted and *very* content. Maya was dozing between the two of them while the video was looping silently in the background. It had played to the part where Ronnie was performing his first Senior Healing on Maya's head, aided by Yandi or some other helping spirit.

He paused it there while in thought. Something was tickling the back of his mind, but it was *just* out of reach. Try as he might, it receded further and further away, until it was totally lost, and he sighed in frustration.

'A problem, Lord Caldar?'

'I misplaced something'

'Undoubtedly your mind'

'Just a tiny piece of it'

'Important?'

'I'm ... not sure ... it could be'

'When did you lose it?'

'Earlier ... when we were...'

Maya gave out an exasperated sigh, pulled both their heads to her breasts, and maneuvered their lips over her nipples – thus forcing them to either nurse from her or be smothered. As their lips and

tongues teased them, her nipples puckered up substantially, and Maya sighed contentedly when her letdown occurred and filled their waiting mouths.

She lay there, happy at the silence, then wondered at her sudden sensitivity. She reached out tentatively and sought out her students.

She felt that Shay was currently being serviced by her Andy in a slow and loving coupling. Andy was being very careful not to bump his baby brother. Apparently, the lifting of Andy's con watch was still in effect. Seeking another, she felt Amy sharing a loving moment with Larl.

Searching carefully, she found Diane dozing contentedly while Laisee practiced her oral arts on David once again. She noted the increased clarity of her contact with Laisee and observed her techniques; catching Laisee's concern that she not bite him or scrape him painfully as she had the *first* time she'd practiced on him. She stifled a laugh before continuing to search.

She missed her time with the old Elder – the consultant Mistress Kita – and went in search of her, but could not find her. Then she remembered the pills she was now taking and reasoned it was probably why she remained silent to her. She looked at the timer and thought her milk would replenish in plenty of time to bring some for her in the morning.

She went on to touch her Aunt Molara, but found her surrounded in sadness ...a sadness that darkened the rest of the Elder's staff who were all crowded together around the Elder's bed ... the bed that held, as she saw fleetingly through Molara's eyes, the body of the past Elder – Lady Kita.

Tears dampened her pillow while she lay there giving her love and sustenance to her Mother and lover.

It had been a very long day, indeed...

Noon –4 (Day 107) – A Quiet Pall

The platform was strangely quiet. If anyone spoke at all, the conversations in the commons remained muted. News of the death of the previous Elder seemed to affect everyone the same...

Lili had come early to Ronnie's room to inform them of her passing, but Maya had already told Ronnie and Sai that Kita was gone. With tears in his eyes, Ronnie had hugged Lili and assured her of his utmost fondness for the diminutive tyrant. Then he'd lamented that he never got the chance to share contentment with her.

Lili had flushed at that, but immediately felt the truth behind his words. She mentioned Kita had recently shared such pleasures with Sectorus' ships doctor, Commander Woldron, and truly felt his gladness for that confidence. Afterwards, they'd all hugged before she turned to go and inform the rest of the Healers in her extended family.

As she was leaving, Sai silently brought her up to date on the previous evening's revelations regarding Maya. That Maya was stable so far seemed very promising. Also, the fact that she now seemed sensitive to the *silent* communications used by Seniors. Lili considered the implications of that while walking down the corridor. Upon reaching the Lane's compartment, she was faced with the prospect of Laisee as well, and had no idea what would occur before Laisee greeted her at the door.

"My Lady Lili. Good morning. Forgive me, my Lady, but you do not look well. Is Ronnie all right? Is my Mother...?"

"Laisee... The old Elder, Mistress Kita, has passed," she said, and watched as Laisee's face stiffened in shock before falling in sadness.

"Oh Lili ... I'm so very sorry for you," she said, and reached out to hug her tightly.

Surprised at both her familiarity and her obvious distress at the news, Lili stood there for a long moment before returning the hug. With tears leaking from her eyes, Laisee pulled back and kissed her gently on the cheek just as Diane entered from the sleeping room.

"Good morning, Lady Lili, how are... Laisee, what's wrong?"

"Elder Kita has passed, Diane!"

Diane came forward and joined them in the hug; passing her love to them both.

Lili was confused. As far as she knew, neither of these two young Healers had even *spoken* to the Elder except at their interview.

"How is Ronnie, my Lady?" Diane asked worriedly, which also confused Lili for a moment.

"He is upset. He is with Maya and Sai. Maya has ... she knows about the Drecks now. She knows everything about her ordeal now and seems stable ... as reported by her mother. They watched the video together."

"Well *that's* a relief. We should probably go see Ronnie, Laisee. Oh, Lady Lili, what's the proper protocol for a death like this for us and ... and for Ronnie?"

"What do you mean, Diane?"

"Well ... she was his Grandmother, wasn't she? Ronnie said they were related somehow. Or is this like sometimes on Earth ... you call someone Auntie or Uncle out of respect? Ronnie was kinda vague about how far back she was to him, but he cared for her a great deal."

"Ronnie ... cared for the *Elder*?"

"Oh yes, my Lady!" Laisee said quickly. "He favored her greatly, my Lady. He spoke of her often and of how much he admired her and how she still chose to carry the terrible burden she was forced to bear. He must feel much sorrow at her loss," she said while still sniffling.

Lili was in a quandary. *She* knew of Ronnie's antecedents, but she was not aware that *Ronnie* knew of any, other than his mother. She went with the polite fiction for now.

"Well, my young Healers, you know how Ronnie is about relationships. It's very easy for him to associate people he cares for into his idea of family. After his adventure searching for ice, he has even associated Lady Sai Tal *and* her crew into his idea of family."

"Oh ... my. Those are the *big* ones, aren't they?" Diane muttered, and Lili nodded. "We'll have to watch out for Amy," she said in a distracted murmur, while her surface thoughts played readily over her mind to the point that Lili almost blushed. "Umm, Lili ... is there anything we need to do? Is there anything you need us to help you with?"

"Ahhh ... thank you, Diane, but no. There will be a remembrance for Elder Kita, but I do not know what will be involved just yet. I will be going to the Elder's next. Would you be so kind as to tell Amy and Shay if they do not already know?"

"I will go do that, my Diane," Laisee said before turning to finish dressing.

"Thank you, Laisee," Lili called out to her. "I will be on my way, then," she added, but paused when Diane reached out to her.

"I share your sorrow, my Lady Lili. Please extend our condolences to the Elder and her staff," she said, and Lili half-bowed her head in acknowledgement before taking her leave.

She walked down the corridor with her guard in escort mode, but was lost in contemplation.

'Ronnie binds them with chains of love. Remarkable,' she thought.

Noon –3 (Day 107) – Second Wife’s Resolution

Both Ronnie and Sai had been shocked to learn of Kita’s passing. For some reason, the Elder’s staff had kept it a secret until morning, but Maya had told them at their waking – somehow finding out before either of them. Sai stayed with Maya while Ronnie dressed and left to check on Meela.

Meela’s door wasn’t guarded, which meant that either Tomar was still inside with Meela or – given the Elder’s standing order of house arrest – they were trying to sneak off the platform somehow. When he came abreast of it, he extended himself and felt the both of them still in residence. He also felt them in somewhat of an emotional turmoil. He knocked politely, just the same, and waited for the door to open.

“Good morning, Lord Calder,” Tomar said quietly. It sounded like he’d actually *meant* it for a change, but there was a weird feeling of finality about it.

“Good morning, Vitas. Would your mistress be about? She slept well, I trust?”

In point of fact, Tomar had done his best to wear Meela out the night before, but she’d finally pushed him away at the midnight hour, and they’d simply lain quietly together and talked nearly all the rest of the morning. At the bottom of the morning, they’d shared an hour of soft and gentle lovemaking that had none of the frenzy of the night before – it being just the quiet loving and caring of two people who had made their final decision.

“Good morning, Lord Calder,” Meela said when she entered the room wrapped in her sleeping gown. He could see the redness of tears, smell the freshness of morning sex, and feel the quiet resolution of acceptance. She seemed very polite this morning, as well.

This would *never* do.

“Vitas, your mistress looks *terrible*. Did you not let her sleep at *all* last night?” He’d spoken in jest while quickly feeling the surface thoughts of them both.

‘*Oh no...*’

“My Lord Calder...” Meela paused, took a breath, and then smiled. “I want to thank you for all your efforts on my behalf yesterday, but the Elder would have her criminal, and I am easily found to be the correct one.”

“Nonsense! She has nothing solid on you unless you open your mouth and admit to everything – and *that* I will not let you do!”

"My Lord... Ronnie..." She came forward and rested her palm against his cheek. "I am *deeply* sorry for all the horrible things I said about you, and for all the terrible things I let my boys do to you. I admit that it was my intervention that eventually caused the death of your son on Earth, and ... and it was at *my* prodding that the Loca delegation to the Dreck's was allowed by the Emperor. I *still* do not understand how he let that pass ... so *many* things I never believed he would let pass. Please believe me that I *never* wanted Maya to be involved. I - I didn't even know she was *on* Loca."

Her eyes glistened as she spoke, but she'd already run out of tears.

Ronnie was catching everything from her surface thoughts and was amazed at the great strides she'd taken in becoming a human being – except for that current bit of nonsense they were planning. Saying nothing, he gathered her into his arms and held her snugly while momentarily thinking that she was warm and soft in most of the right places.

"Ronnie ... we've ... never shared ... contentment," she said haltingly. "I would be pleased if you would accept contentment from me this morning."

Damn! Not that he didn't already have *enough* things to do!

"Tell you what... After all this silly business is over, I'll declare ships holiday – *two days worth* – and we'll *all* celebrate together, then."

'Oh yeah ... these damn kids are gonna keep me hoppin'.'

"I ... all right, Ronnie. I will look forward to it. And I will always cherish the memory of how hard you fought for me."

He smiled and nodded before making a show of looking at the compartment timer.

"Oh my – *look* at the time! So *many* things to do. I've gotta run! Vitas ... see that your mistress gets some rest. The party may be starting late today. Maybe even as late as tomorrow," he said while already backing out the door.

'Crap! Today of all days!'

He shook his head as he started down the corridor.

'Contact Talon ... Contact Lili and Larl... At least two more... Sai and her Déjà? No, Déjà is an unknown... Ahh, Sai and MOLARA will do nicely.'

First stop, the *con*.

Noon –2 (Day 107) – Ronnie Visits Molara

“My Lady Molara, I have heard the sad news and I’ve come to pay my respects.”

“Please come in, Lord Calder.”

“How is the Elder, my Lady?” Molara was startled for a moment, but then realized he was asking about Ai.

“She is ... upset – lost – angry ... angry at *you*, primarily,” she warned him. “Was all that *really* necessary, Ronnie?” she asked while looking at him through reddened eyes.

“There is a purpose to everything I do, Molara,” he said quietly. “I truly meant no harm and – *truly* – do you believe *we* were the cause of Mistress Kita’s passing?”

Molara looked around at the other visitors, catching Doctor Woldron staring at them with concern, before drawing Ronnie into the room Maya had been staying in and closing the door. Once they were alone, she spoke quickly and quietly.

“Kita was tired and took one of her pills just after you left. She argued on your behalf, but Ai was resolved. She ... Kita *slapped* her, Ronnie! She told her to see *beyond* the black and white of reality and learn to swim in the murk. Kita said you have a plan, but you’re not sure of it yet?”

He gave her a tiny nod.

“She told Ai to make the law work for *her*, not just follow it blindly,” she added, then thought of something else. “Ronnie ... Kita mentioned ... *Visions*?” she whispered, and watched in shock when he nodded and smiled. “Something about pieces – putting them in and taking them out. She also told Ai to follow *your* lead ... she said you were all grown now. At the very last, she was talking to *Yandi*.”

Somehow, he wasn’t surprised by this.

“What did she say?”

“She was saying that she was right ... that Maya *had* to go to Loca so she could find *you*. And then ... then she was gone.”

He reached up and scratched his head. *Loca?* ... Maya *had* to go to Loca? Meela really *didn’t* know Maya was on Loca?

“Molara, I need your help to–” He was suddenly interrupted by the door slamming open on its rollers.

“Come to *gloat*, Lord Calder?” the Elder said cruelly.

"I have come to pay my respects, my Lady Elder," he said quietly.

"And yet I find you in here with one of my *staff*? Running around and hiding in the *shadows*, are we?"

"My Lady Elder, Lady Molara is Maya's aunt. I felt she would be gratified to know that Maya has been assimilating the information about her Drecks experience with her mother and I helping her through the trauma of it. All three of us watched the recovery video together, and many questions about the bad dreams she'd been having were resolved to her satisfaction. I felt it would be in poor taste to discuss *family* matters in the presence of your other visitors. Until Maya decides otherwise, she will be resuming her duties as Healer of my crew and staying with me."

"Well then, *Lordling* ... come pay your *respects*. Although I *still* fail to understand Kita's *leniency with you after all these years!*"

"It must have been my natural *charm*, my Lady Elder. After a while, I sort of *grow on you*."

'...like a *fungus*' both Ai and Molara concluded silently, but then turned and looked at each other for just a moment.

'*We will speak later, Molara!*' the Elder pushed at her brusquely, and Molara nodded politely.

Noon (Day 107) – A Not So Petty Theft

"Did you get them, Vitas?" she asked fearfully after watching him close the door behind him.

"Yes, my love." She reached out her hand, but he merely hugged her instead.

"No, my love. We will wait and see. The Elder, the *old* Elder has died. There will probably be no continuing today."

"Oh no. Poor little Kita!" she said, then nearly started crying all over again.

"My love? She was the reason we are *here* today. She intended to *kill* you, and now her pet Elder will try to *finish* the job – *but not today!*"

"Please, Vitas ... let me have them *now!*"

"No, my love. While we yet live, let us be together. Our lives are short enough without rushing to their conclusion. If the time comes, I will provide them for you," he promised, then pulled her into his arms and began kissing her before they eventually wandered into the inner room.

Noon +2 (Day 107) – Plotting with Lili

After the guardsman announced him, Lili gestured for him to enter, and Ronnie quickly ducked into her room and closed the door behind him.

“My Lady Lili – how is Kita doing with my request?”

She remained silent, but pulled a data tab from her robes and showed it to him...

She’d been shocked earlier when he’d come to her with such an outlandish request – not that he’d actually told her what it was *really* about. She’d asked – quite *pointedly*, in fact – but then he’d airily gone on about the condition of her digestion, and she’d finally let it drop. On the issue of the investigation, though, she’d been *adamant*. The Elder was *not* going to sully the memory of Elder Kita’s death with a resumption of the investigation. Not even if *he* were the target.

He’d told her not to worry, that he’d take care of it...

Looking at him now, he was smiling like a young virgin who’d just had his first contentment lesson. She sighed and handed over the data tab.

“Ahhh, Lili, your little Kita is a treasure. Would that Grandmother were able to stay for the final act,” he said somewhat sadly, but then brightened up. “Please extend my thanks to your Kita and tell her I will save her space on my *dance card* for the next ships holiday,” he promised, before quickly hugging her, kissing her, and waltzing out the door.

She just stood there while shaking her head and wondering ... what is a *dance card*?

Noon +2 (Day 107) – Co-conspirators

“Molara, do you think this wise?” Sai asked her, but Molara just laughed.

“At least you have your *own* ship to run away in. I *work* with the woman.”

Sai reviewed Molara’s discovery, while her mother’s sister radiated worry over her earlier meeting with Ronnie...

When Ronnie had come back to her asking questions about Kita’s involvement with various activities – activities never *previously* looked into – Molara had been shocked.

Then she remembered Kita’s last words and Ronnie’s earlier comment, “Who watches over he – or *she* – who watches over *us*?”

In the guise of cleaning up Kita's personal belongings, she'd poked, prodded, searched and discovered evidence that it was *Kita* who'd had Maya delivered to Loca – which suspiciously coincided with a mission being drafted to the Drecks.

Further digging brought up notes indicating that it was actually *Kita* who'd submitted Maya's name as a possible recruit to begin with. Her daughters weren't even mentioned; just the comment that, "Maya Tal and two other Healers were needed."

On the face of it, this was incredibly damning evidence, but she'd stopped there and committed it to her *own* data tab and then a backup data tab. She'd made notations that the records of Kita would be sealed until further review at the Elder's leisure – sometime *after* the investigation was over. Sometime this *day*, if Ronnie – and *she* – were persistent enough. She'd voiced her doubts, but also knew how devious he could be...

Sai understood what Molara had revealed to her, but reading it in person was *especially* depressing...

Ronnie had approached Sai earlier in her compartment. She'd been making sure the prisoners were fed, watered, cleaned, and all in once piece. Once she'd finished checking both prisoners, he'd pulled her aside to speak with her.

"Sai, I've been thinking about something," he said.

"Will I have time to get one-hundred kilometers away before you complete that thought?"

After a light chuckle, he'd made his proposal and given her pretty good reasons to follow it through with him. He'd even promised to put her and her children on his payroll if things turned sour, assuming, of course, that he'd survive the Elder's wrath. She'd thought it over for a long while until he'd pointed out that it wasn't that much of a stretch for her to begin with, and he might make a tiny miscalculation anyway. She'd reluctantly agreed.

Either way, justice, if not revenge, would be served...

Sai turned off the data pad and pulled the tab before handing it back to Molara while looking at her and shaking her head.

"If it all goes sour, I'll save you a spot on my ship," she told her. "The bunk room has *extra* long accommodations and the boys don't snore all that loud."

Noon +5 (Day 107) – Pushing Buttons

At hearing the knock, Molara opened the door, saw that it was him, and reluctantly nodded.

“Ah! My Lady Molara! All the guests are assembled, and we await you at the Recreation Center!” he said loudly.

From one side of the open door he heard a muttered, “What *now...*” before the already irritated Elder came forward.

“My Lady Elder, all preparations have been made and we await your attendance,” he said with an affable smile.

“What nonsense are you talking about *now*, Calder?” she asked while her anger continued to rise.

“The *trial*, my Lady. Pardon me … the *investigation*, my Lady. You remember, I’m sure. We now close these discussions and investigative procedures until they are called again, presumably sometime tomorrow,” he quoted her. “Well, today is tomorrow,” he said, but then tilted his head. “The tomorrow for *yesterday*, that is. Today is *yesterday*’s tomorrow. Of course, today will be *tomorrow*’s yester—”

“*WILL YOU BE STILL, CALDAR!*” she shouted, then struggled to calm down. “There will *be* no resumption of our investigations *this day*.”

“Why ever *not*, Lady Ai? Afraid you’ll *lose?*” he prodded cattily, and was gratified by the angry glare in her eyes.

“In case you’ve *forgotten*, Lord Calder, Elder Kita has just *died!*”

He’d not forgotten. Not at all…

He’d paid his proper respects to Grandmother and promised her very quietly that he would do his best to follow the teachings she’d passed down to him from her servants Lili, Yandi, Molara, Sai, and Maya. Then he’d kissed her on the lips and both cheeks. He personally thought she would have loved to have seen the last act…

“My Lady Elder, *Mistress Kita* just died … *yesterday*,” he pointed out while still pushing her buttons. “Today holds the business of *today*. Now that you hold the security and power of the Commonwealth in your hands, surely you must realize that any more time wasted on this *trivial* matter just delays you from continuing your more *important* tasks back on *home world*. Or aren’t you worried that the reins of power might just *slip through your fingers* the longer you delay out here playing as *Gods?*”

He noted that her nostrils were flaring nicely again.

Ronnie liked to play nice. He was good at playing nice. He could also play the *bastard* when called upon. Molara suddenly picked up her cue.

"My Lady Elder, if everyone is *already* assembled, then perhaps we can dispose of that ...*that traitorous woman once and for all!*"

"Molara..."

"My Lady, let's be *done* with this business so we can honor our dead *properly! Without* having Caldar's production hanging over our heads!" she insisted loudly before continuing silently.

'*My Lady, he is DONE with his arguments. You have all the evidence you need and you have your two witnesses. Her life is YOURS, my Lady!*' she pushed to her.

Ronnie was watching Ai disinterestedly, even as he noted she was still fuming nicely. Elevated heart rate, rapid breathing, and she had a nice rosy flush to her cheeks. A few seconds later, she turned to him with a triumphant look of finality on her features.

"Very well then, Caldar. My Ladies and I will attend at the bottom of the day – *but it will be short!*" she said angrily.

"We will be *waiting*, my Lady Elder," he said sweetly, before abruptly turning and leaving.

Noon +6 (Day 107) – A Dithering Senior

Things were pretty quiet in the Recreation Center this evening.

Everyone was arranged just as they were yesterday – except that Meela was moved forward and well out of Tomar's reach. Ronnie and Sai were over by the room monitor where he was trying to quietly deal with her sudden ambivalence with the situation.

"Ronnie, are you *sure* about this?" she whispered to him once again.

"You never know. If we win, maybe she'll loan us her ship to go pick up a load of water?"

She just shook her head in disgust at his levity.

'*Sai, are you all right with this? Do you see where I want to take this?*' he asked her silently, almost desperately. He didn't want the rest of the room's occupants eavesdropping on them at this particular moment.

'*My Granddaughters are DEAD, Ronnie!*'

'And Kita was willing to sacrifice ANY two Healers as long as MAYA was part of the mission ... you KNOW that now'

'If what Molara says is true'

'You have no reason to doubt her'

'She shared contentment with you!'

"*And so have you!*" he pointedly reminded her, which caused her temper to flare.

"*Damn you!*" she blurted aloud, which caused the others to turn and stare at them in anticipation of another incident.

'Sai?'

She stood silently while still quivering in frustration ...and time was running out.

'Very well, Ronnie ... but most likely they'll feed us to the valaets'

'Not you, Sai. Your boys will protect you while you make your escape'

'Ha! They EAT valaets for BREAKFAST!'

'I thought that was your cannibal?'

"*Ow!*" he exclaimed, just as the Elder's party was entering the Recreation Center.

As he and Sai went forward, the Elder and her Ladies resumed their seats, but none of them looked particularly enthused at being there.

Ai was thinking furiously over the last words Kita had spoken to her. She was both worried and sorrowful – worried that she would make a mistake and sorry their last words together were spoken in anger. She had disappointed Kita and made her doubt her decision to advance her to the position of Elder. Her mind was not really on the task at hand, but she'd somehow let herself be goaded into it.

Ai closed her eyes while considering the corner she'd let herself be backed into. While the room was becoming increasingly still, she reluctantly decided that she was weary of Lord Caldar's games. If he wanted to save Meela so much, then if he could – sobeit. She stood up to address the small group.

"All of the assembled persons here ... I open this discussion and investigation. The same restrictions apply today as they did yesterday," she called out resignedly, and her staff turned curious eyes towards her at her sudden listlessness. "Lord Caldar, as I recall, you were just finishing up your *last statement?*" she asked hopefully.

"Yes, my Lady Elder. All that remains is my summation," he said, which elicited groans from several locations in the room. "But I will be brief, my Ladies. Supper awaits ... for most of us."

"You may continue, Lord Caldar," Ai said wearily.

"My Lady Elder, My Ladies. Yesterday, I believe I had sufficiently shown, *right down to the last descriptive word in the act*, that Lady Peizhi did *not* – by the letter of the law – commit the act of treason," he said reasonably, then paused.

The Elder merely waved her fingers for him to continue.

"That leaves two other issues; the *first* of which is the presence of two credible witnesses to attest to her treasonous acts. Is it too much to presume that those bodies back there are your 'two credible witnesses'?"

"Lady Sai Tal," Ai said irritably.

"Yes, my Lady," Sai answered, then waved to Endo and Gallus.

Her giant crewmembers picked up their bundles –transport platform and all – and brought them to the front where they were placed before Meela.

Ronnie walked around them, then bent down by Meela, saying, "*Meela! You - will - not - speak!*" in a loud whisper. She merely nodded her head sadly, while still resigned to her fate.

As he'd approached Meela, Sai had come forward and pulled the sheets away to reveal the two paralyzed bodies ...that she quickly checked to see if all their parts were still intact. Turning to the Elder, she began formal introductions.

"My Lady Elder, my Ladies ... May I introduce Taldus Remy se Loka, a conspirator in–"

"*Alleged* conspirator," Ronnie interrupted while straightening himself and turning to face her.

"*Alleged* conspirator in treasonous plots involving Lady Peizhi," she continued in frustration. "He will *testify* to that if asked," she added, with a harsh look at Ronnie before turning to the second body.

"My Lady Elder, my Ladies ... May I introduce Cleeve Dalis se Loka, also known as Cleda Malia se Krux ne Zarox, who will *also* willingly testify against Lady Peizhi," she finished before walking back to sit down again.

Ronnie walked over and looked at each of them carefully. Then he poked each of them once or twice before turning around.

"Uhh, Sai ... they *are* still alive?" he asked, then smacked the Krux prisoner a few times across the face.

"They are alive and well, Lord Caldar. They are merely paralyzed so they do not make a fuss. Though their eyes are closed, they hear *everything* ... just as they did yesterday. And they *will* testify to the guilt of Lady Peizhi once we inject them with the antidote."

Ronnie walked between the two of them while looking at both of them again. Then he turned back to the gentleman from Krux.

"Krux ... Krux ... now *where* have I heard of that planet before?" he pondered aloud.

He knew very well were it was – he'd counter-raided it several times out on the Fringe.

"Ah! Now I remember Krux! It was a border planet in the disputed area ... now under the influence of the *Drecks*, if I'm not mistaken. It fell on *their* side after the activities at the Fringe, did it not, Lady Tal?"

"Yes, Lord Caldar. They are listed as a planet subject to the Drecks Hegemony."

"How *curious*," he said, then moved up close to Cleda Malia.

Then he bent over and poked him on the nose several times while saying, "Oh, Malia ... you've been a *very - naughty - naughty boy!* Have *you* let these Commonwealth witches mess with your *mind*, perhaps. Tell you things that you do not *really believe*?"

"*Lord Caldar, you have been warned!*" Fan said, which brought Ronnie upright before he turned to face her.

"My Lady Fan, do you *truly* believe these – these *things* would make credible *witnesses*? One is an *enemy* of the Commonwealth, and the other gives the appearance of an incredibly stupid *child*. *Neither* of them is here by their own free will, and will no doubt say *anything* if they are led to believe they will *survive* this encounter!"

"LORD CALDAR!"

"Lady Fan, I will allow it," Ai said quietly. She seemed almost relieved.

"My heartfelt *thanks*, my Lady Elder," he said politely, while calming himself down and centering his focus on the goal once again. "That leaves the last matter – and *it will not occur*. Lady Peizhi may convict herself for the act of treason if she admits to it – *but she will not!*"

He froze for a moment before turning to face Meela.

“Not if she has any common *sense*,” he muttered thinly, while capturing Meela’s eyes and shaking his head slowly, but she just looked away and hung her head sadly.

Damn...

“Are you *done*, Lord Caldar?” Ai asked with a sigh.

“Yes, my Lady.”

“Very well,” she said, and quickly conferred silently with her staff.

‘*Guilty or not – Fan?*’

‘*Guilty*’

‘*Xiu?*’

‘*Not guilty*’

‘*Molara?*’

‘*I recluse ... related to the victim*’

‘*Sai – Guilty or not?*’

‘*I am not of the staff, my Elder*’

‘*Today you are – guilty or not?*’

‘*Guilty!*’

‘*Lili?*’

‘*Not guilty*’ Lili pressed, while not sure how Ronnie had been so confident she’d even be asked.

‘*Very well ... thank you, Ladies*’

“Lady Peizhi, please stand,” Ai said, before rising and waiting for Meela to steady herself next to Ronnie.

“Lady Peizhi, Lord Caldar has argued most eloquently against your conviction and ... *incredibly* ... most of his arguments have sound backing,” she said, while looking at Meela and hoping she was making the right decision. “Do you have anything to say before I pronounce our findings?” she asked her, but Meela gripped Ronnie’s arm tightly.

“Very well, then, Lady Peizhi, this investigation finds you *not-*”

“*Wait!*” Meela said, which caused Ronnie to visibly sag. He’d really not wanted it to go this far.

“I am guilty. I committed treason. I – I must be punished,” she said, then fell to her knees. Tomar started to rise, but Endo held him down with a finger on his shoulder.

“By your pardon, my Lady Elder,” Ronnie said, then quickly squatted down and confronted Meela quietly.

“*Meela, do not do this thing!* You will lose your *life* and destroy *Laisee’s life as well!* This will work out if you just *let it!*”

“No, Ronnie, this is the right thing to do. I am guilty. I deserve to be punished. And … and I trust you to make Laisee understand in time.”

He sighed and helped Meela stand again before turning to face Lady Ai.

“Lady Peizhi is understandably distraught, my Lady Elder. In the interests of justice, I ask that her impromptu confession be struck at this time, and that your sentence be announced.”

“Very well, Lord Caldar,” she said, but was more confused than ever now.

“Lady Peizhi has been found *not guilty* of all charges,” she said, then sat back down.

“*NO! I am guilty!*” Meela shouted. “*I spied for the enemies of the Commonwealth.* I helped spread *lies* and … and … *other* things in the Royal household. I planned the death of Lord Caldar’s son on Earth. I was planning to have Lord Caldar *killed* on Earth if only those fools could have *found him!* I manipulated the Emperor with my influence. For *all* these crimes and more I am guilty, and I must be *punished,*” she insisted, while now standing shakily but defiant.

The Elder looked at Ronnie, but he just looked back and shook his head. Then he shrugged his shoulders a tiny bit before sitting down dejectedly. It was time to change tactics – which was something *else* he’d planned for, but it promised to get ugly.

“Very well, then. Lady Peizhi, by your *own* admission, you are found guilty of *treason*… whose sole punishment is *death*. Sentence to be carried out–”

“*I’m not doing anything right now!*” Ronnie said angrily, and stood up with Plan B ramping up in his mind, which was *very* tightly wrapped at the moment.

“Lord Caldar–”

“My Lady Elder, *your* office has performed the required service and *YOUR – JOB – IS – DONE!* As *Master* of this platform, it is now *MY*

responsibility to see that the *SENTENCE IS CARRIED OUT!*" he shouted, then reached out and grabbed Meela's arm painfully.

Midnight –5.5 (Day 107) – Punishment to Fit the Crime

Things were rapidly getting away from the Elder, and the witnesses were getting restless. *No one* had expected this outcome.

"Gallus, may I please use one of those transport platforms up front?"

At Sai's nod, Gallus came forward, unbuckled Remy from the platform, and dropped him to the floor. Ronnie took one look at Remy and at the platform.

"That one sprung a leak. My Lady Peizhi should at least be comfortable and *dry* while she waits to die."

Gallus unbuckled Malia and dropped him to the floor as well. Then gently kicked them both out of the way, and away from each other.

"Maya, may I please have a towel or two, and perhaps something for the *other* end?"

"Ronnie ... no..." she said weakly.

"Maya, if you please, my love. No doubt the Elder is getting *hungry*," he said ruthlessly, while warming up to the task.

Maya went to get the towels, and Sai joined her. When Maya brought the towels out, she helped Sai find a suitable small toy from one of the drawers, then they came back and stood together way off to the side while Ronnie dealt with Meela.

"Mistress Déjà, would you please hold this for me?" he asked while rotating Meela in his grip and waiting for Déjà to take hold of her.

Once he was free of her, he adjusted the transport platform so that its top was horizontal and waist high. He flipped all the straps and buckles out of the way before Maya reluctantly came back with the towels.

"Mistress Déjà, would you please remove its clothing?"

With a tiny knife she'd had concealed on her body, Déjà deftly removed all of Meela's robes – revealing the still beautiful and young-looking woman underneath.

"Thank you, Déjà. I will take it now," he said, and grasped Meela's arm once again.

Lili hoped Ronnie knew what he was doing. She was having a hard enough time keeping Radatel under control while also dealing with her own share of problems – the first of which was that Ronnie's mind had become *completely* blocked since Meela's sentence had been pronounced. Her lessons had paid off, but it prevented her from following his plans. She noticed, however, that Maya's thoughts were becoming extremely stressful and confused.

"Maya, please lay out a towel across the platform, and one long ways on top of it," Ronnie asked her politely, and she numbly complied. "Please scoot them down a little more. Fine," he added.

He swung Meela around roughly and stared into her frightened eyes.

"*You! Up!*" He pushed her against the platform before lifting her at the waist until her naked bottom was hovering over the towels. Then he set her down so she could manage on her own.

"Lie down," he ordered brusquely. "Knees up. Hold them in place."

"Maya," he said, and held out his hand. Sai passed her the toy, and with a shaking head, Maya placed it in his hand. Sai held up a container of lubricant as well.

