The Recreation of the Warrior

by twistedchick

Summary

From the unpublished memoirs of Tyr Anasazi, out of Victoria by Barbarossa, of Kodiak Pride.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes

It should make no sense at all.

Survival is optimal. Survival of the pride is all-important. A Nietzschian must add his enhanced genetic traits to the next generation.

Traits for which Nietzschians select include strength, courage, intelligence, and the practical skills of warfare, technology and multilevel logical analysis. One must be able to strip down a laser cannon, pilot a warship through a battle in six dimensions or more (with or without slipstream), and work the necessary quadratic equations in one’s mind, often at the same time, or within a reasonable facsimile thereof. One should be able not only to provide the raw ingredients for dinner but also to cook an elegant meal, give pleasure to a mate, entertain a diplomat, raise a child, discuss philosophy and literature and outwit an assassin.

And one must survive.
In an unstable cosmos, genetic inheritance is all. It is control over the fickle whimsy of fate. A man who has not passed on his genes to the next generation is considered, by some, to be a man only in potential: that is, he is male, and nothing more. A true man has a family, a wife, children, grandchildren, a pride.

And yet I still live, the last survivor of Kodiak Pride, without a wife, without children, without a home, without any of what most Nietzschians would consider the necessities of life.

I live, and I watch, and I wait.

And I am, still, a man.

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Harper felt better today. His visible wounds healed nicely, with few if any scars thanks to the powers of this ship's med deck. His invisible wounds, however, were festering.

I had chosen to keep one of the scars of the battle as a badge of honor; it is decorative, nothing more, and in a location obscure enough that it will neither draw attention to itself nor inconvenience me. I could feel it under my clothing as I sat in the galley and watched Trance Gemini fuss over Harper's food, making sure the machines add the right amount of some obscure spice to his hot drink. They teased each other as if they were brother and sister instead of ... whatever. Friends, most likely. Allies.

They are not lovers; I doubt that she has ever taken a lover, while his flirtation with her is too obvious to be serious.

She worries about him. Apparently, she always has, even more than Beka has. Perhaps she knows something the rest of us do not. Perhaps she is only one of those women who will worry, regardless of the situation, though her usual reaction is a fanatical sort of optimism.

Optimism is a survival tactic. In her abilities at this, she could be a Nietzschian clan matriarch.

Harper drank his beverage to the bottom, and smiled at her, flirting again.

It's a surface occupation for him, this flirtation. Behind it, he is always thinking.

These are only a few of the things I've noticed.

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If one were to hazard a prediction about whom I should choose, in the current circumstances, the most logical guess would be Beka Valentine, and the second most logical would be Dylan Hunt.

Both would be wrong.

Most Nietzschians would understand why Beka would certainly be worth the play, but not consider her worthy as a mate. She's intelligent, strong, a survivor of many battles, and, whether she chooses to be or not, beautiful. She understands our way of thinking, though she seldom chooses to employ it. However, she is genetically damaged, as a result of a lifetime spent living aboard the Maru, with its far-from-adequate shielding against radiation, and therefore not a good mother to a Nietzschian's potential offspring.

Centuries ago there were, in Nietzschian society, places for women like her, women of strength and beauty and ability who were not born to our prides. She could have been a concubine, a lesser wife,
not allowed legally to choose her man but allowed to be the choice of a man who had first been
chosen by a woman of the pride. Her place would have been that of a plaything, a recreation,
something less than fully human but still, in its own way, treasured. Alternatively, she could have
been a scout, or a warrior guarding our women and children, trusted though not fully accepted as one
of us for childbearing.

In my wildest fantasies, I could not imagine Beka Valentine allowing herself to be any man's toy. A
shieldpartner, yes; a berserker, certainly; a worthy opponent or ally, without doubt -- but those were
roles for non-enhanced females. There would be no room for her as she is in the world that my kind
created, and this is unfortunate, for she knows far more about survival than many Nietzscheans I have
met.

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Harper has been brooding again. He has taken to working late at night in his shop, tinkering, talking
to himself. I have stood outside the door, listening, and he has not even noticed my presence.

No, not talking to himself, but to the Magog larvae within him.

He is braver than he knows.

Were I still to be infected with Magog, however dormant, I would find the simplest and easiest
method of death available to me and arrange to have myself placed back within a Magog hive, so
that I could take them out at the same time. I do not believe in acquiescing to death; I will not go
gentle into that night. I have always fought it whenever it approached, and I am still here.

It is not in the nature of a Nietzschean to allow defeat.

It appears, also, not to be in the nature of this particular Earthling to give up, not now.

It was the small hours, or it would be if we were planetside. While others on board slept, he was still
tinkering, still thinking, still talking.

He's named the creatures.

Rev Bem would say that he has given them shelter. Were it up to me, I would put Rev Bem through
the same ordeal that Harper endures, to relieve him of the annoying habit of always supplying the
unanswerable comment, regardless of the situation.

"You can quit lurking out there, Tyr."

I pushed off from the wall and walked quietly into the room. "You noticed."

"I noticed when the exercise equipment stopped making my ceiling creak." He pointed at a spot in
the corner of the large room; I calculated distance and realize that I had indeed been lifting weights
directly over that area.

"If it annoys you that much --"

"Nah, don't bother. I like to think that you might come crashing through if I need the help."

I cast a glance at the ceiling. "I'm flattered, but I must reluctantly admit that my crashing through six-
centimeter corrugated metal flooring supports is unlikely."

Harper snorted. "Right. Aren't you supposed to be the Superman side of 'Man and Superman'?" I
raised an eyebrow, and he saluted me with the hand holding the screwdriver. "All these sarcastic literary comments from me, all this time, and only now you think I read the right books?"

"Not at all. I've been favorably impressed by your literary taste more than once."

"Danke, takk and -- " He made a throaty gurgle that indicated thanks in Ganloni. "So, why the surveillance?"

"I was concerned."

"You don't think I've already got enough eyes on me? And in me?"

I moved closer to him, within the zone of friendship but outside the zone of personal safety so he would not feel threatened. "If there's anything you need from me, you have but to ask."

"Anything." He appeared to mull the thought, considering possibilities, while twirling the screwdriver between his fingers. "That's 'anything short of getting rid of my passengers', right? Or 'anything that won't upset Dylan.'" His eyes searched my face.

"I won't allow you to kill yourself until there's no other choice, and if that comes I'll help you die bravely, and without pain." My voice dropped into a whisper, in the futile attempt to dissuade the Andromeda computer surveillance from notice. "I will do all I can to help you rid yourself of your ... passengers."

He shook his head. "Not going to happen, dude, but I appreciate the offer. And, by the way, Rommie doesn't scan in here; I told her I needed some privacy, and she agreed as long as I promised not to off myself with the tools." He glared playfully at the screwdriver. "Like I'm really going to go samurai with this thing. Not a chance."

The screwdriver, one of the cross-head varieties, had seen hard use. "I suspect she was more concerned about the arc welder."

"Ooooh. That's just plain messy, and who'd have to clean it up? Me, myself and I. No way, no how." But his face straightened, all the humor gone. "Anything?"

It took effort to remain still, but I have been well trained in effort and in stillness. "Dylan's opinions do not move me."

"You always have a reason."

"None that you might understand, beyond concern."

"You sure about that?"

A pause. He came closer, within reach, but I held my ground and stayed still. "No. Not entirely sure."

"Good." He spun away from me toward whatever he was doing. "Well, if you really meant
anything, hand me that lug wrench when I get back under this thing. I could use an assistant.”

I waited until he was in position, handed him whatever tools he requested, and stayed until the next shift, making small talk as I watched him work.

***

If physical perfection, an intelligent mind and intellectual brilliance -- not to mention the political craft of a Machiavelli -- were all that might be needed to qualify for genetic enhancement, Dylan Hunt would be at the head of the list. Although old to be chosen -- and I do not mean his inadvertent three-century time shift -- he has the qualifications to become Nietzschean, were he to request it.

This is not something done lightly these days, when we have spent centuries perfecting our race. Many Nietzscheans would say that modification of those born lesser was a relic of the past, to be discarded as unnecessary now that we have our prides and clans, but we have always retained that option, that ability, lest we lose too many of our own in a disaster.

The last time modification was used at large was after the Battle of Witchhead, when the Angel of Death destroyed two-thirds of my people's fleet, a hundred thousand Nietzscheans aboard a thousand ships. I know that angel's identity now, the fine bones of that face, the fierce pale eyes and the voice ordering their death -- all of which were Dylan's. Knowing this of Dylan does not diminish my regard for him. He acted as a Nietzschean in what he did, weighing the cost, knowing that cost to himself and to the Commonwealth he once served, and I believe he could have acted in no other way -- regardless of how that decision affected my people. It saved my own life; I cannot therefore oppose it.

However, Dylan's current quest and his methods of achieving it would bar him from consideration indefinitely. Even after Witchhead, we did not provide enhancement to those who were (however temporarily) insane, regardless of their brilliance or ability to use logic as a precision tool or a fine weapon.

Dylan is the highest-ranked alpha male aboard Andromeda, though not the only one. I know. As the only remaining Kodiak alive, I know what an alpha looks like whenever I glance into a mirror. An alpha is the ultimate survivor. An alpha will survive anything that can be thrown at him, because he cannot respond to a threat with less than his ultimate effort regardless of the circumstances. An alpha female will always choose an alpha male as her mate; were Dylan already a Nietzschean, he would be held in high regard by our matriarchs. His genes already offer the advantage of an ancestress from a heavy world, which gives him greater strength and stability in uncertain footing than might be expected from a mere human.

All things considered, Dylan might make a logical choice if one were to consider only temporary pleasure. However, it's likely that he would consider any approach by me to be an attempt to seduce him from his purpose, and his trust does not extend that far when it comes to me. If it did, however, the ability to be so seduced would reduce his desirability as it would indicate his preference for pleasure over survival. We are at war, whether the enemy realizes it or not; survival is the first priority, not dallying in the shade with a lover -- pleasurable as that would be, I'm sure.

So I watch him move in his uniform, or out of it on the basketball court or elsewhere, and keep my thoughts and consideration and conclusions to myself ... and there they remain.

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Rev Bem? Faugh. Don't even.
I thought I had already dispensed with our little purple friend some time back. Let me be frank: even if she were a hypothetical deity, with corresponding powers and abilities, I seriously doubt that adding a tail to a Nietzschian child would be an admirable survival adaptation for all situations. We are, at heart, generalists; we adapt our skills to our situations. Forearm spikes -- bone spurs taken to lethal length -- are a reasonable defensive tool; however, a prehensile tail would probably be more of a liability than a benefit. Never give the enemy something that can be grabbed.

(Yes, I know that Alexander of Macedon wore his long hair tied up in a knot under a helmet. I have done that at times as well; a pad of hair can ease the fit of the most uncomfortable headgear. However, a strong head of hair -- and a comely one -- is an advantage I would not wish to surrender when dealing with women, or with men who insist on underestimating me based on my looks. I'm well aware that I seem younger and possibly more inexperienced than some; it's wise, when negotiating, not to show one's strengths or hand entirely.)

On the other hand, it's possible that I may be underestimating the little purple one; she has never, yet, shown her hand completely to anyone on the Maru, nor to Dylan, as far as I can tell. And her ability to think logically has surprised me more than once. She might bear watching, but not for any closer purpose.

Originally, Nietzschians were developed from the superior genetic stock of all human races, selected for their talents and strengths, their ability to endure, to plan and execute plans, to triumph over the odds that condemned lesser mortals to death. It is not within me to choose anyone who cannot meet these standards for ability.

Yet, upon Andromeda, I have been surprised more than once, and not by the obvious.

The obvious surprise would be Dylan himself, of course. I have learned to play that game he enjoys so much, basketball, and have found ways to win without breaking the game's ridiculous rules. It's a matter of speed, which, again, is a matter of strength and agility. I do not train my body only for its appearance.

The first time I won, Dylan laughed and challenged me to another game. The second time, he raised an eyebrow.

"What?" I asked in response. "Did I violate some obscure rule?"

"Not at all. That's what surprised me."

"You think only High Guard officers can learn this ridiculous pastime?" I sent the ball through the basket from center court, or what would be center court if we were playing in the kind of place the historical videos show as center court.

"No." A shadow crossed his face, and I knew without asking that his mind was showing him scenes of centuries ago, when his crew of hundreds would hold basketball tournaments and playoffs for the sheer enjoyment of the game. He caught the ball on the bounce and threw it back to me, hard. "Bet you can't do that again, five times running."

"What are the stakes?"

"Hmm." He considered. "I don't suppose you have any preference?"
"If I make all five baskets, you owe me a favor." I dribbled the ball from one hand to the other.

"Oh, a serious bet. I thought you were just playing."

"Am I ever other than serious?"

"Occasionally." Dylan stepped aside, out of the free-throw zone. "You've been known to exhibit sarcasm, irony, even humor."

"Don't let it out; it'll ruin my reputation." I made the first basket perfectly.

"Your secret is safe with me." He returned the ball. "If you lose, do you owe me a favor?"

"That depends on what you might be likely to ask of me."

"Aha. A double standard."

The ball flew into the basket again. "It's simple prudence. Self-preservation. Or, perhaps, the influence of a philosopher who said, 'Beware of entangling alliances.'"

"George Washington. Now, I would have thought you were already as entangled with the good fortunes of the Andromeda as possible." Dylan said lightly, returning the ball again.

I shrugged. "If I lose, you may ask me any one question you wish and I will answer it honestly and without prevarication." I sent the ball on its way for the third time, faultlessly.

"That's quite a bet. Of course, you don't expect to lose."

The ball came back to me. I sent it flying through the basket again. "Of course."

"Good to know. So," Dylan leaned a shoulder against the wall, watching me line up the last half-court shot, "how do you think we're doing?"

"We?" I let an eyebrow rise interrogatively, and dribbled the ball slowly for a moment or two. It is always wisest to know to what one is responding before opening one's mouth.

"Andromeda. The ship. Is there anything else we should do to combat the Magog?"

"Other than ridding our company of them?" I thought I'd hidden the flare of anger within me well enough until I saw the ball hover on the edge of the basket before falling in.

"Ah. Yes. I don't suppose you mean Rev."

"No."

"If I told you that we're doing the best we can to find a cure, would that appease you?"

"Considering the current state of affairs, I'd say you hadn't a hope of appeasing me." I threw the ball at him, hard, and he caught it between his palms, in front of his chest.

"Rommie is scanning the data of the All Systems University Library, as well as searching the information available on every planet we come near. Trance is doing research every day and running experiments every night."

I noticed that he had not reported on his own progress toward a cure, if he had made any.
"And the little professor is still waiting."

"Is this the favor you want to ask of me?"

"No." I let the glare show. "This is what you owe to your crew for being your crew, for abandoning their previous lives and agreeing to come with you on your quest. I haven't asked for the favor yet."

"I'll keep that in mind." He looked thoughtful as he turned away toward the shower.

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One learns, in Nietzschian society, to take one's pleasures lightly but seriously, just as one takes pain or discomfort.

I let myself relax as the hot water rolled over me. Some days it took very little to bring me to the spending point, such as now, when I watched the water on the tiles wash away what might, in different circumstances, become my passport to the status of husband and father. Other days required not only touch but imagination, and, on occasion, the need to resort to meditation on the Sylphidian mysteries, the tales told by our women of the prowess of their husbands. As soon as we are old enough to understand their meaning, we are encouraged to learn from them, so that no Nietzschian male will ever be unaware of or unskilled at the arts of pleasure.

It is not a coincidence that the men of my race are well-shaped and well-endowed. This was a matter of conscious breeding, of care and thought, many generations ago, for which I am grateful to my ancestors.

(My people learn as small children that religion is the opiate of the masses. In practice, however, we spend far more time acknowledging our debt to our ancestors than might be expected of any Confucian monk. Since no actual deities are involved, this does not count as 'religious observance,' but merely as practical genetics.)

And we know, as boys, that the touch that pleases a woman may also please a man. We do not speak of it, but we know. We are expected to give up the pleasure we find with each other when we come of age, so that we will be chosen by the women of the pride and attain the status of husband and father.

Not all do. Not all prides are understanding of this choice, but many allow it among those who have chosen only to be warriors or explorers, who will not often live in pride. Conventionally, most often no one speaks of this, but it is known and never forgotten.

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We were reclining in the ship's video viewing room when Harper mentioned it again.

Simultaneously off shift, I had suggested dinner and a movie from the ship's historical library; he had blinked but agreed. It was not as elaborate as the meal I had once prepared for Beka, but substantial and filling, much of it genuine with the help of the hydroponics garden -- filet of salmon with fresh dill, new potatoes, bequat temsh (a vegetable dish I'd picked up on Surinali), and ginger ice for dessert. Afterward, we watched his choice, a light comedy that emphasized beautiful women and sleight-of-hand, and then mine, a historical drama disguised as a martial-arts entertainment.

"You consider that historical?" Harper shook his head. His hair, grown longer since our captivity, flicked off his forehead and back down again. "Jackie Chan didn't even film most of that in New York."
"I have it on good authority that certain scenes portray the world of that time accurately. More to drink?" I waved a hand toward the bottles I'd brought.

"No, thanks. This is fine." He sighed. "Y'know what, Tyr? I'm still waiting for either of our esteemed captains to say one word to me about my ... passengers."

"Really?" My surprise must have shown in my face, for he nodded solemnly. "That's odd."

"You're telling me. I mean, I sort of expected it from Dylan, since he takes this captain shit so seriously. Beka, well, she and I don't talk about the serious stuff much, but we do talk." He shifted uncomfortably on his couch. "It worries me." As I watched, he gave me a sickly grin. "No, I'm fine. It's the feelings that bother me, not the critters."

"Dylan knows. I'd assume Beka does, too, though I could be mistaken. Our honored captain does tend to keep secrets."

"It's not as if this is a secret." He leaned up on one elbow to scowl at me. "I mean, it's not like they didn't know what happened on the Magog world, especially when I was screaming about it in every direction. Dylan's the one who found us, f'crying out loud. Maybe they think whatever Trance did to you worked on me, too."

"Dylan told me he and Rommie were searching the information banks on every planet and station we contact." I watched him think about it. "Perhaps Beka is uncomfortable with discussing it."

"Beka's good at talking about things you can survive ..." His voice trailed off.

"You will survive this, Harper."

"You can't be sure about that."

He was factual, not hostile, but I felt his words reverberate within me.

"I can't be sure the sun will rise tomorrow, and I can't be sure the next band of Drago-Kazov won't impale me on their ship's bowsprit, either." I smiled at that, so he would realize I considered the Drago-Kazov a joke rather than a threat. "I know you, and you're a warrior, a fighter. You don't give up." I rolled over to face him fully; we were within touching distance, if either of us wished it. "I'm not a doctor or a scientist, it's true; I can't help you in those ways. But I will do anything else I can to keep you alive."

"You said that before. Anything." He watched me steadily, his head leaning against the back of the lounge chair. "I'm not sure how much I trust you about that."

"Because I'm a Nietzschian?"

"I don't know what you get out of it, Tyr."

I closed my eyes briefly; when I opened them, he was still watching me. "What I get out of it is the satisfaction of continuing to have a shieldbrother and a friend in my life. We have risked our lives together. That's not a small thing to me."

"Shieldbrother?"

I nodded.

"You don't have anyone you care about outside this ship, do you?"
"I could say that it's to my advantage to care about the people here because it keeps me alive."

"That's right, you could say that." He toyed with the video controller. "And it might even be true."

"It is true. Whether it's the whole truth is something you'll have to decide for yourself." I would not burden him with the history of my dead, unless he specifically requested it.

Harper nodded slowly. "And if I decided that there was more to the truth, and I wanted to find out what it was ..."

"You need only ask."

He held silence for a long time, watching me, thinking, as he always has. Sometimes I could follow his thoughts, but this time they were shuttered behind his eyes. "And if I do ask, what do I have to trade you or pay you for the answer?"

My breath rattled in my throat. Could he hear it? "Honesty."

I started to reach across the space between us, slowly, gently, giving him time to draw back or signal displeasure -- but Dylan's voice came over the loudspeaker, asking Harper for help with a section of the new bridge installation that kept shorting out, and the moment was gone.

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Beka fell into step with me the next day as I came out of the ship's weight room. "I hear you're spending time with my engineer."

"He's more than just your engineer." I wasn't in a mood to chat. Dylan had started to plan the next phase of his grand scheme, which would involve enlisting the aid of the same Sabra-Jaguar Pride that he'd nearly been killed assisting in the past. Keeping him alive was promising to be a challenge.

"Yes, he is. He's my friend." Stubborn, that woman.

I rounded on her. "If he's your friend, why don't you talk to him about what he's carrying around inside his belly?"

"There's no need to discuss that."

"There's every need." I held back the words I wanted to say -- it would do me no good to point out to her that if she and Dylan had been there for Harper, he probably would not desire my company so much. "He's confused and upset by you and by Dylan."

"Why, Tyr, I'm surprised. I didn't think you cared that much about the emotional state of the crew." She still sounded as cool as ever. I wanted to smash that icy facade, but I knew violence would not work. I settled for brooding.

"When that emotional state is likely to affect his work to program the Andromeda, and keep this ship and the Maru in working order around the enemy?" I leaned over her. "Oh, I'm very interested indeed."

"You appear to be becoming a bit emotional yourself." Beka didn't intimidate easily, one reason that I respected her as a captain.

"Don't be ridiculous. My survival is concerned, and so is yours if he's upset enough to try to kill himself again."
"Again?" The word jolted her.

"Again."

"Rev Bem tried to starve himself, and now this."

"Harper should never have been left to clear dead Magog from the ship. Never. That's what those 'bots are for, and the A.I.s."

"I know." She was nodding. "I was furious when I found that out. I gave Rommie a piece of my mind."

"I'd have given her the boot in her cybernetic ass if I'd known. Trance Gemini would not have come up with that idea for herself."

"You're right." Beka looked rueful. "It seems I have some talking to do, and I owe it to you."

"You're welcome," I growled, "as long as you do it."

"You know," she said in leaving, "I like you like this. Fierce. Protective. It's a nice change from your permanent coolth."

I snorted but let her past me without further comment. If she didn't talk to Harper, my next conversation with her would be considerably less polite. However, I did trust that she'd have a long and loud conversation with Andromeda herself, which would be all to the good.

Of course I was concerned about the wellbeing and safety of everyone on the ship, which depended greatly upon the peace of mind and continuing health of the ship's one and only engineer.

Of course.

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Another movie night seemed redundant, perhaps too predictable. I continued to keep an eye on Harper, as much as possible, without letting my surveillance be known to the rest of the crew. This should not have been so difficult, were it not for the android Rommie, who walked up silently behind me as I drank coffee in the passageway one night and asked, "Why?"

"Because we need him alive," I said, "and sane, no thanks to you."

I hadn't thought an android could change color like that. She paled, temporarily, and looked away from me. "You're right. It was stupid." Her voice stayed soft, as mine had been.

"I'd use stronger words than that."

"I was thinking in terms of expedience. You should understand that."

"And you should understand that I don't care about your terms."

"Children, please," Harper broke in. He stood in the door of his shop, bouncing on his heels. "Would you mind arguing about me out of my hearing? It's distracting."

"Of course." Rommie turned away.

"Tyr, you got a second? I could use some muscle in here."
I put the mug down on a side brace. "I'm not busy right now." I waited until the android was well away before moving into the room.

"Here." He pointed to a long strut on the end of ... something. It wasn't one of his usual bits and pieces of machinery or computer technology. "Would you get under that and lift it while I slide these things underneath?" When I had grabbed it and had lifted myself, with the strut on my shoulder, he continued, "You know, I really appreciate the defense, but it's not necessary."

"Yes, it was." The strut was so deceptively light that Trance could have moved it easily. I stayed put, since he obviously wanted me there. "You should not have had to move Magog corpses, not in the condition you were in."

"Physical or mental?" His glance cut like a razor.

"Either. Both." I let my guard down a little. "I would not have wanted to do it, either. I have disposed of the bodies of my enemies for nearly two decades; it's seldom an amusing experience. But requiring you to move Magog when -- " I needed to back off, to cool down, but I could not. "It was unconscionable to make you do that, in your mental state. We need you to be able to think and work."

"Aha. You only want me for my electronics, and for my nimble fingers on the computer controls. I should have known."

I ignored that. "Is this enough lifting for now?"

"Actually, no. If you'd put that down, I need you to move something else."

"What?" I let the strut rest on the things he'd moved under it.

"Yourself. Over here."

This was unprecedented. As I walked toward him, he flicked the control near the door and it slid closed. I paused, one heel off the ground, and waited.

"I'm not going to bite, unless it's called for." Harper leaned his hips back against a counter. "I wanted to thank you, for ... for ... for being so nice to me. I know that sounds stupid, but I mean it."

"He was only a foot away; I could feel his body heat, and the extra heat from his core where the odious grubs were sleeping. "I don't have many friends, and it means a lot that you want to spend time with me."

It was as formal a statement as I'd ever heard him make, and as serious. "You're welcome. I would not make the offer if I didn't enjoy it also."

"That's what I thought. See, that right there makes me feel good, because I know what Nietzschians think of Earthlings like me."

I raised an eyebrow. "Am I the same as all Nietzschians, then?"

"No, you're not," he said slowly. "And that makes me think I've misunderstood other things as well."

How had I lost control of this situation? Perhaps neutrality would return it to me. "It's always possible to misunderstand something if you don't reach your conclusion by logical means."

"See, that's where you're wrong. I've been doing the math. Actually, I'm rather good at math. I can do summations, permutations and integrals in my head without counting on my toes, and what I'm seeing doesn't quite add up with the data I've been given."
"And that is?"

"I can see it more than one way." He ticked off the sentences on his fingers. "You and I fought together for survival. We both had Magog larvae. Therefore, we're both warriors and you respect me because of it."

"That's not incorrect," I murmured.

"Sssh. I'm not done. Second version: You don't have larvae any more. I do have them. You feel sorry for me. Problem is, that's a logical fallacy because Nietzscheans don't ever feel sorry for anyone."

I remained silent.

"Most Nietzscheans, in fact, would probably be glad that there was one fewer Earthling kludge around. But you are not most Nietzscheans, as we've established. Therefore, I can't use what I know of most Nietzscheans to calculate what you would do." He cocked his head a little, staring me down with the sort of gaze I'd expect to see through an electron microscope. "Tyr does what's best for Tyr, always. Tyr also does what's best for us on Andromeda because it's also what's best for Tyr, most of the time. What I'm wondering is how my health intersects with what's best for Tyr, and saying we're shieldbrothers doesn't quite cover it. And don't tell me it's because I'm the engineer. Beka's almost as good as I am at some of it, and so is Trance if she's given half a chance. They just don't have the same touch, and they're better at other things. So, why do you care?"

I looked away, at the contraption beside us, at the door. When I looked back, he was still watching me. "Not everything in life obeys perfect logic."

"Are you sure you're a Nietzschean?" It wasn't quite a smile.

"All things should, undoubtedly. And there is an order in the universe, whether we acknowledge it or not."