"Yes, Sai. There's no need to be cruel," he said quietly, and let her squeeze lubricant all over the toy. He held out his other hand as well, and she added more to his palm.

"I'm sorry if this is cold," he said, just before pressing his slimy hand between Meela's bottom cheeks and spreading the lubricant around thoroughly. He pressed the tip of the toy against her bottom and teasingly moved it in and out in small measures until she opened up enough to accept its widest portion. Then he slipped it all the way in; causing her to gasp when her bottom closed around the flared base, locking it in place.

"Lower your legs!" he ordered. Once she'd done so, he raised one towel up between her legs, then folded the other two flaps of towel around her as well, wiping his hands in the process.

After strapping them in place, he went through and strapped the rest of her down before going back and checking that everything was snug. Then he glanced at the Center's timer and nodded.

"Larl, the emergency med kit, if you please."

He set about getting her hair out from under her head and laying it out neatly before carefully checking everything again. The only things

left were the neck and forehead straps. While he waited for Larl, he thought he'd say a few last words to her.

"You know, Meela, you really *are* a very beautiful woman. It's a shame I was so *busy* this morning when you offered me contentment. I've thought long and hard about this day, though ... finding out who killed my son and who arranged to kill my Maya's *children*. Unfortunately ... all of the fingers seem to point – *to you*," he said, and tapped her lightly on the nose once.

"On *my* planet, on Earth, they've used numerous ways to dispose of unwanted criminals. There's beheadings, hanging, burning, drowning ... in some countries some fathers *still* bury their disobedient daughters in the ground up to their chests and invite the neighbors to throw rocks at them until they're dead. That's *true*," he said, while glancing up at the Elder.

"Then there's poison gas, electricity – that's basically *cooking* someone to death – and my mother's people used to tie the arms and legs to four different large animals and then drive them away in four different directions. Some countries used to have a *professional* executioner who would wrap a thin wire around your neck and strangle you with it. In one country, they even made a chair with a clamp that tightens around your neck with a screw mechanism. It was used to break your wind pipe and you'd eventually choke to death."

He heard the facilities door open and turned to see Larl return from where the med kit had been previously stashed. A grim smile graced his lips when he turned back to Meela.

"The more 'enlightened' countries started using *sophisticated* poisons – first to make you *sleep*, and then to stop your *heart* ... but where's the revenge in *that*?" he said, then followed it with a sigh.

"My personal favorite? *Boiling oil* ... or perhaps ... *melted lead!* That was the *preferred* method way back several hundred years ago. Do you know that if you pour boiling oil over someone, the pain and scalding kills them *quickly*, yet if you put them in the pot and warm it up gradually, they eventually just ... fall asleep – *slow cooking?*"

He gave out another sigh before continuing.

"But that was then; this is *now*," he said just as Larl delivered the med kit and started setting it up.

"Lord Caldar, my Ladies and I will retire while you—"

"**NO! YOU ... WILL ... STAY ... HERE!"**

He slowly turned to face the Elder while forcing himself to calm down again.

“My Lady Elder ... regardless of *how* we got to this point, this *was* your intended punishment for Lady Peizhi. Would you show so much courtesy as to *leave* her in her hour of passing?”

‘If they are to be RESPECTED, those who hold life or death in their hands should be intimately acquainted with the RESULTS of their convictions’ he pushed openly, letting all the Seniors hear his remarks.

“Very well, Lord Calder, we shall wait—”

“Gallus, please bring seating close at hand for the Elder. She needs to have a *good* view of the final act.”

“Lord Calder—”

“Right *here*, my Lady. I may require your help to determine the *exact* time of death.”

While the Elder was being seated close to Meela’s head, the rest of the group was beginning to feel sick. He really *was* going to go through with it and it no longer seemed to have anything to do with Meela.

It was now between him and the *Elder*.

A constant stream of tears were running down Meela’s face and dripping onto the platform. Likewise, Maya was back by her mother and leaning close to her with tears streaming from her eyes as well. The Seniors arrayed themselves *well* behind the Elder, leaving just the Elder and Ronnie close to Meela, while Larl waited with the med kit.

“Captain Tomar, your *sword* if you please,” Ronnie said, and held out his hand.

He noted it wasn’t the typical ceremonial guard sword but a power sword without a power pack. Tomar reluctantly gave up his weapon, and Ronnie pivoted it in his hand a couple of times.

“It’s out of balance without the power pack,” he muttered, then lay it down between Meela’s breasts, which caught the Elder by surprise.

“Lord Calder, you don’t mean to simply bludgeon the girl to death, do you?” she asked quietly.

“My Lady Elder, that ... that would be *horrible!* She should remain as *beautiful* in death as she was in *life* ... just as our *Yandi* is.”

He looked down into Meela’s eyes, and she closed them in shame. The Elder began petting Meela’s hair, and she was startled at first, but relaxed and cherished the human companionship of this last caress.

"Uhh, Ronnie," Larl murmured quietly.

"Oh ... right. Hook her up to the ...ahh ... the beep, beep thingy," he said.

Shortly they could hear Meela's heart measuring out the beats of the last moments of her life. He turned to Tomar and grasped his shoulder gently.

"Vitas, I am so *very* sorry for your loss. You may say goodbye to Meela," he said, then grabbed the sword while stepping away from them.

He wasn't looking directly at them, but was carefully gauging everything and everybody within reach. The Elder also backed away discreetly.

"Oh Vitas, I'm so sorry, my love," she whispered, and held her lips up for a kiss.

Ronnie hoped Vitas wasn't going to go through with this, but yes, he'd palmed it...

"I'll always love you, Meela, now and forever," Vitas murmured, then brought his hand up to caress her lips while shifting the Grace pill to his fingertips.

'Sorry Sai'

'Huh?'

The power sword screamed an angry raucous tone while Ronnie whirled and swept it up – severing Tomar's right arm neatly below the elbow. His lower arm, hand, and the Grace pill went flying in the direction of Lady Sai. Meela screamed at the agony Tomar was feeling, and the Elder reached out to comfort her. The sword settled into a pleasant high-pitched tone; its violet aura swirling about the blade. Ronnie held it vertically until it popped into silence.

Everyone was frozen in the moment, while Tomar was clutching his severed stump and Meela was keening loudly. Sai had Tomar's lower arm in her lap and was covered in blood. Maya had pushed back and nearly fallen over her seat, but caught herself just in time.

Ronnie looked around slowly before focusing on Tomar.

"My Lady Lili ... one appears to be distressed," he said, but she was already up and moving.

Pushing roughly past him, she reached over to grab the rest of Tomar's arm from Sai's bloody hands before nearly *blinding* everyone

when she flashed Tomar back together. She rudely pushed past Ronnie again and sat back down in a huff.

Ronnie turned to Tomar, who was looking at the sword he still held in his hand. Sai cleared her throat and handed the Grace pill to Ronnie, who handled it gingerly while inspecting it carefully.

“Captain Tomar, it appears you are guilty of attempted *murder*. As Master of this platform, I have rule over life and death. The accepted punishment for attempted murder is – *death!*”

Tomar merely smiled while reaching out one hand to touch his Meela. Then he knelt in front of Ronnie before bending his head down and waiting. Ronnie raised the sword high over his head, and the tone came back louder and harsher, with the bright violet light bouncing from every reflective surface.

“*NO! PLEASE, MY LORD! DO NOT KILL HIM! HE DID IT FOR ME!*” Meela cried out while struggling in her bonds.

Her head kept anxiously jerking around while trying to look at Vitas, Ronnie, and the sword all at the same time. The Elder was as terrified as Meela.

He looked down at Tomar and over at Meela. Then he sneaked a glance at the Elder. It was enough. The sword shut off with a pop before Ronnie brought it down gently across Tomar’s neck.

“Vitas Tomar … it appears that your lover’s pleadings have moved my heart. Your life is spared,” he said while the beep, beep thingy still raced at a panicked clip.

“Gallus?” he said, and tilted his head to Tomar. Gallus picked him up and took him to the back.

“M-My … Lord C-Caldar…” The Elder paused and tried to get her voice under control. “I understood the power pack had been removed from that sword.”

Ronnie turned cold eyes in her direction.

“We provide power packs for the rank and *file*, my Lady. I am … I was an Imperial Warrior. We don’t *need* power packs.”

“Get on with it, Caldar. *KILL THE BITCH!*” screamed a bloodied and angry Sai.

Ai flinched and turned sharply to Sai, while Ronnie let out a dejected sigh.

"Oh, very well. It's almost suppertime anyway. Uhh, the resuscitation pack, please, Larl." He pointed to it, and Larl handed him the facemask and breathing bag.

"What are you going to do to her?" the Elder asked softly, now resigned to the situation.

"It – my Lady. We call the intended victim 'It' – lest we assume too much familiarity with it and become reluctant to carry out the sentence."

He held up the mask with its build-in mouthpiece and looked down at Meela.

"You – open your mouth," he ordered, then pushed it roughly between her lips and strapped the mask over her nose and chin.

He could hear her breathing through the hose attachment and placed his hand over the end of it, which made her struggle for several seconds as her breath was cut off before letting her breathe again.

He strapped her head down and pushed it roughly – making sure she couldn't struggle and get loose. He turned on the breathing gas and the bag started filling while he hooked up the hose. Once the bag was full, the over-pressure started bleeding out the vent flaps of the mask.

"I wondered just how to do this dirty little deed and considered all my options. The *best* one I could think of was to let her die the same way that her sons did – asphyxiation. Oh, Lady Ai, would you please flip that lever just there? Just rotate it down. Ahh, thank you," he said politely.

The vent flaps closed when the breathing gas shut off, and Ronnie locked them shut. Now the bag expanded and shrank with every breath Meela took.

"You see ... she will remain just as pretty in death as she was in life – no marks, no scars, no burning. It won't be pleasant, but she *is* being punished."

He ran his hands over her hair in a false show of concern while smiling down at her.

"Don't worry, Meela. This won't take long. You only have a couple of liters of air, and it should only take a few minutes more," he said cheerfully.

The Elder came forward and began caressing Meela once again. Cradling her head with both hands now, Ai could hear Meela's heart

rate jump as betrayed by the heart monitor. Ai looked up at Ronnie with an expression of panic, but he ignored Meela and smiled at the Elder.

"Ah, you *hear*? Already her heart is beating faster while trying to push more blood to the lungs to carry more oxygen to the body. Soon she'll hear a pounding in her ears. Her blood pressure will increase as her heart works harder and harder."

Gallus and Endo moved closer to the prisoners on the floor. They were holding injectors in their hands.

"Caldar..." the Elder whispered.

She was watching the panic in Meela's eyes as she drew in great breaths of useless waste air. Meela was breathing rapidly and starting to make mewing, crying sounds at each exhalation.

"Right about now, her lips ... ahh, see? Her lips are turning bluish. That's a sign of cyanosis. Her blood has little or no oxygen left in it, and carries waste gasses that will not be purged because she is rebreathing all of her bad air. Can you believe that part of this is a sexual practice on Earth?"

He shook his head sadly and sighed again.

"Let's see ... next should be convulsions, paralysis, coma, and ... oh yes - death," he said casually.

Meela started struggling in her bonds as her heart rate was running away. Her eyes kept darting all around in panic, and then she started jerking uncontrollably.

"Caldar ... stop *this!*" the Elder begged him as tears started running down her face.

"My Elder? This was at *your* command. This was *your* intention all along. I even let *you* move the lever to start the process of her *death!*"

She reached for the lever, but Sai blocked her hand.

"*Let the traitorous bitch DIE!*"

Meela's struggles became frantic ... and then lessened ... and then she slumped ... her body only making occasional lurches when it tried to draw air into her lungs, even on the verge of death. Her eyes stared straight above her - right into the Elder's eyes.

"Paralysis should come pretty soon. It won't be long now," he muttered.

Ai was crying openly. She leaned forward and began kissing Meela's hair and whispering, "I'm so sorry – I'm so sorry," over and over.

The towel around Meela's waist became wet. The beeping became erratic as Meela's body began the final shutdown process. The Elder suddenly gasped and sat back.

"*She's gone! ... she's ... gone,*" she said in a whisper.

The heart monitor beeped intermittently for another few seconds and then stopped. Meela's irises opened all the way, and her eyes looked up blindly.

"Time of death? *Elder! Time of death of the condemned prisoner?*"

The Elder obediently looked up at the Center's timer.

"Mm ... Midnight ... minus ... five," she said in tears.

"Let the records show that Meili Tung-Mei Peizhi se Loca ne Zarox died at this time and date, at this location. Cause of death – *execution at the orders of the Elder, Lady Ai,*" he said formally, then stood up and stretched.

"Excellent, just in time for supper!" he added cheerfully.

'*Sai, the prisoners'*

Sai signaled her boys, and both prisoners received an injection quickly putting them to sleep.

Ronnie started unstrapping Meela's head and removed the mask from her blue-tinted face. Tiny blood vessels in her eyes were prominent. Handing the mask back to Larl, he raised his hand when Larl moved to recover the heart monitor pads from Meela's stationary chest.

Larl was still in shock at Ronnie's callousness over Meela's death, but froze in place at his gesture.

"My Elder, are you not well?" Ronnie asked her solicitously.

"You *killed* her! I *never* thought—"

"No, my Elder. You killed her. You weighed all the evidence and found her guilty. She was convicted before she even walked in here yesterday, and you just needed *me* to be your executioner. And I even got *you* to perform that nasty task for me when you shut off her air. Thank you, my Lady. At least *I'll* sleep well this evening."

'*One minute*' Sai pressed to him silently.

The rest of the room was in shock, and most of the witnesses were in tears. Maya was terrified at seeing this side of her Ronnie.

"It's quite different to kill a person calmly – *dispassionately* ... simply by pushing a button or flipping a lever," he said quietly, his voice carrying throughout the silent room. "Nothing at *all* like the necessity of killing a person who is actively engaged in trying to kill *you*. Sometimes I wonder if we would have executions at all if we required the adjudicators to *personally* push the button or pull the lever that would remove a person from this life. Perhaps you'll remember this lesson the *next* time you plot revenge in the name of the Commonwealth."

Ai was outraged at this and let her anger spill out loudly.

"A LESSON? IS THIS ALL IT WAS TO YOU? KILLING THIS POOR CHILD AS AN OBJECT LESSON FOR ME?"

"This 'POOR CHILD' was a *TRAITOR*, and *COMMITTED TREASON!* As for *ME*, I have *ALREADY* been schooled in *DEATH, MY LADY! ALL FORMS OF DEATH!*"

He stopped and looked away before continuing in a calmer tone of voice.

"You needed a touch of it yourself to appreciate its *import* to your position – or so Grandmother would say," he muttered, before turning back to her.

'Two minutes Caldar!'

"Are you disappointed with your *lesson*, Lady Ai? Do you think it needs *repeating?*" he chastened her.

"NO! No, Caldar. I do not need another lesson!" she said angrily.

He contemplated her comment; knowing better than most that the lessons would *never* end for her.

"Rest assured, my Lady," he said softly. "Many opportunities will arise in your position. and you will be called upon to balance the good with the even *greater* good. It's all in how the pieces fit together."

'Or what the Visions suggest to you' he added silently.

Ai looked at him in shock.

'Ronnie – three minutes. We're going to lose her!' Sai pressed urgently.

'Help me, Sail'

"Lesson learned? *Good!*" he said, then reached out for Larl to hand him the mask, then placed it on Meela's face.

Larl gratefully flipped the breathing gas lever back on while Ronnie began rapid chest compressions. Sai came over and pushed the Elder out of the way before checking the locked vent caps and starting to pump pure oxygen into Meela's lungs by holding the mask and squeezing the bag.

Ronnie was sensing everything about Meela, but it didn't look good. Considering the generally accepted guidelines for brain death, he'd not waited that long with her. He quickly pushed through her and flooded her with energy, but was not finding enough willing cells to take advantage of it.

He was desperately working through his options when he suddenly came to himself, relaxed, placed his hands flat over her heart, then closed his eyes and prayed ... and was rewarded.

'*Good show, Grandson. Next time, do not wait so long*' he heard echo inside his head before his body opened up to receive and redirect energy into Meela's lifeless one.

With his own eyes closed, he didn't see what everyone else did.

His hands glowed, it spreading all across Meela and then up his arms and all over his body. In just moments, both Ronnie and Meela were shining like captured stars in the enclosed space of the room.

Maya stood by silently as she watched her Ronnie work. Lili nodded her head approvingly, while Sai tried hard to ignore him while she kept pumping air into Meela's lungs.

The boys were on their knees in the background. Déjà stood between them and cried tears for reasons she couldn't explain. Lili was holding the First Lord firmly lest he drop to his knees as well.

The Elder just watched – amazed – as the Man-child played Gods with the dead body before him. Her staff was entranced at the spectacle.

Ronnie was being given the best lesson of his life. Grandmother was giving him a crash course in both living and dying while enwrapping him in the warmth of her soul and cherishing these last few moments with him. Together they worked through Meela's organs; energizing the repairs Meela's body knew how to fix, but merely needed the strength to do so. Her weakened heart muscles began repairing themselves at an accelerated rate, along with the rest of her organs.

As he worked, he became worried about her brain but tried very hard to refrain from interfering with the Healing by refusing to focus on it – other than hoping there was not too much damage in there. He knew the damage could be fixed, but memories in the mind might not remain. As Meela's body continued with the rest of the repair tasks, his attention drifted to concerns for the Elder.

'Advise her ... she will learn ... Lili should expand her office ... make their lives easier for all they have to do ... behave yourself, Grandson'

Then she was gone.

The glow gradually receded and Ronnie finally opened his eyes.

Meela still lay as if dead – until he raised his fist and smacked it sharply on her chest. The heart monitor kicked into low gear before slowly ramping up, while Sai kept the bag compressions going.

Meela's heart began to beat faster and stronger, and after a few more minutes, she finally started to resist the bag. Sai opened the vents and strapped the mask back to her face now that Meela was breathing on her own. They could see that her color was coming back nicely, too.

"Thank you, Grandmother," Ronnie murmured with his head bowed low.

The Elder sat down. She didn't know what had just happened, but she who was dead, was living once again, and she *swore* she could hear the echo of elderly laughter ringing in her mind.

Maya came to her Ronnie and hugged him tightly while both shivering and crying. He'd warned her it might turn out poorly, but she'd never suspected it would be this *ugly*. He staggered for a moment, and Maya helped him sit down before he looked around him and met all of their faces one by one.

"One may simply ignore what you've just seen ... if one so chooses," he said, picking his words carefully. "I doubt seriously, if anyone would believe you, anyway."

'My Elder, my Seniors ... Kita sends her greetings' he shared, then pushed to them the memory of her last words to him. Ai started to cry again while she slowly came over to him.

"My Lord ... Ronnie," she said, then ran out of words as he keeled over on the floor.

"Anyone *else* hungry?" he asked while looking up in confusion. "Gods, I'm *tired* too," he mumbled before losing consciousness.

Maya and Sai looked on helplessly for a moment before Lili reached down and slapped him – producing a bright flash at the moment of contact ... and his eyes slowly opened again.

“Whoa! Who *are* all you people?” he asked while looking around in bewilderment.

Lili reached down and slapped him again – this time *without* the flash.

“Ow! Okay, bad joke,” he said while struggling to sit up, but was still too dizzy. His stomach made the most *remarkable* complaint, which made him blush. Lili held him down, closed her eyes, then frowned. Then she glowed for several seconds.

“Ah ... Ah ... AH! Okay, Lili, I’m full ... *I’m full!*” he said while trying to squirm away from her.

She finally relented and let him stand, although he was still a bit wobbly on his feet. He looked over to Meela, who seemed to be sleeping quietly. He thought to search her mind, but Lili interrupted him.

“Do *not* do that *again*, Rondal!” she scolded him. “Take your time and pull from the *universe!* *There was no need!*”

“*I did!* I ... umm, I just forgot about dinner,” he said, but she glared at him. His stomach growled hungrily again, and she looked at the Center’s timer.

“When did you last eat?” she demanded.

“Ahh... Forgot to,” he admitted.

“Apparently, the Imperials *don’t* always think with their stomachs,” Sai muttered, while Lili turned back and joined her husband.

Ronnie struggled back to his seat with Maya’s help, and they sat there together, where she rested her head against his shoulder and held him with one arm. Her other hand held one of his.

Radatel was shaking his head, but Lili reached out and cupped his face before bringing their lips together so they could dance with their tongues. In only moments, Radatel relaxed and reached out to her as well; succumbing to her loving charms and drawing strength from her.

Endo brought over the body of Tomar and laid it on the floor, then handed Ronnie a pill packet containing the remaining Grace pills. Ronnie squeezed Maya before letting her go to accept the packet of pills.

“Stubborn man. Strong willed ... and truly in love with *Meela!* Who would have guessed?”

He shook his head in bewilderment while counting the pills. Then he selected one of them and began scraping at the red coloring on it to reveal a blue color beneath.

“Oh ... now *he’s* gonna wake up with a headache,” he muttered

“What? I thought those were *Grace* pills?” Ai said.

“Yes ... apparently so did *he*,” he said while looking askance at Tomar and shaking his head.

“They *aren’t?*” Lili asked.

“Not unless Commander Woldron screwed up somehow,” he said, while showing her the blue under the red coloring he’d scraped off the pill before handing them to Larl.

“Flush these, will you please, Larl? Unless you’re having trouble with Amy keeping you up at night?”

Larl just laughed and wiped away some tears while taking them to the facilities to toss them down the toilet.

“Wait ... you *knew?*” the Elder accused him.

“By the Gods, how could you *not* know? They fairly *screamed* it from the top of their skulls!”

Ronnie yawned and rotated his neck, but still felt a bit dizzy. As he sat there slowly recovering, Ai was still trying to fit new pieces into the puzzle.

“Did you know Tomar had taken the Grace pills?” she asked him.

“I did not. I felt their intentions to ease Meela’s exit from this world, and *his* intention to join her in death. What a *bozo,*” he said while looking down at Tomar. “A person who does foolish things without a tangible reason,” he added for their edification.

“A lot like *you*, Ronnie,” Sai muttered.

“Ronnie ... when did you feel their intentions?” the Elder asked softly.

“About an hour before I came to pay my respects to Kita. Plenty of time to sabotage their plans by substituting fake pills provided by Talon’s doctor. I’d felt in Tomar’s mind his memory of my testimony regarding the pills, so I made sure the only ones he could find would be fake.”

“And then your meeting with Molara in private?” she asked pointedly.

“Maya is recovering well, and Molara is family.”

‘*And we must meet later with your staff and speak’ he added, again, to her surprise.*

“And … today … this whole … *charade?*” she asked weakly.

“I am truly sorry about that, my Lady Elder. I had very little time in which to work and could not trust them to delay their plans before getting a verdict. Even then, Meela was *determined* to die for her crimes anyway – which, I should like to point out, she has *done* so. In that regard I would consider her punishment as being ‘paid-in-full,’ would you not?”

“I … yes, Ronnie. I drop all charges against Lady Meela Peizhi,” she said quietly before finally smiling at him – even though she was still angry that she’d been manipulated so easily.

“I thank you, my Lady,” he said, then laughed once. “Do you know how extremely *difficult* it is to come up with a complex arrangement of this nature at a moments notice?” he asked absently.

They could hear the joints in his neck crackle as he rotated his neck again.

“By the *Gods!* I was in an absolute *panic* the moment I learned of Grandmother’s passing. Then I stopped to visit Vitas and Meela, and learned of *their* plans. If I hadn’t had years and years of practical experience out on the Fringe doing … *other* things, then who *knows* how I would have managed without the help ofarl, Sai, and Lady Lili.”

“*Lili?* … You were a party to this as *well?*” Ai asked her, now surprised at the extent of the conspiracy.

“Ah … no, my Lady,” Ronnie interjected while holding up his hand. “She was unaware of what I had planned. I merely asked for Lili’s assistance in getting some necessary information … if we got to *this* part in the festivities.”

Maya stiffened at his callus remark, but he never noticed. She still sat beside him, though, and continued to listen attentively.

“And which part is *that*, Ronnie?” Ai asked him, now becoming somewhat intrigued by it all.

“What we do with *Meela*. Choosing the appropriate fiction that most benefits the goals of House Caldorous *and* the Commonwealth.”

Maya let go and leaned away from her Ronnie. He continued to ignore her when he got up and approached the comatose Meela. Maya began shaking her head slowly before standing up to move further away from the group.

“She is still very young and *pretty*, Father,” he called out, and got Radatel’s further attention by grabbing one of Meela’s nipples and tugging it firmly ... watching it pucker as soon as he let it go.

“Of course, *Vitas* loves her. But then again, he fell in love with the *bitchy* Meela. Who knows how long he could put up with a loving and *compliant* Meela?”

Sai pinched him, making him jerk.

“We can concoct an elaborate story and make subtle manipulations to her mind such that she’d ... oh, perhaps been in an *accident* many years ago that changed her personality, but she’s all better *now*. I have *some* experience with that.”

“Ow!” he said, after Molara pinched him this time, and Maya didn’t miss the similarity with her personal experiences.

“Or, we can swap her for her dead mother; the *original* woman who was selected for father’s companion and Second Wife. Lili now has all her factual data, and we can manipulate the records to reflect that Sharla was *not* killed, but was, in fact, merely *injured* and lost her memory for all these years. Then she could become well and join the household as was *originally* intended, while poor *Meela* here has had an unfortunate accident and lost her life in the far reaches of death space,” he suggested.

“Indeed,” the Elder said. “Any *other* potential plans for Lady Meela?”

Maya was *appalled* at the Elder’s complicity in this further conspiracy!

“Well, if we need to maintain the fiction that she’s already dead, her showing up as *herself* on Kantor or Loca is out of the question. There are *witnesses*,” he said, and nodded his head towards the comatose spies before going on. “Likely, if she’s turned loose, her handlers would either try to pick her up or kill her. If I was still working reclamations, and she learned to become a *true* Healer, she could be useful to the Commonwealth in that fashion. Or she could go out to the Fringe and become a common contentment girl and take care of the needs of the mercenaries. Sai, you need another couple of crew? Meela’s trainable, but Tomar’s swordsmanship leaves *much* to be desired.”

“Well ... he could help with Déjà – she’s *always* wearing out the boys,” Sai considered. “But then Meela would want to play as well.”

"So lots of possibilities ... perhaps best *slept* upon?" the Elder suggested.

"A reasoned and measured decision is *always* best when time allows, my Elder," he agreed.

'And be sure to get some *REAL* rest! Don't get lost in the *Visions!*' he silently warned her, startling her once again.

"Very well, then. Rondal, you look tired ... and *hungry*. And I feel very tired as well. And it *is* past supper time. Oh, what of *them?*" Ai asked him while pointing to the spies. "I suppose you have plans for *them?*"

"Ahh, actually ... I would recommend their disposition be decided by your own master spy, Lady Lili. Meela's final resolution would be aided by her advice as well. I'm afraid I play these political games rather poorly. I do much better sword-to-sword."

Ai smiled and dropped her head, shaking it slightly before looking up at him once again.

"We will certainly take it under *advisement*, my Lord Caldar. Perhaps tomorrow a suitable fiction will come to mind. Rondal – Sai – Lili ... I leave Lady Meela under your care. I have every confidence."

"I try to serve faithfully, my Elder," Ronnie said, pausing to bow before turning to Meela again, while Lady Ai gathered her staff and left the room. Lili came over to stand by Ronnie, and Radatel joined her.

Maya stood well aside and was in a great deal of confusion. She could not believe this ... this *travesty* of the Healer's arts! Lies, deceit, broken promises, and using people like ... like *pieces on a game board!*

"Father, if I'm not mistaken I believe death is as good as a *divorce*," Ronnie said while reaching down and pressing Meela's breasts together before moving them around gently. "However, she is still young and firm if she still interests you?"

Radatel reached up from behind and cupped Lili's very full breasts, then gently pressed them back to her chest while massaging them. Meanwhile, Lili reached down and behind to caress his growing stiffness.

"I believe the charms of the First Wife would be enough to last me a *lifetime*, Rondal, if only I were not her *second* job," he lamented, but Lili gripped him firmly, which caused him to emit a slight gasp. "However, I leave important household decisions of this nature to the *First* Wife," he wisely added.

"Come, my Lord Husband. I have time to work the *second* shift, and my need is suddenly upon me," she said teasingly, but paused to speak to Ronnie. "You did well, Rondal. Gods grace that your Grandmother stayed to help you. Is she *truly* gone?"

"She stayed behind for the final act," he said, then closed his eyes and stretched out, but didn't feel her anywhere. "She might still be around. Perhaps he will hover over your bed and take vicarious pleasure in watching your excellent skills with Father?"

"I miss her, Ronnie. I *really* miss her," she said sadly, before turning to Meela.

She quickly pushed through her from top to toes. She was impressed, for the most part, but there were still some concerns about the sanctity of her mind.

"Your Grandmother teaches you well, Rondal. *Mind you heed her lessons!* We will see how best to use Meela's remains. You will care for her this evening," she said, then turned with the First Lord to leave.

"What now, Ronnie?" Sai asked him. "Where are we gonna stash her?"

"You heard the Lady. We'll put her up with us for a bit until Lili figures out what to do with her. Better yet, we could turn her over to the rest of the Wives and let *them* deal with her. No one goes into their corridors except – ahh, staff. Damn!"

He started thinking furiously while his stomach growled an angry reminder.

"Okay, *long* term, the *Shining Star* would be good. Probably no one but the Elder and her staff have seen her. In the meantime, no one else knows she was executed and brought back – *provided* she makes a full recovery. She was struck ill, gravely injured ...no, too many Healers. Damnit! Maya, what is it that Healers *can't* fix?"

Maya was shocked by his callousness.

"No ... NO! ... I will *NOT* be a part of this! I cannot STAND you like this! I cannot stand *any* of this!" she said abruptly before suddenly turning and leaving the room.

"Ronnie, I'll go and–"

"No, Sai. Let her go. This wouldn't be the first time I've disappointed her," he said softly, while fighting the urge to leave his assigned task and go after her himself. "All part of the game we play," he muttered with a sigh.

"She felt so ... so *lost*," Sai murmured. "I really should go and talk to her."

"We have other issues," he said, and swept his arm around to the non-vertical bodies in the room, then finally noticed Larl was still hovering around Meela's head.

"Uh, how's she doing, Larl?" he asked, causing Larl to look up at him with a calm expression on his face.

"Heartbeat is steady and strong. Respiration is pretty normal. I was just about to unmask her and see if her saturation sags any," he said, while looking down at Meela and then back to Ronnie. "Where are we gonna stash the body? *Bodies*," he corrected as he pointed down at Tomar.

Ronnie looked down at Tomar and slapped the side of his face in surprise.

"Ai-yah! He thinks she's *dead!*" he exclaimed, but then his stomach rumbled impatiently. "Okay... We'll be taking Meela home with me and... Sai, do you think Déjà can keep our good Captain Tomar from trying to kill himself again? For at least a *couple* of days or so?" he asked while glancing back to look at Déjà's gleaming eyes.

Sai looked at Déjà's rapidly nodding head and big smile, glanced at her boys, and then down at Tomar. She finally sighed and nodded her head.

"Endo, please bring the prisoners. Gallus please bring Captain Tomar," she said, and watched as he bent down and hefted Tomar to the other transport one-handed. "I'll go with Ronnie to his compartment and retrieve the other transport. *Déjà – do not break our guest!*" Sai warned her, then thought for a moment. "Likewise, do not inform him that Lady Meela yet survives, as he thinks she is dead, and her disposition is still undecided."

"Yes, Mommy! I will be *extra careful!*" she promised excitedly, then left with the boys while Ronnie looked on in confusion. He shook his head before turning his attention back to Meela.

"Go ahead and unmask her, Larl, and let's watch for a moment," he said, before yawning and rubbing his face.

They observed Meela for several seconds, and then both Sai and Ronnie extended through her. Larl checked her saturation levels and they were close to nominal. Then there was a quiet moan from the transport. Ronnie did a quick scan, only to find that Meela was in there, but terribly confused and in pain.

"Time to go home, Meela," he murmured, then loosened some of the straps and cleared away the rest of the medical hardware before covering her all the way up with a sheet.

"Larl, please message the con to have the emergency medical kit serviced – soonest availability. There should be spares in ship doc, or Talon may help us out. And thanks for all your help, Larl. I don't tell you often enough, but you're an important part of my crew."

His stomach growled again ... reminding him yet *again* that it needed to be fed.