"I'm not keeping you here to discuss the music of the spheres." Unaccountably, he was starting to move again, to bounce a little on the balls of his feet as he slid his thumbs into his pockets and started to smile.

"I have no complaints. Music can be a fascinating topic."

"See, that's what I mean. I'd expect you to want to hang out with Dylan more than me. I mean, at least he's had pretty good experiences with you guys in the past, whereas I haven't done so well that way until now." His voice softened. "I didn't think you believed in friends."

"It's not the same for us as it is for other races," I admitted. "I don't know if I can explain it to you."

He shook his head. "That's not important. What I want to know is this: if Tyr always does what's best for Tyr -- which I know to be true -- and if Tyr has offered to do 'anything' to help me in my current, um, situation -- which I also know to be true -- are there any limits to what that 'anything' covers?"

His gaze locked me in. It felt as if the whole spinning universe had managed to implode within my brain. My muscles tensed, then eased almost imperceptibly; the fight-or-flight response was inappropriate. "No." I swallowed hard. "No limits."

"So." His voice dropped until it was softer than mine. "If I should happen to have trouble sleeping, which I do sometimes now and then, and I should come to your room in search of, say, company for
a while, you wouldn't throw me out?"

"You would be welcome," I said, formally. Such matters as this always required the formal tone of voice.

"Even if it was more than just company I wanted...."

The formal tone of voice deserted me, though I struggled to retain it. "Yes, even so."

"Thanks." He looked relieved, his muscles looser. "I mean it. I might take you up on that one of these days."

I nodded. "I'd be honored." I started to turn toward the door. By now Dylan would have been informed that I was in a scan-blocked room with his chief engineer; he would probably want to threaten to shoot me out an airlock if I harmed Harper. I would have to be elsewhere and quickly in order to throw him off the scent.

"You say that like you mean it." Harper's voice was quizzical.

"I do mean it."

"Good. I mean, that's really good. I appreciate it. And just for that," he swaggered a bit, "I promise not to ask you too much about that nice long container you've got in storage in the third auxiliary cargo bay."

I swerved so quickly that, were I a lesser man, I would have fallen over my own feet. "How did you --"

"Had to clear a couple of corpses off it," he said, as if it didn't matter at all.

He would have said 'bodies' if they had been human.

"Then I am doubly in your debt, Seamus Zelazny Harper." I bowed to him, formally, and left before I could betray myself with any more words.

***

By the time Dylan found me, I was in my second set of reps, sweating well and considering the beneficial effects of a tourniquet for my mouth, should another such encounter occur. "Tyr. Just the man I was looking for. I'd like to get your opinion of Sabra-Jaguar Pride, if I may." He sat on a neighboring weight bench, and I felt his eyes calculate the load I was pressing.

"They're enemies of the Drago-Kazov, if that's what you're asking."

"I knew that. What do you think of them as individuals, any that you've met?"

I considered the question. "Well armed, well trained. Good fighters. They tend to be less than straightforward in their dealings with other prides, but that's not a mark against them."

"I can see that." He rose again. "I wasn't sure, from that other trip I made into their territory, what their capabilities might be."

"Significant, I'd think, although I believe they'd be impressed by Andromeda."

"Let's hope so. I'm planning to invite Arch-Duke Charlemagne Bolivar to join the fight against the Magog."
I set the long bar with its iron weights down on the stand. "Are you sure you don't have a death wish?"

"Would I be working against the Magog if I did?" He picked up a twenty-pound dumbbell and did slow arm curls, reflectively.

"Certainly. It's a man's privilege to choose the type of death he'd prefer."

He nodded to himself and set the dumbbell back in its place. "How do you feel these days?"

"Well enough for whatever occurs."

"Good." He rose to leave. "By the way, thank you for keeping an eye on Harper."

I tried to keep my tone civil, without straying into the formal mode that would indicate a threat. "He fought beside me bravely and well; he is not a child to be 'kept an eye on'."

"Nevertheless." Dylan stopped in the doorway. "Is it because you're free of what happened and he isn't?"

"No one of us is free of it, you most of all," I countered.

"True." Dylan nodded. "If there is anything I need to know, for the good of the ship, I'd expect you to tell me before I have to ask you."

I used the formal tone this time. "Of course, Captain."

He turned and left. I showered and went to the observation deck to stare at the stars until my shift.

***

I lay on my bed, reading, a few nights later when I heard the tap at my door. No one else would tap like that, jittery and hesitant. "Come in."

Harper came in quietly and stood by the door. "I'm not intruding, am I?"

"If you were I wouldn't set the door to open." I put the book aside. He looked tired, his forehead furrowed as if his eyes hurt him. "Would you like something to eat or drink? I think you could use it." I filled a glass with water at the sink in the corner and handed it to him.

"Thanks." He gulped it down. "I've been too busy down in the lab. Things got away from me."

"How so?"

"Forgot what time it was, forgot to take my meds until the kids reminded me." He winced. "Then I made sure to take a double dose, and they got quiet again, but -- " his voice broke.

"Here, sit down." I pulled out the comfortably padded chair by the desk for him and he slumped into it gratefully.

"I'm not sure how much more of this I can take, Tyr."

I nodded, as much to keep him talking as any other reason.

"It's not the pain -- I'm good with pain, you know that -- it's the not-knowing that kills me." He gazed up at me, his eyes red and damp. "You know about that, too."
"Yes. I do." I moved behind him. "I can't do anything about the not-knowing, but I know something about dealing with pain. Lean forward a little." I rested my hands on his shoulders and started to rub, carefully, letting my fingertips seek out the knots and stresses. "I know that when one is in pain, any muscle tension anywhere in the body will add to the discomfort. However, relaxing the muscles with any pleasant experience will cause the release of endorphins within the body, which will relieve pain."

"Yeah. I've read about that. There's a whole study in the ship's library on humor and pain relief, and even a discussion of which societies have a sense of humor that's more suited to different kinds of funny stuff." He leaned forward, resting his forearms against the desk and laid his head on them.

"Humor is one route." I rubbed more deeply into the muscle and he groaned. "If you'll take your shirt off this will be easier for me and feel better for you."

"That's the best offer I've had all day. All week. Maybe even all year. Who knows how long a year is in space? Years are calculated on planets." He unbuttoned the shirt and slid it off over his head to drop on the floor. I calculated the tension in his spine and the angle of his head as I rubbed down the spinal column and out along the curving shape of ribs. He must have been in considerable pain, well beyond what conventional pain relief would cover, unless he'd elected not to take any.

"Have you eaten this evening?"

Harper moved his head from side to side. "Forgot."

"Pain pills?"

"You got me there. I did take 'em, but not early enough."

"I can tell. Your back muscles are tied up like a nest of Hyrconian rats."

"And you know how much we all love Hyrconian rats." He groaned; I'd hit a sore spot.

I tested it and teased it out slowly, hampered by the angle at which I was working. "It would be easier for us both if you would lie on the bed."

He sat back up in the chair, stretching a little. "Yeah. I can do that. I'm not even going to make a crack about whether your intentions are honorable."

"Go ahead." He had to feel more at ease with me or this would never help him.

"Well, then." He flopped back on the bed, leaned up on his elbows with surprise. "Oooh. Soft. And here I thought you were all Spartan or something."

"Comfort is a fine thing; it need not lead to decadence."

"Not unless it's done right." He snickered. "So, how honorable are your intentions toward me, Tyr Anasazi out of Victoria by Barbarossa?"

I drew a breath. By invoking my parents' names, he'd made this a formal question, whether he realized it or not. I would have to make him a formal reply. The Nietzschian laws of formal exchange are strict on this matter: a formal question requires an answer that is truthful, whose words cannot on their face be lies, though there is room for prevarication if that is called for. It does not matter whether the answer is made to another of my race or to anyone else; failure to reply to a formal question truthfully is a violation of honor -- and a Nietzschian respects his own honor as he respects his will to survive.
Did he know what he was asking of me? I thought not.

"My intentions, sir, are most honorable. I would like to relieve your pain, and I will do nothing that you do not request or approve. Will that suffice?"

"Oh, yeah. And what's this calling me 'sir' business? This is me, Tyr, not Bolivar Rastaman or whatever he calls himself." He lay back and rolled over, stretching on the dark red blanket and crimson sheets and wincing at the cramped muscles.

"Are you speaking of Charlemagne Bolivar, or Napoleon Rastafarian?" I sat on the bed next to him and began to stroke his back slowly, using the palm of my hand to warm his stiff muscles. Nietzscheans have a slightly higher average body temperature than non-enhanced humans; I've been told in the past that the touch of my hand pleased because it was always warm.

"Probably the first guy. Who's Napoleon Rastafarian?"

"I have no idea," I said, chuckling a little. "I made him up. There's nobody by that name in my people's histories."

"Cool. Hey, let's just create the guy for the hell of it. Invent his history, what he looks like. Oooh. More there."

"You have but to ask," I said, rubbing lower on his back until I reached the bony plate of his pelvis. Without my asking, he loosened the top of the trousers and pushed them aside so that I could reach the tensed muscles more easily.

Such lovely muscles. His body was compact but deceptively strong from wrestling with machinery. I had seen how strong he was when I had fallen in battle, stunned by a blow to the head, and watched him knock aside two Magog so that I could get back on my feet. He had never let his terror get the best of him then. His skin looked pale against my bed, but healthy. I slid my hands up his back to work on his shoulders and shoulder blades again, and heard a soft sigh of relaxation.

"I don't want to be, um, inappropriate, but my legs are cramping too."

"It's a side effect of the double dose you took; it affects all major muscle groups. Go ahead, take them off if you want." I sat up out of his way, and he rolled over to slide out of the clothes completely and push them over the side of the bed.

"Not trying to come on to you, Tyr, though ..." His glance slid over me like water. I spent a brief millisecond in thanksgiving to my ancestors and their ability at genetic modification.

"I know. Lie down again." I refrained from touching him until he lay prone, his tortured legs within reach. I started at the buttocks, rubbing out the stiffness and soreness, working my way down the tensing muscles.

"You're a godsend. Where'd you learn to do this?"

"I worked on Kotyra for a while."

His brows knitted as he thought. "Kotyra." The reference registered. "You were a --"

"The accepted term is courtier, the masculine variant of courtesan. Yes. It was a long time ago." His calf knotted under my hand and I warmed it for a moment before continuing.

"I thought you said you were in the mines."
"This was after that." I was working my way down to his feet now; I pulled a fold of the blanket across his back so that he would not chill. "About a year after I escaped from the mine, I was captured by a slave trader at the Daligon Pass, and he sold me to a ... trainer, who sold me to a noble house on Kotyra."

"Does the house still exist?" His voice held a hint of humor. "Or did you take it apart beam from splinter when you left?"

"How well you know me." I felt, rather than heard, him snicker. "It exists. The family was kind to me, comparatively." I smiled, remembering. "I seduced the daughter, who helped me escape. That might have caused problems, but I also had taken the time to seduce the mother as well, so she took care to hide any evidence of my leaving." I shook my head to move my dangling hair from my face; it had come untied somewhere along the way. "There was a war a few years later; I don't know if they survived. I was in another galaxy by then."

"So, what did you learn from the Kotyrans?"

"A few things," I admitted. "I learned to distinguish different races by their musculature; many may appear human, but there are ways to tell the difference if one can see part of a body. Changes in the direction of joints, for instance, or the alignment of muscles along the spine." I was moving back up his legs again, paying more attention to his inner thighs, sliding my hands up slowly to his almost-parted buttocks, letting them move ever so slightly apart as I passed them. Yes, there was a shift, a small moan from him, barely louder than a breath. He would be pleased, then, perhaps ...

I put the thought aside. This was for him, not me.

"If you want to roll over, I'll work on the front as well."

"Ohh. This feels so good. If you ever need to go back to being a mercenary, you might set up as a masseur as a sideline." He rolled slowly, luxuriating, and flopped loosely onto his back, his face blissful.

"What, you don't think I could make it as a masseur, with mercenary jobs as a sideline?" I shuttered my eyes, grateful that I had retained my trousers. Form-fitting though they might be, they would hide my state for some time, at least.

"You, Tyr, could make it as anything you wanted." His eyes were closed but his mouth curved deliciously. I ran my hands across his chest and ribs, checking for tension. "Would you be a little careful there? Don't want to wake them."

"Show me where they are, so I don't disturb them."

He pointed them out: there and there, a cluster a little further over, another one down and a couple of separate ones, all wrapped around organs between his breastbone and his pelvic bone.

Thirteen little biological time charges, thirteen harbingers of death and destruction. If thought could have slain them, they would already have been dead weeks before from my concentrated ill will alone.

I ran my hands down his flanks and he relaxed again. "That's fine," he murmured. "Anything."

"Your legs are still tight. I'll work on them." And I did, kneading the quadriceps on each side and loosening it so that it no longer tried to bend the femur in uncomfortable ways. I slid my hands up again, dodging the areas he'd indicated, to run my palms across the front of his shoulders, down his arms one by one, to pull gently on his fingers until he was limp in my bed. The one area I had
ignored, his cock, lay half-aroused against his thigh.

I rested my hands gently against his face, warming it, feeling the prickle of unshaven skin against me. His eyes fluttered open.

"That's so good, Tyr."

"Do you want more from me?" I could not, would not go into the formal mode again if I could help it. "I don't know how risky it might be, but I am willing to try." I slid one hand downward, stopping before it reached his groin.

He studied me a moment. "Is this part of being a shieldbrother that they left out of the manual?"

"You could say that." I waited, the other hand still cupping his face.

"It wasn't something I thought I could ask," he said, as if that explained everything. "I mean, you being who you are. I didn't think I'd have a chance if I did ask."

"You underestimate yourself, as usual." But I had to be certain, beyond doubt, that he understood and agreed. "What would please you?"

"Just about anything. I, um, don't know if active sex is going to wake them, though it shouldn't. I mean, more than what I could do with Rosie, here." He waved a hand. "If you need it to be official, okay. Yes. Da. Ja wohl. Si. Domo arigato."

I smiled at him, solemnly, my own fears subsiding. "It would be a honor. No," I rested a finger lightly on his lips, "don't object to my words. It is an honor to be here with you, and it pleases me to do what will relieve your pain." I dared not say any more. Let him read between the words and the touches and conclude what he might.

"Only if I get to reciprocate." Harper's voice went lower, sweeter.

"Later." I stretched out near him on the big bed -- and sent thoughts of gratitude toward the genius who had equipped the Andromeda's crew quarters with oversized beds as a general practice -- and slid my hand down to cup him, to roll his scrotum in my palm tenderly, as his cock began to perk up. I leaned in to sniff and lick and lap, to caress his thighs and the soft space behind his balls, to listen for his sighs and his moans and learn, from them, what would most please him. I licked a finger and slid it between, to stroke across that tight round muscle and tease it gently, and felt him shiver and sigh, and with that I bent my head to him and began to lick the shaft and up around and across the glans, loving the feel of him in my hands, loving the taste of him on my tongue and in my throat.

I went slowly, for he was already relaxed and I did not want to negate the effect of an hour's massage, but I did not let up. I used every trick I'd ever learned in the schools of pleasure, both in my pride and on Kotyra, and from every bed I'd ever shared, to give him as much joy and sweetness as I knew how to do. I slid one slicked finger into him, slowly, carefully, while I took him with my mouth and my other hand, stopping only occasionally to lean across to bestow a stray caress or lick where he would least expect it, always avoiding the places where the hidden dangers slumbered. When I finally let him come, he came powerfully, tensing around my finger, flooding down my throat, and I closed my eyes and let him fill me with himself.

I came back to myself to find his hand in my hair, playing with a long strand. "How are you feeling?" I asked him softly, my cheek pillowed on his hip. His muscle had released my finger, but my hand still rested between his legs.

"Better than in a long time. I ... don't have words."
"None are necessary." He was shivering, a faint tremor marring the effects of afterglow. If he grew chilled, his muscles would tense again. "If you'll move over a little and get under the covers, you can stay."

"Thanks." He moved languidly, as if he'd turned to melted butter, and I smiled, pleased with my work. "Don't think I could walk anywhere right now."

"There's no need." I settled in beside him, a hand on myself. I could take care of my own tension quietly, without awakening him; this, too, was something I'd learned on Kotyra.

"Mmmmm not fair to you, man. You didn't get anything." He sounded so sleepy I half fantasized that his words were slipping out and sliding onto the bed. "Sor-ry."

His hand reached for me and landed on the part of me he'd been most concerned about, below my own hand. His touch was cool to me, sweet, and I yearned for it even as I told him, "Later."

"No. Now." His eyes stayed shut, but he frowned. "Later, too, but right now I can do this. Hell, I usually do myself in my sleep these days, why not you?" His grip tightened on me, sliding, and I sighed and let him slide over to run a hand over me. His touch made me shiver, made me want to come so soon, just from the pleasure of his cool, strong hand on me. The muscles he strengthened as an engineer were different from the ones I used in fighting; his grip felt unlike mine, stronger in the palm, careful in the fingers. The glide of his hand up and down my crest delighted me.

I never expected him to slide down under the covers, to take me in his mouth as I had done for him. I grabbed the head of the bed, afraid that I would hurt him if I reached for him while he aroused me so, and he took me over and had his will of me, taking me into his mouth, into himself, his wet fingers finding my secret places, the sizzling touches that made my back arch against the sheets as I spent myself in him, throbbing, burning, glowing. He licked me clean afterward like a cat, slithered back up on the bed and opened one eye toward me as I waited for my heartbeat to subside so it no longer thundered in my ears.

"Do you kiss? I mean, do shieldbrothers kiss?" he asked. His hand slid up my abdomen to rest loosely against my breast.

"Yes," I told him, but I let him make the first move, coming up so that I could bring my arm down under his head and gather him in close. He kissed not like a woman or a warrior but inquisitively, tenderly, ending with a small lick of the tip of his tongue between my lips after his had just pulled away. "Go to sleep," I whispered to him as I felt myself drift off. My last thought was that I was glad beyond all reckoning that Dylan adhered to the ancient practice of suspending two days of work and calling it a weekend, regardless of the calendar, as tomorrow would be the beginning of mine, and Harper's.

***

I dreamed seldom since I came on board the Andromeda. Lately, when I did dream it was only rehashed images of the day's work, or nightmares of the Magog, which were more common that I wanted to admit. I had had too many of them to ignore before and during the time when Trance operated on me, and she had had to give me a drug to block them so that I could rest enough to heal.

"It's ridiculous," I growled at her. "I should not be unable to face my fears."

"No one is questioning your courage, Tyr," Trance said. "It's a matter of caring for your body. If you don't heal, you won't be able to get your revenge, and that's what you want, isn't it?"
Sometimes Trance could see entirely too much. I nodded, reluctantly.

"Will your drug impair my mind, remove my memories?" I had to ask her.

"Oh, no," she said, distress on her face. "It will only block the dreams. It's all right, Tyr, really. You're not losing a thing. They're not your dreams, they're theirs."

"Theirs." It took a moment for me to realize who she meant. "Theirs? They dream?"

She nodded. "I can't explain it, but that seems to be what's happening. I can sense it a little -- not as much as you can, but the scans show that when you're asleep and having a nightmare they're particularly ... active."

"Give me the drug." I held out a hand and she waved it aside and spray-injected it into my neck. "Thank you."

"Don't thank me until we're done." She bit her lip. "You'll need all your strength to get through this, every bit of it, and you'll have to help me with Harper because you -- you --"

"I know." I patted her shoulder. "You get me through this. I'll do the rest, whatever I can."

She did. It seemed as if it took years, though it was only days. I did not allow myself to sleep unless she drugged me, to keep the larvae's dreams from violating my mind the way their existence violated my body. And she was right. It required all my strength to survive, and the aid of two A.I.s to get around and regain my strength when I started to recover.

And then she'd had to wake Harper from stasis to tell him that, with what she'd learned from freeing me, she could not free him without killing him.

I could not sleep at all after that, seeing the look on his face when he understood what had happened, what would happen. I told myself that lying awake would not aid Harper in the slightest, but it took several days for me to be able to rest without thinking of it.

And I had not dreamed, or remembered that I dreamed, since then.

But as I lay in my own bed with Harper's head resting against my shoulder, I dreamed of my parents, Victoria and Barbarossa, at home when I was a child. They had not known I was there, reading by the window, as they sat in the garden behind our home, enjoying the evening's cool air and talking. I heard their voices, as if I were still a child, but this time I understood the words.

"What in the universe is Ariadne Tecumseh thinking, to allow Aelfric to bond with Suleimon Lionheart?" My father's voice rumbled in his chest, as it did when he was particularly annoyed though not angry. "It's a ridiculous maneuver. Kliopatra does not favor Aelfric at all. Does Ariadne think this will change her mind?"

"I doubt it," my mother said. "Ariadne's thinking of Aelfric's happiness. He would be miserable if he were to marry Kliopatra, and she would divorce him, and then he would have no status at all. With Suleimon, at least he has the status of shieldbrother."

"It's not enough for him. He's better than that. He deserves to be a husband and father, to know the joys that I know with you." He kissed her, his long light hair drifting across her black braids.

"Baro, listen. You, of all people, should know that it's wrong to force a marriage without affection, and Aelfric feels nothing for Kliopatra. I chose you for love; would you rather have had me choose Juarez Gautama, as my mother wished, for status?" Her voice was quiet. "Let him bond with the one
he has chosen, who has chosen him. His unhappiness will not advance the fortunes of Kodiak Pride, while his work with Suleimon may well bring us wealth and glory. He has a host of new inventions to show you, when you have the time, new thoughts on weaponry and battle tactics."

"Aelfric's quite the scholar. Very well, if this is what Ariadne wants I won't speak against it in council."

"But will you speak for it?" My mother, pushing again. Perhaps that is where I acquired the tendency to press my advantage.

"If you wish it, I'll speak for him. I can't begrudge the man his happiness when I have mine."

The dream faded, and I drifted, half asleep, remembering. Aelfric and Suleimon had been on an expedition, cruising the four moons of the next planet in search of rare minerals for their projects, when the Drago-Kazov stormed the Kodiak lands. They returned, in their light craft with its experimental weapons, and blew up half a dozen Drago-Kazov ships before their own ship was blown out of the sky. At the last moment they'd jettisoned to temporary safety on the far side of the planet, where they evaded capture by the Dragans long enough to harry the invaders with guerilla attacks from more experimental weaponry for four weeks. When they were captured, and paraded through the town in chains, I saw them from my own imprisonment in the van, and when Aelfric caught my eye he nodded, as if acknowledging the payment of a debt. They were executed the next day, and I'd wept for them, silently, thinking at sixteen that they were the last men of my pride who would ever look on me with kindness and friendship. The next day I had been sent to the mines...

I opened my eyes and stared at the ceiling, not even feeling the tears on my cheeks until they rolled down my face.

The warmth in my arms stirred, whimpered, and I held on and whispered soft words of comfort in the language of my childhood, foolish words, the words I'd missed hearing when my world was blown apart, the words I imagined Aelfric and Suleimon had whispered to one another as they hid from the Dragans in the hill caves where we'd played.

"Are you all right?" Harper's whisper brought me to consciousness, away from cold hill caves and lost hopes.

"Are you? I thought you were having nightmares."

"I was, but they went away because you were here." He touched my face and his hand came away wet. "What were you dreaming?"

"I saw my home again, while my family lived."

He nodded. "Good enough. Go back to sleep; you need the rest."

"So do you."

"Yeah, and your arm's got to be stiff, and I'm not as good at massage as you are. So you roll over and let me hold you for a while, and go back to sleep, all right?"

"All right." I rolled over, away from him, and rested my head on his outstretched arm, and he brushed my hair up onto the pillow out of the way and slid his other arm around me loosely, and we fell asleep again, as simply as that.

***
Harper was gone when I awoke, which didn't surprise me, though I should have felt him leave if he were still serving as my pillow. I listened and looked around, and found that he was not in my quarters, that the shower was dripping and that his clothes were gone. And that a cup of coffee and a note sat on my desk, waiting for me.

The coffee sat on a hotpad, a small device to keep it at its original temperature, in this case the precise one necessary for it to be perfectly drinkable without scorching. The note, in a precise engineer's lettering, said, "I owe you." and was unsigned.

I drank the coffee and didn't let myself think at all for a while. After, I showered and dressed, devoted myself to an hour's labor in the weight room and another hour of listening to an Akkhadian Opera Company version of the principal arias from Wagner's "Ring" cycle. I had been amazed that Andromeda carried it; it was one more treasure of the past that I had thought lost in the past three centuries of war.

The Andromeda may not always seem like a large ship, but she is relatively easy to be lost in if one wishes to be. I tired of the sounds of vibrato, and turned off the music. Restless, at last I slid my feet into shoes suited for running, and set off on a circuit of the ship at its widest point. By using certain passageways and floors, I could run ten kilometers without passing the same rooms twice. The path had the added benefit of keeping me out of the more used areas of the ship, but away from the cargo bay where my treasure was stored. It was safe there; that was all I needed to know at the moment. When I was ready, I would make my move, and not even Andromeda herself would be able to stop me.

But that was for another day. For now, I ran past the passageway leading to the cargo bay, rounded the corner and kept going, out of the way, letting my muscles tell me whether they were still in the shape I preferred.

When I finished my run, panting a little, I stopped beside the basketball court Dylan had set up, where he and Beka were playing an impromptu game. Dylan was fast, I knew, but Beka was faster, though her reach was less than his. He won by only two baskets, one of which he snatched away from her for himself.

"Stupid game," she said with a smile, wiping her forehead. "Ridiculous. Now, if you challenged me to steal the ball, or substitute a fake ball for the real one, that I could do."

"No, you couldn't," I said from the sidelines. "You'll never find a replica as beat-up and scratched as the one Dylan has."

"This is true." Beka raised the ball to eye level and began to count the number of scratches on its surface.

"You two are too much." Dylan drained a water bottle and wiped his mouth on his wrist. "It's probably a good thing you weren't here at the start, Tyr, because I wasn't in a mood to lose today."

"Oh, is that why I lost? Because you 'weren't in a mood to lose'?

"No, you lost because I'm taller."

"This, I must reluctantly admit, is true," I put in.

"You stay out of it," both of them chorused at me.

I raised a hand. "I'm gone." But I smiled as I left. All might not be well in the world, but it was certainly better if Dylan and Beka were on good terms. What could I say? Our improbable crew had
After showering and changing into work clothes, I wandered toward the galley to see what Trance had brought out of the hydroponic garden for the day. She had begun to harvest the fruit and vegetables there on a schedule she couldn't explain, except to say that the food wanted to be picked then and would be unhappy if it were left to grow. I didn't care if she sang it to sleep; the little purple girl grew the best vegetables I'd had in years, and I was willing to cook whatever she sent, whether I'd seen it before or not. Today it was beets, parsnips, carrots, four kinds of greens that would have to be used within a day, and ripe pears from the absurd tree in the corner that she insisted on naming Eden in honor of what she said was its original home. I found the ship's equivalent of sirloin tips in the cooler, and decided on a meat and vegetable stew, a green salad, and pears poached in wine.

I was part way through preparation when Harper wandered in. "Hey, you're cooking. Can I watch? I might learn to do something besides grilling burgers."