"Ronnie, I'd almost *pay* you just to let me watch you work – *almost*," Larl said, then laughed. "Someday I'm gonna write a book. I'll finish up here and then go get something to eat. You kids have fun. And if you find Maya, give her my love. It's been a long day."

While Ronnie and Sai wheeled Meela back to Ronnie's compartment, Larl started packing up the med kit, noted the usage on the label, and started shutting down the Recreation Center. He'd wondered why Ronnie had him stash the med kit in the facilities, but was very gratified that everything had finally worked out in the end.

Midnight -1 (Day 107) – Rebuffing the Process

Ronnie yawned, stretched, and *almost* curled around Maya again, but forced himself away. Instead of doing anything else, he decided to close his eyes and try to get back to sleep...

Earlier, he and Sai had wheeled Meela back to his compartment, where they'd found a sullen Maya waiting for them. She'd already gotten the guards to bring in another small bed and had it placed within their room.

After he and Sai had transferred her, Maya got additional towels and wet cloths, and with Ronnie and her mother's help, extracted the small anal plug that prevented Meela from making an odorous mess at the time of her death. Once removed, however, her body voided rapidly through the loosened orifice. Sai had bid them a cheerful adieu while they'd quickly dealt with the mess. It had required several trips with wet cloths and clean towels to tidy her up.

He'd *then* finally eaten the bowl of gruel he'd snatched on their way back from the Recreation Center, and with his stomach finally settled, he'd been able to pay proper attention to their temporary house guest.

He couldn't deal with her pain or discomfort, but hadn't wanted to introduce drugs into her system unnecessarily. He'd sat there scanning her, until Maya joined him and pointed out that Meela's body also needed fuel to Heal. He'd considered aloud calling Talon's doctor and

getting an intravenous feeding drip going, but Maya had suggested a simpler solution. She then got a wetted cloth and brought it to Meela's mouth – which sucked at it unconsciously.

After nodding her head once, Maya bared her breasts and leaned over Meela. She'd introduced her nipple into her mouth and gotten a tentative nursing reaction from her that got stronger while she continued to suckle. Since her stress levels seemed to be subsiding, it appeared that Maya's milk was having the expected palliative results.

Looking within, he'd not seen the wild party first experienced with the nursing Shay, but easily recognized the increased blood flow indicating her body was taking full advantage of Maya's gift.

He related the story of Lili's teaching, which brought a single snort from Maya. It wasn't much, but just hearing her make it was something he'd missed so very much over the last several days.

Once Meela was settled, they'd both washed and gone to bed – Maya with her back to him.

That had been a few hours ago...

Meela was sleeping fitfully. Her mind was jumbled from its death ordeal and was still in the process of healing and arranging itself. How it all turned out would be a surprise that awaited them once she finally awoke, and they all hoped it would be a *welcome* one.

As Ronnie dozed beside her, Maya lay there thinking of all the things she'd seen and witnessed in the last two days...

Her memory was now intact and contiguous. She still grieved for her daughters, but it was no longer the sharp agonizing grief she'd suffered when Kita had led her through her first recovery ordeal. She wondered at that, for Kita had not only seemed concerned about her, but more apologetic as well. She couldn't help feeling there was something else going on that was being kept from her, and wondered if her Ronnie – who had promised *never* to lie to her again – was committing yet *another* lie, but one of omission this time.

Even more disturbing was the shocking revelation that she had known *both* of the captured spies. They'd been among those persons she'd seen back on her survey mission to Loca when orders had come from the Elder's office to go to Loca and check the status of their planetary clan skills – which she'd found lacking in *many* regards.

Surely, the Elder's staff had more useful ways to track the training of the Healer clans. And why send a mere Healer when a *Senior* was really more appropriate?

Of course, the issue of the Peizhi family was quite *atypical*. If everything she had learned about Laisee's mother and grandmother were true, it would indicate that no proper training was available at *all* for the daughters of the Peizhi clan. That was an *abominable* concept, and should probably be brought up to the Elder ... or Lady Lili, as she had been ousted as the Elder's master spy.

But then, Lili had *already* known.

Lady Liling Shan Ting Song se Cletus ... First Wife of the First Lord ... the Elder's Master Spy ... stepmother to her Ronnie, or rather, Lord Rondal Caldar sai Caldorous se Earth ne Kantor.

And why is it that *she* – a low-level Healer – was now finding herself caught up in *Royal* intrigues?

Fifteen years ago, all she had known about her Ronnie was that he was that nice old man who sat with her while she was recovering from a shuttle accident. Back then, he had offered her a Healer's position with him on a little backward planet to help work the Gleanings from the Blight. It had seemed appropriate at the time ... a place to Heal, a place to serve, and to have the company of that nice old man.

After the first few months, she'd gotten him to stop bothering her about "Yandi this" and "Yandi that" and they'd gone on in a quiet truce.

As part of her normal duties, she'd naturally been providing Healer's milk, along with contentment and other Healer services for the needful, but he'd never *once* asked for contentment or anything else – just for her to do her job as best she could. She'd even asked him outright, *herself*, but he'd rebuffed her advances and told her he'd lived long enough without and was just fine.

Several times during that first year, she'd seen him get angry after receiving unpleasant messages through diplomatic channels. On more than one occasion, she had even heard him swearing about the administrative incompetency of the Elder's staff. She had even overheard him muttering about their lack of concern over the wellbeing of "his" Healer.

Still, she'd found his company pleasant for the most part, and been especially delighted with his skills in dealing with the Gleanings – all the hopeless souls who'd found their way into her Ronnie's hands for guidance, instruction, and acceptance.

He'd worked relentlessly with them; getting them ready to rejoin Commonwealth society ... of a sort. They would be reintroduced onto Class-Five planets, with a few groups more technically advanced moving to Class-Four planets.

Nearing the end of her first year with Ronnie, she had finally seduced him when he was not looking. It was in summer – September on Earth – during which he had received a birthday present from his mother. It was a cherished bottle of ambrosia. He'd opened it and sat smelling the fragrance that wafted out of the tiny glass he'd poured. Then he had poured a small glass for her as well.

He had been glowing nicely somewhere into the middle of the bottle and she'd finally decided she would take advantage of the situation. She'd begun by flirting with him. At first he'd been responsive, but then realized what she was doing – and then he'd said the *unthinkable* ... that he was not about to "take advantage of *her*."

That had made it a *challenge*, and she'd poured him a few more drinks before helping him stagger to his bed, where she'd administered the *final* stroke. She'd squirted her milk into his mouth, and in moments he'd been hers. Then she'd taken great delight in putting him through his paces.

He'd not been clumsy like a young man, nor was he extremely skilled in his lubricated state. His size was "average" and they'd both enjoyed the encounter. In the morning, she had been surprised to find him laying sideways to her, with his legs scissored between hers and loving her again. It had been warm, nice, and comfortable, and their relationship gradually changed over the next few months until they'd moved in into his room together; the one with the bigger bed.

It was about a year later when she'd discovered they now shared the Healer's Bond.

She didn't know it right away, of course. She'd experience a sensation of injury upon occasion, which she'd believed was due to their refugees. It was after the third or fourth time when she'd found out that Ronnie ... *her* Ronnie now, had somehow developed a limited amount of Healer talent from somewhere.

She'd been on her way to tell him something when she'd heard him swearing just as her arm began to burn as if cut painfully. She'd dropped the bundle she'd been carrying and clutched her arm in confusion. She'd been wondering what had happened to her while the pain began to lessen a bit.

She'd picked up what she'd dropped and walked up behind him, only to catch him clutching his arm and seeing the tiny tell-tale glow around the edges of his hand while her pain slowly went away. When he'd pulled his hand away, there was another new thin scar on his arm, and the only blood visible was that which had dropped onto the

dirt. At that point, it had become obvious – she and her Ronnie were Healer-Bonded.

When confronted about it later, he'd admitted that it was something he'd picked up. A "useful skill for an old warrior" as he'd put it, and pointed out correctly that it was not entirely unknown, and certainly not proscribed by the laws – unlike other things that men were *definitely* not allowed to do. Besides, he wasn't *Kantite*-born, so that issue would never come up now, would it?

She'd asked if it was related to the horrible scarring all over his torso, but he'd told her it was merely a constant reminder of his "*misspent youth*" so he would not make the same mistakes again.

Over the years, she'd also discovered her Ronnie's "curse" – he was an empath, and sometimes *painfully* so. It was of great benefit, for this particular variant allowed him to relate to nearly *everyone*. Unfortunately, this variant also had a downside.

Aside from feeling all the joy, happiness, love and caring rolling off their clients; he also felt all the pain, anguish, torment, and suffering. He'd finally admitted to it after they'd spent time working together with a single family of three survivors who'd needed to stay behind after their group was transferred to their destination colony. That small family had *many* issues that needed working through, and she'd seen the pain on his face when they'd sat witness to the story of their lives while it was related to them in agonizing detail. It had allowed them to grieve, accept, and finally let go of their pain during the solitude of that one summer.

That is when she'd finally learned that Ronnie could work very well in large groups, but the smaller the group, the less overall "noise" he experienced, and the easier it was for him to be affected by the sorrow of those around him.

They spent the remainder of their time on Earth in a comfortable partnership, and she'd even considered several times the concept of their being bonded, if not actually married. It was a *remote* possibility, but he'd never broached the subject, which was very frustrating for her. She had once considered that, certainly, after all those years, the Elder would not simply break them apart. It was almost as if they had forgotten about her altogether. Messages to her Mother were always replied by her Aunt Molara, who'd said that "Mother was fine" and that she was to "stay put, indefinitely."

That had been fine with her, as she had both her Ronnie, and a small but important job to do. She even had friends as well. As for her Ronnie, he seemed to love what he was doing. It seemed to give him a great deal of happiness to help his campers heal and grow strong. He

seemed to love them all. To her, it seemed that he could not love his own children any more, if he'd any, and she'd wished on several occasions that she could give him a child to love as his own. Of course, that was before she'd found out who his old friend Walter *really* was.

He'd always been so happy to see Walter on his frequent visits to the camp, and they'd talked about so many things. He'd once come to her about Walter and asked her to look within – to do that “Healer thing and check him out” – because Walter was really sick. She'd looked, found a disease common among Earthlings, and set out to see if she – a low-level Healer – could have any real affect on it.

She'd started with her milkshakes, which helped a great deal with the nausea from Walter's chemo treatments. She'd shuddered at that concept; poisoning an otherwise healthy body to kill part of it in hopes that the *rest* of the body survived the treatment. Later on, when the cancer had come out of remission, she'd determined that a more “hands-on” approach was necessary. Ronnie had readily agreed, which had surprised her to no end.

Up until then, their presence on Earth as “illegal aliens” was a national secret. No one outside of a very tiny group – sometimes not even the *ruler* of the country – was aware of them, so keeping a low profile was paramount. Yet Ronnie had given her *unlimited* permission to treat his friend Walter, and she had. When Ronnie had made himself absent one night, she had *seduced* Walter. She'd allowed him to watch her make her “special milkshake” for him, then offered him a taste of *fresh* milk.

The rest had been relatively easy. As a palliative agent, her milk made any pain go away. Then she used her additional skills to assure him that he was loved and safe, and that it would be best if *no one* ever found out about her and Ronnie, because then he couldn't visit her anymore. Then – having gained his trust and confidence – she'd taken him to bed and given him *much* contentment. In the process of loving him, she had sent him constant streams of Healing that, over the course of just a few years, had finally given his body the necessary strength and energy to deal with the cancerous invader and finally defeat it.

It was only on Walter's untimely death ... *murder*, now ... that she'd learned Ronnie was his *father*. And that he *had* a grandchild ... and *great-grandchildren*. It appeared that Ronnie had all the children to love that he needed.

If only he loved her as much, as he'd *still* never broached the issue of a formal bonding with her.

And then there was the picnic and subsequent departure.

Then came all the other revealing facts about her Ronnie and his extended and ... and apparently *continually* growing family. And she still loved him, and he'd finally admitted that he loved *her* – no matter what. She thought she knew and understood her Ronnie well, but every time something new happened, she learned another little tidbit of information about him.

He'd been Captain of this platform – *and had spent twenty years here alone with the body of her Grandmother while waiting to die!*

He'd rescued her from the Drecks – *in person* – and then Healed her at the Senior's level; *lying to her about it for the last fifteen years!*

Her mother shows up – and she finds out he was a *mercenary*; the notorious *Madman of the Fringe*, no less!

He'd always done his very best to help *everyone* he came across, and yet he'd gone ahead and orchestrated *today's* events – *right up to the execution of Lady Meela* – and apparently without a *qualm*!

She wondered at that, as he had stayed with Meela and felt both her terror and her death – *right along with her!* She had known that personally, as she had suffered it with him through the *Healer's Bond*!

After all this, she was beginning to think she did not know what kind of man her Ronnie *really* was, and afraid in some ways to find out even more. This saddened her a great deal, because she loved him so very much ... but still wondered if it was right to stay with him at all?

It was at that point when she finally drifted off to sleep.

Midnight –1 (Day 107) – The Elder Shares

It had only been one day, but Ai was already violating one of Kita's rules. While Molara was spending the night with Sai Tal and her brood, Ai was sharing the Visions with Fan and Xiu...

It had still been hazy, but she described what she had seen before Ronnie had taken agent Sai out ice mining and reported that it was much better now. Things seemed to be shaping up, and the paths had become much clearer since then.

Following Kita's advice – and now backed by suggestions from Fan and Xiu – she'd been putting pieces in and taking them out; watching the paths change and roil as a result.

At Ronnie's off-handed remark, she fitted Meela's piece into the various roles he'd suggested. There didn't seem to be too many variables to that piece until she added Lili's involvement to it. That

cleared up *many* paths – some bright and some dark. The only problem was, down the line, there were always more branches to consider...

"That damn Caldar has the *easier* part of this!" she blurted in frustration.

"How is that, Ai?" Fan asked. Her casual familiarity was yet another change now that Kita was gone.

"He gets to deal with reality at the point of his *sword*. Looking as you see within me, the paths keep changing, even as I consider the possibilities."

"My Lady–"

Xiu!"

"Ai, you have been doing this for all of ... a *day* now?" Xiu pointed out. "And Kita needed several years to work it out ... by *herself*, if she acted as you say. All of us are ... well, it wouldn't be right to say *accepting* of this development, but surely you must see that – even as we realize the *truth* of your Visions – it is still merely a tool that will need plenty of study to use properly."

"*Regardless* of the need, Ai," Fan added helpfully.

Ai lay back and sighed heavily. Even as she closed her eyes and saw dim reflections of the future, the wisdom of their counsel made a tremendous amount of sense ... but then the Visions turned *black*.

"AWK!" she exclaimed, and sat bolt upright.

"What! What is it, Ai? Why is it suddenly dark?" Xiu asked.

"He ... he *died* ... *Ronnie died!*"

"What? When? Now?" Fan quickly asked her.

"No. It happened once before with Kita. When Ronnie's path was removed from the mix, the *Commonwealth* died! That is why I sent Sai out with him. Otherwise, she would have chased him down and killed him, or he would have had to kill her. And if he had killed her, he would lose his *Maya!*"

"Did *Maya* die?" Xiu asked.

Ai closed her eyes and searched the Visions carefully while Fan and Xiu sent out feelers and found Maya's sleeping presence.

"Nooo..." Ai said slowly, "...but she leaves him for some reason. It throws him off. He – he loses himself in any number of ways; but at the end of each one ... he dies. And so do we – the Commonwealth."

"I found it," Fan said unhappily. "She is becoming ambivalent. Her thoughts are retrospective and worried. She is becoming concerned that perhaps Ronnie is *not* part of her destiny."

"But Kita went to so much—" Ai broke off her murmur, but not before Xiu caught part of it.

"Ai, you know more than you are sharing," she said accusingly.

Ai pulled completely out of the Visions and looked at her staff. They were still her friends – she hoped. She was beginning to understand Kita's reserve and remoteness. It could be very lonely at the top. She let out another sigh. This would be hard ... *very* hard. Especially when she revealed all that she now knew ... or suspected.

"My ... friends?" she asked, and got tentative nods from Fan and Xiu. "We need to talk ... all of us. Molara as well, and probably Sai and Lili. And Lord Calder and Maya ... and anyone *else* you think would be appropriate once we have a chance to confer with Molara tomorrow morning."

"How about Trenka?" Fan suggested. "Has she been approached about joining our little family yet?"

Ai was relieved to feel the warmth that Fan put behind that reference.

"We should approach Trenka about joining our family, although I'm not sure if this is the time to do so as we know very little about her."

"We knew very little about Sai as well, yet she was under consideration also," Xiu reminded her. "Except, of course, that she has a rather large family, which *would*, no doubt, be quite a distraction all by themselves," she added with a grin.

"It is very late, Ai, and today was extremely stressful for you because of the *Man*-child," Fan teased her. "You should try to sleep as he suggested."

Ai nodded in acceptance of her suggestion, then closed her eyes in a lost sigh, while Xiu caught Fan's attention and nodded towards Ai. Fan smiled and nodded in agreement.

"Ai ... it is very lonely at the top," Xiu murmured. "But it need *not* be. Would you please accept the company of Fan and me with you this night?"

Ai looked at them both, and tears started forming at the edges of her eyes. Of all things right now, being alone was probably the *worst* thing she could think of. She wasn't desirous of contentment, but the simple fact of them staying with her tonight would be most welcome.

"Oh my dear friends... I would like that so *very* much," she said before reaching out to them.

Midnight +3 (Day 108) – The Undead Awaken

Tomar stirred. Then he moaned. Then he tossed a bit and discovered he'd acquired a *pounding* headache and moaned some more.

He wondered if his headache would go away by the time he was assigned to a new body and had been reborn.

'So this is death?' he contemplated painfully.

He didn't think much of it. Where were his *guides*? Where were the friends from his *past*? Oh ... *that's* right – he didn't bother to *make* any. And why was it so damned *dark*?

He considered his situation.

First, of course, would be the review – what had he done with his life?

Let's see ... he'd been cruel and unkind to *everyone* ... made *plenty* of enemies ... thought *ill* of the Royal family ... and then fallen in love with a *traitor* to the Commonwealth.

That would look good on his Akashic record.

What lessons must he still learn?

Kindness?

Trust?

Caring? Well, he cared for the *traitor*.

Humility? *That's* a good one, especially after watching the old man in action.

Acceptance? He thought he learned that one when he'd bowed his head for Caldar to take it from him. Maybe he'd get a check mark under acceptance?

He heard a noise ... kind of a rumbling, *breathing* sort of noise. He didn't remember anything about that in the theological studies of his distant youth. He listened closely and wondered what was hiding out there in the darkness. He also heard something else ... something *beyond* the pounding in his head.

It was a *mechanical* sound of some sort. The sound of ... of an *air handler*? *Here*?

With a great effort of will, he finally cracked his eyelids open, only to find himself looking at the ceiling of a dimly lit room. With a wincing effort, he was able to shift his eyes sideways and saw a large lump over by the opposite wall. He moved his head painfully and noted there were *three* large pallets in the room, and he was on one of them.

Apparently, in *this* portion of the between life, you had to *share* accommodations.

He struggled to sit up, but the pounding in his head threatened to push his brains out through his ears. Instead of fighting a pointless battle, he settled back and waited for it to subside while considering this development.

He was slowly coming to the sad conclusion that those Grace pills he'd broken out of the med locker had had an expiration date.

In Sai's Room...

Déjà caught movement from the monitor and giggled.

"He is *awake*, my love," she whispered, between nibbling at Sai's nipple.

Sai reached out and danced around his thoughts.

'... pain ... contemplation ... no fear, interesting... ahh, he thinks he's dead ... but – not anymore ... bad pills' She stifled a laugh.

"Do you think you can deal with his *headache*, my precious?" she asked her little cannibal.

"I will do my very best to make him forget *everything*, Mommy," Déjà promised her.

"Not everything," Endo told her while still carefully thrusting into Sai, where he lay beside her.

"That's true, Endo," Sai agreed reasonably. "We must wait for a *final* determination by Lady Lili and the Elder."

"Then I will make his headache nothing but a *bad* memory and leave him *weak and helpless!*" Déjà declared with a joyful tinkling in her voice.

Sai laughed before adding another condition.

"Just enough so he won't be leaving us without our permission, Déjà. Perhaps you can arrange that?"

"Oh, but my *love*? Isn't that ... *forbidden?*" Déjà asked in mock dismay at the mere thought of it.

"We are agents of the *Elder*, my sweet one. Most of what we do is forbidden," Sai reminded her.

"Ah... That is quite *true*. I had *forgotten*," she said with faux contriteness, then gave Mommy a short but loving kiss before sliding out of bed to deal with Captain Tomar.

After she closed the door, Endo shifted around and rose up above Sai. Then he raised her legs higher – holding them easily in his huge hands. He began thrusting deeper, but still very slowly – letting Mother adjust to his size, which was something he and Gallus had to do *every* time they played with Mother now.

Once she was fully ready, he sped up and began giving her a *great* deal of pleasure, as was evidenced by her reoccurring squeals as she peaked repeatedly. For all his size and strength, the fact that he was loving Mother *always* made him very excited, and he finally emptied himself within her for the second time that evening. As he relaxed, he was careful to hold himself above her before carefully rolling to the side – lest they have a repeat of the time he'd simply collapsed on her and nearly smothered her with his bulk before she'd managed to lever him off her.

As Sai lay there in contentment, she reached down with a towel and covered herself – holding Endo's warm seed within her while protecting the bed with the towel just in case. Both her boys were very prolific producers, and even their hot seed alone was sometimes enough to bring her over one last time when they deposited it within her.

She was *proud* of her boys. She loved them, and they loved her in return, but she sometimes wondered how it would be if they became *fully* grown and added another two to four feet to their height, or how huge their members would be *then*.

Where Tomar Resided...

Tomar lay there in pain, which was a *totally* unexpected situation...

He'd failed to give his love the Grace pill, then watched helplessly when Lord Calder had coldly and brutally abused her before suffocating her to death with the help of the Elder.

Once the Elder had pronounced her dead, he'd immediately swallowed one of the Grace pills and waited to die; blacking out within seconds. However, from the size of that monster against the other wall, it appeared that he was simply under guard, and probably in the same quarters as the *other* prisoners of the Elder. Given the circumstances, her agent, Lady Tal, was probably holding him. After hearing the sound

of a closing door, the young lady he recognized walking quietly over to stand beside him, merely confirmed it for him.

"Hello, Captain Tomar. How are you feeling?" she whispered solicitously, before smiling at him sweetly.

"I've got a splitting headache. Why didn't I die?" he asked softly. He'd not whispered as Déjà had, but still didn't want to risk a cranial rupture from speaking too loudly.

"Expired *pills*, I would imagine," she lied airily, which was part and parcel for an agent of the Elder. "Can I get you anything? Water ... food, perhaps?" she asked him eagerly.

"How about something for this *pounding* in my head?" he muttered with a grimace.

"Ohhh," she said softly while bending over and getting *very* close to him. "I thought you'd *never* ask," she whispered, then grasped his head with both hands before planting her lips on his.

His first impulse was to complain – which allowed her to thrust her tongue into his open mouth and push it partway down his throat. The enzymes she released with her saliva quickly worked their way into his blood stream by easily slipping through the walls of any mucus membrane.

He struggled for just a few moments until his body became limp. Then Déjà sent out *waves* of pleasure and passion that his body found *impossible* to ignore. As his endorphins kicked into overdrive, his headache vanished – even as he grew an erection that became full and would have been *painful* if he could even *feel* pain any longer.

Drawing away from him, she quickly dropped her clothing and began stripping him down as well. Once she had him sufficiently naked, she mounted him and began to extract her pleasure from him in *full* measure, while occasionally leaning down and bathing his tonsils with her tongue to maintain the level of enzymes needed to keep him pain free and willing.

As a matter of habit, Déjà used him for quite a while and enjoyed him *thoroughly*. Eventually, though, she remembered her lover's orders and let him recover enough of his senses to achieve a climax that *completely* knocked him out while giving her that *extra* thrill she found so exciting during sex with humans. She sat on him and kept grinding against him while he slowly deflated within her, but now that he was out, she sighed and let out a despondent shrug, before poking him a few times just to make sure.

Finding him *truly* out, she got up, caught his drippings, and wiped them on her tongue – *relishing* the taste of fresh uncooked protein. Then she bent down and sucked *strongly* on him to get the remainder of his seed. While tidying up, she thought once again about the Drecks who'd taken her from her people so very long ago. Mommy had *insisted* she not forget her past and sometimes quizzed her on it unexpectedly.

From what she remembered, the Drecks were *fun* – just another form of human, except *huge* – but they'd never understood her people. These humans, though, were a *great* deal of fun. She and Mommy had often talked of how dangerous Mommy thought her people could be among the humans or the Drecks.

Sure, she did have this little bit extra left over from her *predator* roots, but now she just used it to *play*. Who cared about Hegemonies or Commonwealthies as long as there was food to *eat*, a warm place to *sleep*, and someone to *play with*?

What *else* was there in life?

As an adopted daughter to an agent of the Elder, she saw *lots* of interesting people, but the silly conflicts they were all involved with only detracted from *play!* The one thing she was *very* glad of was meeting Mommy Sai. Mommy was the one who'd *saved* her, just like she'd saved her *brothers*. Mommy was the one who'd taught her to “*pace herself*” and to let people *sleep* once in a while, which was a *good* thing because it taught her “*anticipation*” as Mommy had called it, and she was *right*. Play *delayed* was play enjoyed more *thoroughly* – as long as it wasn't delayed *too long*!

And Mommy Sai had given her *another* gift – *climax!* She'd *never* experienced *that* before ... not like the *humans* do. Her people mated among their kind, and their males splashed their seed within them, then just kept on *going*, but they never “*peaked*” like the *humans* did. Mommy had tried to explain it to her, but it wasn't until she'd linked Déjà's body with her own during sex that Déjà had ever felt *anything like it!*

It was *extra* fun, and she liked it very much, but at first could only feel it when linked to Mommy. That *alone* was worth studying so hard to learn that tiny bit of Healer skill, if only to be able to connect like that during sex to feel the *human* climax inside of her, or *along* side of her, as when Mommy climaxed with one of the *boys*.

It was *especially* nice when the boys climaxed inside Mommy, as they were quite intense about it – and produced a *great deal of fresh protein!* She thought that was the only *down* side of humans. They didn't appreciate *fresh food* – not like the *Drecks did!*

That thought triggered her memory, and she quickly grabbed her clothes, then paused while looking over at Gallus and Molara – *both still asleep, darn it!* – before running back to join Mommy and Endo. Maybe he'd already finished up inside of Mommy and left a *fresh snack for her!*

Midnight +5.5 (Day 108) – An Early Morning Visitor

Laisee had been distraught all night long...

She knew the Elder had kept her mother behind the previous day, and yesterday she'd been called again. Then – sometime around supper time – she'd felt a wave of fear and panic wash over her that sickened her stomach and gave her chills before finally subsiding after a short while.

She'd spoken worriedly to David and Diane, but they'd forbidden her to approach the Elder or Lady Lili, or anyone *else* involved with the proceedings. They'd told her she'd be informed in due time – as *all* of them would be.

They'd finished eating an otherwise quiet supper, and Laisee had afterwards managed to ask about Captain Tomar, but he'd not been seen. It was looking like whatever had happened to her mother had also involved Captain Tomar.

Perhaps it wasn't as bad as she feared? Perhaps they had simply banished her? Surely, *Tomar* had done nothing wrong – but then she remembered his words to protect her with his life. Perhaps they had *both* died – Tomar, while trying to protect her?

Later that night, they'd all showered, and after listening to Laisee cry in the other room for a while, Diane had ordered her into their bed. Laisee didn't really want to practice on David that night, but Diane told her to lay between them and they'd simply lain there together and rested – Diane hugging Laisee to her and letting her cry, while David snuggled up against her and bound them to him with his arms. Eventually, Laisee fell asleep in the comfort and warmth of their love.

It was when David had gotten up early to pee that Laisee slipped out of bed and quickly dressed, before sneaking out the door and walking down to Ronnie's compartment...

Coming back to bed, David noted Laisee was gone. He checked her room, then checked the outer room. Poking his head out the door, he saw her arguing with the guard stationed outside Ronnie's door. He thought it over for just a second, but shrugged in defeat.

Ronnie's *only* order last night had been to keep track of Laisee – *sit on her* if necessary – but keep her under control until tomorrow to let

things settle a bit ... and now he'd screwed up even *that* little bit of responsibility.

While waiting for a compartment-to-compartment link, he was wondering to himself just what *had* happened to Meela yesterday.

In Ronnie's Compartment

Ronnie awoke quickly and turned the audio down before answering the monitor. He glanced at the compartment timer while learning that Laisee was on the move and currently arguing with his guard.

Great ... she *could* have waited another two hours, but *no*. He thanked David for the heads up and told him it was okay – that “today was tomorrow, after all” and everything would be explained once they came up with a convincing lie.

David gave out an understanding “Ah” and wished him good luck before clicking off – no doubt going back to bed and leaving the problem with him.

Ronnie checked on Meela – still asleep – then felt around her and found that she had also not peed herself. Autonomic systems appeared to be functional.

Stumbling into the outer room, he closed the inner door before carefully walking through the dim lighting to the outer door, where he listened at it. It took only moments to determine his morning was already shot, so he opened it and thanked the guard for his diligence in keeping this minor annoyance from bothering him. Ronnie told him he would deal with her disobedience *personally*, then dragged her inside and closed the door. When he turned around, his face had turned angry and his voice was low and stressed.

“Laisee! I left *specific* instructions with David and Diane last night that we were *not to be disturbed*, and that *you*, young lady, were to remain with them at *all times!* Now what is going *on* here?”

“Ronnie, I’m worried about my *Mother!*” she said while clutching at him.

“We’re *all* worried about Meela, but this is a matter for the *Elder*,” he reminded her tersely.

“I felt her! Last night at supper, *I felt her ... I – I heard her... she called to me, Ronnie!* She ... she was screaming for me!” she cried loudly, and tears began dripping down her face.

“All right ... all right ... it’s all right,” he said, and drew her into his arms.

"Oh, Ronnie ... I think my Mother's *dead!*"

He was stuck thinking on his feet again. He *hated* this. Even though Lili had *finally* taught him how to block emphatic emissions, he was still a sucker for a woman in tears. He held her tightly while lowering his voice to a murmur.

"Laisee, your mother did some very bad things. Her fate is yet to be determined by the Elder. You should not worry about her right now."

"No ... no, she's *dead* ... I felt her *die last night* ... it was *horrible* ... she – she couldn't *breathe* ... she hurt *so much*, Ronnie ... and she was *so sorry*..." she said through broken sobs.

He knew *exactly* how Meela had felt when she was dying, right up until she did. He'd never blocked those feelings away from himself, and still wondered how he'd managed to keep his composure while sharpening the edge of the new Elder. Still, this was his stepsister, and she had never deserved a torment this cruel. He leaned closer to her ear and whispered a warning to her.

"Laisee, this is *Elder* business ... higher even than the *Crown*. I can lose my *head* over this! You must never say *anything to anyone!* Do you understand?"

"Y–yes..." she stammered, and sniffled while leaning back and looking up at him hopefully.

"Come with me and be *silent!*" he whispered, then drew her to the sleeping room door. "Not a word – *ever!*" he murmured again, before bringing her inside.

Laisee stifled a shriek as soon as she recognized her mother on the small pallet. She tried to go to her, but he held her back.

"Okay," he whispered. "You've seen her. Now go back to bed..."

"*No!* I want to *stay* with her," she said stubbornly.

"Laisee, this is not the time–"

"I won't *leave her!* I want to *stay with her!*" she insisted, only much louder now.

He sighed in resignation at this unexpected complication. He'd *one* order to follow... He didn't want to give in, but Maya took that moment to speak up from the bed.

"Laisee ... come to bed, child," she said wearily.

"Oh Maya, I'm so sorry I woke you," Laisee whispered loudly. "Mother ... is she all right?"

"She is simply sleeping, child," she lied. "Come to bed."

Laisee looked longingly over at her mother, but reluctantly let herself be guided to bed by Ronnie. She crawled into the middle and cuddled up to Maya.

"Is she all right, Maya?"

"Yes, she should be fine in a few days," she said, while wondering if it was really true.

"What happened to her? Was it the Elder? Did the *Elder* punish her?"

Ronnie paused before slipping into bed alongside Laisee; dreading not knowing what Maya was about to reveal to her.

"The Elder had sentenced her to death for her crimes," Maya said, and Laisee stiffened. "But Ronnie argued with her and changed her mind. Then your mother foolishly admitted to all her crimes, and that forced the Elder to order her execution."