I raised an eyebrow as I scrubbed the parsnips and carrots, which were too tender to peel. "You only grill burgers? I suppose there are worse things. You could be frying them."

"Frying? Is that like cooking? Oh, no, no, the Harper does not wander into the realms of cuisine without a guide, or at least an armed guard. Which, of course, I've got at the moment, since you're always armed."

I snorted. "If you wanted to make yourself useful, you'd cut the meat for me."

"Sorry, no can do. It's the weekend, so I'm supposed to be decorative instead of useful. Besides, I've already been useful enough; I'll show you later on." I raised an eyebrow, but I let him sit and watch, and after a while he said, "You know, we never did finish talking about Napoleon Rastafarian."

"We didn't, did we? I'm sorry. If I'd realized you were that interested in him I wouldn't have done anything to distract you from the subject."

"You're a jerk. You know that, don't you?"

"Didn't they ever tell the reason why you don't call a Nietzschian names?"

"Um. No. Is this something I should worry about?" He rested a hip against the opposite side of the counter, watching me slice the meat neatly into identical chunks, a little larger than bite-sized.

"Okay, I'll bite. Why don't you call a Nietzschean names?"

"Because he already has enough without them." I let myself smile at him, and watched him beam in return. "Each of us has at least three and usually five or six more family names besides the ones we are known by, to help us remember our ancestry. Those of highest caste and longest lineage, not to mention greatest wealth, have more, of course."

"How many do you think Charlemagne Bolivar has? A dozen?"

"Probably. One's name is one's fortune and treasure."

"Ah. Gotcha. So, let me see. Napoleon Rastafarian was born to the Clan of the Rugrat, in the Year of the Lily-Bellied Porpoise, and his parents were ..." He watched me expectantly. "Lucy and Ricky. No, don't ask -- it's an obscure historical reference. Trust me on it. He grew up in Rugrat-Chihuahua Pride and when he was old enough he -- what did he do next?"

By now I was laughing, not just at the ridiculous names he was coming up with, but at the look on Beka's face as she came into the galley and heard Harper ridiculing Nietzschean culture. I sobered at
once, glared at Harper, who had the sense to shut his mouth, and asked her, "Would you care to stay for dinner? I can make enough for three."

"Um, no thanks. I'm just getting a quick snack before I go on shift." She opened a bottled drink for herself. "Did I just hear you laughing, Tyr?"

"You think I'm incapable of humor?"

"I would never say that." A quick swallow from the bottle and she put it down on the counter while she reached for a prepackaged meal, the sort of thing I would consider good-quality battle rations but that she evidently liked. "Your sense of humor is just a bit ... different than ours. It's a cultural thing."

"Speak for yourself, babe," Harper informed her.

"Some things are innately humorous," I said serenely, dumping the meat into a cooking pot with the hard vegetables and a cup of red wine. "I happen to think that Napoleon Rastafarian of the Rugrat-Chihuahua Pride is one of them."

"Napoleon Rastafarian? This isn't a real person, is it?" Beka threw me an amazed glance as she retrieved her dinner from the microwave. "You're putting me on."

"Well, actually, I invented him. I figure it never hurts to have a spare Nietzschian around when you need one." Harper buffed his nails on his shirt and smiled sweetly.

"Ah. An alias. Well, I'm all in favor of keeping a few around for the fun of it. Go to it, guys!" She picked up her food and left.

"See? That didn't go badly." Harper leaned on the counter. "You could even say she gave us her blessing."

"Don't exaggerate," I told him, but under it all I was pleased. "She gave her blessing to Napoleon Rastafarian, that's all."

"It's something. We can put him together and then, if we ever need him, we've got him."

"And what would you do with him?" I looked up from where I was drying lettuce and tearing it for the bowl. The glee on his face made me pause. "Oh, no. I am not going to impersonate a hypothetical Nietzschian from a nonexistent pseudopride."

"C'mon. Just think about it. We could have a whole lot of fun with it at the gambling tables at Denali Station. You, me, Trance for luck ... we could clean them out."

"And we wouldn't be alive for an hour to enjoy our winnings." I sighed. "Once, long ago, I won a fortune at those tables."

"And then what happened?"

"My father told me I had to invest it wisely, so I did. I spent a little on myself, bought presents for my family, and then I gave the rest to some friends who were making experimental weapons."

"And?"

"Six months later, the Dragans attacked."

"Oh, that sucks meteorites." Harper perched on a stool, across from me, watching me compose a salad dressing from whatever dried herbs I could find. When we reached the next trading post, I
would have to see if I could find any herb seeds for Trance to grow in the hydroponics garden.

He folded his hands on the counter like a good child, but his face was sympathetic. "And your friends didn't make it?"

"On the contrary. Their 'experimental' craft disposed of six Dragan warships before it was eliminated. They survived and waged guerilla warfare for a month, causing untold damage to the Dragan occupation force, before they were captured and executed."

"Still. Sheesh. No fun. Hey, what's that?" He examined a small, unmarked jar.

"Mustard seed."

"You mean, the stuff they grind up and you get mustard? Oooh. Can we grow it on the ship?"

"Perhaps, though this seed is too old for that. Should I add it to the list of herbs and spices I'm thinking of getting at the next station?"

"Definitely. I'd love to see what it looks like, growing."

"What what looks like, growing?" Trance asked as she wandered in.

It was dinnertime, obviously. Good thing I hadn't planned a tete-a-tete.

"Mustard seed. See?" Harper held the bottle out to her. "You can make mustard from it."

"I see. And you'd like me to grow some for you?" She held the bottle up to the light, considering it. "This is too old; it won't grow at all. I can look for some fresher seed when we get to Wenzed; it's on our route and it's much better than Denali Station for living things. And if you've got other things you'd like me to grow, just let me know and get me the money and I'll see what I can do." She handed the bottle back, holding onto it a moment after Harper reached out his hand. "As long as they're not illegal."

"Trance. Would I do that?" Harper grabbed the jar and she let go, grinning at him. "I promise that whatever I ask you to grow will be legal in ... some domain, all right."

"All right, but if there's trouble, you're the one who will have to deal with Dylan. I'm just the gardener."

"Are you staying for dinner?" I asked her. There was still time to add another few chunks of meat to the stew.

"No, but thanks for asking. I just wanted something to drink." Trance took a bottle from the pantry, and followed that with a handful of crnaps, a type of Oligarian pastry. "And something to nibble on."

"You sure you don't want me to check that over first, make sure it doesn't nibble back?" Harper asked.

"Oh, I think I can handle it. Bye." And she wandered back out again.

Harper turned back to me. "Sometimes she can be so ..."

"Purple."

"Yes. If we were on a planet, I'd swear she'd be about to go and tell someone that we were seen together."
"Who could she tell?" I contemplated the pears, and compromised by peeling them in stripes, to retain at least some of the surface color. "Here." I handed him some strips to nibble while I finished cooking.

"Oooh. Thanks. Good stuff. Yeah, I know. Who could she tell? Beka was already in here, Rev wouldn't care, Dylan ... well, it's none of his business. And I doubt that Rommie cares, either."

"Oh, I've already been warned about you," I told him, hiding my smile.

" Warned?" His eyebrows rose.

"Warned to behave myself where The Harper is concerned."

He smirked. "The Harper thanks you, but The Harper is perfectly capable of taking care of himself."

"I'm well aware of it," I assured him. "You don't think they could keep me from anything I really wanted to do, do you?"

Harper shook his head, blond hair flying. "No way. I'm kind of glad of that, myself."

We ate at one of the tables near the window, watching the ever-changing starscape, and talked idly of the work Harper was doing on his latest project, and of a movie he'd tried to persuade Beka to let him borrow to show me.

"It's about two guys escaping from a frozen prison on an old-fashioned train. You'd love it!"

"This sounds intriguing. Tell me more."

"Oh, it's very Nietzschian, trust me. But Beka wants the moon for it, or at least an asteroid or two."

I handed him his share of the poached pears. "How large an asteroid?"

"She wants me to do extra mineral scans on the next three we come to, probably tomorrow, so she can see if there is any extra bergyllim on them."

"Interesting. You should, of course, do the scans. Bergyllim is a useful substance. How do you like the pears?"

"Mmmmm. Wonderful. My mouth is having orgasms right now." He caught my eye and blushed. I ignored it but let myself smile just a little.

After supper, as we cleared the dishes, he said, "Think you could stop by the shop later on? I've got something to show you."

"In an hour or so?"

"Fine. Great. Stupendous. See you then. And thanks very much for dinner."

"It was my pleasure."

***

Nietzschean culture recognizes several distinct modes of discourse, forms of speech for which certain vocal tones and manners are required: formal, philosophical, civil and casual. Only the intimate tone is not taught in school; one is expected to learn that one at home, the rhythm of speech among family and lovers. The casual is, of course, for trusted friends, but could be stretched to include trusted
business partners, if such existed at the moment.

The formal mode is employed only for matters concerning one's honor, such as contract negotiations, challenges of war, declarations of personal intent. If the formal were used within a discussion in another mode, it signified that the user was speaking absolute truth as far as he knew it, with no attempt to lie, and if another Nietzschian were present, he would be required to acknowledge this. We were trained to remember with eidetic precision any encounter that included the formal mode, and I retained that training as it stood me in good stead when dealing with Andromeda's captain. Dylan might not have understood much about my people, but he did understand the implications of formal speech.

One would use the civil mode for ordinary business, whether with our own kind or with outsiders. It was polite and courteous but presented a blank wall to any attempting to read expressions or vocal tone. It was also excellent for use in threats, though we were generally taught to warn once and then act rather than threaten; however, threats were much preferred to assassinations on the schoolground. Much time was devoted to it and to the philosophical; an educated adult should be familiar with all philosophical concepts throughout history and be able to debate in at least three of the schools of philosophy at the graduate level.

All this was in addition to the necessary skills of life: self-defense, battle, warfare, history, survival skills (including cooking) and pleasure, which also included the arts and literature. What humans would call science was included in general living skills taught at home, unless it was part of one of the other areas. Every child was taught to navigate, to understand the mechanics of a ship and to be able to adjust them, to be able to find his way in the territory of familiar space with or without a map. At least, that is how it was with Kodiak Pride. I have no knowledge of how other prides brought up their children. From what I saw upon the Orca Pride asteroid, during my brief marriage, our way was far superior.

Aboard Andromeda, I found that I used the formal most often with Dylan and on occasion with Rev, and the civil and casual with the others. I have attempted to engage the philosophical mode with Rev, but his insistence upon seeing all things as aspects of the Way hindered our discussion. I missed the philosophical mode, but I was not fool enough to want to find other Nietzschians simply to discuss the thoughts of Hume, Kant, Nietzsche and Peravir of Thrasis.

I have not, yet, used the intimate mode at all, though I came closer to it while Harper lay on my bed under my hands than at any other time in my life.

***

Harper had left the door open for me, and I walked in without announcement. He turned, grinned at me, a little anxiously, I thought, and pressed a button to close the door behind me.

"Privacy. Right."

I nodded, hoping to reassure him. "Privacy is good."

"Yeah. Well, um." He handed me something small and metallic, and stepped back to watch my reaction. "This is for you."

It was tiny, jeweled, exquisite, and looked like the sort of ornament one would wear on a ceremonial uniform, but I was uncertain of its function. Many of Harper's inventions appeared simpler than they were. "I'm honored. Hmm. It's a -- "
He had been bouncing in an agony of suspense, his brow furrowed. "It's to unlock the cargo bay where your box is, so you can get it whenever you want. And it doesn't look like a lock release, so Dylan shouldn't be suspicious if he sees it in your hand by accident."

My head snapped up and I stared at him. "Do you know what's in that box?"

"No. No. I didn't look. It was heavy and it got scarred up a bit by the Magog but it never opened, I'd swear it never was opened." He was backing away from me as if he expected me to hit him for presumption, when, instead, I felt so grateful I could have danced. "I checked. The locks and seals are still there. I made sure it was tight, and I covered it back up, the way you left it."

"I believe you." I took the two steps to reach him and grasped his shoulders to still him. "Thank you. Thank you."

He gazed up at me as he had the night before, and I threw aside any common sense I retained and leaned to kiss him. He opened, returning the kiss, his arms coming up to hold me too, briefly, before the kiss ended and we backed a step away from each other to return to a casual distance.

"I cannot tell you what this means to me." My voice had dropped half an octave, and my eyes felt damp. I tucked the precious bit of mechanism into a secure pocket, my hands almost shaking.

"I think I can guess." Harper put a hand on my arm. "I knew it was important, I didn't know it was this important."

"I don't know how to thank you for this." All the modes of discourse were deserting me when I needed them most. If I were to lapse into the formal, he would misunderstand, yet it was the only appropriate mode I could think of. Perhaps if I made my stance less formal he would understand. All this went through my mind in far less time than it takes to think of it logically; on such occasions logic deserts one, and one must rely upon instinct.

I sank to my knees before him -- I, who have knelt of my own will to no one, including the Kotyrans or the Dragans who slaughtered Kodiak Pride. "I told you before that I was in your debt because we are shieldbrothers and you saved me in battle --"

"No ..." he murmured. I reached up to touch my fingers to his lips and he was silent.

"-- I tell you now, Seamus Zelazny Harper, that I, my entire future and the future of Kodiak Pride are in your debt, for keeping what is most precious to the Nietzschian people from desecration by the Magog and for finding the means to restore it to me unharmed."

His eyes shifted; the thoughts must have come to him within an instant. "Omigod. That's the body, isn't it?"

I acknowledged his guess. "Drago Museveni, the founder of my people. The Progenitor."

"Get up, man. Really. You don't have to do this." His hand was on my shoulder, and when I looked up at his face he was almost crying. "Please. I did it because it was right, that's all. I couldn't stand to see dead Magog on anything that was yours."