Laisee lay very still while tightly clutching Maya's arm.

"The Elder ... started her death process ... but then she changed her mind when she saw her suffering. Your mother suffered a *great deal* ... but Ronnie was able to save her before she suffered too much," she lied again.

'I let her die, Maya'

'She does not need to hear that now'

"Our Ronnie saved her?"

"Yes, Laisee. Ronnie saved Meela from death," she lied again, and felt dirty in the saying of it.

"Oh my *Ronnie!*" Laisee cried, and rolled over and hugged him tightly while kissing him around his neck and face. They could both feel her passions quickly ramping up.

'Would you care for me to WITHDRAW so you may reap your REWARD, EXECUTIONER?'

'Tell her the truth, Maya'

'It is not MY truth to tell. Perhaps MEELA will tell her - if any part of her mind is STILL IN THERE!'

He pushed Laisee away and rolled her over to face Maya, whom she hugged just as excitedly, while he moved further away from the both of them.

'Is this how it starts, Lord Calder? One lie atop another? How many MORE lies, Lord Calder?'

'Go to sleep, Maya. This is not the time'

'Is it EVER the time, Lord Calder? Or is it SENIOR Calder now?'

'Maya, Kita told me—'

'Did Kita tell you WHY I was on Loca? Did she tell you WHEN to pick me up at the outpost? Did she mention that my DAUGHTERS were with me?'

'Maya!'

'WHAT? You need time to make up MORE lies, Senior Calder?'

'Today... Sometime today, the Elder will call us ... ALL of us ... and we will talk—'

'So we can all agree on the NEXT lie we tell? It must get very difficult keeping TRACK, Senior Calder.'

'Maya, please!'

'Please YOURSELF, Senior Calder! You do not need ME any longer. I have handpicked Laisee as my REPLACEMENT. Perhaps if you do not lie to her so FREQUENTLY, she will stay with you longer than I HAVE!'

Maya got up, dressed, and left the room ...surprising an oblivious Laisee in the process.

"What... What's *wrong*? Did I do something *wrong*?" she asked plaintively, but only heard his sigh when he rolled away from her.

She rolled towards him, but he held her away while he sat up. He turned up the lights a bit more, then moved to check on Meela – both within and without. Opening an eyelid, he could still see several spots of petechiae and pushed some energy there; gratified at seeing her body Heal it by the light of his hand. Then he checked her other eye.

Looking downwards, he could see where she had bitten her lips when she fought the air tube he'd forced into her mouth. He could also see a faint outline of the air mask he'd used to cover her mouth and nose. He sighed and gently caressed her face and hair before turning away and digging out a bottle of ambrosia and a cup. He poured himself a measure, downed it quickly, then poured himself another

before finally sitting down. He glanced over at Meela once again before turning to address Laisee.

"Like I said before, this is Elder business – *and you will not repeat it!*" he stated firmly before sipping at his drink again. "What Maya said earlier was a *lie*. Your mother *did* die."

"What? But she's *here!*" she said, then jumped out of bed and went to her side. She felt her face and hands, pressed her ear to her chest, and heard her heartbeat, and felt her breathing. "Ronnie, she's *here*. She's *alive!*" she persisted while he had another sip of ambrosia.

"Yes, she's alive. I brought her back after she died. I *think* I fixed everything, but... we're not sure about her mind... her *memories*. We'll find out after she wakes up ... *if* she wakes up."

"But, my Ronnie, that ... that's *wonderful!* You saved her! You saved her from the Elder!"

He looked up at her before draining his cup, then poured himself another. He closed his eyes while consciously avoiding thoughts of how this was all going to hell right in front of him before settling back and proceeding to tell her the truth about yesterday.

Noon –4 (Day 108) – Molara's Second Walk of Shame

Molara gingerly walked down the corridor while occasionally mincing her steps. Last night Gallus had been *much* more than she'd expected, but it had been quite *wonderful* at the time...

She'd had trouble relaxing and letting him slip inside her, right up until the little cannibal had come over and kissed her. The next thing she knew, she was alone with Gallus and riding him for all she was worth; experiencing *enormous* contentment with him and climaxing one last time when he'd finally released himself within her and flooded her vagina, thighs, legs and the bedding with his hot seed.

In that deep rumbling voice of his, he'd told her not to worry about it before they'd both fallen into a blissful sleep ... broken only once when she'd heard grunting from Captain Tomar when the cannibal had extracted *his* seed as well...

This morning she'd awoken stiff and awkwardly. Gallus had one arm stretched over her, and it was like trying to move a tree branch. She'd finally wiggled out from under it while he continued to slumber away the morning in the blissful ignorance of the innocent.

Well, she *supposed* adolescent Drecks were much like their human-standard counterparts.

If Sai's estimates were correct, she'd gotten them at the equivalent age of just prepubescent. Once they'd become sexually active with her, she'd managed to keep them at an early level of physical, if not *intellectual*, development. They were both very smart, but still had the boyish charm of middle adolescence about them.

Sai's "semi-official" excuse for their presence was a "Cultural Adaptive Study of Nurture vs. Nature in an Intelligent, Human-Based Alternative Species," which was a "cover-your-ass-with-the-Elder" document she took great pains to update frequently. Of course, she hadn't realized Kita had immediately known both who and *what* her two new crewmen were just as soon as she'd added them to her crew – not to mention the cannibal she'd acquired a few years later.

Déjà was the *wild card* of the bunch – a single-anomaly that Kita had wanted Sai to keep to herself. She'd just never mentioned it to her; figuring correctly that Sai would take great pains to keep Déjà and her *unique* existence out of the public eye.

Before leaving, Molara had suggested that Sai speak with Doctor Riker about eventually getting her paper published – he being a noted Commonwealth scholar in sociology – and Sai assured her that she would seriously consider it.

Seeing how Molara was walking poorly, Sai suggested that Déjà give her a goodbye kiss, but she'd begged off – only *vaguely* remembering from last night when Déjà had kissed her once before and she'd ended up a willing and eager participant with Gallus as a result. Molara did suggest, however, that they all meet together for contentment as a *group* – perhaps with the *rest* of the Staff, which made Déjà's eyes glitter with excitement.

It was while walking down the corridor that she met Maya headed to Sai's compartment. Her niece refused to speak with her and only extended a cool greeting in passing. Molara just shrugged. She was not feeling up to arguing this morning and finally made it back to their shared compartment – finding, to her surprise, that Lady Trenka was opening the door and just leaving.

In Ronnie's Compartment

"Laisee ... *Laisee*, do you want to go eat first?" he asked after returning from the facilities.

She looked over at him, dully. Her eyes were still bloodshot from all her crying over the last two hours, and she turned away.

"Laisee, I must be about the platform. Do you want to go and eat now?" he asked again, but she continued to ignore him. "Laisee," he

said again, then walked over and reached out to her, but she flinched away from him.

"Laisee, you either go eat now and return quickly or I'll have something sent for you. I must be about my business."

"What is your *rush*, Lord Calder? Does the Elder have someone *else* for you to kill?" she rudely asked him.

He wanted to slap her, but that wouldn't help. Instead, he went over to Meela and checked her once again – with Laisee now watching intently from the edge of the bed. He pushed through Meela and sensed a need, so he got a couple of towels and uncovered her.

Separating her thighs, he folded the towels, pushed them up against her groin, and placed his hand over her mound before closing his eyes and concentrating. Laisee stood up and came over to watch. After a few seconds, the towels became wet. Ronnie had sent a suggestion that it was all right for Meela's body to relax her urethral sphincter and drain her bladder.

He followed her progress using some of his newer skills and thankfully noted that her bowels were still relatively free of debris after last night's voiding. When she was finished, he cautiously lifted the towels, but found Laisee standing there with a warm, wet cloth. He backed away; letting her finish washing her mother while giving her his instructions for the day.

"*Laisee, you will remain here! You will not speak to ANYONE about your mother! You will not let ANYONE in to see you except for Maya or Lady Lili! I will order the guards to turn away all visitors, with the exception of Maya or Lady Lili, until further notice! Lady Lili will make the final disposition of your mother in accordance with the best utilization of her remains to the benefit of the Commonwealth! YOU – WILL – NOT – INTERFERE!*" he said very sternly, which frightened her with his intensity.

"Do you *understand?*" he demanded.

"... yes..." she whispered.

"*Laisee!*"

"Yes, my Lord Calder," she said quickly, then bowed her head before he turned and left the room. She remained standing there with head bowed and new tears running down her cheeks.

She suddenly realized that this was *not* the same Ronnie she'd grown up with on Kantor. She stepped over and looked at her Mother longingly; remembering some of both the best and worst times she'd

had with her. A sudden impulse gripped her, and she made a mad dash to the facilities where she emptied her stomach after just barely making it to the toilet.

In Lili's Compartment

“Rondal, *you're* up early. How is your charge this morning?” Lili asked him lightly.

Ronnie came in and shut the door behind him. He glanced around wistfully for a bottle of ambrosia, but put it out of his mind almost immediately.

“Laisee got loose this morning,” he said calmly, which belied his underlying turmoil. “She snuck away from the Lane’s and ended up outside my door early this morning. She said she felt her mother *die* last night and she’d been distraught ever since.”

“She knows her mother lives?” she asked while her eyes glanced off in the distance for a moment before returning their attention to him.

“Oh yes. She knows – both how *and* why.” Lili could hear the frown in his voice.

He quickly explained what had happened that morning; how Maya had lied, and then confronted him non-verbally before stalking off... prompting him to tell Laisee *everything* about the events leading up to her mother’s death and resurrection. He finished with the unpleasant situation of having Laisee cry for most of the remaining time until she’d run out of tears, and also that he’d left her guard limiting access save for Maya or herself.

During the telling of it, Lili had paced with intense concentration, then confusion, then *frustration*, before finally standing still and throwing her hands up in *exasperation*.

“Ai-yah! What is *wrong* with that girl!”

“Who? *Laisee*? ”

“No! *Maya*! Do you know where she went?”

“No. I stayed with Laisee and Meela. We stashed Tomar over with Sai. Her *Déjà* is keeping an eye on him.”

“Ha! I’ll wager she’s keeping more than an *eye* on him,” she said in distraction, before focusing a bit more of her attention elsewhere again.

Ronnie stood there helplessly. It was a feeling he didn’t like, even though he knew his best recourse was to bring this issue to the Seniors *first*.

"Rondal, I must go to the Elder and inform her of this latest situation," she said. "Plan on meeting with the Elder and her staff sometime this day ... probably *before* the midday meal. Eat something before you arrive!"

"I obey, my Healer," he said meekly.

He waited for a moment, but Lili began pacing again, so he decided to leave.

"Maya ... Maya ... Maya," she mumbled, then stopped and closed her eyes to search some more.

Ronnie paused when he heard Maya's name, and waited to see if Lili could find her.

In Sai's Compartment

"Mother, I need to *know!* Tell me *EVERYTHING* you know about Lord Caldar!" Maya persisted.

"Maya, I've already told you all that I'm allowed. I knew him at the Fringe as... as someone else. It turns out that I *worked* with him at the Fringe. He's much *different* now, you know," she said reasonably.

"But, *Mother!* What was he *like*? Was he *always* this deceitful? Did he *always* lie like he does? Can I *trust* him?"

"Maya, darling, I don't know what you're after, here. You've *lived* with the man for, what ... fifteen *years* now? Isn't that enough time to learn a man's *qualities*?"

"Yes ... you would *think*. But every time I turn around, it is always something new and *frightening* I learn about him!" she said in tears. "He ... he has *killed*, Mother. He has killed *millions of people* and ... and yesterday he killed *Meela*... I ... I just do not know if I can *love* him any longer," she said while nearly breaking down completely.

"Maya... Sweetheart, Ronnie is a good man. A *very* good man, but he does what he has to do. Sure, he's a little *crazy* at times, but at heart he's a good man, and he loves you very much, darling." She'd plied her with the truth; offering what little comfort she could with her hug while Maya still fumed before pulling away from her.

"Oh *sure*. He *says* he loves me, but when I was sick and out of my mind, he was quite willing to love *anyone* who spread their *legs for him!*" she said, flailing her arms aimlessly as she went on. "Two of the staff of the *Elder* ... even *Aunt Molara!* Do you know what he *did* to her? He forced the *Gift* on her and it radiated to the *entire platform!* Even in my *nightmares*, it affected me! I am surprised that he did not

try to take advantage of *you* when—" she stopped and looked at her mother hard. "Mother ... did you ... and he? Did he...?"

"*No! No – no – no.* He made it *seem* like he could have done so, but it was just to put me in my place," she admitted, although now she was wondering if that's *all* it was.

"But he ... and you ... the fight in front of *everyone* when he... *OH, MOTHER, YOU DID NOT?*" Maya stood away and gasped.

"Maya ... Maya ... of *course* I did. *You* know how I get ... and I imagine you also know all about Ronnie's *special* skill. *I* certainly wish I did before I'd grabbed his other *hand*," she mused aloud while remembering that *very* exciting altercation.

In Lili's Compartment

Lili had found her.

Maya was with her mother, who kept putting off her questions until she had time to consult with the Elder. Meanwhile, Maya was becoming extremely agitated and increasingly frustrated.

Lili searched nearby for possible listeners, and stumbled over a void. She considered the *familiarity* of that with a recent experience of hers for just a moment, before making a decision. She keyed the intercom to Déjà's suspected current location and overrode the receiver.

"Déjà, this is Lady Lili. Please distract Healer Maya. We only need to keep her calm," she asked politely.

"*I hear and obey, my Lady Song,*" Déjà's response came back faintly, but Lili could *swear* she heard a tinkling of joy in the message.

Lili momentarily considered what little she knew about Sai's cannibal, but figured that Maya should be safe for the time being. Then – erring on the side of *caution* – she extended outwards and observed silently to see what would *really* transpire.

In Sai's Compartment

"Mother, I cannot ... I just *cannot* anymore ... I cannot *stay* with him," Maya said resolutely while trying to calm herself and yet steel her resolution.

Their attention was drawn to a short knock on the door, which then opened.

"Excuse me, my love... Oh, *Maya!* How nice to *see* you again," Déjà said, and came right up to Maya and hugged her before giving her a

little lick on the neck with enough enzymes in it to temporally confuse her.

‘Sai, I asked Déjà to distract Maya until—’

‘Already taken care of, Lili... Thank you’

Maya slowly opened her mouth to say something, which was all the opening Déjà needed. In just moments, Maya hung helplessly within the circle of her arms, and Sai pointed to the bed. Déjà shuffled Maya's limp body over to it while keeping her tongue pressed firmly down the upper part of her throat. She laid her down and then lay next to her while still attached.

She withdrew a little bit to make sure she was still breathing all right, but remained attached to her while keeping a low level of enzymes flowing into her system. After about a minute, she finally withdrew and turned to Sai.

“Can I *play* with her now, Mommy?” she asked hopefully.

“No, my girl. We just need to keep her calm for a little while, but you can *nurse* from her. Her milk is very sweet and very restful,” she allowed, but Déjà still pouted. “Tell you what, love. You nurse from Maya, and *I’ll* play with you. Would you like that?”

“But I want to feel her *orgasm!*” she pouted, so Sai considered the situation overall. Maya could probably use the contentment, but *no*, not without her consent.

“Not this time, love. She is one of us and we always *ask* before we play. You may nurse from her, but you may only make *me* orgasm – not too many times, though. And I will play with you, too. Now get your bottom uncovered.”

Déjà quickly dropped her garments before rearranging Maya on the large platform bed to accommodate all three of them. Then she opened Maya's clothes to bare her breasts. She kneeled next to her and washed her mouth with more enzymes while waiting impatiently for Mommy. Sai joined them on the bed, and Déjà quickly worked her tiny fingers into her vagina. Once her hand was fully inside, she began a gentle thrusting. Meanwhile, Sai easily inserted her hand inside the girl's vagina and began thrusting evenly with the long strokes Déjà enjoyed.

“Take your time, Déjà... Do not rush and we will *both* enjoy this,” Sai murmured, just before her first climax threatened to overcome her.

Even as this was happening, Déjà was relishing the sweet taste of Maya's warm milk.

Fresh food! Yummy!

In Lili's Compartment

As mesmerizing as it had been to observe, Lili forced herself away and tried to relax before turning to see Ronnie still standing there.

"Rondal, I said to go get something to eat and then take some food to Laisee. Then go tell Diane that Laisee has been instructed to stay within your compartment. If she does not hear from you, Diane is to bring a tray of food for Laisee at each meal time."

"What about Meela? Maya fed her last night, but she'll need to be fed again."

"Ahhh ... Diane is nursing, yes? And she is trustworthy – she is *family*," she considered aloud. "If Maya cannot be convinced to do so herself, Diane will feed Meela – at the evening meal. In the *meantime*, Laisee can see if Meela will take water from a cloth – understood?"

"Yes, my Lady."

"Good. Now go and eat. Then inform Lady Diane of her new duties," she said.

Ronnie bowed and left to run his chores, while Lili stretched and contemplated these *new* complications.

"Ai-yah! *Children!* What else could go wrong this day?"

Somewhere Else...

The Fate on Duty had completely missed that comment, which was fortunately very lucky for Lady Lili.

*As it was, that particular Fate had been distracted after seeing the order list had a check mark next to "**Drecks, one or more**" and was wondering when **they'd** showed up – especially considering there'd been no reported murders or mayhem over the last several hours.*

*Well ... except for that **one**.*

The comment about a large fan remained most confusing, however.

Noon –2 (Day 108) – Leveling the Field

The Elder and her staff had spent a quick morning updating each other on their status, but Ai held back on dropping the bomb about Kita's *hidden* agenda for the time being.

The implications were staggering, and Ai had eventually decided to bring it up at this meeting in hopes it was made clearer of how they got

to where they were. It would take time to assimilate these painful revelations and – *hopefully* – the paths would clear somewhat when all the principal players were working from the same data set.

The Elder's compartment was too small to accommodate all the participants, so they had adjourned to the Recreation Center once again. There was a general feeling of uneasiness when they had arrived at the scene of the recent execution, but it wasn't as heavy a feeling as expecting to cram everyone into their existing location. In addition to the Elder and her staff – including Lady Trenka now – the party included Lili, Sai, Ronnie ... and a very sullen and angry Maya, who was still furious at her mother for letting Déjà attack her in that manner.

Under other circumstances, Maya thought it might have been acceptable ... but she might just as well have struck her down or locked her in a room, instead.

Larl was a surprise addition at the request of the Elder. Apparently, she'd considered his presence at the investigation and execution a sufficient reason to be added to a meeting at which he would otherwise be excluded. After all were settled, Ai called them to order.

"You are all here because you need to be fully aware of the current situation and how it affects everyone here in this room. Doctor Riker, you are included *specifically* because you hold special value to us in a consultant capacity, and your loyalty has been unquestionable."

"I remain loyal to the Commonwealth, the Crown ... *and* the office of the Elder, my Lady," he said diplomatically, and Ai nodded before she continued to everyone else.

"I introduce to you Lady Trenka, who was hand-picked to join our small family by Mistress Kita. Trenka becomes our *fourth* ... moving Fan up to first, Xiu to second, and Molara up to third," she explained familiarly, before turning to Ronnie with an open gesture.

"Rondal, please explain your understanding about Meela to all of us."

At that request, Ronnie went down the summary list of considerations he'd made regarding Meela and her involvement with the various happenings within the Commonwealth for the last few hundred years. He referenced both his own knowledge, plus the information provided by Kita, Meela, and Tomar. He also explained, to Ai's embarrassment, his reasoning for pushing so hard to have her personally involved with Meela's execution – for that was the result she

had intended anyway, and he'd seen the need for her personal growth regarding the importance of life.

That last brought him to the summary of his stance regarding Meela's situation.

"So you see ... Meela did many bad things, but she did them *poorly*. From *my* viewpoint, it was almost astonishing that she was able to achieve as much as she *had*. After all, Meela was but *sixteen years old* – *Standard* – when she was married to Radatel. To put it bluntly, her position might be considered no more than *brood host* for the Royal lineage. It may seem simple to say it, but I believe she truly *was* a victim of her poor upbringing. She was easily swayed by forces that allayed themselves to the Hegemony, while presenting themselves to her as noble and *reasonable* supporters of a more stable and secure Commonwealth ... to an *extremely* naïve sixteen year old *child!*"

He glanced at his audience without sensing any argument, so he continued along that line.

"As hard as it is to hear it, our own society is viewed with distrust and fear in certain quarters, and all of us in this room know very well the reasons for that."

He paused while looking around the small gathering again.

"As for Meela ... at the end, she truly was repentant, and I felt her death would accomplish nothing more than further loss to our society. First of all, her execution would *never* have been made public. The scandal within the Royal family would cast doubt upon the stability of the Crown, and perhaps that was a *potential* goal for the conspirators to begin with? Who knows? Execution is supposed to be a deterrent – but not if no one *knows* of it. Second, her death would *greatly* affect the mindfulness of her daughter – Laisee. Her brothers had already been vilified, and the *last* thing she needed was the heritage of a treasonous mother to haunt her for the rest of her life."

"You seem to hold the highest honor in that regard with your failure at *Zarox!*" Maya muttered hatefully.

Ronnie turned to face her and nodded his head slightly in response.

"Yes, I do. And I have worked diligently since then to recover the honor of House Caldarous ... albeit in the background. Much as your mother, the Elder's First Sword."

"My Mother has never done *ANYTHING* to sully the honor of Cletus!"

The room became silent. Sai closed her eyes painfully, while Ronnie continued to stare at Maya.

"And you would know this ... *how?*"

Maya opened her mouth to respond, but was stuck silent by the looks of smug watchfulness coming from her aunt and the Elder. At her continued silence, Ronnie turned away and continued.

"Laisee is rapidly accepting the Healer's teachings. I feel she will become a valuable asset to the Commonwealth, and perhaps another valuable asset to the Crown in *whatever* capacity she is allowed – now that the mouse has been *freed*."

The ripple of suppressed laughter lightened the mood slightly, and he pressed along in that vein.

"As I said yesterday, Meela is useful to us still, although in what capacity I am currently unsure of myself. I defer to Lili in that regard. I *would*, however, deem it a failure to simply discard her at this point after Grandmother worked so hard with me to bring her back to us."

"So *you* say!" Maya stabbed at him heatedly, before continuing on the offensive. "Or was it merely *you*, playing with your new found *Healer skills* to pretend that your '*Grandmother*' had come back from the dead to deliver messages to you and this *easily misled group of Seniors!*'"

Ronnie turned to her and spoke quietly.

"Maya ... do not offend the Elder. Your destiny lies elsewhere than in conflict with all of us here."

"*Destiny?* Who are *you* to speak of *destiny?* *Killer of millions! Murderer of helpless women!* You would speak of destiny as told to you by a *dead woman?* A wizened Healer in the process of losing her *mind?*!"

Outraged, Sai stood up and slapped her soundly across the face.

"*MAYA!* You will NOT speak of *Mistress Kita* in that fashion!"

"She was just a *sick old woman!*"

"*SHE WAS-*" Sai froze when Ai rose gracefully and turned to face Maya.

"She was the *Elder*, Lady Kita Qi Shu Tal se Cletus ... *Regnant* ... most *Senior* of Clan Tal, and ruler of Cletus," she said calmly before stepping over and standing in front of Maya.

"And I am the new *Elder* – Ai Biyu Jia Tal se Cletus ... *Regnant*. At this time do you wish to sever your ties to Clan and home, Maya Kao Lai Tal se Cletus?"

Maya looked at her in shock – she'd had no *idea*...

Ai reached out and took her hands before speaking to her gently.

"This office has served you *poorly*, Lady Tal, and we are compelled to offer you compensation for your trouble. At your request, you may sever your ties to Clan and home. This office will arrange for your relocation, and you may never be bothered by anyone here again," Ai said calmly, while Maya simply stared at her.

"I understand Lord Caldar holds a considerable amount of funds in your name and you can go on to lead a quiet life away from Kantor, Cletus, and the rest of your family and remaining friends. I am sure you will find satisfaction in serving the needy in any number of situations."

Maya still found herself speechless.

"I ask *again*, Lady Tal ... do you wish to sever your ties to Clan and home?" Ai pressed her gently, hoping she would come to her senses over this partial revelation.

Maya stood quivering before bowing her head and dropping to her knees.

"... no..." she said very quietly.

"Lady Tal?"

"N-n ... no ... m-my Queen," she said in the very subdued silence of the room.

The silence continued for several seconds until Ai said, "Very well," and turned to resume her seat.

The conference continued in a less heated atmosphere while the Elder explained her operational strengths and weaknesses. *She*, for one, was sure of the loyalty of everyone attending; even the confused Maya, who was still teetering between staying with or leaving Ronnie.

She didn't bring up the Visions as such, just referring to them in allegorical terms and relating how, in her *declining* years, Kita was less able to track the significant events within the Commonwealth that allowed the office to apply corrective actions at critical moments in history. It was Ronnie and Lili who provided appropriate examples of "corrective actions" when they each described a situation with several possible outcomes, and the reasoning behind choosing one particular outcome over another; sometimes – as Ronnie had mentioned to the Elder – picking the *unassuming* good for the many over the good for the few.

Then the Elder brought up the delicate issue of Kita's deceptions.

"In the course of our internal housecleaning, Molara came upon Mistress Kita's *personal* records – documents and memos that detailed certain actions the rest of the office was not aware of. It was much to our shock and dismay when we discovered Mistress Kita was behind *many* of the mysterious actions that had plagued the Commonwealth during the last few hundred years."

She closed her eyes while new memories of those events rose up in her mind once again before finally forcing them aside by focusing on how Kita had become Elder to begin with.

"Kita served long and faithfully as Elder, even after she had not been fully prepared for the office. As she aged, her ability to absorb and balance the perceived weaknesses of social trends gradually failed her. Then she became *reactive* – trying to *correct* problems, instead of heading them off."

She stopped and gestured to Lili as a representative example of one of Kita's victims in that regard.

"Such was the case with Meela. The signs were there, but Kita's research and analysis had failed to discern the problem so that it was upon us and in place *before* it could be diverted. We all know the result of that," she said softly, before turning to Maya.

"Likewise, Maya, your *personal* tragedy was a reaction to a problem – not something to head it off," the Elder admitted to her. "We are all deeply sorry for your loss."

Maya could not believe what she was hearing. *Kita* had put their lives in jeopardy? On *purpose*?

"How... How were my daughters' deaths involved in all this?"

"Lady Tal ... I speak frankly here. I have been Elder for but a few days and not in a position to know in detail *everything* that has been handed down to me. I neither know completely nor truthfully understand the exact reasons for your involvement."

Ai somehow managed to say this with a straight face.

"What I *do* know is that – once Meela was inserted into the Royal household – certain steps were put into place by Kita to *negate* the long term effects Meela would trigger. *One* of those steps was recovering Rondal and his mother from Earth and relocating them to Kantor. There they would remain safely within House Caldorous ... more or less.

“Due to the unfortunate circumstances of Rondal’s failure at Zarox and his subsequent *disappearance* from our watchful eyes for many years...” she paused while pointedly looking at Ronnie before continuing, “...another major step was the necessity – in Kita’s *opinion* – that the *ultimate* needs of the Commonwealth would be best served by eventually placing you in the *exact* position you found yourself – as part of the diplomatic mission to the Drecks, which was sponsored by Loca.

“We do not know if Kita had realized your daughters were going to travel with you, or if they and the rest of your diplomatic party would be lost. Presumptively, the *only* reason Rondal would be prompted to rescue you in the first place was that you, *personally*, would be in imminent danger. We accept the supposition from Rondal that it was the *spirit* of Yandi Tal who called to him – hosted either by you, or independently. Kita left no other notes to that effect, other than that you had been placed in harm’s way by *her* plan.

“Likewise, your subsequent sojourn with Rondal on Earth was also by Kita’s design. Kita directed that no Healers be sent to you, nor allowed your recovery home for treatment. She prevented contact with your mother. She also prevented Molara from leaving us for a visit to Heal you. It was Kita’s determination that you and Rondal must combine your destinies – forming a strong bond that would ultimately *strengthen* the Commonwealth, or provide certain other – as yet unknown benefits to sustain the Commonwealth in the future. Right now ... we just don’t know what they are.”

For all this, Maya just wasn’t buying it.

“But ... how can our relationship have any *possible* affect on so large a scale?”

The Elder remained silent while contemplating the repercussions of disclosing the existence of the Visions to yet *another* outsider, but Larl chose to speak first.

“If I may, Lady Ai...” he said, then continued at her nod, “There is a study of certain esoteric mathematical concepts called Chaos Theory. It is studied, although not fully understood, anywhere it finds a foothold. Even on Earth, it has a small but voluble following.”

He looked around, but saw nothing but blank looks on everyone’s faces, so continued gamely.

“One of the postulates is that everything affects everything *else*. One too many raindrops blown by an errant gust of wind, falls upon a different leaf, which directs their fall in a different direction, which changes the course of a stream, which causes a dam to overflow and

break. In the *extreme*, a low-level minion making a tiny clerical error on Kantor might be the initial trigger for the collapse of an industry on Tyler.”

Maya looked at him in disbelief, and he smiled.

“In *your* case, Maya, I’ve had the opportunity to watch you and Ronnie together. *Together* – when you are in *harmony* – you both accomplish so much more than when you’re apart. You are his *Healer*, soon to be his *Senior*, one hopes, and he is your tool. With you by his side he can excel at what he does,” he said, but caught a look from Ronnie.

“Ronnie, not to denigrate your capabilities in solo operations, but when you work alone, you lack a certain ... *cautiousness*? When you and Maya were at odds before the docking, you took some extreme risks to insure our safety. In fact, when you feel you’re alone, you often take *foolish* risks as long as you believe your family will be safe. When you are immersed in a situation – and Maya is by your side *supporting* you – your efforts are moderated somewhat by her influence; although your natural ability to proceed to a quick and surprisingly accurate solution is enhanced astonishingly, even though it often irritates her.

Turning back to Maya, he continued. “Maya, I understand *you* identified the disharmony in our crew during the early days and sought a solution from Ronnie. This was a perfect example of the relationship between you and him. You each focus on a solution together and proceed to make it happen. The Elder has a similar relationship between herself and her staff, and Lady Lili and Lady Sai. When the Elder sees a problem, or if one is pointed out to her, she has the resources to help review, plan, and then delegate her suggested solution to – after which she leaves it within their capable hands. Likewise, between you and Ronnie ... someday, one hopes.”

Maya stared at him for a few seconds before giving an angry response.

“But ... I want *nothing* of this! I do not want to play these deceitful games with ... with the lives of *people*! If it means I have to lie and cheat and *harm* people, then I do not *want* to be part of his destiny! Let him find someone *else* to bond with and become a puppet of the Elder! I *will not* ... I *cannot treat people this way!* This was *never* my destiny!”

Ronnie reached out and touched her shoulder, causing her to jerk away from him.

“Maya ... Yandi called me to you, to bring you back with me,” he said softly, then reached out to hold her hands. “The goals of the

Commonwealth are vast and honorable; yet the stewards of our society are forced to walk in grayness to keep those goals. Better that our stewards be guided by beings of *heart*, rather than left to those of a vengeful demeanor ... such as *I was*,” he urged her softly, before Sai reached out to her as well.

“Daughter ... this was *always* your destiny. Grandmother Yandi was an agent of the Elder. Your Aunt Molara is an agent of the Elder on Kantor. I am an agent of the Elder in the field. Lady Lili,” she said, while waving her hand in Lili’s direction, “...is the Elder’s agent *within* the Royal household. What did you think you and your daughters were being *groomed* for, Maya? Just to be lowly Healers in some little village somewhere? Just Healing burns, insect bites, and broken bones? Did you see *other* Seniors from Clan Tal doing such?”

Sai turned and bowed to the Elder and her staff, then spared a glance at Lili before turning back to Maya.

“We are of the ruling clan of Cletus, and this is *our* destiny, my daughter. I was sorry your path diverted from where it was expected to be, but your path now rejoins us, and you must rejoin your destiny – and that path *includes* your bond with Lord Rondal.”

Maya looked at her in shock. Then she looked at the Elder and her assistants. A deepening dread began to envelope her as she surveyed the others in the room. All she could feel was a sense of impending personal loss.

“No ... no, I will not ... I ... I *cannot be with him!* I ... I do not LOVE him anymore! My destiny is my OWN, and I will not bond with such as he if it means a life of LIES AND DECEIT! That is NOT the way of the Healer, and I wish to remain a TRUE HEALER!” she cried, before abruptly running out of the room.