I came to my feet. "You know something of our history, don't you?"

He nodded slowly. "I know that Museveni's the closest thing you have to a god. He's going to come again, right?"

"So we hope. When that happens, whoever holds the body of Drago Museveni will rule the
"Because that's the only way to compare the genes accurately." Harper blinked. "Look, I shouldn't have to tell you this. You're a Nietzschean. You shouldn't be kneeling to me. You shouldn't be kneeling to anyone. I mean, I didn't do that much."

"Yes, you did." A thought passed my mind. "Would you wish to take it back?"

He shook his head. "No. Dylan's wrong to keep you from what's yours. I know why he's doing it; he thinks that's the only thing that'll keep you on his side now that you've got it on the ship. But if that were all that was keeping you, you wouldn't still be here, would you?"

"You know me very well, I think."

"Yeah, well, that's how it goes..." He shifted from one foot to the other.

"How are you feeling today? Are you all right?"

"Are you kidding? Better than all right. I feel like I could fight old Fire-eyes with one hand behind my back." He smiled at me, that sunny smile that says all's right in the world, though the smile leaked away at the edges. "Well, actually I'm a little tired, but I haven't had any more leg cramps, and that's good, right?"

"That's certainly good. But you needn't be in pain to visit me." I glanced away, so that he would not feel that I was pressing him for an answer. "If you wish, that is."

"Oh, I wish, all right. If you do, that is."

I felt a cold lump in my chest start to melt and dissipate. "Do you need any more proof of my intentions?"

"No, but you might want some proof of mine. I'm told I can be fairly dangerous in a tight corner." He slid into his cocky everyday stance, the light in his eyes the only thing that told me he meant more than the words would say.

"Oh, I'm sure you can. Perhaps you'd agree to show me some of your better maneuvers at some time in the near future? I'm always willing to acquire new techniques for close-order combat."

"Or non-combat?"

Why did my voice deepen so suddenly around him, so often? "Especially non-combat."

"Hey, you want me to spar with, I'm your man."

His words took my breath away. I managed the only word in return that could begin to express the feelings within. "Why?" It wasn't even in the casual mode any more.

"Why? Because you're not just another pretty boy with muscles. Or am I going to get whomped for even calling you that?"

I shook my head, laughter arising within me. "What you'll get is something for another place, one with more ... cushioning. Why would you think you'd be 'whomped' for saying that? It's no more than the truth."

"Well, because it is the truth."
"Don't you know by now that Nietzschians hold the truth in high regard? So high, in fact, that we're extremely cautious about how it's employed."

"I believe I've noticed that." He glanced around the shop. "I've got a bit more to do here, but I'd look forward to, um, sparring with you later on."

"I'll be waiting." I bowed to him in the grand manner, with a smile on my face that anyone else on the ship would have been amazed to witness, and he returned the bow with a matching smile as I left.

***

Lightheaded. It was like drinking too much good champagne, this feeling, or eating too much stolen lilioli fruit on Kotyra. It was as if I could fly, all on my own, without ship or power packs. It was dangerous, so dangerous, this giddy feeling, but I treasured it for its rarity all the way back to my quarters.

I laundered the sheets and replaced them -- those were my best, the ones that would go through the ship's instant cleaners and be fresh within five minutes instead of an hour -- and changed from my work clothes into something more suitable for lounging. I brought out the food I had available, and the drink I'd put aside at various times, and I picked up a copy of an ancient novel to read, one that Beka had found in an antique shop and loaned to me with the condition that if I harmed it I would have to replace it. But even the vicissitudes of a ritual-bound slaveholding society at war could not keep me from anticipating the evening.

One should not grant room to anticipation, for it will prove an unwieldy guest.

Still, when he arrived, I felt almost nervous, far more than any trained warrior should ever admit to. Last night he had come to me for help. Why was he coming tonight? To share pleasure? To find help again? Or for some other reason, of which I had no inkling?

I let him in and closed the door. Perhaps I could not truly lock us away from the outside world, but I did what I could; I had set the computerized room controls to observe the ambient temperature and humidity only, and to adjust for what I'd come to consider comfortable. It would not scan for human activity, nor analyze it, unless the programming I'd set were to be overruled by Dylan himself.

Harper looked me up and down and blinked. "Fancy threads. Elegant?"

"You like them?" The clothing was nothing special, only the sort of lounging garb that had been worn in my pride's lost culture: a loose, unbelted robe over a pair of loose trousers, both of them silk. Unlike some other Nietzschians, I believed that wearing comfortable clothes was practical, and not unmanly.

"Oh, yeah. The colors do good things for you, definitely, and the style " He whistled. "Can I touch?"

His fingers wiggled.

"If you wish." I held still and he traced the brocade embroidery and the jacquard weaving in the fabric itself that shifted color as the direction of the light varied. His touch felt light, almost evanescent, and I shivered slightly at it. I shivered again as his hand moved beyond the edge of the robe onto my chest and skimmed the edge of the right areola. The nipple there hardened instantly.

"I've, um, got to ask you something," Harper said.

"Ask anything you want."

"Really?"
"Yes."

He hesitated, and I began to wonder if he was about to request a treatise on Nietzschian sexual practices when he said, "Why do you have red sheets and blankets?"

"It's symbolic," I said solemnly. "I sleep well on the blood of my enemies."

"Ohhhhhh, right." But he was smiling. "Really? You know that's deeply twisted in so many ways."

"Actually, I just like red."

"Okay. I can go with that." And he leaned forward and started to lick the other nipple.

It was a good thing god was already dead, because I was certain this much pleasure could not have been had in an orthodox afterlife.

"Seamus --"

"Ssh," he admonished me. "You had first dibs last night. Now it's my turn. Lie down, please." His eyes widened. "You called me Seamus. Most of the time I only hear that when someone's going to yell at me."

"I promise I won't yell at you in that name unless it's a life-and-death situation. Did you take your medicine?"

"Yes, Tyr. Bossy Nietzschian."

I lay down. "I am at your disposal, sir."

"Now, that's what I want to hear."

Had I been without sight, or hearing, or sense of smell, I would have known Harper was unique simply from his touch.

Nietzschian women are aggressive, sexually voracious, wonderfully so. One matches a woman, one overawes her with skill. One enjoys one's lovemaking with a Nietzschian woman as one enjoys battle, because it is dangerous and calls forth the height of one's abilities. As a youth, with other boys, or in the Sylphydia, one was often clumsy or gauche, though tenderness was not unknown, but it was always clear that the matter was an exchange: one would receive what one was willing to give, and reciprocity was important.

When Harper touched me, I could feel the reverberation of his fingers on my skin to the marrow of my bones. This was not reciprocity or exchange, but pure gift, something that was supposed to be impossible in the life that we knew.

He brought me off quickly the first time, too quickly, and I felt my face warm with embarrassment, but he looked pleased, gratified at his efforts, smiled at me and rubbed his cheek against my thigh. I slid my hand down from his head to his shoulder and back, finding no knots in his muscles, only warm satiny skin. When I pulled him up next to me on the pillow to kiss, he came readily to my lips, but he was aching for more and my recovery time is not measured in seconds. So I practiced tadronssich, the art of bringing about orgasm with kissing alone, and soon he climbed up to lie on me, his muscles tighter, working, and I anchored him with my hands and felt his ass clench and move, the strong muscles beautiful under my fingers as I explored his mouth, his neck, and the curl
of his ears.

***

Nietzschean males are noted for their sexual stamina. I was unaware that unenhanced human males could rival us in that area. I have determined to continue my research, in order to achieve a better understanding of cultural biology that could surely benefit my people. Of course, the sample size is small, but greater depth of analysis can be achieved with a small sample than with a larger survey.

It's possible, of course, that I'm only using this as a rationalization for doing what I wish to do. Self-examination of motives will only go so far. Beyond that, one must act.

It is also possible that I'm in danger of losing myself over one nonenhanced human. One must acknowledge that this danger exists, but it is best observed from a distance I am unable to achieve at the moment.

***

"Do you want this?"

His hand stroked me, the thumb rolling softly across the glans.

"Ever since I saw you in that black leather outfit. Do you have any idea what that does for you?"

I chuckled softly. "Some idea, yes. It's also the most practical everyday combat gear I own."

"Hey, I'm just delighted to get you out of the chain mail. Kissing through that is scary."

My hand slid lower, fingers seeking. His quick gasp told me I'd reached my goal. My fingertips felt warmth, tightness and slippery moisture.

"So I prepped. Don't kill me for it."

"Oh, I won't."

He went to hands and knees and I moved behind him, carefully. My arm spikes were as retracted as possible, but I did not want to chance any accidents. When I entered him, he arched his back and sighed, and suppressed the smallest possible wriggle. We went slowly, his breathing my cue, and I played with his nipples to distract him. Apparently my hair distracted him as well.

"It's like being hit with a really soft flogger," he murmured.

"You play those games?"

"Sometimes. Not very often. Only when ... it's not real."

"I understand." And I did. One would not willingly play at such games unless the actuality of slavery or mistreatment were impossible within the circumstances.

(I had, when I was a courtier, been beaten in the bedroom for displeasing my owner. He had decided to make an example of me for the edification of the other courtiers and courtesans, who had been summoned to watch. At times the sensation of the soft leather strap, doubled to make it a punishment rather than a pleasure, and used again and again on the same area, was still tangible; that dream would wake me shivering in the dark, and achingly hard ... the part of the brain that turns certain varieties of pain into pleasure was enhanced by my ancestors. This is another thing not spoken of, especially where outsiders are concerned.)
Harper was around me, holding me in warmth, so close that our balls brushed against each other, warm, soft, solid.

I braced one hand on the bed and held him close with the other arm. "Let yourself go; I'll hold you," I whispered in his ear, licking the back of its outer rim, and I leaned back slowly and rose so that I was kneeling, holding him on my lap. The hand that had been against the bed came up to stroke him, to toy with him as I pleased, to wrap around his length and surround him in the warmth of my fingers as he surrounded me.

His head came back against my shoulder as his knees found support on the bed. "Wow. You have good ideas."

"You talk too much," I said roughly, and began to jerk him, to make him move while I held still. He rose and fell, writhing, around me, in my hands, moaning with pleasure. His hands moved on my thighs, stroking, clenching. When he spent himself, spurting onto the sheets, clenching around me, he nearly brought me with him, but it was not my time yet. He stretched back in my arms, turned my head and opened my lips with his tongue, softly then roughly.

"The next time we do that, I want to face you," he breathed in my ear. "I want to see your face when you come."

"Your wish is my command." We disentangled ourselves briefly and he lay back against the pillows. I moved in between his parted legs, which wrapped around my waist as soon as we were joined again. "How would you have me?"

"This one's for you." His face shone bright and trusting. He stroked me and pinched my nipples gently. "I can take it."

I reset my angle, so that his pleasure would not be neglected as I took mine, and drove into him, slowly but with strength, with control, and he moaned and pulled my head down to his. "Let go. You won't hurt me. That's what the legs are for. If it starts to hurt I'll tighten them." His tongue slid in and out of my mouth hard, in the rhythm of my strokes into him, and I felt a long deep shiver float over my skin. "Trust me." I arched my back and anchored my knees in the mattress and took him hard as I felt the piston drive of my heart inside his, the same rhythm, the same rhythm, and when I spent, drenched with sweat, and collapsed on top of him, he took my head in his hands and licked the drops of salt from my eyelids, from the corners of my mouth, then held me for a long, long time, even after we had slipped apart.

My back muscles, buttocks and thighs had worked themselves to aching and now lay limp. He had not tightened his legs around me at all.

***

Another physical enhancement that my ancestors determined would increase one's chances of survival was increased memory. I have, when necessary, eidetic memory for whatever I see or read, as well as aural memory that eliminates the need for a recorder if necessary.

But I also have enhanced physical memory, body memory. My body actively recalls everything it has ever felt; if I think of something pleasant, it is as if I am experiencing it again. Fortunately, we are also all taught control of appearance from our earliest years, so that the record of our passions would not be legible on our faces and in our ways of standing and moving unless we wish it so.

***
I awoke as he was dressing, quietly and quickly. He leaned down to kiss me. "I'm on shift in half an hour; gotta get a shower and fast food."

"Go. Be well."

I lay abed, listening to his rapid light footsteps disappear into the constant minor hum of the ship, before I threw myself out of bed and set about the same tasks, plus a few more. Clean sheets, for one thing, for we had brought into the bed the food I'd set out for us and, as expected, a few things had spilled. I may be trained to endure much, but I would rather avoid crumbs in the bed sheets.

The key he'd given me still lay securely in its secret pouch in my clothing, as near to my skin as it could be without discomfort. It was tiny, far smaller than most of the anti-locks I'd seen, and resembled nothing so much as an ornament. If I should lose it on the ship, the first place I'd have to look for it would be Beka's ears or Trance's hair, which would necessitate more explanation than I felt I wanted to provide.

Dylan met me in the hall outside the galley, with the look on his face that meant he already felt as if large reptiles were snapping at his back. "Oh, Tyr. Good. We need to go over the security precautions for the conference on board next month."

I nodded, my usual procedure for dealing with an anxious client. It's hard, even now, to think of myself as being allied with as ancient and straitlaced a military organization as the High Guard, though if all the officers were like him it might have been an interesting place. I preferred to consider myself to be on an extended contract with him, regardless of whatever he thinks of the situation.

"Do you have any specific concerns, other than having invited Charlemagne Bolivar to attend?"

"Actually, I do." He handed me a pad. "I've itemized them there; probably over-organizing, but that never hurt."