The Elder sighed, before sitting back in dejection.

“My Elder, *please* do not dismiss her. She may yet come around,” Sai begged her.

Ronnie stepped over and gently hugged her.

“Sai... Maya has made it quite clear that she wants nothing more to do with me. I will not fight her. I can accept it. She has declared her rejection of me among all of you ... even to her Queen. This is no longer a *private* matter between me and Maya,” he reminded her, and saw her shocked reaction.

The social mores of Maya’s outburst were quite binding in some regards.

"Do not mistake me, Sai. I *do* still love your daughter, and I will always cherish the time we had together, but I will not impose further grief upon her. It will make her life hard, and my life ... well, it will continue with enough difficulty as it is."

He gave Sai another brief hug, before turning to the Elder.

"Lady Ai, I suspect the Commonwealth will survive for at *least* the next few years ... certainly while you grow into your role as our benevolent dictator," he said with a tight grin, and was rewarded with a wry smile in return. "I promise I will avoid causing any undo alarm among our enemies in the hopes that your Visions become clearer," he continued, now causing no little concern to reflect upon her face while she digested that tidbit of secret awareness from him.

"Rondal, what are you planning to do?" she finally asked him.

"Oh, a little housecleaning ... here on the platform. We'll call it 'deferred maintenance.' I have a pile of broken tanks and scrap metal that needs recycling, and probably a ton or more of waste from the last several years of occupation to dispose of," he said, then nodded his head slightly. "There is a suitable furnace in almost *any* direction from here," he added, then shook his head and chuckled lightly.

"Afterwards... I'm an old warrior, and as such, I have a certain *limited* but useful set of skills. I understand my old friend, Lord Gagsa, would very much like to meet with me someday, and something ... something *still* tickles my mind about the Drecks."

"What is it?" the Elder asked, curious now.

"I'm not quite sure. I had it for just a moment when Sai and I watched the video with Maya, but ... I lost it," he said, then shrugged his shoulders. "If it's important, it will come back to me at the appropriate time. It seems to happen that way more often than not," he considered aloud, then closed his eyes and concentrated for a moment before shaking his head and coming back to the present. "Is there more you would like to cover in this meeting, my Lady Elder? The Visions... The ... the *Others*," he prompted her.

The Elder looked at him askance, frustrated in his casual mention of most secret Elder information.

"Ahh ... at this time, Rondal, those discussions would only confuse the current issues. Please see to Meela and arrange for her disposition with Lady Lili. I suspect Mistress Maya will no longer be participating in her care."

Molara and Sai were both heartbroken to hear the Elder downgrade Maya's status so readily. In the Elder's eyes, Maya was no longer associated with Rondal.

"Mistress Maya is an excellent Healer, my Lady. I *still* recommend she receive formal Senior training," he said, while accepting the Queen's designation for Maya. "Or at least tell her to read the damn *books!* Gods know, I struggled through them for nearly two decades on my *own!*"

He stopped to chuckle quietly before considering the previously deceased Meela.

"As to *Meela*... I doubt Maya will abandon her charge so casually, but I will ask her – should she deign to speak to me. With your permission, my Ladies." He bowed to them and withdrew.

After the door closed behind him, Fan, considering his lack of propriety, asked, "Lili ... was he *always* like this?"

"Our Rondal? Oh yes ... he was always very focused ... sometimes to the point of *rudeness*. Do not mistake his social failures for disrespect, my Ladies; for he cares very deeply, but has often been disappointed by circumstances he has no control over. He is, after all, only a man."

"It's a male thing," Larl explained, which brought their attention to him. "We need constant assurance that what we do is appreciated. The human male is an extremely simple being; we eat, we sleep, and reproduce ... or go through the motions as often as we can, but what makes us thrive is our sense of *accomplishment*. You, on the other hand, are the *nurturers* – the bringers of *life*. That is *totally* overwhelming to us. In many societies, the males cast down the female from their natural role as leaders and nurturers of society because of our *own* lack of such natural power and respect."

"An astute observation, Doctor Riker ... Larl," Lili said, then smiled when he bowed his head to her. "We will need to review your proposals and see to the disposition of the *rest* of our extended family ... perhaps after we perform a little housekeeping ourselves. My Ladies, I must be off to see to Meela ... and then perhaps Rondal – to see what his plans are. Sai, perhaps you can beat some sense into your thick-headed daughter?"

Sai momentarily bristled at her comment, but could see the wisdom of it just the same.

"I ... I'll do what I can, Lili, but she's a strong-willed one," she said quietly.

Lili, Sai, and Larl took their leave via proper protocol to pursue their tasks; leaving just the Elder and her staff behind.

"What now, Ai?" Fan asked her, but Ai just seemed bewildered.

"I ... really don't know. The Visions of the future are not clear ... other than all is lost."

"What about ... just the *nearest* future?" Trenka asked. "A few days hence; a week, a month?" Ai thought about that for several seconds before blushing.

"I am humbled once again. First by Ronnie – who reacquainted me with my humanity – and now by our new sister, Trenka," she said, then stepped over to hug her. "Thank you, Trenka. You remind me – as Fan and Xiu did last night – that I am new at this and must learn in small steps," she said, before turning to them all.

"The future is not immediate – but if we watch it carefully, perhaps we will find an opportunity to manage it to our advantage. However, the future will have to wait while we offer proper respects to our sister Kita. In a few days time, I think." So saying, she led their group back to their compartment.

Nearby, Noon (Day 108) – Lamentations of Disaster

'Wasted! ... All wasted!' '?' thought.

'Ah! There you are!' '?' exclaimed.

'We missed you' '?' pointed out.

'Didn't you want to go with us' '?' asked.

'I still have responsibilities here' '?' replied.

'Whatever for?' '?' questioned.

'They are my family' '?' stated.

'We are all family' '?' explained.

'Then you will help?' '?' asked.

'What a curious idea' '?' conjectured.

'How may we help?' '?' asked.

'The Visions are dark' '?' stated.

'The visions?' '?' wondered.

'The Flux' '?' explained.

'Ah ... how ... intriguing' '?' thought.

'We could help' '?' considered.

'And it will pass the time' '?' appreciated.

'Let us think about it...' '?' suggested.

Noon +1 (Day 108) – Moving Out

Ronnie visited around the platform, with his exterior displaying the same pleasant personage to everyone he passed. During his walkabout, he managed to project his confidence and assurances to everyone that things were going optimally. With any luck at all, the occupation would soon be over so that everyone would be going home.

Inside, he was writhing in anguish. He'd lost his Maya – for *good* this time – and just couldn't bring himself to accept it with the calm and dignity that was his norm. He ached for a bottle, or better yet, a *case* of ambrosia to ameliorate his sorrow and afford him some solitude ... and maybe a loaf of bread ... and some cheese. What he'd *really* settle for was killing something in bloodied battle so he could work out his anger and frustration. The only problem was, the *last* time he'd done that, they'd sent Molara after him, and he'd ended up servicing half the Elder's staff in person or by proxy.

He stopped by the gym and saw that Diane was back on duty. She said she'd taken a tray to Laisee, and that Meela seemed to be resting comfortably. She also mentioned that Maya was just showing up as she was leaving, but hadn't shared anything other than a somewhat neutral greeting. He thanked her and then left, heading back to his compartment.

Approaching his door, he saw both Laisee's guard and Maya's guard were present, so he took a deep breath and blew it all out before entering. He heard Laisee and Maya talking when he entered, but they stopped as soon as he approached the sleeping room door. He came in anyway and greeted them both, before turning to Maya.

"The Elder asks if you will continue to provide services for Meela. Otherwise, she will relieve you of that responsibility and reassign her to Lili's compartment."

"That will not be a problem, Lord Caldar," she said in an undertone.

"Very well, then. I will inform Diane that she will not be needed for nursing Meela. Will you and Laisee be taking turns watching over Meela? Laisee could use the opportunity for more training."

"I will see to the training of my *Healers*, Lord Caldar," she said stiffly.

"As you desire, Mistress Tal," he said formally, thus severing their relationship socially, just as she had done by her hurtful declaration during the Elder's meeting. He turned his back on her to gather some of his belongings and missed the look of shock on her face.

"I will be performing some long overdue maintenance on the platform and most likely not be returning to disturb your sleep. I will keep you advised," he said to the compartment wall.

He pulled his hard suit and ship suit from his locker, bundled them together for carrying, then left. Maya sat down and stared at the door when it closed behind him.

New Digs...

Ronnie walked several corridors closer to the tank service bay before locating an unused compartment. He keyed his palm to the lock, making it his new temporary home, and stashed his stuff inside before heading up to the con, where he caught David and Donnel in a discussion about the ice processing operation.

"Aye, water ... *liquid* water would be nice, but it be hard to transport in a vacuum. It has a tendency to boil *out*, don't ye know? At least *ice* has the decency to stay *put* ... long's it don't get too *hot*," Donnel was saying.

"And how is our ice machine doing today, Donnel?" Ronnie asked him.

"Well, the *second* design by your Spacer here is a real winner," Donnel told him. "He says it's based on something called a *wood chipper*. Do they *really* take trees on Earth and turn them into tiny pieces of wood like that?"

"Makes sense. Good ground cover. Easy disposal of tree trimmings," Ronnie said before David jumped in.

"Donnel didn't believe me when I told him how we manage our hardwoods. Seems that trees – or *bushes* where he comes from – just don't grow much higher than four or five feet, or so."

Ronnie nodded in agreement before changing the subject.

"Mister Ardan, I was wondering if I could borrow David and Andy for a day, or maybe two. I have some housecleaning to do, and I'm sure you remember that big pile of trash down in the hold? I want to make a recycling run. That, and the old tanks ... unless you want to strip them for any parts?"

Donnel thought about it for just a moment, but shook his head.

"We picked over them poor thins' pretty thoroughly back then. Nothing useful left – especially after all these years since switching over to new converters and such. Not even worth it to recover the *shells*, most likely."

"I thought as much. You think you can get a crew together from the *Sectorus* off-watch to pull out the tanks and bundle them for transport? I'll be able to drag them off with my ship and push them into one of the primaries out there. Same for the trash. Uhh ... we got something like thirty loose hulls, and those few left in the service bay ... plus maybe a couple of tons of garbage. I can jump that much mass with my shield, right? And not take half a day to get there, I mean."

Donnel made a quick mental calculation while nodding several times.

"Keep everything within a hundred meters and jump it with zero velocity – just in case you have to maneuver when you arrive. Or you *can* do something like with the ice. Pack it in tight and jump it on the *move*. Personally, *that* much armor banging around on armor I be sittin' in ... well, I'd like not to take the chance."

"I see your point."

"What compensation you be offering for this trash duty?" Donnel asked.

"Oh, time and a half ... at least."

"Aye, you'll have your bundles ready this time tomorrow," Donnel said with a smile. "I'll get a relief scheduled for Andy tonight so the boy gets a good night's sleep. David here can sleep in as well, since I imagine he'll be piloting?"

"That's the plan. See you tomorrow, Gentlemen. Noon plus two in the '*Ceti*. Oh, if Talon has any garbage, he's welcome to add it to the pile," he said in leaving.

"Aye, lad. I'll let him know," Donnel said just before the door shut. "Good man, that Ronnie of ours."

"That he is, Donnel ... that he is," David agreed.

Visiting the New Digs...

Lily was waiting for him when he returned to his new compartment and he bid her enter before dropping another load of items on the floor.

"How did you find me, my Lady?" he asked, while grabbing a cup and a bottle of ambrosia.

"Kita. She remembers a promise you made in *haste*, and means to hold you *to it*," she said with a titter. "Once she learned that you'd moved out of your compartment, she tracked you down and informed me so that I may find you *easily*. The Elder wishes a private meeting with you later this evening."

"We've already had our meeting. I've other things to attend to now."

"Rondal, she is ... she appreciates the effort you put in to saving Meela's life. At the end, she truly did not wish for Meela to die."

"Well, looking into the condemned one's eyes sometimes has that effect on you," he said coolly, then put down his cup before sorting through his stuff.

"Rondal ... this has all been very sudden for her. Kita dumped it all on her shoulders but left too quickly to help her through it. She *really* wishes to meet with you and ... and perhaps you can help her understand what is going on with her. The ... the *Visions*? The *Others*?"

He couldn't tell if she really understood the references or not, and turned back to confront her.

"If *you* know about the *Visions* and the *Others*, then you know more than *I* do of their nature," he said bluntly. "I thought I was going *insane* out here – the wild *dreams*, the *voices* in my head. I stopped drinking altogether for a month or so, but they *still* haunted my dreams. I wish the Gods *grace* on her if *she* suffers the waking nightmares instead of *me* this time."

He turned away again while she watched his body tremble with memories of times long past.

"Then what will it harm to visit with her? *Talk* to her. Bring her a bottle of this fine vintage and *share* it with her. Perhaps you might find *accord*? I understand she had only enjoyed your charms from a *distance*. Perhaps you may grant her a parting *Gift*?"

He glanced up at her before turning away to deal with the bottle.

"What makes you think I'm going anywhere, Lili?" he asked casually, and she tittered and pointed at his belongings on the counter and the floor ... none of them having been put away in a cabinet or drawer.

"Oh, Ronnie... You suckled at my empty breasts often enough, and I was your *first*," she chided him. "Do you think I *don't* know you and your moods by now?"

He turned to her and saw her warm smile. Then he enveloped her in his arms and kissed her lovingly, then *hungrily*, while sliding his hands from her back to her waist, before finally reaching her bottom, where he squeezed it firmly... before she pushed him away gently.

"Not right *now*, Ronnie. Perhaps *later*. But you *will* meet with the Elder?" she asked him again, and he reluctantly nodded his head.

"Good! Now ... I would know of your plans ... or rather, your *thoughts!* I don't believe you *make* plans too far in advance any longer."

"Ha! As is said on Earth, the *best-laid* plans fail at the first moment of contact with the enemy. But I will lay out my thoughts to you, First Wife," he said, thus putting it strictly in the category of family-only information – at least until the Elder ripped it from her mind by force.

They spent the next hour in quick conversation, but by the time Lili left, she was confused and amazed at her stepson; confused at some of the directions his thoughts were taking, and amazed that he hadn't already gotten himself *killed* before all this.

Noon +6 (Day 108) – In the 'Ceti

Ronnie was sitting in deep contemplation – with a bottle of ambrosia on one side and an empty bowl of gruel on the other. Apparently, today was *not* baking day in the kitchens.

He'd stopped by the commons to grab a loaf of non-existent bread, but had to suffice with just a few bottles of ambrosia to complement the small portion of gruel he'd squirted out of the '*Ceti*'s dispenser. Earlier he'd brought out the rest of his supplies and personal effects, and was now resting from his efforts while looking over his credit accounts before the meeting later on this evening.

He heard the lock cycle, and his heart leapt for a moment, but the suit coming out was not *nearly* buxom enough to be who he'd hoped for.

"Amy! What brings *you* out here?" he asked while smiling widely, but glancing at the ships timer. "Aren't you supposed to be on *watch*?"

"Got fired," she muttered, while shrugging out of her suit before joining him at the table in her underwear.

"*NO!* Maya didn't–"

"Wasn't Maya's doing. The Elder's new fourth said it wasn't fair your crew was the only ones got to stand gym watch when the *Sectorus'* Healers were all sitting around with their thumbs up their butts – *paraphrasing* here – so she asked Lady Lili to give us all a break and let her bring in the *second* team," she said with a shrug.

"So ... why aren't you with Larl, then?"

"Ha! He's afraid if we start *this* early in the day, he'll never survive it!" She laughed a tiny bit before turning a little somber. "Umm, Grandpa ... Mom says Maya's acting funny. Did you guys have another fight?"

Ronnie looked away and took a sip of his drink.

"Mistress Maya and I did not exactly fight. She has decided we are no longer a suitable match, and has declared such to her mother ... and the Elder," he said, before nodding and sipping from his drink again.

"Mistress? Oh, Ronnie, you *dumped* her?" she asked sadly. She remembered the subtle title references of Kantite society and now understood what it really meant.

"No ... no ... it was the *Elder* who acknowledged her declaration before her family; her mother and her aunt. In the Elder's eyes, Maya has severed her relationship with me and ... that's it," he said with a half-hearted shrug.

"But ... but what's she gonna *do*?"

He thought of Maya's comments ... his lies ... his deceits.

Didn't that foolish girl realize that sometimes society didn't *need* to know all the details? And now he was going to start yet *another* lie; keep yet *another* secret from his own Granddaughter simply because it was none of her business. He thought of a suitable half-truth.

"The Elder ... she offered Maya a release from Clan and home. That means – if she so chooses – she would leave Clan Tal and no longer call Cletus home. The Elder would also grant her a ... a *stipend*? A retirement package of sorts so she can relocate and setup a simple Healer's residency elsewhere in the Commonwealth. Larl has all her back pay that he'll have transferred to her as soon as she decides. Well, she'll get it regardless of what arrangement she makes with the Elder."

Amy stared at him in disbelief.

"Oh, Ronnie ... I'm so sorry," she said, then slid over to hug him. "Do you want to ... I mean, would you like me to make you feel better?" she asked, but he just laughed quietly.

"Granddaughter, were circumstances different, I would *gladly* enjoy your company," he said quietly, and hugged her back. "As it is, heartbreak cannot be easily mollified by pleasures of the flesh. But

enough about me. What are the rest of my girls doing? Still taking lessons?"

"Well ... Mei-Mei and Yin-Yin got tired of us *bleeding* all over their floor – they move the cushions out of the way when we come over now – so they're having us work on 'internal discovery' as they call it," she said, while still slumped against him with his arm resting around her shoulders. "Like that business Lili did with the dance party in Shay's tummy that day, but not *nearly* as much fun," she added.

"Yes, I can believe that. Lili has a rather *unique* sense of humor at times. Can't *imagine* where she gets it from," he muttered, which triggered a snort from Amy.

"It's not *all* dull, though. It's kinda neat to be able to see what's *really* going on inside a body rather than just reading about it. It's kinda gushy compared to the new Gray's Anatomy, though. It's got *illustrated* pictures instead of photos of all the parts."

"You've studied the Gray's Anatomy book?"

"Hey, girls' gotta get her sex education from *somewhere*."

"Yes... But it's too bad it didn't have a chapter on *birth control*," he teased her, which elicited chuckles from both of them.

He wondered how to approach the next topic without having her go crazy on him.

"Amy ... Larl is a bright, young, and personable fellow, and I've been looking forward to seeing you and him getting married ... or bonded. Is that still likely?"

"Grandpa! I'm carrying his *child!*" she said indignantly, but chuckled.

He smiled for a moment when she did, but then turned serious.

"Yes, he accepts the jerk's seed as his own, but ... what plans have *you* made?" he asked. "Or have you thought about the future at all?"

"Grandpa, we've only known each other for... No ... I *want* to be bonded with him. *We* want to be bonded – or married – I don't care which. As for the *future*... All I know about your society is what I've seen here on this ship, and that decrepit old platform of yours. Larl says there are endless opportunities, and he's confident he can support three of us as easily as he's done for himself. I just never gave it a thought before, and ... and I'd kinda like to travel and see some of the *real* Commonwealth, 'cause ... so far, I've not been impressed."

He certainly had to agree with that, and nodded.

"A very wise observation, Amy. Very mature of you. Must be those motherly hormones surging through your body," he teased her.

This time it was Amy's turn for questions.

"Ronnie ... why'd you ask?" she asked quietly, and he hugged her a little tighter while getting his thoughts together before speaking.

"I brought all of you here in hopes that I could *protect* you. Now that my protection is no longer required – I find that I'm no longer needed here. I'm thinking it's time for me to get back to work."

Her shock of betrayal lasted all of two seconds.

"What? So you're ... you're just gonna *abandon* us here?" she asked in a panic while pulling away from him.

"*No!* No, Amy. I'm not *abandoning* you. You're *family*, and family is entitled to quarters at the Royal Homestead. I've spoken to Lili about this and she will *gladly* help smooth your transition into Commonwealth society and make sure all of you have something productive and fulfilling to do with your lives."

"But ... but we wanna stay with *you*, Grandpa! We just *found* you and – and now you wanna dump us off like some ... some unwanted *kittens*?"

"Amy, you *know* what I do for a living. Do you think it would be proper to drag..." he quickly counted on his fingers, "... three infants into harm's way?"

"What harm is there in running a refugee camp?" She was confused for a moment, but suddenly figured it out. "*NO!* You've *served* your time!" she said, and pushed away to stand up.

"I *won't* let you do this... We won't let you do this!" she said, while wiggling back into her hard suit before leaving him alone once again.

He sat there sipping his drink while staring at the closed airlock door.

'*Kids ... ALWAYS think they know what's best for everyone...*'

Then he laughed out loud and finished his drink. He had some plans to make and would need some input from his old shipmates just to confirm his ideas.

Midnight -4 (Day 108) – Thinking Ahead

The meeting in Ronnie's new compartment was jovial. It couldn't *not* be with the ambrosia flowing freely, along with the snacks picked up

from the commons. Lon, Donnel, and Granger were scattered on the bed and floor while laughing and joking over some of his ideas.

"You want something like *that*, Ronnie, it won't be cheap," Lon muttered while shaking his head. "Unless you already *had* a source ... but that's hard to come by."

"I think this part *here...*" Granger said while tapping a section on the display, "...it could be done. Have to be done just *right*, of course. Not too many places do that without asking too many questions."

"Umm ... suppose I was looking for a place ... out on the *Fringe*?"

All three of them ignored him for the moment while they looked at each other. After a few shaking heads, a few tilted heads, and finally a trio of nods, they turned back to him. Donnel looked cautiously around the compartment before taking a breath and speaking in a low tone.

"Ah don't ken o' a steid ... mibbie *heard* o' it, mynd ye," Donnel muttered slowly in his adopted and broken Scottish accent (interestingly adapted to Standard just the same). "Micht aye be daein' business ... micht nae. *Wey* oot thare ... a'maist at th' Blight. Steals credit whiles trade ... *salvage*, if ye wull. Figure that insae something ye wid be against?" he said, before reaching over and keying in a name on Ronnie's pad.

"I have credit. As for *trade*... Not as long as it was a *fair trade*," he murmured, then looked down at his pad. "Oh. I've *heard* of him. Thought he was ... *retired*," he said skeptically.

The *last* time he'd dealt with him, there was talk of him finally shutting down. Apparently not.

"Aye, that's whit th' *Emperor* thought," Donnel murmured.

"And the Drecks," Lon muttered.

"Hard to work *both* sides of the field like that and stay in business," Granger added.

"I imagine it makes the Founding Day party a bouncing affair," Ronnie muttered, before suggesting aloud an improbable situation containing both Drecks and Imperials partying in celebration of the birth of the Commonwealth at the same time and in the same place.

They all laughed at that and poured another round of drinks – each of them sipping carefully as they'd all had an accident or two related to two-hundred-year-old ambrosia since their arrival just two weeks ago.

"We'll work up some numbers for you, Ronnie," Lon promised him. "And Granger will get you some *real* drawings. Donnel, can you take care of the rest?"

"Aye, I can work out the rest ... long as he can find someone to *build* it for him. Two ... three days tops."

"Well, you can signal it to me if I leave before then – care of the Royals if necessary."

"Will do, lad, will do. And you be dumping your garbage tomorrow on time?" Donnel asked him.

"That's the plan."

"Then we'll be on our way, Ronnie," Lon said. "Get some sleep. Long day tomorrow," he said, and they all took their leave.

They talked about it quietly while walking down the corridor...

"Think it can be done?"

"Sure. If we do it just *right*."

"But do you think *he* can pull it off?"

"He wouldn't have asked if he didn't have it *planned* now, would he?"

"This be our *Ronnie*, we be talkin' about, lads."

"So ... there's nothing to worry about then?"

"Ha!"

Basking in the unabashed confidence of his former crewmates, Ronnie withdrew from their surface thoughts while considering it. They could do it. Now it was just a matter of him following through. He checked the compartment timer and remembered that he had one more appointment to keep, so he washed up, grabbed a fresh bottle of aged ambrosia, and made his way to the Elder's compartment.

In Ronnie's Old Compartment

Maya leaned over and fed Meela, while Lili sat holding Meela's hand and looking within.

Laisee watched her bodily processes just as the Lady Wives of the First Lord had taught her; still amazed at the revelations of her new life. She watched for a while longer, but finally couldn't stand it any longer and spoke up.

"Lady Lili, is she going to be all right?"

Distracted by the interruption, Lili turned to Laisee with a frown, but smoothed it after seeing the concerned look on her face.

"Laisee ... your mother *died*. Using his Grandmother's teachings, Rondal was able to bring her back, but something like this is *always* a very touchy thing. He acted quickly enough, but Meela's mind is still ... confused? Upset?" Lili sighed at her own lack of control over the situation, and watched when Laisee's face began to crumble in despair.

"Why Lili? Why did Ronnie *kill her?*" Laisee sobbed and started to cry. Letting go of Meela's hand, Lili pulled her into her arms to comfort her.

"Laisee, Rondal saved her the *only* way she left open to him. She was determined to recover her honor by *admitting* her guilt and offering herself up as payment. She was prepared to *kill* herself with the help of Captain Tomar. Then Vitas was going to take his *own* life to remain with her in death. Rondal had just learned of this yesterday morning before he came to me for information that would help Meela if she followed through with her plans."

"You *knew*? Ronnie told you and you *knew*?" Laisee murmured into her neck.

"No. Rondal just asked me for information. He never told me what he'd learned because then I would be bound to report it to the Elder – or she could have pulled it from my mind, since I work so closely with her. If anyone else knew of it, the Elder could have immediately picked up on it, and things might have turned out very *differently*," she said clearly, and saw that she had Maya's eyes on her.

"As it was, Rondal antagonized the Elder sufficiently enough to get her to finish the investigation, change her mind, and release your mother from all charges, but Meela spoke up and *admitted* to her crimes. Rondal mollified the Elder once *again*, but Meela ... she just wouldn't give up. She *insisted* that she be found guilty." Lili paused while remembering that incredible foolishness of Meela's.

"At that point, the Elder had no choice but to declare her guilty and sentence her to death. I don't think the Elder expected things to move along so quickly. I was as surprised as *everyone*," she said, while looking pointedly at Maya again.

"It was very frightening to see Rondal act as he did. As it turns out, he'd already made arrangements with Lady Sai and Lady Molara if this particular event came to pass. Ultimately, he was able to give your mother what she wanted, and school the Elder in her humanity, as

well. If Kita were still alive, I think she would have enjoyed watching Lady Ai learn her lesson – as harsh as it was.”

“What of Captain Tomar? I’ve not seen him around. What did the Elder do to him?” Laisee asked quietly.

“Brave, loyal Vitas Tomar tried to give your mother poison so she wouldn’t suffer a painful death. Rondal caught him at it – most *effectively*, wouldn’t you say, Maya?” she asked pointedly, and waited to see how Maya responded.

“Yes, my Lady,” she said quietly, before changing breasts to continue feeding Meela.

“After your mother … *expired* … Tomar himself took poison. Sai tells me he woke up with a *terrible* headache!” She tittered at the memory of that news, and Laisee pushed herself far enough away to look at her face.

“He … he *woke up*? But you said he took *poison*!”

“Laisee, our Rondal has *many* talents. One of them is being very *thorough*. Once he learned of their plans, he made sure the *only* poison Tomar could find would not kill anyone. Tomar was nice enough to have their plans in the forefront of his thoughts when Rondal spoke to them yesterday morning,” she said, then glanced at Maya again.

Laisee sat very still in Lili’s arms while it all sank in. Ronnie *had* saved her mother … even from *herself*.

“Oh Lili. I treated him so *poorly this morning!*” she wailed, with new tears starting to fall while leaning into Lili’s arms and letting herself be comforted again.

“It’s all right, Laisee, it’s all right. He told me *all* about you this morning and he understands. At our level of responsibility, many things are hard to explain to the comfort of *everyone* … but the goal is *always* for the best result. He was able to save Meela from the Elder … and from *herself*,” she said, while again catching Maya’s eyes. “Of course, now it is left to *me* to pick up the pieces! *Ai-yah!* Maya, I’m sure *you* are quite familiar with that aspect of our Rondal!”

“He … he was not always so troublesome,” she allowed quietly.

“Ha! Not according to the reports our *Yandi* sent to us!” She let out another titter while Maya looked at her quizzically. “Ahhh … if only Kita had not lost her way… Then Zarox would have been a success, and you and Rondal would have been *married!*”

Lili spared another glance at Maya before letting out a soulful sigh.

"Even now, your children would be training to hold the *reins* of the Commonwealth," she added wistfully.

"M-My Lady ... wa-what are you t-talking about?" Maya stuttered in confusion.

"Oh! Your pardon, Maya. I spoke out of turn. That is a discussion best left between you and your mother ... she *is* still your mother? You haven't yet accepted the Elder's offer?"

At the confused shake of Maya's head, Lili turned her attention back to Laisee.

"Now Laisee, your mother still dreams in confusion, but Maya's milk eases her pain and feeds her. Make sure she voids regularly until she wakes up ... perhaps in another day or two. Once she does, I will be determining how to use her knowledge and skills to our best advantage. My Lord Husband denies it, but I see the appreciation in his heart when he considers a Meela returning to his household who is *not* rude and demanding. We must make the *best* use of this unexpected windfall."

She turned Laisee's face towards her and gave her a loving kiss before standing up to leave, but paused for a moment and turned to face Maya.

"Maya, should you have any problems with Meela, do not hesitate to come to me. You may come to me about *anything*, Maya. Anything at all," she offered, before turning to leave.

In the Lane's Compartment

"*Mom! Ronnie's leaving us! He ... he's just dumping us on Lili and takin' off again! He's running away! Again!*"

Most of the Lane clan were in attendance, but Larl was still dealing with platform issues.

"Amy, Lili spoke to me already and I'm sure we'll be just fine," Diane assured her. "Larl has some plans for the platform that Lili is interested in looking into. He also says the back pay Ronnie allocated to us would keep us for several *years* if necessary. At the very least, we could all return to Earth and your father could get his old job back. And I'm sure the hospital would be glad to get *me* back now that I have something extra to bring to the table," she said.

Then she had another thought.

"You and Shay as well. I don't believe Healers would *need* a medical degree to practice on Earth, would they dear?"

David had to think about that for a little bit.

"Well ... if you actually *claimed* to be practicing medicine, then that would be illegal. But since what you do is not invasive, you could probably get by as massage practitioners or ... yeah, holistic health practitioners. That's pretty much open-ended. At the very least, we could form our own church and make "laying-on of hands*" one of the tenants of faith."

"Mom, somehow I don't see Larl being happy as a ... a deacon in a flake church. Besides, he's a Galactic. I don't think he'd be happy stuck back on Earth again."

"Amy, your Larl is a gifted scholar," Shay reminded her. "Perhaps he would not mind studying your family while you reconnect with your home world? It would only take thirty ... perhaps only forty years? Besides, if you get tired of staying on Earth and wish to travel once again, there will be plenty of time *afterwards*."

"Thirty or forty *years*? I - I'll be *old* - like *Mom*," Amy whined, but caught the look from her mother. "Okay, not *that* old, but *still* ... we'll all be too ... too..."

The realization finally hit her.

"We're not gonna *get* old, are we?"

"No, dear," her mother said calmly. "Not as long as you don't *want* to - and you maintain a loving relationship with someone who *cares* about you. Remember what Maya showed us?" she reminded them, then hugged her David. Shay and Andy hugged, and drew Amy into their arms as well.

"Well..." David muttered, but paused, "...my understanding is you *continue* to grow old, but maintaining a healthy personal interaction with another lets you slow down the process somewhat ... or in *your* case, Amy, stop it all together!"

David had to wait for the round of laughter at Amy's expense to taper off, before going on.

"The *only* reason the Galactics seem to grow old is for *propriety*. Lili is still a hottie at her age, but she let herself age visibly just to present a more *mature* aspect in her position as First Wife to the First Lord, and the Elder's representative in the Royal household. Can you imagine *Meela* commanding the same respect that Lili does while looking as *young* as she does? Or how about *you*, Amy? What do you think *your* credibility would be as First Wife?"

"That is very true," Shay said, while basking in the closeness and acceptance of her new family. "Usually, the only cause of death is by accident or the foolishness of being unpleasant enough that no one cares about you enough to willingly share contentment with you. Or denying yourself of contentment with another, as Lord Ronnie did when he was out here by himself. Oh, I wish Maya had not been so *foolish!* Now Ronnie will have no one to share contentment with and he will grow old and *die*," she said sadly, while hugging her Andy even tighter.

"I don't think it'll be that bad, Shay," Andy assured her. "Ronnie always seems ready to jump in the sack with a willing lady."

"No, you do not *understand*. None of you understands! Ronnie loves *deeply*, and Maya was to be his *bond*-mate, but she has cast him *aside*. He may still give to others, but he will not *accept* from them in kind. Thus, even if he shares contentment with another, he will still grow old and eventually become too weak to fight ... and then he *will die*. Even if he denies himself and does not fight, he will *still* end up like Mistress Kita and grow old and die."

"Shay, that's *silly*," David said. "Even if Ronnie and Maya were bonded, she could still have an accident and die. Then he'd be left without her anyway. Are you saying he'd still die, then?"

"No, it is not that way among them. When you love as he and Maya did, they were bonded in their *hearts*. Maya now casts him out and his heart is sealed from another. If Maya had simply died, his heart would eventually heal and he could possibly find another. But Maya has *broken* his heart and he will not seek another, for his love for her is too strong. His heart will *never* heal. And now he will not be looking anyway, as his task is in front of him again."

"What task?" Andy asked her.

"You *still* do not understand?" Lord Ronnie is a *Warrior Lord of the House of Caldorous!* He resumes his *duty* in a short while."

"Duty? *What* duty?" Andy asked her.

"He goes to fight the enemies of the Commonwealth once again, and ... and I fear he will *die* in the process," she said sadly.

They became silent at that sobering thought until David remembered what was scheduled for tomorrow.

"Uhh, Andy. You guys get to bed and get some sleep – *eventually*," he teased them lightly. "We have garbage duty tomorrow with Ronnie. Any of you girls want to come along?" he asked, but Diane spoke up before Amy or Shay could say anything.

"Lili says she has other plans for us, and you guys are going with him by yourselves."

That said, they broke up for the evening and made their way back to their own compartments just down the corridor, each guard following their Healer at a discreet distance.

Amy thought it was silly now that it looked like Meela was out of the picture – *forever*, it would appear.

Midnight –2 (Day 108) – The Visions are Confusing

For nearly two hours they'd discussed the various repercussions of the Visions Ai had seen and what had happened recently to affect them so poorly. Ronnie didn't blame her and told her so. There were “*wild-cards*,” as he called them, that had an unpredictable effect on the future. Apparently, Meela was one such, as was Maya.

He'd listened to Trenka's suggestion, and then pointed out the further you reached, the fuzzier the interpretation became – but the exercise was *still* a valid one for learning how the Visions worked. And *this*, he'd reminded them, was *his* experience shortly after he'd finished reading the Seniors' texts for the fifth or sixth time while living on the platform nearly sixteen decades ago.

He'd also quietly admitted that he'd steadfastly *refused* to engage in such “nonsense” once he'd returned to civilization – preferring instead to rely on his *own* decisions about his future.

This had been especially true in his own case, since whatever he'd seemed to anticipate would change the Visions in such a radical manner that he couldn't glean anything useful to himself anyway. He'd left out the part about his feelings sometimes affecting his judgment, though, or the question of whether he'd actually been going mad at the time.

What was *more* revealing was his understanding of the “Others” – the voices in his head that ... not so much talked to him, but talked *about* him – prattling on about “the Fire” and such. He'd had no idea at all of what it meant. For her part of the information exchange, the Elder had called upon Molara to show him Kita's notes about the “Others” and their recent “summons” to come and visit death space.

From that revelation, he'd suggested that perhaps the “Others” were the manifestation of either human spirits or something similar. The fact that they'd contacted Kita – *presumably* to come recover him and his crew – he felt significant. It implied an interest in the well-being of humanity ... or they simply could have wanted him and his crew removed from death space and either didn't feel like doing it

themselves, or they weren't capable of it. He'd left further speculation about that to the Elder.

One suggestion he *did* make was for Ai to relax – not stress about putting effort into *solid* readings of the future. He also told her to think of it in wider terms, *outside the box* (whatever *that* meant) and put in wildly different pieces and see what happened next. After that, they concluded their meeting. The other Seniors bid them a good evening, while he and Ai stayed behind to finish their drinks...

"So, Rondal, would you care to share your thoughts on your *immediate* future?"

"My immediate future is being the garbage man for tomorrow. I'll take my crew and go dump the garbage in the afternoon. Most of it has been waiting for many years."

"I see. Will you still be around the day after? We wish to honor Kita on that day, and I would have you and your family attend– your *Healers*," she said pointedly.

"The Wives will certainly be there, my Lady."

"No, Rondal, you misunderstand," she told him. "Your *new* Healers – Diane, Amy, Shay and Laisee – I would have them attend as well. I am beginning to think they will play an interesting role in *all* our futures – for as long as we last."

"My Lady, I am confident things will not be so dark in the coming year or two. I'll poke around a little ... *gently*. If your Visions clear up, then let me know and I'll sharpen my stick."

That got her to laugh, but she persisted with her request.

"Our remembrance of Kita ... you *will* attend? We plan to have it on the day after tomorrow ... after *lunch*. Can you *wait* ... 'til then?" she asked him pointedly, then broke into a titter at the look on his face.

"I could not *resist*, Ronnie. Larl spoke of to me afterwards and explained the reference. He promises me a copy of the performance with suitable subtitles. I look forward to it. He really is a remarkable person, your Doctor Riker."

"Yes, well ... just don't remind him of it too often, or it'll go to his head."

Ai poured them both another drink.

"We must finish this tonight, Ronnie. Once opened, I understand that it spoils rapidly," she lied shamelessly.

"I will be happy to help relieve you of that burden," he assured her, then sipped a bit more while watching her eyes. Very *pretty* eyes, he noted.

"You know, Ronnie, that night we sent Molara to you, we *all* experienced something very entertaining. I wonder if – before you go – you might have time to demonstrate that to me ... *personally*? I'm doing nothing in particular for the *rest* of this evening..." she coyly left open.

"I would be *honored*, Ai," he said, then stood and reached out for her hand. She led the way to her chamber, while he grabbed the bottle in passing.

He knew almost immediately it had been a long time since Ai had last been with a man, and took a great deal of time in his attentions to her until she finally asked him to enter her. They took their time in pleasure, with Ai responding warmly, all the while thinking how foolish Kita had been to deny herself and her servants this pleasure for all those years.

He treated her very well and – during lulls of peak activity – suggested they find counterparts, if not bond-mates, to fulfill the role of companions; just as they found companions for the men of the Royal houses.

She laughed at that and pointed out how the fragile male ego would find it a difficult position to be in, while he countered that some men would find the situation *intriguing* – having a *woman* command his services to help her relax at the end of a very demanding day. He suggested that Larl could easily fill that need if he wasn't already attached to his Amy.

She then suggested that Amy might be a good addition to the Elder's staff in a support capacity, as that would then let them borrow Larl on a semi-regular basis. They laughed about that while he refilled their glasses with the final drops of ambrosia.

As they drank, they looked at each other warmly ... Ai wondering again why he was so different from most other men she'd known. Then she remembered who his father was, and maybe it wasn't that much of a difference after all.

As they drained their last drops, she put her glass down and drew him towards her lips again.

"Ronnie, our ambrosia is all gone, but I would share a bit more pleasure with you. Will you please share the Gift of the First Wife with me?" she asked huskily.

"In what measure, my Lady?"

"In *full* measure, Ronnie. I want you to make my body *forcefully* withdraw your seed from you and spray it within me for as long as it pleases you. I want to *feel it* and *you*... all the way to the *end!* Please do not set me to sleep?"

"I will do my very best, Ai," he promised, then began by gently arranging her for his final penetration.

He started very slowly and gradually built up her excitement; taking his time and only bringing her to short peaks, and those widely spaced apart. As the minutes grew longer, he eventually speeded up, her small climaxes becoming more frequent, and she becoming more vocal. Only minutes later, she could no longer resist.

"Will you do it *now*, Ronnie? Please, Ronnie, I want to feel it like before!"

He began exciting her more and more, before triggering the feedback loop in her genitals that started the involuntary repetitive clenching of her vaginal muscles. He rapidly worked himself in and out of her while immersing himself in her sensations of pleasure. Her climaxes became continuous, and her body hunched and clamped against him even more strongly. At the very end, he held her down with his hands and groin while she milked him into her willing orifice. It was during the aftermath of her final climax when she saw a relatively *clear* future in front of her and suddenly knew what she must do, and when.

Once he let go of her hands, she let her legs drop and spread, then reached up and tightly clasped him to her while crying between gasping breaths until he rolled himself to the bottom and let her continue her passions more comfortably with her above him.

"Do not ... leave me ... this *night* ... Ronnie," she said in a whisper while her body was still responding involuntarily.

"You make me much too comfortable to leave you, Ai," he whispered back, even knowing that as much as he'd enjoyed their play, his heart was still with his Maya.

'No ... not my Maya anymore,' he reminded himself.

Noon –4 (Day 109) Maya Visits Her Mother

Maya was walking down the corridor to speak to her mother when she saw Ronnie backing out the door of the Elder's compartment.

"Thank you for coming, Lord Caldar," Ai said, but then noticed Maya watching them warily. "It was very good of you to come so *early*,"

she continued smoothly. After all, he'd finally "come" sometime *after* midnight, and that was considered early.

Her slightly disheveled appearance and Ronnie's subtle morning scruffiness were not missed, however, and Maya turned her nose and continued past without comment. If Ronnie was already finding comfort – in the arms of the *Elder*, no less – then it was none of her business.

After knocking on her mother's door, Déjà answered it only moments later and invited her in.

"Good *morning*, Mistress Maya!" she greeted her excitedly, but pouted prettily after Maya artfully dodged her open arms.

"Good morning, Mistress Déjà," Maya muttered while warily watching her every move. "Is my Mother around?"

"Ah! My love has checked the prisoners, and now sees to our *guest*, Vitas *Tomar*," she said dreamily.

"Vitas is *here*? Is he *well*?"

"Oh, he is *very well*," she purred. "And *delicious!* He *cries* a lot, but then my Lady bids me calm him down, and lets me *play* with him! Would *you* like to play with me?" she asked hopefully.

"Ah, not right now," Maya said tactfully, just as Sai stepped out of the bunkroom and sighed wearily.

"Déjà, please go see to our guest ... *again*. He's mourning his lost love, yet again."

"*Oh! Thank you, my love!*" Déjà said excitedly, and entered the room to cries of dismay from Vitas.

"*Oh no ... no ... please not again!*" was heard, just before the door closed behind her.

"Thank the *Gods*, I found her," Sai muttered irritably. "I'd have killed him *myself* if it weren't for Déjà's talent at calming men down."

"Or angry *daughters*," Maya muttered.

"Maya, I've *already* apologized for that," she said, then gave her daughter a hug. "What brings you to visit your evil old mother today?" she added, while drawing her into her sleeping chamber and directing her to a chair.

"Lili ... yesterday Lili said something – by accident, I think – and then would not speak more of it. She said it would be better if you told me."

Maya looked away and glanced at the huge platform where the little girl had dragged her after she'd been attacked and rendered helpless; missing her mother's eyes when they stared at the wall for a few moments.

'*Lili, did you send Maya here ... by accident?*'

'*She is very naïve. She is there, is she not?*' Lili shot back before Maya turned back to her mother with more questions.

"Lili said Ronnie and I would have been married and our children would already be schooling for duties in the Commonwealth. Mother, is this *true*?"

Sai glanced away for a few moments...

'*Lili, you didn't...*'

'*Your daughter, First Sword – tell her the truth*'

"Sweetheart, you *do* understand how government works at the very highest levels, don't you?" Sai began smoothly, while shifting over slightly to lean against her desk before turning back to face her.

"Well ... as we all know, the Royals control commerce, security—"

"Maya, I'm talking about how the Elder holds sway over the *Royals* so we don't have any unfortunate *incidents* to deal with. Although I don't see how much more unfortunate that incident with *Meela* could have gotten," she muttered wryly with an aimless wave of her arm.

Maya continued to look confused while Sai fumed in frustration at her simplistic-minded daughter.

"Maya, did it never occur to you that Lady Lili was made First Wife to the First Lord, even though she was over three-hundred years *older* than him and would *never* bear him children? Lili was placed with the First Lord as his *handler*. She was *never* intended to provide him with an heir to the throne."

Maya looked at her mother blankly for a few seconds before coming up with – to *her* – a reasonable conclusion.

"So ... Lili entered a loveless marriage on the orders of the Elder? Does she still regret her decision?" she asked obtusely.

"Ai-yah!" Sai exclaimed, while leaning forward to smack Maya lightly on the side of her head.

"Did you even *listen* to your teachers? What does a Healer feel when providing contentment, Maya? Does she refuse contentment because she does not *love* her client? The First Lord holds his position because he is the very *best* at what he does. Lady Lili is the very best at what *she* does – which is making sure the First Lord is able to do what *he* does. They were brought together to *complement* each other. In seeking *contentment* with each other, they have grown to *love one another!*"

Sai stood and began to pace in the rather cramped sleeping space.

"Do you not love the members of your *crew*, Maya? Do you favor Larl over Andy because of his *size*? Or David over Diane, or Amy, or Shay? We are Healers *first*, Maya! Those are the *basics*! What Clan Tal does with our Seniors is provide the Commonwealth with the very *best* tools for its continuance and *stability!*"

She stopped in front of the small desk and slammed her palm down on it – startling Maya in the process – before turning back to confront her.

"Did you not wonder at the *suddenness* of your instructions to bear children? It was after Ronnie was lost to us – after the *Zarox disaster*. It was hoped that – since your *intended* bond-mate was lost – a measure of salvage would be gained by you having the children *he* would have brought from you if only he had returned as planned and you assigned to him as *intended*."

"*Salvage?* What do you *mean*, Mother?" Maya stood up at this revelation, as confusing as it was to her.

"I mean that *you* were to bear Rondal's children, and *they* would somehow be key to the *Commonwealth's salvation!* Since Rondal was lost, it was thought that those two men would be the most likely to produce acceptable offspring for the same purpose! Instead, my Granddaughters were lost through the intervention of *Kita!* *Well-meaning*, no doubt, but still not one I would have *wished for!*"

"But Mother, Ronnie and I could *never* have children now. Why go through all that bother *now?*"

Sai was astonished at Maya's incredible lack of attention.

"Why? Because there is something you two do together that saves the Commonwealth, foolish one! Did you not study *history*? Did you not read the causes of the *Blight*? When chaos reigns, society collapses! Who are you but an *insignificant mortal* – a mere *bit* of sand on a very *wide beach* – yet you are *that* bit of sand which makes a *difference* ... you and Ronnie *together!*"

Sai began pacing again when her frustrations began to overrule her self-control.

“You prattle on about being a ‘true Healer’ and ‘telling the truth.’ Clan Tal is Healer to the *Commonwealth!* What do you think would happen if the truth came out that the Emperor is merely a *puppet* whose strings are pulled by the *Elder* and does *her bidding*? How long would the Commonwealth survive if he lost the respect and allegiance of the other sectors, when it was seen that he was *not* a strong and noble leader, but merely the tool of an *old woman*? It is Kantor and Cletus *together* that keeps the peace ... which makes the Commonwealth a *reality* ... yet you would place above this your *own* selfish longings for ‘absolute truth’ and ‘honor’ and ... and ... whatever the hell *else is bothering you!*”

Maya was stunned by her mother’s outburst. She sat down and quivered in her seat while Sai continued to stare at her sadly for several seconds. Sai finally managed to calm herself before sitting down next to her and hugging her, one armed, then took a cleansing breath before admitting her place in the grand scheme.

“Maya – for the benefit of the Commonwealth, I have lied, cheated, and stolen things. I’ve also *killed*. I’ve done this for *many* years, and yet ... I’ve also learned the lessons Ronnie taught me so long ago. I don’t always *have* to kill. My boys are a testament to that ... your stepbrothers – Endo and Gallus.”

“My stepbrothers? And I suppose Déjà is my stepsister?”

“Ahhh ... Déjà. If I had a *hundred* like her, I could take down the Hegemony within a month – a *year* at most!” She sighed at the potentials, but shook her head sadly. “Yes, she calls me mother and has sworn allegiance to me *personally*, as did the boys. The boys are honorable and I trust them completely. Déjà ... Déjà is – *was* a subject under the Dreck ... I *think*. She does not truly remember as she was taken when she was very young. For all I know, she might be the *last* member of her race. If the Dreck were *that* afraid of her, then they might have sanctioned her entire *planet*.”

“Afraid of her? How do you mean?”

“Ahh ... that is a story I will *not* be telling you,” her mother said.

“Why, because it is a *lie*? ”

“No, because it’s a *secret!*” she whispered loudly. “And whatever I told you would *then* be a lie,” she added, then braced her lips into a momentary grin before relaxing them again.

Maya dropped her head and shook it slowly from side to side while Sai hugged her a little tighter before telling her the latest news.

"Cheer up, daughter! I learned that Ronnie has finally come to his senses and rejoins the *battle!* He leaves to defend the *Commonwealth* once again!"

"What! *When? How?* He *cannot leave now!* He ... he cannot just *leave!* He ... he still has *family here!* He has *responsibilities!* *Meela* ... he has to take care of *Meela!*"

"Pish! Ronnie's no Healer – not a *real* one, anyway. Lili and the Wives will be taking care of Meela now, and Lili and Larl are arranging for his family to join the Royal household while they adjust to life on Kantor. I understand young Amy is anxious to begin this new adventure. Besides, there's *nothing* keeping Ronnie here now," she said with finality, while ignoring the utterly lost look on Maya's face.

Noon +1.8 (Day 109) – Garbage Duty

David and Andy showed up at the air lock right on schedule, but were met by the diminutive figure of Lili's assistant – Kita – who was waiting for them in her ship suit.

"Uhh, hello Mistress Kita... You going somewhere?" Andy asked her.

"Oh *yes!* My Lady Lili sends me with you to take notes – so she *tells* me," she said, before adding in a whisper, "I think she wants me to make sure Lord Calder *returns* today." Her impish smile lessened the accusation. "And I am so fortunate to have two such big, strong men to *protect* me from Lord Calder. I understand he can be a bit *overwhelming* during ships holiday," she added with a grin.

"Ahh ... yes, the girls say he does provide quite a bit of enjoyment," David offered; already suspecting this might evolve into *more* than a mere garbage run.

"Well, time to board," Andy said, and they cycled through to make their way to the ship.

On the 'Ceti

After getting out of dock, Ronnie wrangled the garbage with the shields before bringing it in close to the ship and making it *absolutely* stationary. Then he gave some precise target coordinates to Andy. With David now in the pilot's position, Ronnie gave him the nod, and David executed the transition.

Coming out of the jump, they saw that Andy had placed them right on target... in an outer orbit more than fifty diameters away from the

selected primary, which was always a good idea considering how hot and how big the gravity well of a star was.

Picking an exit vector, Ronnie had David slowly accelerate the ship before dropping the shield, while simultaneously slipping further away from the primary. This allowed the bulk of the garbage to move ponderously along the way past the huge gravity well below them.

Ronnie had watched David carefully when he did this to make sure both his acceleration and departure vectors were *well* away from the star. That way, the slowly moving mass would simply wander by in the next few days and fall naturally to its demise. Then they went back to pick up the tanks and the rest of the scrap metal.

This time he had Andy run the calculations for another star by himself. Then – after crossing his fingers – he gave David the execute order. He noted Andy had placed them *well* away from the new primary and complimented him for his caution. Andy told him better safe than sorry, before setting a track for David to follow.

Just as before, David brought them up to speed, then slipped aside, which let the mass of metal drift on by – soon to be yet another cloud of metal vapor in another three or four days from now.

CPS Microcosmus, Noon +4.9 (Day 109) – A Simple Life

Maya held herself over Meela's head while providing nourishment for her semi-comatose client...

Lady Lili had just left after having extended through Meela and sighing at the relatively mild chaos that her mind was still dealing with. Other than a polite "Hello" and a quiet "Goodbye" she'd kept the conversation to a minimum – save for complimenting her on the excellent quality of care she was providing Laisee's mother.

Having nothing else to discuss, she'd patted Maya on the shoulder before taking her leave.

Maya felt the air change when the outer door opened, but it was only Laisee returning from the evening meal. She glanced up at the room timer and estimated Meela would be done in another five or ten minutes, then Laisee could watch over her mother while she took the opportunity to wash herself and go eat.

It suddenly struck her that this was just what she'd wanted – being a simple Healer and taking care of needful clients. Upon somewhat deeper reflection, her probable future now seemed rather shallow...

CS Odontoceti, Noon +5 (Day 109) – A Pause That Refreshes

For all this time, Kita had been making entries on her data pad and observing silently. Just before they were going to transition back to the platform, she made one small request.

“My Lord Rondal, Lady Lili suggested that I take advantage of this opportunity to ask you to fulfill your promise to me. She fears you will not be around to honor that request much longer.”

Ronnie was caught flat-footed, while David and Andy just smiled.

“Oh … your pilot and navigator are *welcome* to participate as well, of course,” she added with a smile.

Ronnie just dropped his shaking head. Lili had cornered him again.

“Uh, Andy – set a small jump to these coordinates,” he said, then rattled off a bunch of numbers from memory.

Once executed, they found themselves in far orbit around an ice planet, the same one he’d harvested ice from with Sai, and smiled at that memory. Quickly searching the surface, he found a nice flat spot and had David drop them down for a landing; very competently done, he noted.

“Gentlemen, Mistress Kita … I believe the back-most stateroom is available,” he said, then grabbed a half-full bottle of ambrosia from a lower cabinet and four cups…

It was a dream come true for Kita, as there was always someone inside of her *somewhere* and she was loving every minute of it.

The men could hardly believe her energy, and David made a remark about the *battery bunny*, which then had to be explained to her. They’d all laughed at the analogy while continuing to share a great deal of contentment among the four of them.

Finally, Kita brought up the issue of the Gift, and Andy mentioned what they’d done with all the women during one of the ships holidays.

She was eager to try them all, so she lay with her head in Ronnie’s lap, while first she brought Andy to a climax with her vaginal spasms, and then David. By the time David was done, Andy was ready to go again, so she eagerly asked Ronnie to do her again with Andy one more time.

He just shook his head, reintroduced the excitement cycle, then let her biofeedback run wild. She frenetically clenched Andy repeatedly for several minutes until she brought him to a flashing climax – heightened by his own connection to her as well. When she finally

came down, she lay there, panting and sweating. She had a huge smile on her face, which was tinted a *much* deeper shade of blue now, as was the skin above her breasts.

"Had *enough*, little girl?" Ronnie asked her.

"Oh *no*, Ronnie! I want *you* now!" she insisted, while still somewhat out of breath. "And don't you *dare* put me to sleep! I want to remember this moment *forever!*"

Getting her all arranged, he had Andy and David on either side of her and holding her legs up while he easily slid in and began thrusting. Andy and David took turns kissing her between licking and sucking her nipples, while Ronnie slowly worked her up.

"Hold her tightly, now," he said, before triggering her first climax.

Before that even subsided, he began running up her excitement level to trigger subsequent climaxes, one after another. Once she was coming in repeated strings, he started working on his own pleasure. As he approached his own climax, he pushed her into high speed; making her peak harder and faster while firmly clamping down on his shaft, which felt delightfully pleasurable to him.

David finally clamped his mouth over Kita's and forced her to rebreathe with him, which quickly sent her spinning dizzily into an upward spiral of excitement and passion that finally brought her to a massive set of spasms that triggered Ronnie's finish as well.

As soon as Ronnie was done, he cut her response triggers and David pulled away – leaving Kita laying there, panting rapidly with her lower body still hunching up against Ronnie. After perhaps half a minute, she began to relax and just barely opened her eyes to look at them all.

Looking up at David, she smiled and then pulled him down for another kiss. Then she held him there and blew her breath into his lungs – sharing her breath with him for several seconds before pulling away while still looking at him dreamily.

"That was *different*," she murmured languidly, then pulled him back down to wash his mouth with her tongue. Pushing back gently, she reached up to grab Andy and did the same with him; several seconds of hot, shared breath, followed by an internal tongue bath. When she pushed Andy away, she looked up at Ronnie and raised her arms.

Smiling warmly, he awkwardly supported himself above her while she attached herself to his lips and repeated the process – but didn't let up. She pulled him onto his side and continued until she was out of breath, then pulled away dizzily and gazed at him through heavy

eyelids. She started kissing him gently all over his face and neck, before working her way down his chest.

Seeing the direction she was headed, David smiled and Andy tilted his thumb to the door, with David nodding his agreement.

"I'll start us on back, Ronnie," David said in a whisper. "We'll take the *long* way."

Ronnie just nodded, then looked down and smiled when Kita's lips finally reached his shaft.

CPS Microcosmus, Midnight –6 (Day 109) – A Surprise Revelation

Lili was feeling somewhat indignant at being summoned so cavalierly by the Elder. It would seem that there was something that needed saying, but she would not risk the chance of it being overheard – even by her own Seniors. How or why Ai would even *consider* such a lack of trust within her own staff disconcerted her, but she arrived and stood outside the Elder's compartment while waiting for the guard to knock.

'Welcome, Lili. We have things to speak of that require your intervention with the First Lord' Ai silently pushed out to her, which immediately put her on edge before she even set foot inside the door.

She simply could not imagine what *other* new intrigue could befall upon them at such an inopportune time.

Midnight –2, In Lili's Compartment

Lili had enjoyed the warm shower with her little assistant, and now gazed down at her pale blue face with a smile on her lips...

A fresh shower had been *just* what she'd needed after having worn out poor Spring Blossom while distracting herself from the information the Elder had shared with her earlier.

Of course, she'd already had suspicions about little Rondal centuries ago, when he'd started out as a young Kantite half-breed. No mere *Earthling* could have progressed as quickly as he had without the benefit of a genetic donor at some point. Even Lord Husband had conjectured as such when Rondal continued to excel while growing up, and that was *before* they'd been made aware of his *true* origins – thus explaining why Spring Blossom and her toddler had been turned over to them for safe keeping. But as for this *new* information...

She supposed it was to be expected ... *eventually*. In some ways, she was surprised it had taken *this* long. Radatel seemed to have taken it quite calmly, in fact. Now, it was just a matter of...

The pale blue eyelids on the pretty face below her preceded the smile that followed their opening

“Well, my pretty Kita ...was it everything you’d hoped for?”

The smile got wider, and the eyes twinkled lazily.

“Oh *yes*, my Lady,” Kita said dreamily, and raised her arms to her mistress.

Lili joined her and snuggled even closer – almost nose-to-nose with her, before Kita continued her tale of debauchery.

“It was all that and *more*. I had all *three* of them,” she said softly, while remembering the wonderful time spent in their arms. “And Lord David did the most *unusual* thing.”

“Oh? And what was that, my precious Kita?” Lili murmured, while nibbling on her ear lightly.

“Let me *show* you,” she whispered, then turned her head and locked lips with her.

Lili was surprised, but remembered what Rondal had said during the recent execution. Then she matched it with some of the impressions she’d picked up from Diane and Shay during their impromptu gatherings.

She let Kita continue with her ministrations while extending through her to examine the physiological effects that were occurring that affected her sexual response. It appeared to be an artificially induced enhancement to sexual excitement – not a *true* physiological response to stimulation, but a byproduct of the physical body’s diversion of resources that temporarily scrambled the sensory feedback.

It was both amusing and stimulating in its own way, of course, but there were other interesting things one could do with lips and tongue.

She waited for Kita to begin relaxing before capturing her tongue and holding it in place, then suckling upon it firmly while enjoying her weak struggles before Kita gave in and let her have all of it.

Lili thought this was *much* more enjoyable, and certainly better than what she had had to inform Radatel of just a little earlier that evening.

Noon –5 (Day 110) – Testing Level Fifteen

Ronnie was in the gym early as he wanted to check out level fifteen just once before he left.

Calling up the program in mute mode, he still managed to startle the Healer on duty – one of the ones from *Sectorus*, he noted. She soon calmed down and watched in fascination when he dove in with two swords and danced with the pair of Dreck simulacrum for a few minutes before backing out of the circle. He stood there watching them, watching *him* in silent anticipation.

They were *beautiful*. Donnel had programmed a fully-grown representation of an adult Dreck warrior, and then duplicated it. The two of them stood just over twelve feet tall and bore a striking resemblance to Lord Gagsa – except that both of them still had their left arms. Donnel even got it down to a scar across the eye, but saw immediately that he'd not gotten it from a recent image – it was an artful extrapolation from the original footage from when he'd rescued Maya.

He danced in again, made several lunges and feints, then danced back out before turning to make notes on the monitor for suggested improvements. He did this several times, and added more notes and comments before turning up the audio and listening to their breathing and rude Dreck curses; each uttered as if talking to each other – and then he *smiled*.

He dived back in with a yell, and the gym was suddenly rocked with the roars and howls of angry Dreck in combat. He was *really* enjoying this! As he danced and weaved across the floor, the sounds of enemy combat echoed down the corridors – all the way to Lady Sai Tal's just opened door.

Without missing a beat, Sai ran back into her room, grabbed her sword, called the boys for back up, and started running towards the sound of conflict. Reaching a corner, she paused to listen while the boys caught up with her. Endo pointed down the other corridor leading to the gym and took off with Gallus, with Sai now sprinting to keep up.

The spectacle that greeted them was terrifying. All three stood in confusion when they saw Ronnie facing not one but *two* identical Dreck Lords, and cursing just as fluently in Dreck as they were. The situation was surreal; *double* that, with the figure of a Healer sitting cross-legged on a bench off to the side and observing the action with fingers in her ears, but otherwise ignoring it. Sai held her boys back and just watched for a while.

Finally, Ronnie fought a fighting retreat and backed out of the circle again, which brought the simulacrum up to the edge of it, where they began taunting him in Dreck to come back in and play some more. Sai watched as their eyes followed Ronnie's swords, but then one pair

of them crossed unexpectedly, which made her laugh out loud. This made Ronnie finally notice that he had an audience.

“Program-Pause,” he called out, and the simulacrum froze in place while he stood there in confusion.

Sai was still chuckling, so he looked down to make sure he still had his clothes on.

“N-No,” she laughed, while pointing up to one of the figures – the one with the crossed-eyes – as she walked over and stood next to him.

He looked up, nodded his head, then made another notation for Donnel. The boys, he noticed, were looking carefully at the simulacrum, and then at each other, eyeing the differences and the similarities.

“Uh, Sai...” he said in a whisper, “... they *know*, right?”

“Hmm? Oh yes, they know. They’ve just not seen adult Drecks all that often. The females raise the young in most packs, and their fathers never interact with them until they apply for adulthood. It’s only at the *upper* levels of the packs – the Lords and such – when the father pays any *real* attention to them while they’re growing up.”

That comment triggered a memory from Maya’s recent recovery that might be pertinent to some degree – a bit of sociological information about the Drecks he’d never known before.

“Ahh, perhaps that explains why Gagsa was so upset with Maya?”

She turned to stare at him thoughtfully before giving him a half-nod of agreement.

“Hmm, never thought of it that way. Maya spoke to me about her ordeal and mentioned the baby, but ... yes, if that were Lord Gagsa’s son, then he would probably be pissed at her for ‘ruining’ him like that. Healers and Drecks – like oil and water.”

Something pinged in his mind, but it drifted out just as quickly as it had drifted in. He reached out for it, but it seemed to elude his efforts to recall it.

“Well?” Sai asked again, and waited for him to come back from wherever he’d just gone.

“Uhhh... Well what?”

“You gonna ask me to the *dance*?” she asked, then nodded when he pointed to the mat.

"Let's just crank it *down* a notch first, all right? Maya's already pissed at me for *enough* reasons. Program-End," he said, then asked, "You've fought adults before?"

"All the *time*," she assured him, so he keyed in level twelve.

"Program-Begin," he said, but grabbed her arm to stay her for a moment to give her some pointers after the program introduction taunt was done.

"It attacks when you reach the *inner* circle. It stops when you reach the *outer* circle. You lose your *footing*, you get *stuck* – *toss your sword away!* It focuses on the *sword!* Or you just shout out, 'Program-End,'" he whispered, then thought for a moment.

"Hey, Healer! How do you *stop* this thing?" he called out.

"PROGRAM-END!" she called back, and the simulation died.

Ronnie gave her a thumbs up, and called out, "Program-Begin."

He moved to get out of her way, but paused a few feet later to add, "Oh – one more thing. Use your *powered* sword and you won't earn any *points!*" he said loudly, just as she crossed the outer circle...