I glanced at his list. Most of it was reasonable, considering the various races and cultures that would be represented. Of course we would increase surveillance of the entire ship for the duration, but since certain groups had different abilities to detect our surveillance we would have to be a little more creative than usual, to compensate for having a crew of five instead of three thousand.

"This seems reasonable. I'll get back to you later today."

"Good. Great." He headed toward the bridge but turned so that he was walking backward. "And whatever you cooked that had leftovers in the galley last night was great. Would you show me the recipe?"

"You liked it?" I raised an eyebrow. I hadn't thought Dylan would favor such a simple dish.

"Let's just say there aren't any leftovers any more." He grinned at me and patted his stomach.

"I'd be pleased to show you how it's done."

"Wonderful." And he was off toward the bridge as I set off in search of Rommie to discuss security.

Rommie was on the observation deck, considering the latest plant that Trance had placed there. Trance had recently been on a campaign to move plants out into the rest of the ship, for various reasons. I thought she might be running out of room in the hydroponics garden and might simply want to expand it; in fact, I'd considered mentioning that to Dylan as a design alternative for the next shipwide upgrade, since we all benefitted from the good food she grew there.
"What do you think of this?" Rommie asked, head tilted to the side, as she observed something that could be classified as a plant only because it resembled neither a mineral nor any animal I'd ever seen.

"I think it's probably very expensive." An attempt at diplomacy seemed the best approach.

"Hmm. The cost wouldn't seem to be that justified, would it? I mean, what does it do?" Rommie reached out to touch it, but hesitated a centimeter from contact. "It doesn't have flowers or fruit that I can see, it's not terribly pretty or green, and it doesn't seem to create any measurable difference in the air quality."

"Perhaps it's meant to be an object for contemplation," I offered.

Rommie shrugged. "That must be it. What's up?"

"Security. Dylan has concerns." I handed her Dylan's pad.

"Hmm. I understand that the Dilantians get rashes from exposure to infrared, even at the low levels we have, so I'll employ quantum flow sensors for security in their quarters. We are monitoring the guest quarters, aren't we?"

"It does seem the only way to prevent assassinations."

"Particularly with your kinsmen aboard."

I raised an eyebrow. "At the risk of boring you with my genealogy, let me point out that neither Charlemagne Bolivar nor any of his pride are my direct relations."

"That may be a good thing. Are you willing to negotiate with them if the need arises?"

"Certainly. We do speak the same language."

Rommie frowned. "I thought there wasn't a universal language among Nietzschians."

"Only the nuances of power."

"Oh, very well. I don't see anything else here that I need to take care of."

"What about external surveillance?"

"Harper hasn't gotten around to repairing the vane on the port-side area of the stern. After he does, there shouldn't be any problem, barring new technology, which, of course, even I can't predict."

"I presume that Dylan will conduct tours of the ship for the visitors?"

She nodded. "I'll adjust the area to voice commands for him, during the tour, and have it revert to ship control afterward while continuing full monitoring. There's no excuse for carelessness."

"Now you're starting to sound like a Nietzschian."

"Funny thing; I was originally programmed by one."

"Ah. Perhaps that explains why we get on so well," I suggested. She handed back the pad, turned on her heel and left.

***
Later, on the bridge, as I performed daily systems-checks on the weapons array, Beka said, "So, Tyr, have you found out anything more about Napoleon Rastafarian?"

Dylan was reading a display on one of the newer monitors that Harper had revised while repairing the bridge and comparing it to something on his pad. When he looked up, his face wore the same expression I recalled seeing on my oldest brother's face when a teething baby had kept him awake for three nights running. "Napoleon Rastafarian? I don't recall that name. Is that someone in Sabra-Jaguar who should be on the invitation list? Or is it someone who shouldn't be allowed on the ship."

"Too late," I murmured.

"Relax, Dylan. It's a joke," Beka grinned at him. "It's a hypothetical Nietzschean."

"And I thought we were having such fun with the real ones," Dylan countered. He shook his head as if knocking the hair from his eyes, but he has not worn his hair that length in months; it was simply a nervous movement to give him time to think.

"Harper was trying to imagine the most unlikely Nietzschean possible," I said. "Although Beka seems to think of it as an alias."

"Oh, come on, Tyr, wouldn't you just love to be Napoleon Rastafarian if the opportunity presented itself?"

I let her hear a little of the low growl in my voice. "I refuse under any circumstances to claim a heritage from Pride Rugrat-Chihuahua. Find yourself another patsy."

"Um, I think we can agree that the opportunity isn't going to present itself, can't we, Tyr? Beka?" Dylan said, his eyes tapping back and forth between us. "Though I'm pleased to have a happy bridge crew. It makes the work so much more enjoyable."

I shook my head and set back to work. The Dylan I'd known before the Magog encounter would have dropped his pad in laughter at the mere thought of the ridiculous Rugrat-Chihuahua Pride. This Dylan was too driven to allow himself the time to relax, a dangerous condition for a warrior. Nothing good could come of it.

***

Harper returned to my bed on alternate days until the start of the conference; our increased workload did not permit any other time together, much though I might have wished it. He seemed to be growing too thin in my arms, and I would have liked to cook for him again and watch him eat. However, as I observed him, I noticed that he was still eating as much as he had in the past; perhaps our activities were burning away more calories than I'd realized.

I had rekeyed the door to his touch, so that he no longer needed to announce himself before entering; as he touched the door a low tone, audible to me but to no one else on shipboard, would tell me he was there. I was grateful that it woke me, or called me out of the washroom. Once, while I was in the shower and heard it, I stayed there and he came in to join me, dropping his clothes quickly as he arrived. The soft rubberized floor of the shower stall made an excellent surface for his knees and mine, in turn.

When he slept in my arms, I slept well.

***

"But why not?"
"I ..." Harper's voice was hesitant. "I don't want to hurt you."

"You will not hurt me, and I'm in no danger from your passengers."

"We don't know that. I don't want to take the chance."

"Does what I do with you upset them?"

"No. No. And I love it, don't get me wrong. If I could, I'd have you in there all the time."

"It might make work somewhat awkward."

"True. And how would I flirt with all the beautiful babes at the conference if we were joined at the ass?"

"I can see that would be a disadvantage."

"No, don't say it. I'm not large enough to be a human shield for you."

"I wasn't even thinking that, though now that you bring it up, I'd say at least part of you is sizeable enough to afford me some protection."

"Hey, I'm flattered. Feel free to express your admiration any way that you want ... oh ... oh, yeah, more there..."

***

We played at night and said nothing of it beyond the doors of my rooms, nor did we allow our outside concerns to enter. He did not inquire about the security precautions, and I asked nothing about his activities or the special projects that Dylan had him working on.

"Has Harper repaired the vane yet?" I asked Rommie, a few days before the conference. "I have some free time, if that's not done, and I'm a competent welder."

"I appreciate that. No, he fixed it a couple of days ago. You're welcome to go and check it out."

"I might do that."

Rommie hesitated. "Do me a favor and wear the gravity boots, not the free line."

"Why? Aside from keeping me from getting a longer view of the ship, of course." She had never asked me something like this in the past.

"I don't really know, but it feels as if I'm ... itchy. Me-the-ship, that is. It's as if something were tickling the outer hull, though I've checked all my sensors and there's nothing out there."

"I'll take a look. Perhaps you picked up some small debris from the tail of that comet that went past us yesterday."

"That might be it. Thank you, Tyr."

I strapped on breathing apparatus and a containment suit and went out into the blackness of space to check the vane. I saw nothing that could account for the "feeling" that the android reported, but it occurred to me that it might be wise to have the planetary battle robots do forays out there during the conference, just for the sake of added safety. I made a note to mention this to her, and sent her the message, but it went through the system while the ship was experiencing power flickers due to some
of Harper's upgrades being tested. I should have checked to see if the message went through but forgot to do so.

***

As it was, neither Rommie nor I could have done anything to prevent what happened. We paid for our lack of interdimensional technology in the blood of attendees, though I was pleased to see Charlemagne Bolivar exhibited many of the finer attributes of my people and few of the less pleasant ones. He appeared to be a capable fighter, and I thought his pride's ships might make the difference in the fight against the Magog -- if he could refrain, in the meantime, from the stealthy backstabbing and double-dealing that had made Sabra-Jaguar Pride a name even among Nietzschians.

What could I say? He and I got along very well.

Rev Bem was still away at a Wayist gathering, probably purging his continuing feelings of guilt over his behavior during the events on the Magog worldship; it was just as well.

It is possible that, even if Andromeda had sent out the robots, the ship that had attached itself to us would have remained unnoticed because of its ability to shift time and space dimensions. Harper's ability to walk between brilliance and insanity, and his sense of timing -- which was beginning to rival that of Trance Gemini -- saved us at the last.

And, through the intervention of the scheming Satrina Leander who had caused the problems by allyng herself with the enemy, he was rid of nearly half of his passengers.

When the ship was ours again, and all the delegates, living and otherwise, were sent home, Dylan declared a three-day weekend, saying that we deserved it. He asked Andromeda to take us to a quiet sector near a stable sun, and told us he'd see us on the bridge in seventy-two hours.

I took time to make sure all the security measures were in place, and then wandered past the cargo bay where my treasure waited. The key Harper had made worked perfectly, and I slid past security and rekeyed the door so it locked again within a second. I paused to let my eyes accustom themselves to the darkness rather than turn on lights and risk notice from some automated sensor, and brought out a small handlight from a vest pocket.

The progenitor of my race lay undisturbed in his coffin, under the cloth I'd draped over it that now bore bloodstains and a few fraying tears from Magog claws. Harper had done a good job here; there was none of the smell of death that had lurked in corners elsewhere for weeks. I could tell that, despite his situation, he'd taken care to do this himself rather than allow the A.I.s to do it, though I hoped he'd let the androids dispose of the bodies.

I let myself out again and relocked the door. Dylan was free to think he had control over me, though I knew he wouldn't be fool enough to think I would not try to regain my property. Of course Rommie would tell him I'd been there, if he asked. I hoped that by disturbing nothing I'd allayed his suspicions.

***

Harper slept for the first 30 hours or so of the weekend, ate for the next three (on and off, or so Trance told me later), and then came in search of me.

I was asleep. I'd gone running after my foray into the forbidden, setting my feet on decks I seldom visited simply to make sure all was well there and we had no more unscheduled visitors of any description. Upon returning, I had showered, eaten a quick meal, watched a movie with Beka --
some drawing-room comedy of manners about time travel and mating that was quaintly humorous -- and then had gone to my bed. I slept, woke, read, snacked, and slept again.

The door alarm told me who it was. I feigned sleep, until he curled up naked behind me, his skin cool and soft, and ran his hand down my flank. "I know you're awake. We've got to celebrate."

"What are we celebrating?" I'd heard rumors, but I wanted to know for sure.

"Half of my passengers have checked out. They're no longer in residence. They've gone bye-bye."

I rolled over to face him. "That's certainly worthy of celebration." I pulled him close and kissed him, and he returned the kiss with attentive energy. "What did you have in mind?"

"Oh, a little of this, a little of that, a ride on the joystick --"

"Anything else?"

"No limits. No, wait, only that one limit still." He kissed me again, his eyes turning pale. "I don't want to hurt you."

"All right, for now. But one of these days, Seamus Harper, I'm going to back you into a corner and force you to do me properly, as a shieldbrother." I rolled on top of him, supporting myself on my elbows. "Do you understand me?"

"Yes. Yep. Gotcha. Da. Ja. Oui." He punctuated his reply with fast, hard kisses. "And believe me, on that day I'll have absolutely no mercy on your magnificent backside."

"You have no idea how much I'm looking forward to it," I whispered into the curve of his ear.

I started to slide down to catch him in my mouth, but the sweet friction between our bodies ignited me before I could stop myself, and we spent ourselves together the first time without further ado.

It took some time to wear down his energy so that we could both nap again; I enjoyed it all.

Having the proof that our prior activities had not caused his passengers to reanimate, I felt free to let him occupy himself in whatever way he wished, as he roused me with hands and mouth and with the sweep of his body against mine. When I could wait no longer, I seized him and, with his enthusiastic assent and cooperation, rode him thoroughly, so that I lost myself in the sensations around me as well as my own, and came hard and long inside him, as he whimpered in delight.

Afterward, as I held him, I said, "You know I will hold you to it."

"As hard and fast, or easy and slow a ride, as you want," Harper promised, raising my hand to his lips, "but only when --"

"I know." I slid a hand down his belly to cup him tenderly. "I spoke with Rev Bem yesterday; he sent a message to say he was praying for the council. I didn't tell him about the invasion."

"Just as well. He'd probably think he caused it." Harper turned toward me. "And?"

"I asked him how you were doing, comparatively, and he said," I took a breath, "you were doing very well."

"Don't lie to me, Tyr. You said you wouldn't."

I closed my eyes, not wanting to say the next words. "He said that nobody had lived on the drug this
long. He thinks your health is a miracle."

"Hmph. I'm a miracle. Well, yeah. The Harper is good. Haven't I been saying that?"

"I would be the last one to argue against it," I told him, tightening my arms around him, willing him to leave any other questions unasked so that I would not have to answer. Regardless of our long weekend, time was running out and I wished to waste none of it.

***

A week later, Trance cornered me in a hall. "I need to talk to you," she said, in a voice she must have borrowed from Dylan when he was giving someone a piece of his mind. "Now. In private."

"All right." Just off shift, I had been going to lift weights for a while, but that sort of exercise is always available. I followed her to an empty room that had been a High Guard lancer's cabin three centuries earlier. "What is it?"

She slapped the lock on the door and whirled to stare at me as if she'd never seen me before. "What have you been doing with Harper?"

I blinked. If a placid house cat had suddenly savaged me with twelve-centimeter claws I would not have been more surprised. "What exactly do you mean?"