After only two minutes, he was impressed. Sai was holding her own, and that was *something* for a woman her age.

Then he ducked when she shot him a dirty look while simultaneously blocking a vicious cut to her neck. That prompted a bit of fancy footwork when the simulacrum apparently took umbrage at being ignored like that. She finally backed outside the outer circle, and it stood there – panting silently and glaring at her.

"*How come ... it's so ... quiet?*" she asked, while panting loudly herself.

"Audio starts at level thirteen, but you end up facing *three* swords – the last one comes in randomly and it's quick," he said, and then thought about it. "Wanna do doubles?"

"Will it do it?"

"Don't know. Wanna find out?" he asked, and she just shrugged.

"Program-End," he said, and reprogrammed the system for level fifteen.

"I'll take the left side," he said, and shifted his sword to his left hand. "Ready?"

She nodded and called out, "Program-Begin!"

"AHH – HA – HA – HA – HA – HAAA! COME TO FACE ME, KRAKEN'S CHILD!"

In Ronnie's Old Compartment

Maya had been up most of the night thinking about how bad a mess she'd made of her life. Now she was lying listlessly on the bed while Laisee fussed over Meela...

She'd sent Laisee out early to eat and had promised to go once she got back, but just couldn't raise enough effort for it after she did. Laisee tried to cheer her up, but Maya just wasn't responsive. Laisee had finally given up and gone to her mother and pushed through her again; checking her bodily functions before getting more towels to have Meela empty her bladder into again.

Laisee had then suggested she go feed Shay, and Maya had promised she'd do it a little later in the morning; in the meantime, curling up on the bed and wrapping herself around her pillow for comfort – which Laisee thought was foolish, since she was standing right *there* and was ready and *very willing*...

Lying there alone, Maya considered her situation again.

The concept of having a life – a *real* life without obligations other than being a Healer, was *never* intended for her. Instead, she'd embarrassed her Aunt, her mother, her Queen, and herself – and driven away the *one* man she'd ever met who'd said he loved her and actually *meant* it, by both word *and* deed. Worse yet, she'd declared her freedom from him in front of her family *and* Queen; there was *no* going back after that. She'd hurt her Ronnie so *terribly*... No, not her Ronnie anymore. And he was *leaving soon!*

She didn't know what to do except maybe talk to Lady Lili ... after the remembrance, perhaps. Yes, right after the remembrance – and then maybe she could still fix this and get her Ronnie back. Yes, that was something she would pursue before Ronnie left the platform again.

Maya yawned and closed her eyes, settling in to rest for just for a moment...

Her dreams were in turmoil...

Drecks ... fighting Ronnie ... TWO Drecks ... the screams and cries ... her Mother yelling something ... yelling at Ronnie ... both of them yelling ... not angry ... cries of joy! ... exaltation! ... PAIN! ... HORRIBLE PAIN!

Maya sat up quickly and looked around. Laisee was sitting in the corner reading a Healer volume, and Meela was still horizontal. She got up and turned on the monitor to the gym. Ronnie was there, *and* so

was her MOTHER and her BROTHERS! They were *all* fighting the Drecks simulation!

In the Gym

Ronnie, Sai, Endo, and Gallus were having a *grand* time in the gym. Unable to hold back any longer, the boys had whipped out their own swords and joined the glorious fray.

The simulacrum seemed to have finally found its match when it faced not *two* foes, but *four*. It was easy to see Endo and Gallus had fought together before, and had the extra reach Ronnie and Sai lacked. Their strikes on the upper body raised the defense of the simulacrum higher than usual, and allowed Ronnie and Sai to attack the legs and waist with near impunity. On top of that, they were all laughing like maniacs.

The boys kept their power swords silent; a tribute to Sai's training and their paying attention to the previous match and his instructions. As the minutes wore on, they lost some ground because – unlike the *unlimited* power supplied to the simulacraums – they ran on blood and sweat – the *lack* of which was eventually taking its toll.

Little splatters were here and there; the lighter bright blood of the human-standards scattered with the slightly darker blood of Sai's boys. Likewise, the two simulacraums weren't looking too good either, as the program had opened each cut on the simulacraums and dribbled down simulated blood, which dripped, streamed, or oozed right down to the mat – where it promptly disappeared.

Each of the contestants were bloody from little cuts and nicks, but no one seemed to notice – right up until Sai caught a good one across her upper chest and screamed. Then the boys suddenly went berserk and started screaming and yelling in embarrassingly foul Drecks at the top of their lungs before launching simultaneous neck swipes against the simulacraums.

Meanwhile, Ronnie watched Sai reap her revenge with a solid thrust to the heart of the one that got her. Ronnie followed through with his, and both simulations screamed loudly before fading away – leaving them standing there in puddles and splashes of their own blood while four swords floated silently back to the rack.

In the absolute silence of the gym, they looked around at the mess, then at each other ... then started *laughing*. It continued until they all fell to the floor.

"Ah, damn," came from Sai, when she finally noticed the blood still dribbling out of her chest wound.

She blocked Ronnie's hand and directed him to watch the boys as they did a fast finger game before Endo clenched his fist and came to help her.

"Watch this," she said quietly, while Endo pressed his hand over her wound and concentrated mightily.

A tiny bit of glow surrounded his palm for several seconds until he pulled his hand away just as Maya rushed into the gym.

"Ronnie? ... *MOTHER!*" she cried out, before rushing over and squeezing between them while Endo respectfully backed away.

Maya reached out her hand, but Sai blocked her before looking to Gallus.

"Gallus?" she called, and he came forward, along with Endo.

They both examined the wound, while Sai explained what was done, what needed to be done *better*, then asked Gallus to finish her Healing. He did so, and when he pulled back to reveal a completely Healed Sai, Endo clapped him on the shoulder and hugged him proudly.

"Well..." Ronnie paused, bemused by this startling event. "*That's* certainly something you don't see every day."

"Nurture..." Endo said in his deep voice.

"...over Nature," Gallus finished in a similar tone.

Ronnie shook his head before standing up, smiling. He went over to both boys, looked up the extra two feet to meet their eyes, and hugged them both.

"Well *done*, boys, well done *indeed!* I am very proud of *both* of you, my new family!" he said, which brought beaming smiles to their faces.

"Do you want..." Endo began.

"...to play again?" Gallus finished.

"Oh no. You guys stop that or you'll fit right in with the *Elder's* staff," he teased them, which confused them just a little so he added, "Besides, we've got to clean up this mess now," he said, and waved his hand at the floor.

As they went to ask the Healer where the cleaning supplies were kept, Ronnie bent down and helped Sai to her feet.

Then he started going over his own arms and legs with a fingertip of light; sealing the little cuts and scrapes that had been inflicted on him over the last several minutes. He'd been studiously ignoring Maya,

who'd remained silent while Sai had instructed her boys – her *stepbrothers* – in a Healing technique.

"Good morning, Mistress Maya. What brings you to the gym so early in the morning?" he finally asked politely while otherwise ignoring her.

"I... I was with Meela and Laisee, and I felt ... I felt a terrible pain," she said, while looking at Ronnie, and then at her Mother. Her Mother was the one with the wound that matched the pain she'd felt, and her heart sank.

"Well, all better now," he muttered. "I suppose it would be imprudent to mention Endo's and Gallus' *extra* talents to Lady Lili at this point in time?" he suggested prudently.

"Ha! *She* probably found out before *I* did," Sai muttered. "I think it was my little demon – *Déjà* – who taught them."

"Not a bad talent for a warrior to have. As Yandi once told me, 'Go and glue your *own* damn self together.' I think those were her words."

He turned and called out for a couple of towels, and when Endo tossed them to him, he went right down to his knees and started wiping the mat. Then he paused and looked up at Sai – who rolled her eyes in disgust, then took the other towel and started helping as well. They'd made quite a mess, and by the time they were done, Maya had already left.

"Well... *That* was quite rude of her, leaving without saying goodbye," he commented, only to receive a nasty look from Sai. "Well, you *are* her mother. She should have *told* you she was leaving. It's only polite," he said, while helping her back to her feet.

"Ronnie ... about Maya. She—"

"Made perfectly clear how she *really* felt about me in front of her family *and* Queen," he finished quickly. "The Elder *severed* our bond the other day, and *I* severed it later as well. Maya now has what she wishes ... *and she is no longer my concern, Lady Tal!*" he said brusquely, before turning and walking away.

As the boys came over with looks of concern, Sai folded her arms, but let one hand reach up to cover her mouth as he walked out the door.

"Mother, is everything all right?" Endo asked, and she turned and reached out to hug them tightly to her.

"I'm not sure anymore, boys. I'm just not sure," she admitted wearily.

ES Shining Light, Noon –3 (Day 110) – A Unexpected Invitation

Radatel was waiting quietly just inside the inner lock of the *Shining Light*, but his mind was still several minutes away while contemplating issues on Kantor. He needed to leave for home soon so he could deal with this *latest* crisis. It didn't help any when Lili had just this morning shared with him his instructions from the Elder. He'd immediately objected – but was then reminded of just where *he* stood within the power structure. It'd been bad enough to learn he'd been denied some rather important information from home, but now being told to involve *Rondal*...

His thoughts were interrupted when the airlock cycled to reveal his familiar face smiling at him. He gestured inwards, and Ronnie stepped inside the ship to join him.

"Thank you for coming, Rondal. We have important matters to discuss."

"I trust my accountings are all up to date?" Ronnie asked.

He got a rueful smile from his stepfather, followed by a gesture to join him for a walk down a corridor...

He'd been asked to meet with Lord Caldorous on the Elder's ship for an "important meeting and family discussion." He'd presumed it had something to do with Maya again, but Radatel seemed distracted. Instead of questions about Maya, he talked about their past while they slowly wandered through the Elder's ship...

"You could have told me, you know," Radatel said.

"Would you have believed me?"

His question seemed to require a little extra thought, as evidenced by his stepfather's delay. Finally...

"I like to think that I *would* have, but now we'll never know. Still ... thank you for all the *future* years of remorse for not spending more time with all three of you."

"All part of the service," Ronnie muttered.

Radatel acknowledged that with a shallow grunt as they continued along on their somewhat aimless path.

His next question was preceded by a quiet, "Uh-huh," followed by, "Speaking of which, what are your plans now that you and ... uhh, what's her name?"

"Maya ... Maya Kao Lai Tal se Cletus," Ronnie said brusquely.

“Yes … Maya. Now that Maya is out of the picture, what do you plan to *do* with your life?” he asked, but had to wait several steps for his answer.

“Oh … I’ve a few ideas I’m thinking about.”

“Shouldn’t we get one-hundred kilometers away, first?”

Ronnie stopped and just stared at him.

“Lili,” he said in explanation. “Believe me, Rondal, you have *no* idea what it’s like living with the Elder’s master spy. I wish the Gods I’d never heard of some of the things she’s been involved with,” he muttered with a sigh.

“Is it really *that* bad, Father?” Ronnie asked in sympathy, but his stepfather just shuddered.

“Sometimes I think *none* of my Wives understand me.”

CPS Microcosmus, In the Elder’s Compartment

“Have you told him yet, Lili?” Ai asked her.

“Tell Rondal *anything*? We’ve never managed to do that since he came back from here the *first* time. Perhaps if Kita had put pressure on the Emperor to *acknowledge* his efforts on the Commonwealth’s behalf—”

“*Lili!* I need to *know!*”

Lili merely sighed and looked away while letting the Elder’s anger wash over her without effect. This whole diversion from where she *thought* things should be heading was distracting enough – and now she had to deal with a new *Elder, too*.

“My Lord Husband takes him to see his ‘Grandfather’ even now,” she said wearily. “It all depends on if he can convince Rondal it is the right thing to do. If Rondal becomes his First Sword, then nothing short of *death* will stop him from accomplishing this mission.”

“How can you be so sure?”

Lili turned and stared intently into her eyes.

“Because he is Rondal Caldar sai *Caldarous* – and he will do *anything* he possibly can to protect family and the Commonwealth.”

The Elder paused in thought, but then considered a ridiculous scenario.

"Then perhaps I should take up residence at the Royal *Homestead*," she suggested jokingly, but caught the dark look in Lili's eyes. "You find *disfavor* with that suggestion, Lili?"

Lili's lips thinned, but she looked at her while considering her *own* position. "May I speak frankly, my Elder?" she finally asked, and Ai nodded slowly.

"Clan Tal has ruled Cletus for several thousand years and guided the Commonwealth towards the success and prosperity which it has achieved ... until four or five hundred years ago," she said tactfully. "In recent years, it would appear that Clan Tal is *losing* its fine edge."

The Elder wasn't really surprised at this summation.

"We appreciate and recognize your accurate observation of the *current* situation, my Lady Song," she said delicately. "We also appreciate your long and faithful service to the Elder and her staff. I have been in consultation with my Senior staff, and you have been a part of much of it. In an effort to quickly grasp the *entire* situation and search for an adequate solution to our current problems, I have already violated many of the guidelines that Kita had laid out for me."

She paused and stepped to the table, where her crystal and a bottle waited for her. She almost reached out to it, but turned back to Lili instead.

"Rondal came to us for discussions the other night. Then he stayed afterwards to share contentment with me. He also shared your *Gift*. Perhaps such a skill could be taught to my Staff as well?"

Lili merely looked at her coolly, so the Elder continued.

"After Rondal had shared your *Gift*, I was suddenly aware of a *clear* path before us," she said quietly, but Lili suppressed a snort.

"Rondal has had that affect on *many* women, my Elder," she muttered dryly, which caused Ai to smile.

"No doubt... But I was in turn gifted with a *clear* Vision this time – one *without* his Maya. This Vision shows Rondal accomplishing a great many things that lead to the *continuance* of the Commonwealth ... but at a *price*."

Lili looked at her expectantly, but Ai was not forthcoming.

"And what price might that *be*, my Elder," she finally asked.

"That is what you will have to determine, my master spy. I defer to *your* judgment in this. You know Rondal best, and you have the Commonwealth in your heart as well."

“And if I *refuse*? ”

Ai paused for only a moment.

“That is *always* your option. I cherish your actions on behalf of the Commonwealth, Lili. If you refuse me or not, you are *still* my master spy. If you wish to *leave* our service, that is entirely up to you, and will not affect your standing in the Royal Family. Although, naturally the First Lord would be adding yet another wife to the family tree of our *own* choosing.”

Lili’s eyes flashed dangerously.

“And nothing at *all* like Meela,” she quickly added.

Lili smiled grimly, but kept her tongue, while Ai stared at her for a moment more. Then Ai glanced at the compartment timer before asking about another matter.

“Do you have plans for Meela as yet, or is she still ... confused?” the Elder asked, before turning to the task of pouring herself a drink while Lili shared her concerns.

“I have several thoughts ... but they all depend on Meela recovering well enough to be of service. At worst, she’ll spend the rest of her life as an injured shell of her former self and be confined within the Royal Homestead ... perhaps after having suffered a tragic *vacuum* accident while visiting this station to recover the bodies of her sons.”

“A reasonable explanation.”

Lili thought about it a few seconds more while considering the overall situation once again, but couldn’t make a decision in a vacuum.

“What would you have me do, my Elder?”

ES Shining Light, Still Taking a Walk

They’d been left alone to wander the corridors of the Elder’s ship at will, which they’d been doing for several minutes now, but Ronnie was getting tired of it.

“So, Father ... what brings us all the way out here to the Elder’s ship?” he finally asked him. “What is so secret a discussion that it couldn’t be held on *Microcosmus*? ”

Instead of answering him, Radatel asked a question that had always puzzled him.

“Why ... ‘*Microcosmus*’? Why not something more suitable, like ... like ‘*Avenging Sword*’ or something like that? I looked it up once. Some

sort of aquatic plant or worm... from *Earth*, I believe. I understand your commissioning privilege allowed you to choose a name, but ... ‘*Microcosmus*’?”

“You didn’t look back far enough. It was another name for an ancient sea monster on Earth called the kraken. Legend says it attacked ships and dragged them and their crews to the bottom of the sea where they were devoured at leisure,” he explained.

“Then ... the *Kraken’s Child*...?”

“A little joke by Felis and Talis,” he muttered. “I’d explained to them what it meant, and they came up with the simulation as a ‘gift’ in honor of my promotion above them. But that’s not why you called me over here.”

Radatel pursed his lips as they approached the next corner. They were almost there.

“Oh ... it involves the Emperor,” he said vaguely, as they turned down another corridor. “We go to see him now.”

“Now? The Emperor is *here*? ”

Ronnie was shocked. He hadn’t seen his Grandfather since he’d been cashiered, and now struggled to regain his composure.

“And how *is* my illustrious Grandfather these days,” he asked casually, just as Radatel paused outside a door emblazoned with the Imperial crest on it.

“Oh, he’s been much – *quieter* lately,” Radatel muttered, then opened the door to a small antechamber – the same one he’d been brought to last evening.

They walked through it and entered a traveling throne room. It was decorated as a miniature version of the throne room back on home world – tiny, to be sure, but opulent, just the same.

The drapery was bright scarlet, with the crest of the House of Calderous emblazoned on each panel in threads of gold. His Grandfather’s portrait was prominently displayed in an alcove off to the side of the raised platform holding the throne.

Several alcoves lined the walls of the room, and held various pictures of the Emperor in his younger days while still in uniform; a combat soldier, a pilot, a battle commander. Also were hung a few family portraits and an oil painting done *long* ago of his Grandfather standing waist-high to an incredibly *older* looking version of himself – the Great-Great-Great-Grandson of the Emperor who was the principal architect of the Commonwealth.

In addition to all this, flowers decorated all the remaining shelf space, so the room was a blaze of color, and a cornucopia of sweet smells. Ronnie looked around and saw no one.

“Grandfather is *here?*” he asked, and turned around again.

Radatel stepped over to stand by the Emperor’s portrait, raised his hand slightly towards a decorative urn flanked by vases of fresh flowers, and Ronnie froze in shock.

He blinked hard a few times before taking a shallow breath.

“I remember him as being … much … *taller…*”

CPS Microcosmus, In the Elder’s Compartment

Lili opened her eyes and shook her head before emitting a snort of amusement.

“He knows?” the Elder asked.

“He is now aware of the Emperor’s passing, my Elder.”

The Elder paused and thought about her Vision from the other evening.

“It will not be pleasant, Lili. It may become very frightening. If he loses his way, he may have to be removed from the puzzle – permanently,” she said quietly.

Lili considered that possibility … and not for the first time…

Kita had let their Ronnie live – even though he’d violated so many of the laws, and all the while knowing that *she* most likely would be the one to sanction him in the end. And now *this…*

At least she had one more tool to do the job, and this tool might even *relish* the task … if not so enthusiastically now…

“Then we must see which way the pieces fit, my Elder, and hope the puzzle produces a pleasant picture of the future,” she said neutrally.

ES Shining Light, The Traveling Throne Room

“Grandfather – *Father* – always said the Elder was a blight on his ability to rule effectively,” Ronnie said before sparing a glance at his father’s portrait, but avoiding the simple urn sitting beneath it.

“Yes, but that’s the reason the Commonwealth boasts twelve clusters compared to the Drecks’ *eight*. Otherwise, we’d still be fighting amongst ourselves. We should be grateful for that, no matter *how* it ties the hands of the Crown.”

Ronnie accepted that observation as fact. The news that he was – in fact – seeded by a Kantite was not a complete surprise to him...

He'd once thought that perhaps Radatel had been the reluctant sperm donor, but his history of academic and administrative skill sets would seem to preclude that. It was something he'd wondered about over the years while his skills and perceptions had continued to develop; but he'd *never* suspected that he was the son of the Emperor himself. Looking back now, he saw the signs in the inordinate amount of attention old Rakel Timorous had paid to him growing up ... along with the extremely disappointed and hurt look in his eyes when he'd pronounced his sentence at his court-martial...

"All those years lost," he muttered, while shaking his head slowly before focusing on the present. "So, what does this mean ... *Rad?*" he asked his big brother with a smile.

"Well ... *Ron* ... it means you are now at a *crossroads* in your life," his older brother suggested. "If what Lili tells me is correct, you intend to go out and produce some *mischief* against the Drecks?"

Ronnie shrugged noncommittally before shaking his head a tiny bit.

"I thought I'd poke around a little and develop a few ideas along those lines."

"*Ron* ... *Rondal* ... it would appear that the Emperor is in need of a First Sword of his *own*. Someone who is extremely capable and very well versed in independent operations. His actions *would*, of course, be monitored by the office of the Elder – no getting around *that* – but still, if there were someone like... Well, like *you*, for instance," he suggested lightly, adding in a shrug of his shoulders to go with his slightly raised hand.

"Are you calling me back into service under that nasty little clause in my original enlistment contract?"

Ronnie couldn't swear to it, but it looked like Radatel had actually hunched his head down at the mere *mention* of it.

"Ahhh ... *no*. That brings up all *sorts* of oversight that is probably best left hidden in the shadows. We were thinking along the lines of ... of an *independent* contractor who would simply be given a goal to pursue and the leeway with which to do so – avoiding any catastrophic outbreaks of *war*, mind you."

Ronnie thought about it for a few minutes more, before asking, "Who assigns my goals?"

"Oh ... I'm sure *Lili* would have some interesting avenues to pursue, but most likely – given your *natural* curiosity – you'll probably find enough things to look into on your own," he suggested casually.

Ronnie thought about it some more while turning it over and over in his mind...

His family was now under the *personal* protection of the First Lord – no, the *Emperor pro tem*. And *Maya*... Maya had discarded him. There was really nothing binding him any longer except for some unfinished business with the Dreck's – should he live long enough to make a difference. And Lon, Donnel, and Granger had come up with some interesting ideas of their own...

"Very well, my Lord Emperor! I accept your contract! Where do I sign?" he asked cheerfully.

"By the *Gods, no!*" Radatel said in horror, before his voice dropped to a whisper. "Never leave a paper-trail."

"Very well, then, my Lord," he continued in a normal voice, "I'll leave immediately after the remembrance. Don't be surprised if you do not hear from me for a while, but I'm sure the Elder will pass word down through Lady Lili upon occasion. Well ... there are things I must be doing. By your leave, my Lord," he said, then bowed.

Radatel reached over and raised him back up before bringing him into a hug.

"Gods grant you speed and wisdom, little brother. I'll watch over your family for you," he promised, but then immediately reconsidered. "At least, the *Wives* will," he corrected himself, and that got them both chuckling.

Then they both turned and rendered honor their father before leaving the mini-throne room to return to the platform.

Noon –2 (Day 110) – A Quick Trim

"Laisee, how is your mother this morning?" Ronnie asked after entering the compartment.

"She still sleeps, Ronnie. Lili came by, and Maya ... Maya ran out earlier and has not returned."

"Yes. She showed up in the gym earlier." He glanced at the compartment timer for a moment.

"You'd better run along and get something from the commons to eat. It may become busy later, and you'd better eat now should they

forget about you in here. I'll stay with Meela, but you must hurry back, for there are things I must be doing."

"Yes, Ronnie," she said quietly, then quickly dressed and left the room.

He checked Meela carefully and saw that she was well cared for – despite him having killed her so cruelly. He was sorry about that. He'd stayed with her throughout the entire ordeal and suffered silently with her, if only to honor her sacrifice.

He extended through her and saw her Healing was continuing, then flushed more energy into her to help it along. When he was done, he used the facilities; but looking critically at himself in the mirror afterwards left him feeling somewhat foolish at his own presumptuousness.

Here he was, an old man – gray-haired and ponytailed – and what in the world did he expect to accomplish in the short years still allotted him? He looked around and finally found his old set of hair trimmers, then spent the next several minutes cutting it down to combat-length.

Laisee came back with a bowl of food, but the sleeping room was empty of Ronnie. She was about to call out for him when she heard sounds coming from the facilities. She found him standing in front of a mirror and swiveling his head back and forth while looking at the remains of his ponytail swishing behind him before finally noticing her gawking at him from the doorway.

"Laisee, do you remember the style of hair Captain Tomar is blessed with? Please take these and remove this silly thing," he said, before grabbing his ponytail and handing her the trimmers.

"But ... Ronnie – why would you–"

"JUST ... just please remove it, Laisee," he said wearily. "It no longer suits me."

She slowly approached and took the trimmers before carefully making his hair shorter and shorter. She finally grabbed a handful of ponytail and cut it off close to his head, then blanched a bit before beginning to even out the back of his hairline. She finished by going over the sides and around his ears to make it all reasonably the same length.

He looked at the results in the mirror and nodded his head in acceptance.

“Another skill-set for the accomplished Healer. Sometimes a simple change in aspect can help mold a change in attitude. It looks very good, Laisee. Thank you.”

He turned and looked back at Meela, before extending through her once again. He felt her memories beginning, to coalesce, and suspected she would be speaking again in perhaps another day or two.

Pulling back out, he looked down at the beauty that she still was. He told himself that he shouldn’t feel angry, as that was *not* the Healer’s way, but *DAMMIT!* Because of *HER* actions, so many had lost their lives, even his son Walter. He wondered if she would be more useful as Meela, or if he should have pressed Lili to have her resume a new life as *Sharla Meili*.

Still thinking about it, he left the compartment – leaving Laisee standing there with trimmers in one hand and the hank of his ponytail lying on the facilities counter.

Noon –0.5 (Day 110) – Kita’s Remembrance

The formal remembrance was set to take place in the Recreation Center at the Noon hour...

Larl had begun setting things up at Noon minus one. It was straightforward, as he only needed to set up a single platform in the center of the room, and they would recall him after they were done.

The Elder’s guards then carried Kita’s body in and gently placed it on the platform before they’d departed as well. After that, the Healers and Seniors had slowly streamed into the room by ones and twos over the course of the remaining hour...

“Rondal, this is very important for the remembrance today,” Lili told him privately. “It will be much like Yandi’s, except that you will add a name to your lineage.” Lili glanced nervously over at Kita’s body and closed her eyes in silent prayer that they were doing the right thing.

“Very well, Lili. What name will it be *this* time?”

“*Rondal!* This is *very* serious and you *will obey!* Do you understand?”

“I ... yes, my Healer. I will obey. What name will be added?” he asked politely.

“I will tell you when the time comes. The Elder will tell *me*, and then I will tell *you*. And you will repeat it *perfectly*.”

"Yes, Lili," he said in resignation, before she left him to confer with the Elder once again.

He was beginning to feel annoyed by the whole situation. He'd already paid his respects to Kita the day after her death. Even the two measures of ambrosia he'd downed after leaving Laisee and Meela wasn't raising his spirits any, but at least it suppressed the hunger pangs he'd been feeling.

He'd be leaving in another hour, and the jump he anticipated – without the benefit of Maya's milk this time – had made the decision for him to forgo breakfast and dinner.

In Ronnie's Old Compartment

Maya was lying on the bed with her eyes still puffy and red from crying earlier.

She'd not been invited to the remembrance. She was not even sure if the Elder had forgotten her, or if her Mother was supposed to bring her, or if it was even *deliberate*. In any *case*, unless she was called, she was stuck here with Laisee and Meela...

After this morning in the gym, she'd first been upset that she'd never felt the cuts and scrapes from Ronnie. Then she'd been surprised to discover that it had been her *Mother's* wound that she'd felt so strongly. That meant ... what? She was bonded to her *Mother* now instead of Ronnie?

Of course she was ... she'd felt and heard her when she went ice mining with Ronnie, but now ... now she didn't know *what* to think. And he was *polite* to her. How *rude* was that! Acting merely *polite* – and after all they'd *been* through together! He'd *ignored* her, so she'd just *left*.

She'd searched for Lili, too, but she was not in her compartment, and could not be found. She was probably doing something important for the Elder, but she'd hoped to petition her for an audience *before* the remembrance instead of afterwards.

When she'd finally come back to their compartment, she'd found Laisee sitting quietly and holding a lock of gray strands, but suddenly realized it was Ronnie's *ponytail*. Looking at it, and then the shrug from Laisee, she'd taken the ponytail and held it up to her face. She could smell Ronnie's scent on it, and her tears began to fall.

He really *was* leaving them – leaving *her* – for *good* this time, and there was nothing she could do to *stop it!* She'd lain down and begun to cry, with whimpering, and finally wails of loss. Laisee had stayed with

her and hugged her while letting her tears fall on the both of them until she began to run down...

The loud knock at the door made them both nearly jump out of their skins, and Maya got up and rushed to answer it.

“Your pardon, Mistress Tal,” the guard said.

She could see little Kita standing behind him and wasn’t surprised when Kita pushed the guard out of the way.

“Your mother was concerned when you hadn’t yet joined her for the remembrance. She awaits you there,” Kita quickly said. “Mistress Laisee? You are to attend as well while I stay here with your client.”

“Oh yes! *Thank you!*” Maya said gratefully and waited just long enough for Laisee to join her before leaving.

In the Recreation Center

“Ai, is this the right thing that we do?” Lili asked her again.

“The girl has *still* not come to you, and this is the only positive thing I can see. I believe we must take the risk. Right now, it is the *only* bright spot we have.”

“I believe you, Ai, but I would that there were some other way,” Lili murmured.

“If he is as strong as you believe, then he will survive it ... perhaps get us *past* the point of danger. He has a chance. He is the first since the *beginning*,” Ai said, but glanced around them to see who was uncomfortably close.

“The *first?*” Lili pressed, and Ai turned and looked at her in surprise.

“The first *male* Senior since the beginning of the *Commonwealth!*” she said with quiet urgency. “If he’s bred true, then perhaps we’ll *all* be saved.

Lili was confused by Ai’s interpretation of her Visions. Kita had alluded to this before her death, but when had there *ever* been a male Senior? She wasn’t about to let on, however, and asked, “But what if he does not? What if he fails?”

Ai’s face turned blank at this suggestion, and her voice became somber.

"Then nothing has really *changed*, has it? The *girl* no longer wants him, and his edge needs to be as sharp as possible. You've told him what he must do?"

"Yes, Ai. He will obey."

"See that he does. I have every confidence."

Lili bowed, before turning away to walk back over to Ronnie.

"The Elder sends her greetings and expresses every confidence in your success," she blatantly lied.

"Yes, Lili, and I serviced the Elder last night while standing on my head."

"It's amazing what a little too much ambrosia can do to a man."

"*Remarkable* how she twisted her body around like that ... for an *older* woman."

She leaned in and kissed him, but nipped the tip of his tongue when he returned the favor. She pulled away, smiling, while he frowned at her in frustration.

"Your little Kita was quite *demanding*. I wonder that you get any work out of her at *all*," he said.

"I offer her great *rewards*, my darling boy," she said, then looped her arm through his while looking up at him. "You are one of my *best rewards*."

"Ahhh... Lili, never change," he murmured. "When I come back, I want to spend some quality time with you, if only to refresh my training," he added, and patted her arm as they wandered about the room.

As the hour drew nearer, they began to circle the body of Mistress Kita, which was lying in repose in the center of the room.

As Sai looked around worriedly, Maya finally made a rushed entrance. She was headed directly to Lili when her mother snagged her by the arm.

"Where *were* you, Maya!" she scolded her quietly. "We're nearly ready to *begin*."

Maya tried to rush off, but Sai held her firmly.

"Do you know what to do?"

"I – I say my name after the person on my left says their name and lineage. Do I say anything else?"

“Oh Maya! *No!* No ... you do not yet know.” Her mother quietly sighed at her lack of training. “Maya ... you do not say *anything* more than your own name. I will say your Grandmother’s name, as she is next of my antecedents. Only when *I* am gone, *then* you will say my name, and then *hers’* ... but not now. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Mother. Where do we stand?”

Sai shuffled her into place on her right side. To her surprise, she was standing next to Diane, who quickly reached out and squeezed her hand while looking very nervous. She could see Laisee being pulled into place over by Amy and Shay, who were further around the circle. When all were finally settled, the Elder began the remembrance.

“We gather to honor the memory of our departed sister, Elder Kita, and pray for her deliverance to the shelter of a home, the warmth of a hearth, nourishment to sustain her spirit, and time for Healing,” Ai said quietly. “Please ... all join hands as we give honor to our fallen sister, and to those who have gone before us.”

Distracted by her mother up until then, Maya finally noticed that Ronnie was standing to the left of the Elder at the head of the bier, and Lili was standing on his left. When everyone was ready, the Elder continued with the remembrance.

“Kita Qi Shu Tal se Cletus ... Regnant,” she continued, and a soft, white glow surrounded Kita’s body.

“Jie Kita Qi Tal se Cletus ... Regnant,” she added, and the glow faltered for a moment before becoming brighter.

“Ruolan Jie Kita Tal se Cletus ... Regnant,” she finished, and the glow illuminated everyone by bathing each person’s face in whiteness.

She then began reciting her own name and her immediate two antecedents, followed by Fan, Xiu, Molara, and Trenka. As each Senior finished, the glow about them became brighter and whiter.

After Trenka came Sai, proudly stating her full name and that of her mother, Yandi. Then Sai squeezed Maya’s hand lightly, and Maya spoke her full name as well.

She’d been surprised to see that her mother’s glow was not as pure a white as the other Seniors, but it was just as bright, if not brighter. Glancing down at herself, she was disappointed that she appeared only a sun-bright yellow – just a little bit brighter than Diane, who stood upon her right. Then followed Amy and Shay; each providing, not a bright glow, but a warm, golden glow, with Laisee’s glow a slightly dimmer, but still golden glow.

The rest of the Wives recited in turn on her right, from Spring Blossom and Yin-Yin, to Mei-Mei and then Lili; each glowing brighter and purer than she remembered from Yandi's remembrance just two short weeks ago.

She was not surprised this time to hear Ronnie recite his full name correctly.

"Rondal TSILSQOSÉ BIYIGÉ Caldar sai Caldarous se Earth ne Kantor," he said quietly, and she noted his glow was very much brighter and purer than before.

Maya thought they were done, but then Lili tilted her head and whispered something to him. She could see him stare at her while Lili slowly nodded to him. She watched when he gave a silent sigh of resignation before speaking another name.

"Rakel Timorous Caldarous se Kantor ... Rex."

The room was struck *silent*... then everyone looked intently at Ronnie while his glow first intensified, but then became paler before adding streaks of bright red that stippled through it like tiny red raindrops curling around a vortex.

The Elder was the first to break touch with him before Lili let go as well. Once the circle was broken, the room darkened – except for the swirling maelstrom that still spooled around Ronnie. It slowly started to die down until it flickered and went dark ... like a candle flame suddenly blown out by the wind.

He stood there in the now dim room while looking down at his hands and flexing his fingers and wrists. Then Maya saw him smile, but it was *nothing* like she'd ever seen before. It was colder and more calculating ... and totally *absent* the warmth of the man she'd loved.

The Elder and the other Seniors were grouping separately – mostly *away* from Ronnie – and he eventually stood alone. When he looked up, his eyes locked with Maya's, and he proceeded around the bier to approach her. When he stopped, she felt he was uncomfortably close while he gazed at her calculatingly.

"Mistress Tal. I have instructed Mister Riker as to the distribution of your funds," he said neutrally. "My family will be residing on Kantor while Lili determines their best role within the Commonwealth. I would recommend that you take this opportunity to study the books for your Senior evaluation in the comfort and shelter of our home. It would also be of benefit to them if you were available to continue to train and guide them while they become acquainted with our society. If you choose to do so, an additional stipend over and above your current savings will apply."

His side of the conversation at an end, he promptly turned and walked away to speak with Lili.

Maya was stunned. This was *not* the Ronnie she knew. This was *nothing* like the Ronnie she knew. She watched when he said a few words to Lili, then left the room before Lili quickly came over and hugged her.

“How *nice* for you, Maya! Rondal has arranged for you to join us on Kantor while you study for Senior. That will be so much *better* for you. You will have Mei-Mei and Yin-Yin to help you, and I will be available, as well. Best of all, you will have your *friends* around you, too! We’ll have a *lovely* time!” she said with a smile, but then looked concerned at Maya’s expression.

“Maya? What is wrong, child? Don’t you *want* to stay with your friends any longer?”

“I … he … he is not Ronnie … he is not my Ronnie any longer. What did you do to him, Lady Lili?” she asked, but Lili merely looked at her quizzically.

“Maya, I didn’t *do* anything to him. He’s just back to his old self.”

“I … do not understand. He is different. He is colder. He is … broken,” she said in a whisper.

“Nonsense, Maya. Rondal has finally come home at last. He has found *purpose* once again, and he has found his *father*. Isn’t it *wonderful*? Now that he has accepted his heritage, we will have a *much* better chance of surviving, won’t we? I just hope he has the strength to do this without you. We were all hoping you would change your mind, but you never came to me. We had no other choice if the Commonwealth is to survive. Rondal had to *become*. He had to accept his father’s legacy and go out to do – whatever Rondal does *best*.”

While she was speaking to Maya, Sai had come up behind her and was *furious*.

“LILI! Is *this* what you meant to happen? That man has become a *monster!* They’ll *be* no controlling him now!”

“Sai, there was no controlling him *before*,” Lili countered quietly. “At least he won’t be distracted by your daughter’s confused state of mind.”

“Mind your *tongue*, Lili, lest I *cut it out!*”

“*Threats* now, Sai? After *your* Elder refused to step down when she weakened? After *your* daughter destroyed the heart of House

Caldarous? Perhaps it is time for Clan *Tal* to step down for Clan *Song's* *ascendancy!*"

The entire room had gone silent at this frightful argument, and all eyes were on Lili and Sai while the Elder approached them quietly.

"My Ladies, I thank you for sharing your remembrance with Kita this day," Ai said soothingly, before glancing around and lowering her voice slightly.

"I welcome *all* of you to my quarters to discuss the disposition of Sai's prisoners and Meela ... and her love-struck Captain. Maya, perhaps you would care to join us? I would ask questions about the new First Sword of the Emperor so that I may gauge his performance. Nothing critical mind you, just your feelings about his nature *before* ... and now that he's accepted his father's legacy."

"His father? Who..."

"Sai, *really?* I am sorry, dear, but your daughter really *is* so slow. Perhaps she needs *more* Healing?" the Elder suggested gently while looking at Maya critically.

"Maya, were you not *listening?*" her mother said tightly. "*Lord Rondal is the son of Rakel Timorous – the EMPEROR, child!*"

"My ... *my* Ronnie?" she asked meekly.

"No, Maya," Lili said coldly. "Not *your* Ronnie any longer. *You* threw him away! I asked you, child! I told you to come to me, but–"

"Lili," the Elder interrupted calmly. "Perhaps we might take this discussion *elsewhere* and share it over a bottle or two of ambrosia? The Emperor's First Sword was kind enough to send a case of it to our quarters before his leaving."

"Leaving? He's *leaving?*" Sai sputtered.

"Gone," Lili muttered, before the Elder looped an arm through Maya's and led all three of them out towards her compartment.

She paused only long enough to give orders that Kita's body be recovered to the *Shining Star* with the Elder's staff as an honor guard.

Noon +1 (Day 110) – Sharla is Forgiven

Laisee had hurried back to her Mother's side after watching the spectacle that had taken place during the remembrance.

She'd never known what to expect, but from the reactions of every other Healer and Senior in there, what had happened to Ronnie was definitely *not* expected at all. She'd relieved Lili's Kita only minutes ago

and now paced the outer room; letting her Mother sleep in the dim inner chamber while she pondered what it all meant.

Her musings were interrupted a few minutes later when Lord Rondal opened the door. He strode past her to enter the inner chamber, where he stopped to stand by Meela's side in the dim light of the room.

'Meela ... Meela, can you hear me?'

Meela stirred weakly but remained silent. He flooded her with a little more energy and she groaned painfully.

'Meela ... Meela, can you hear me now?'

"Y – yes, my l-lord," she murmured weakly.

'Meela ... your life has been spared'

"... my lord ... why – why did you ... not kill me?" she asked in a tortured whisper.

'You have been found useful to the Commonwealth, Meela!'

She lay there in a semi-stupor, but painfully opened her eyes to look up at... this stranger with Rondal's face.

"... how ... how may I serve, my Lord?" she asked weakly.

'Meela has died ... but we have found Sharla Meili'

"Sharla? My mother ... how ... she died..."

'You are Sharla Meili Peizhi, and serve the First Lord as a faithful wife'

"I – I don't ... understand..." she said, each word and thought being a struggle.

'You are Sharla Meili Peizhi and you are the First Lord's Second Wife'

"I – I am ... Second Wife..." she murmured.

'Yes. You are Sharla Meili Peizhi!'

"I – I am ... Sharla ... Peizhi..." she said in a whisper.

Laisee was not hearing Rondal's silent words to Meela, but hearing her mother's responses and getting terribly confused.

"Ronnie, what–"

He snapped an open palm in her direction, and it was enough to silence her questions.

'Sharla ... you must pay for your daughter's sins! The mother of Meela must pay!'

"I must ... pay..." she whimpered.

'Yes, Sharla. You must pay – but you will live and become a faithful wife and Healer!'

"Faithful ... Healer ... yes..." she said weakly.

Rondal placed both hands over her chest, pressed down gently, and started to concentrate.

Laisee was frightened by the swirling masses of gray laced with red streaks that flowed over Ronnie and Meela.

In the Corridor

The Elder stumbled when they approached the door to her compartment, and Maya barely caught her. Both Sai and Lili grimaced when they felt the horrible disruption in the Healing energy they all drew upon for their work.

When the door opened, the Elder staggered in with the help of her guard before collapsing to the floor while screeching and crying. Maya looked on in confusion at the expressions of silent pain on the faces of both Sai and Lili.

In Ronnie's Old Compartment

The swirling masses dissipated and left Rondal and Meela visible once again.

'Sharla Meili Peizhi ... Lord Rondal Caldar sai Caldorous forgives you for your daughter's sins!'

"My ... my daughter's ... sins ... forgiven," she murmured, sounding much weaker than before. "Thank you, my – my lord ... thank you..."

Laisee stood aside while Rondal turned and left without a further word. She only turned back to her Mother when the door closed behind him.

"M-Mother? Mother ... a-are you all r-right?" she asked in a quivering voice.

"Laisee?" Sharla said in a pained whisper.

"It's me, Mother ... it's Laisee," she said in a panic, and went to turn up the lights. When she turned around, the shock of seeing the middle-aged woman lying where her mother had been just moments before froze her into silence.

In the Elder's Compartment

The Elder and her Senior companions felt a measure of relief – something that bypassed Maya entirely. Lili helped the Elder to a chair before searching for something to drink.

Sai rotated her head slowly while standing aside.

“Lili – what have you *done?*” she demanded while painful spears shot through her brain.

“Sai … this is of *my* doing,” Ai said weakly. “Lili only follows my orders … for better or worse, now.”

“*For better or worse?* How much *more* worse can it *get*, Ai?”

“For better or worse *now*, Sai, we will rely upon Lord Caldar to seek a path out of darkness for the Commonwealth,” Ai said before her eyes winced in pain again.

Lili’s digging finally produced a bottle of ambrosia, and she poured all three of them a full measure of it while Maya stood by in helpless confusion. Sitting with her eyes closed, the Elder reached out and found the target of Rondal’s efforts.

“She still lives, Lili,” she mumbled while concentrating on the living husk he’d left behind.

“Who–” Lili scrunched her eyes in pain, but continued after taking a large drink. “Who did he take?”

“Meela … he has taken Meela,” Ai said weakly, and Maya turned to leave, but Lili caught her hand before closing her eyes.

“Meela is gone … he’s left behind … Sharla,” she said, then began working through her options while the ambrosia worked through her system. “We can *still* work with this, Ai.”

Maya looked between the three of them in total confusion.

“I do not understand. What has just *happened?*”

The Elder looked at her with a baleful eye while Lili opened hers and addressed her.

“Lord Rondal has taken the youth of Meela and left us with the remains of Sharla.”

“H-How could he *do* that? That is not the *way!* He – he would *not...*”

“And *yet he has!*” her mother said angrily. “Your Ronnie has trespassed the *forbidden way – and taken a LIFE with his gifts!*”

"No," Lili said calmly, while wincing only slightly now. "Meela is gone, and Sharla ... Sharla now lives again and will become a member of the household – as was intended all along."

"HE HAS TAKEN A LIFE WITH HIS GIFTS, LILI! FOR THIS HE MUST DIE!"

"He has taken *some* life with his gifts, Sai," the Elder said wincingly. "And once again, he has *spared* the life of the traitor. Be grateful for that."

"*Grateful?*" she asked in astonishment. "And how grateful should we be when he finally turns all the way and takes a *WHOLE* life with his 'Gifts', Ai?"

"Well then, it appears you have a *new* job, doesn't it?" Lili muttered, while looking first at Sai and then the Elder. Ai steeled herself before addressing Maya's angry mother calmly.

"Sai – we have unleashed our tool upon the unsuspecting Drecks. We will need someone to monitor his activities closely. No actions to be *taken*, of course, without our *express permission*."

"A dream come *true*, Sai," Lili said reasonably. "You've always wanted to kill Lord Calder, and now ... now you just might get your chance."

"*NO! Wait! What are you saying?*" a panicky Maya asked her, while looking from her mother, to Lili, to the Elder and back.

It was Lili who spoke first.

"We are saying the Kraken's Child has been released from his cage and now seeks *advantage* over the Drecks. And Sai – he is as much focused *now* as he was when he commanded *Microcosmus* ... or even *earlier*. I would not advise watching him *too* closely."

The Elder closed her eyes and shook her head with a snort.

"I cannot find him anywhere, Lili. You have taught your student well. I would..."

She paused and reached out for that tentative tendril of thought before looking at Lili with a grim smile.

"It would seem that your *husband* has been 'Gifted' by his little brother. Help him deal with it, Lili. See that it does not become a problem that *we* have to deal with," Ai said with finality, and Lili bowed before leaving the room. Maya wandered behind in confusion, and was followed by her mother.

After leaving her alone to stew in a mess of her own making, Ai sat there and sipped slowly at the remaining ambrosia in her cup.

What a perfectly *dismal* way to end the day.

She thought of reaching out to inform the Elder's Council, but decided to hold off until she could hear their response. Besides, she had no idea of how far she actually *could* reach compared to the limitations she'd had before her ascension. Not that they hadn't kept them apprised of a *certain* event. She snorted in memory of that short encrypted missive that had been transmitted back to Cletus from the *Shining Light*'s communication system.

"*Elder Ai has accepted her position,*" had been the *totality* of it; leaving out pertinent details regarding the death of Elder Kita during an extremely contentious investigation that had been taken over by Lord Rondal Caldar – yet *another* thorn in the side of the Elder's Council almost since his birth.

What was it Sai had said? '*How much MORE worse can it get?*'

She chuckled while contemplating her current situation. How could she *possibly* believe she was capable of making decisions as the Elder after the absolute *folly* of believing what her uninformed interpretation of the Visions had suggested.

"A most *inauspicious* beginning for the new Elder of the Commonwealth," she muttered sourly, then finished her cup before pouring herself another.

Noon +2 (Day 110) – On the Road Again

Rondal removed his ship suit and put it away. Then he plugged the collar into the charger before shutting the locker door.

He quickly checked *Odontoceti* from back to front, and made a final stop in the facilities where he shook out his head and looked at the short dark hair reflecting back at him.

"Thirty-five ... maybe *forty*, relative," he muttered. "Enough to start with."

He momentarily thought of the gift he'd given his older brother before leaving, but considering Lili would be there to guide him, he completely dismissed it from his concerns.

He went forward, transferred all navigation functions to the pilot's station, and sat in the right-hand seat before keying the com.

"Microcosmus control, Odontoceti departure beacons on, request clearance to depart."

"Ronnie, is that you?" David asked.

"Microcosmus control, Odontoceti requests clearance to depart, please."

"Uhh, yeah. Yes, Odontoceti. Bay doors opening now. No traffic in your sector."

"Odontoceti confirms, doors opening, no traffic in sector."

"Clearance granted at your convenience Odontoceti. Contact Sectorus control for screen protocol."

"Odontoceti confirms departure clearance, contact Sectorus control for screen protocol."

On the Bridge...

David watched from the monitor as the tiny ship that had brought them so far from Earth now slowly made its way out of the bay and into open space ... and was just gone.

"Microcosmus, this is Sectorus. Hey, David! You guys lose a chunk of ice? We just had a blip on our shields."

"Ahh, nope! We're all good here. Nothing loose that I can see, anyway."

They chatted for a while longer before going on about their own business.

David wondered afterwards at the coldness of Ronnie's communication, but figured he was just testing to see if he'd been sticking to his procedures manuals as he'd promised. He hoped his newfound Grandfather faired well out there doing ... whatever it was he was gonna do.

Close to a Nearby Photosphere...

Rondal sidled up to the bundle of scrap metal in the decaying orbit Andy had calculated, and brought it in tight against his armor. Then he tightened it even more.

He made a few short jumps, checked that it was still tight, then did some fine-tuning on the nav system. He wanted to get to his destination soon because he'd skipped breakfast and dinner so his stomach would be totally empty for the long hop coming up.

He gave himself a two-count before triggering the jump. Before everything started slowing down and finally *stopped* for the next thirty-five minutes, he was thinking of the name Donnel had keyed into the data pad. If he was still in business, he intended to see just what that renegade metal smith and his minions could do with this pile of expensive scrap.

And then ... then he had a few thoughts of his *own*...

End of Book Two

Taming The Demon

Acknowledgements

I would like to extend my sincerest appreciation to all of the editors out there who strive to insure that the printed words that come out of the publishing industry are spelled correctly, applied appropriately, and in the proper sequence.

Never in my wildest dreams would I have guessed that the proudest moment of my fledgling writing career would *not* be the receipt of my first proof volume.

There is no conceivable way to understand the frustration that overcame me when my first proof came back from my editor with an *incredible* number of tiny post-it notes scattered within its pages; each one telling a tale of error, confusion, frustration, misusage of a verb or noun, or some other literary faux pas – *otherwise quite obvious to the most casual observer* – which I’d let slip through my fingers on the way to the printer.

Alas, no matter *how* hard I’d tried to make the first proof a worthy endeavor, it seemed that I was doomed to failure from the beginning.

Round Two: more dedicated editing, including three revision passes from front to back using a technique of reading and tweaking a section, doing a click-swipe of it to change the text color to “red” (meaning “having already messed with it”), and then going on to the next section.

Each edited section would, of course, involve a “save to disk” (which, in *my* paranoia, involved a “save to disk,” copy that “saved file” to the back-up disk, and then throw one more copy up on the array just in case because – *you never know...*).

A week or so later, and then start back at the beginning ... *word-by-word*.

You know, it’s simply *amazing* the capacity of the human mind to fill in the blanks for missing words, or just flip them little buggers around until you can read them just fine ... *even though they’ve been swapped!*

That’s not to mention the many ways you can spell the *same* sounding word and come up with several different *meanings* for it.

‘To’, ‘Too’ and ‘Two’ most easily come to mind. Not so easily caught are the subtleties between ‘discreately’ and ‘discreetly’ (and I find myself checking their use *every – single – time!*).

I don’t *even* want to get into the “lay-lie” brouhaha (you see my difficulty).

Floyde Leong

I used Createspace.com [now Kindle Direct Publishing – an *excellent* resource for the fledgling writer, and much more reasonable than most “vanity presses”]. When it passed the upload and review cycle, I immediately ordered the second proof.

If only I had bothered to use *their* online proofing tool...

I’d forgotten they send only PDF’s to the printers, and *my* PDF tool was somewhat different from *their* PDF tool until I figured it out.

Once again, I’d fallen victim to my own hubris.

That was all for book one. *This* is book two ... which had a similar ration of post-it notes inserted between the pages, but, I think, not as many this time (thank you, my Editor!).

Due diligence had been applied, and the number of changes kept diminishing to the point where it appeared that it was ready to leave the nest – *despite* the constant urge to tweak a word or phrase just the tiniest amount.

Be that as it may, to paraphrase an old saying from my years at a Silicon Valley founder – “Sometimes you have to shoot the author and release the book” – the initial released version of book two went through roughly twelve revision passes before it finally reached the point where you see it now - including the new map and the additional *FIVE* full “ink-on-paper” edit passes which prompted a “Second Edition” status.

All that explained, I do hope you’ll forgive the occasional misprint or two (which *hopefully* – spell check – and now WRITER.COM, should have *finally* alleviated).

After all, I’m only human (and so was my Editor).

Oh, to be clear, the initial Scottish slang translations for Donnel Ardan were researched back in 2015 – but I never wrote down the name of the website used for their creation. I’ve since discovered another website that offers similar English to Scottish translations that come pretty close, and that is located here:

<http://www.scottranslate.com/>

Unfortunately, it does not translate from Scottish back to English, but if you read those few sequences slowly and carefully, you should be able to glean their contents.

- Floyde Leong (Continue reading for a peek at seven *tantalizing* pages of book three, “Taming the Demon”...)

Fringe Space...

He'd made the transition to an open void at the Fringe, before stashing his raw material in an obscure system. He'd worked with Claxon before, but it was mostly modification and service work for the *Madman*. This job was for new construction, and of a rather delicate nature.

The next several days were spent cautiously closing in on his prospective ship builder and verifying Claxon was still in business. This was before actually sending out a request for a face-to-face meeting, and the reply wasn't long in coming.

Claxon Ship Works, Ltd.

The man seated behind the shabby desk had been startled at first, but then simply watched his guest appraisingly while looking at his somewhat familiar features. The last time he'd seen him, he'd been but a boy working in his father's office.

Standing across from him stood a dark-haired gray-eyed man in an unmarked jumpsuit that was unsealed partway down his neck. What little skin showed was light reddish brown and looked relatively smooth and pure – save for the few remnants of what used to be a fairly severe injury, if the surface indentations were any indication. His hair was short, almost a military cut, and his features were solid and just shy of stern – almost as if he was *forcing* a polite presence for this meeting.

"Heard you might be around this cycle. You look pretty *good*, Tank. You finally got them scars of yours *Healed*, eh?"

"Rumor has it you retired, Clax," Rondal said blandly, but the shipwright across from him never flinched. "In any number of colorful ways," Rondal added, with his hands loose at his sides, but one of them staying near the grip of his pellet thrower.

"And rumor has it you was *old*," Clax replied, equally neutral, but with one hand still below desktop level and gripped tightly around the handle of his own pellet thrower. He'd learned business hospitality at his father's knee, but this visit by a repeat customer seemed somewhat tentative for some reason.

They studied each other for a few more seconds before Rondal slowly folded his arms across his chest and leaned back against a cabinet; letting his lips show a thin line where his smile should have been.

"Knew a witch – owed me a favor," he said, with his face still flat and unforgiving. Clax nodded and leaned back just a bit.

Taming The Demon

“Balancing act ‘tween the ‘mony and the ‘perials. Favors for one, favors for the other. I try hard not to piss either of them off too much,” he said while slowly bringing his empty hand up to join with the other already on the desktop.

The only other chair in the office was parked in front of the desk. Rondal glanced at it, then came forward and sat down; resting both of his hands on the desktop as well.

Outside the office they could hear just a little of the noise this independent ship repair facility was wont to produce. Thankfully, the majority of loud noises were muffled by layers of rock and vacuum on the small planetoid Claxon Ship Works claimed as home and foundry. Clax himself – fifth in a line of fine craftsmen of the same name – was the current head of the “Company” – such as it was – and he was the *only* man to deal with for something of so delicate a nature as Rondal’s request.

“I need an estimate for a new design,” Rondal said, giving nothing away as he handed over a data tab and watched Clax in-slot it to his desktop.

A few moments later, a 3-D image of an odd-looking arrangement of cylinders and framework floated above the desktop and surrounded a smooth shape vaguely resembling a ship. A file list was displayed along one edge of the projection. Clax quickly ran through the design specifications in the files, but started making notes in an old-fashioned paper ledger by using a stylus that actually left a physical *ink* trail beneath its point. He caught Rondal’s look.

“Nice thing about paper – it don’t get snatched by a hack, and it burns quickly when necessary. See them cabinets behind you? Them red boxes on top? I send a signal – or push a button here at my desk – and the entire contents is ash in twenty seconds … *tops*. Drives the Imperials *nuts*.”

After glancing halfway round, Rondal made the obvious comment.

“Must be hard on your customers when you lose records like that.”

“Nah! They be happy for the confidentiality of it. I always update their own data tabs from here,” he said, while pointing to Rondal’s tab sticking out of the desk. “Customer takes it with them and it’s *their* worry if they lose it. Any changes when they’re off-station, and I can transmit it to them encrypted for their files – *if* they dare. But none of it’s stored as data here – just paper. Even the *drawings*. Even this *desk* is run all from firmware. Be a bloody *pain* to upgrade it, but it’s task-driven and don’t change.”

Floyde Leong

"Still, there's an amazing amount of detail you have to work with for a *ship*, isn't there?" Rondal asked curiously, and Clax sat back and shrugged.

"Side from the *drawings*? Not much," he said. He leaned forward again and continued making notes from the list while explaining the protocol to Rondal.

"Think about it, Tank. Every standard part has standard fittings, and we have drawings to back them up. I say take a Hollyford exciter and connect it to a Bergen converter. Well, all that's left for the ship fitter to do is to bend the right size pipe and make the fittings to the stock ends. What you have here looks pretty simple," he said, but frowned when he pointed to a couple of entries on the display.

"The only things we have missing from stock is the type of *armor* you're asking for and that humongous *gun* you want to mount – but I think you'll want to double-up on the converter for that gun. I take it there's more I don't know about yet – what with these hard points on the ends of these spindles all over the modular assembly?"

He spared a glance at Rondal and got a nod back in reply; followed by an explanation.

"Right. I'm looking to park it inside a small rock or something ... something unobtrusive ... *benign*-looking ... yet can act as a portable hanger if necessary. It doesn't have to hold air, but should be pretty solid – several feet or so."

Clax nodded his head while expanding the working area to include these new parameters. Then he started thinking about the *practical* logistics of Tank's intended moving hanger design.

"Hmm, quick releases, I take it," Clax murmured. "Want it to open mostly at one end, but maybe ... *explosive* separation of the entire outer layer for emergencies," he suggested while glancing up at Tank.

Rondal nodded appreciatively before Clax turned off the framework to focus on the ship, in the process separating several ship layers and noting some unexpected differences in certain places.

"Big spaces. *Really* big spaces, Tank. You expecting maybe... big *guests*? Not that it matters to *me*, mind you," he added quickly. Clax watched Tank's face to see if he'd tweaked him any, but he seemed rather unaffected by it, as was his response.

"Oh ... you never know who might need to find shelter in a storm – should the need arise, of course."

Taming The Demon

"Of course, Tank. I've heard about your ... *kindnesses* over the years. It's an honorable thing, to be sure."

"It has the advantage of keeping tensions lower than normal. The Dreckcs are somewhat reluctant to claim revenge for being *allowed* to live – so to speak," Rondal said blandly.

"One would imagine," Clax murmured, before turning his attention back to the plans.

He started making notes in earnest now, while also updating a file on Rondal's data tab. At the end of nearly an hour, he sat back and looked at Rondal through the 3D image, then pushed the image to the side before pulling up an itemized list of charges.

"This be what it'd cost for the whole job if I supply everything," he said, and pointed to the bottom of one column.

"You supply *certain* functional items, there's still an installation charge. The *biggest* expense is all this damned *armor* you want. That grade is hard to come by, but it'll work best with the shield generator what that idiot *Ardan* came up with. I don't suppose you just happen to have a *source* for that much armor, do you?" he asked, and got the appropriate nod from Rondal before continuing.

"Thought as much. That much armor *probably* only comes in a limited form factor and we'll have to send it through the foundry and get it reformed. Standard double-hull, *extra-large* accommodations, what looks like a security pen, weapons storage, *lots* of food storage – good idea that when guests come 'a calling. Gonna need a *big* converter – probably *two* of them for the gun you're gonna hafta come up with."

He rotated the design before pointing to an external area off to the side of the proposed portable hanger mounts.

"Now *this* is a good idea – the extra external tanks. Looks like they're removable so you can tow 'em out, top 'em off and return. No one thinks of details like that 'less they got stuck somewhere once or twice. Makes good sense when you have the room. Small machine shop also, and room enough for two shuttles – or three tanks," he finished, then sat back and looked at Rondal.

"Do you have a secure dock? Some place safe you can build it?"

Remembering Tank's line of work, the question wasn't that unreasonable.

"My workers can be trusted, but yeah, I got a spot or two where it won't be noticed. Not *all* my clients want it known when their ships be in for service."

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Rondal nodded in silent agreement, then asked, “When can you start?”

Clax reached behind him to open another red-topped cabinet. Rondal’s hand flinched towards his sidearm, but he suppressed it when he saw the outline of a ledger in the path of Clax’s searching fingers. He relaxed when the ledger was brought out and placed on the desk, where Clax flipped it open and ran his finger down a column.

“That particular dock will be vacant in about three weeks, so it depends entirely on when you can come up with the payment and the material,” he said, then leaned back and smiled at the sign of Rondal’s nodding head.

“I have credits available, but I need to find my gun and a few other items. I’ve heard you might also take some things in trade instead of credits?” Rondal suggested, while marking a value in Clax’s notebook.

Clax ran some quick numbers in his head while thinking about it for a minute or two.

“Tell you what. I can offer you some credit on anything left over from the armor you provide – *useful* things, mind you. Likewise, whatever is currently carrying that gun you’ll be looking for would probably be of some value as salvage to *someone* – even only as spare parts. I can have my guys start breaking down and reforming the armor, then start the framework of the main skeleton of your ship using standard supplies. I’ll leave a big hole for the gun – that’ll leave you options depending on what you end up finding. Likewise, I’ll leave the engines open while the rest of the ship takes shape. Whatever is hauling that gun will likely have the converters to fire it and fly your ship.”

Clax caught the thoughtful expression on Tank’s face before his next question was on the table.

“What’s your time frame for it all?” he asked, which caused Clax to check his notes again.

“Figure three years, max if you get us the special items on our schedule,” he said. “And I’ll need a down payment.”

“Done,” Rondal said, and offered him another data tab, which Clax in-slotted to a port on a separate small system sitting next to his desk.

When the holo-image came up, Rondal keyed in an account number and one-time authorization code from memory. In thirty seconds, the local down payment was transferred from a dummy account in the name of Cleeve Dalis se Loca to Claxon Holding Companies, Ltd. of Blot, which was one of several dummy companies for the Claxon family but situated on a barely Class-Four system down below Kantor and

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Cletus. The actual transfer of credits would occur after a suitable transmission delay caused by bouncing around Commonwealth financial management protocols between all parties on all registered planets.

Once the local transaction was complete, Clax set a standard and large format printer in an adjacent room to the task of making hard copies of specific parts lists, along with machine and assembly drawings for the ship itself, and the outer spindle arrangement. A short while later, a chime sounded from the other room and Rondal was invited to check over the documents before they were bound in booklet and drawing file binders. The only markings on them besides notes and measurements referenced a dummy job number that was identical on each numbered page.

“From here on, they either live in the security files or they’re taken out and used – one sheet at a time. They’re not back at the end of a shift, I track the man down, and he never works anywhere else ... ever.” Rondal noted the finality of that statement, and nodded his acceptance before they shook hands on the deal.

Clax immediately relaxed and Rondal detected his delight that the deal was done. All he had to do now was make *damn* sure Tank’s ship was put together correctly the first time. He also felt the hope that Tank’s spare parts would be enough to do the job and leave enough useful items left over to turn an additional profit.

Underlying everything else was the *extreme* relief this meeting hadn’t ended in bloodshed – not that it would have since Rondal had fused the shear pin of Clax’s pellet thrower the moment he’d walked through the door and felt it gripped in his hand.

“Always important to check your weapons, Clax,” Rondal said conversationally before looking down at his sidearm.

Clax watched nervously when Tank pulled his pellet thrower and unloaded it in front of him, cleared it, pulled the mechanism back, and dry-fired it at the wall.

“Sometimes they freeze up on you when they don’t get enough exercise. I prefer the *sword*, myself,” he said, then looked him in the eyes while he reloaded and reholstered blind. “Send me your timetable and drop-dead dates for the special items before they’re needed. Update traffic to this account,” he said, and jotted it down in Clax’s notebook.

“I’ll have to do a little research to see what’s available and making a nuisance of itself. For *now*, I’ll be waiting at these coordinates,” he

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continued, and added more notes to Clax's notebook. "Send your tug and signal me on this channel when they arrive. I'll transfer the used armor to them," he finished, before straightening up.

Clax updated the data tab before pulling both of them. Then he handed them back to Rondal, who took them, nodded, and took his leave.

Clax sat back and physically relaxed in his seat. He'd survived the encounter, and that was enough for him. He'd only met Tank a few times in the past, but he seemed a lot different now from back then. He suddenly thought of something else, pulled his pellet thrower out from under the desk, and checked it – only to find that it couldn't *possibly* fire in its current condition. Some rumors never die, and *this* was one that would haunt him for the next several months.

Tank was back in operation, and he was dead serious about it.

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