"I mean, what are you doing with Harper?" She said it again in precisely the same way, giving me no clue as to her intention. "I just had him in the med deck for a checkup."

"And?"

"He's ... getting healthier. There's no way this can be happening. Magog infestations are fatal unless treated instantly. You know that and I know that." She paced up and down the small cabin. "He's been hanging around with you; that's the only difference. Are you feeding him something different than he usually eats, or giving him some special Nietzschean medicine that I've never heard of? What's going on?"

I blinked and tried to assemble my scrambled wits. "Let me get this straight. You've just seen Harper for a checkup, and he's ... better?"

"Oh, he still has the remaining Magog larvae inside, but from what I can tell they're dying. Atrophying. Even with the suppressive agent he's been taking, they should be at least half again as large right now, especially because there are fewer of them than before."

I sat on the built-in desk, my head spinning. "Before I answer, would you tell me something?"

"What?" She tilted her head, shaking it slightly as if to clear her mind.

"What exactly did you do to rid me of the Magog?" I remembered the pain of that procedure in exact detail; none of it had mutated to pleasure. But my mental state had been such that I was unable to recall her method.

She turned her face away from me toward the wall as if the memory were as unpleasant for her as for me. "I gave you an overdose of pannifluerum and flooded you with chlodax-3 rays for four hours at a time. You had three doses, and then I had to keep you alive while ..."

While the larvae loosened themselves from an environment suddenly too hostile even for them, and sought a way out. I endured two days of convulsions, fever, chills and delirium, despite all she could
do for me. At one point she put me into the same kind of coma that Harper was in, so I would not expend all my strength in enduring suffering. I would not have asked her to do it, but I accepted quickly when she offered it; it was the only surcease I had.

I shuddered, flickers of remembered agony licking through my skin.

Trance nodded. "You barely survived the pannifleurum, let alone the rest. It's one of the very few substances that your immunity to poison does not counter, and it can be fatal to any other humanoids even in smaller doses. That's why I couldn't do it to Harper."

"So?" I stood behind her. "Is something wrong now? Are they growing again? I talked with Rev Bem about the drug."

"He told me." Trance turned to face me, her stance full of resolution. "The problem is that there's not a problem, and I don't understand it."

"What?" I shook my head, unsure of what I was hearing.

"Harper told me what the larvae looked like when Satrina Leander took them out of him. That's why I checked the ones that are still there. They're not growing; they look like they're getting hollow inside, starting to die. And I can't account for it." She brushed past me to pace the room again. "I don't understand what's going on. How can I use this to help anyone else if I don't know why it's happening? So I'm asking you -- what are you doing with Harper?"

"We are shieldbrothers," I said slowly, "with all that entails."

"I ... see. With *all* that entails?" Her eyes widened.

For some reason I did not wish to explore, I did not feel that telling her of our relationship would be a violation. I had learned to trust no one far, but I had noticed that Trance would keep secrets. "Almost all. He will allow me within him, but he will not allow himself within me."

Her hands flew up to stop further words. "I have to think about this. No, not about you. You're fine. And I'm glad you and Harper are close; he's needed a good friend for a long time. And --" she turned to face me, "I think you two would be very pretty together."

"Thank you," I said gravely. One should always accept a compliment, regardless of the circumstances.

"I think I need to have you come down to the med deck so that I can run a few tests." Her eyes flickered sideward, which in humanoids means they are thinking of something they cannot access directly in the conscious mind and must search out from within the unconscious. "If what I think is true ... Tyr, are there any Nietzschean beliefs or laws or customs that forbid transfusions or cell transplantation or anything like that?"

"None." I watched her moving, stopping, moving, stopping. Was it possible --

"Good. Come with me right now."

"What will you tell Dylan, if he asks?"

"That I wanted to do a routine checkup. You're due for one in a week or so, when we'll be in Tarsis Cluster, and I'll probably be too busy then to do it."

"All right."
I learned to kill when I was a child; we hunted to eat. I learned all the ways of self-preservation and survival as a youth, both within my pride and afterward, when I survived the mines and Kotyra and went out into the wider universe as a mercenary. I took pride in my work, in my ability to guard whatever I was hired to guard. I was a good mercenary; I stayed bought until such time as it was more opportune for me to do otherwise, and I paid my debts.

Yet, as a Nietzschian without a pride, I knew I would probably never attain the status of husband and father. I might never know the sensation of the power of my body going into a wife's womb to create life.

I am a killer, and a scholar. Life and death are my gift, my work. I know the difference between a Phyrian hawk and a handsaw. The handsaw is much easier for decapitations at close range, though the hawk can be an able assistant if it is tamed. There are six ways of taming a Phyrian hawk according to scholarly texts, and none of them work. The only thing that did work was to bare my arm and allow it to feed on me. A token bite or two from my forearm, and it was mine, not because I held it in my fist but because it knew me, knew me as distinct from any other being in the galaxy, which allowed us to converse. I learned its thoughts, it learned mine. We lived and fed together on the game we killed for a long time, until I was captured by slavers for sale to yet another master and the hawk died attacking them. A handsaw will not fight in defense of its partner.

If there were any portion of my anatomy that Trance did not sample, on a slide or in scanned readings or in any other way, it was so deeply beneath the molecular level that it might not be said to exist at all for any practical purpose.

"Well?" I inquired, when she let me up.

"I don't understand."

"Show me." I was not a physician or biologist, but I had some knowledge of which end of a microscope to look through.

"Those. They're new. I've never seen them before."

They looked much like any other cells. Lumpy, slightly irregular, but cells have their own logic which does not necessarily prescribe beauty of a sort that I understand. "And?"

"I'm going to try something." She pressed a button that tipped the cells she was observing into Magog cells, taken from one of the larva that had infested me. She had explained at the time that she would retain it in stasis where it could not mature but would provide cells for study, and I had reluctantly agreed to it.

She looked again, and magnified the view.

The lumpy cells had attached themselves to the Magog cells, and were attacking them, causing them to collapse. Cell walls ruptured; cellular matter spilled out and was consumed by the lumpy cells, which continued to work.

"So?" My patience has its limits.

"Can't you see? This is unprecedented." Trance was so excited that she hugged me. I was so amazed, I let her. "You've developed antibodies to the Magog. That's not supposed to be possible."
Ordinary people don't do it. Nietzschians don't do it. How did you do that?"

"I don't know." I felt baffled, confused. Had my body taken an evolutionary leap without my knowledge?

"I need one more sample." She handed me a bottle. "Go in the next room, lock the door, and think luscious thoughts about Harper, or whatever. I don't need to know. Just come back with a sample in here."

The bottle, more like a large vial, would have held a half-liter. "Your expectations flatter me."

"I didn't say you had to fill it." A violet blush tinted her cheeks. "Just go do it, all right? I have a hypothesis to test."

I did as she requested; I recalled images of our first time together, and of the feel of his mouth on me as the shower rained warm water upon my shoulders. When I returned and handed her the bottle, she smiled. "Thank you. I hope you enjoyed it."

"What are you going to do?"

"This." She had prepared another test dish of Magog cells; she poured a little of the semen over them. We did not have to wait long to see the Magog cells surrendering to mine. "It's just as I thought. The antibodies exist throughout your body -- they're in every sample I took -- but especially in your semen. And Harper is acquiring them from you."

My legs felt as if I'd just run to the top of Mount Wagner and back before breakfast. "What are you saying?"

"Nietzschians feel very strongly about creating life, don't they? Don't you?" she asked. "The continuation of the people, and so on?"

"Of course." I gazed at her blankly.

"Do you know how fortunate you are? You're able not only to continue your line but also to, um, protect them against Magog infestation, all at the same time. At least, I'm pretty sure you could. Well, your wife would be safe. I'm not sure about the babies, but it's possible they would be, too."

I rubbed my face with my hands. She was babbling. She had to be babbling.

Trance never babbled without purpose.

"Just say it, Trance. Abstract science gives me a headache. Tell me what you're talking about."

"You had sex with Harper. You came inside him. Am I right?" She raised an eyebrow. I nodded slowly. "And you had somehow developed anti-Magog-larva antibodies, though how you did that I have no idea whatsoever. Nobody I've ever heard of has done that. During or after sex, the antibodies were absorbed through his body, and they began to attack the Magog larvae."

Now that I understood what she was talking about, the inferences were staggering. "I hope you can synthesize a serum from this, because I'm really not prepared to spread my favors quite as widely as you might imagine."

"Ooooooh. Now that's a thought. No, I'm teasing. I really can't see you telling Dylan to bend over and drop his pants because it's all for his own good." She giggled. I started laughing, the laughter of relief and happiness, and could not stop. Every time the image started to seem too absurd, her chuckle
would set me off again. I bounced against the wall, laughing, and my arm must have struck a communications panel without my knowing it.

Everyone in the ship raced through the door in quick order: Rommie, holding a gamepad, Beka and Harper, who had apparently been playing tennis in the recreation rooms, and Dylan, in his sleep clothes, rubbing his eyes.

Trance turned to me, apologetic at having to share this with the audience, but I waved a hand to tell her to go on. Everyone who mattered already knew what had been happening; telling it could do no harm even with Dylan's straitlaced attitudes. I had observed long ago that Dylan only appeared to be an ethically constipated High Guard officer, and that appearance did not countermand his ability to think like one of my people.

"We have good news, I think," Trance said, and they assembled themselves in expectant attitudes, though Dylan seemed half absorbed in tying the belt of his robe, and Beka was watching him do it. "We may have discovered an antibody that will combat Magog infestations."

"We?" asked Rommie.

"How? When?" Dylan was awake now.

"You should sit down," Trance told Harper. She pushed his shoulders as I put a chair behind his knees. He sat with a thump, bemused.

"We. Tyr and I. It was sort of, um, unexpected." Trance smiled at them, and at me, and last of all at Harper. He leaned back in the chair and looked puzzled, his eyes moving from her to me and back.

"So, when do I get this miracle drug?" he asked.

It's amusing to watch Trance Gemini blush purpler. "You, um, already have it, courtesy of Tyr."

"What, something you put in my food?" Harper glanced about, trying to catch the joke. "I knew that wasn't an aphrodisiac."

"Not exactly in the food all the time," I murmured.

His jaw dropped. "You're kidding."

I shook my head.

Beka hugged Trance. "You can synthesize this, right?"

"I shouldn't have any trouble, as long as Tyr will help me."

"Delighted," I said with a flourish, attempting to keep the blush from my own face as well. Nietzscheans do not blush well.

"When do we get doses of this wonder drug?" Dylan asked.

"I need to do more testing, to make sure it will reject the earliest stages of infestation. But you'll have it as soon after that as I can do it. Unless, of course, you prefer to take the direct route and obtain it from Tyr in its original form."

The coin dropped in Dylan's mind, and so did his jaw. His eyes slid toward Trance, who nodded, to Harper, who smiled cheerfully, and to me. I corrected my stance, crossed my arms and smiled, slowly.
"Don't put yourself to any trouble on my account. I think I'll wait for the synthesized version." Dylan said.

"Oh, it would be no trouble, Captain," I said, with as much assurance as I could muster over the recurring image of 'bend over, Dylan.' "After all, you have told me many times that the good of the ship is paramount, have you not? And that we are here to bring together a new Commonwealth? I'm certainly willing to do my part in this enterprise."

I had not moved a muscle toward him, but he smiled and backed up, casually, so that Beka was between him and me. "That's ... admirable, Tyr. I'm gratified that you remember my words so clearly."

"Just doing my job," I murmured.

Beka and Trance were still snickering half an hour after Dylan left. Rommie had left with him, on the pretext that someone had to run the ship, but I suspect that her own amusement at Dylan's expression played a role.

Harper tapped my arm. He'd observed the antibodies on the viewer, and talked with Trance about his condition, and his eyes shone. "Would you have done Dylan, if he'd said yes?"

"This is hardly the place to discuss that," I said, with a warning glance toward the women.

"Oh, Beka won't care. She's had her eye on his ass for months. C'mon. Tell me. You know you want to."

"Well, then." I cast one more look toward Beka before continuing, in a softer tone. "I think that if Dylan were to wish to go that route, he would be much happier about the method of application if it came from Beka rather than myself."

"Well, sure. But that's not what I asked, is it?"

"Harper, of course. He's the captain. One does what one must to ensure the wellbeing of the ship."

"Now you sound like one of Dylan's duller speeches. Are you going to tell me you want his ass or not?"

I shrugged, relaxed. "I hardly think I'd have a chance at getting it, but yes. Let's just say it would be a more pleasurable duty than many I've had."

"That's for sure. What, you thought I was the jealous type? Give me a break."

"I never said that."

"You never say a lot of things. Doesn't matter."

"Y'know, Tyr," Beka said, slipping within my zone of safety to stand so close that I could feel her body heat through my chain mail, "we might be able to dose Dylan in a, er, chain reaction fashion. You -- me, me -- Dylan..." Her eyes twinkled.

"Shouldn't you verify that with him beforehand?" I inquired. Beka seldom flirted with me since I made dinner for her; I was not entirely certain why. I enjoyed the flirtation. "But, if you're certain it would work, we can of course start any time you like. I believe there's a bed open in the next room."

"Ah, I think I'll get back to you on that." She twinkled again. "But don't think I don't appreciate the
"You see?" I said to Harper, in mock-sadness. "Nobody wants me except you."

"Their loss. Hey, I know. I could write a testimonial for you."

"Then everyone will want their own Nietzschean lover?" I shook my head and felt grateful that I was the only Nietzschean aboard the Andromeda, and not only for the sake of my reputation. "I'm sure a schedule could be worked out, though I doubt it would fit well with yours since you work odd shifts."

"Oh, yeah. And I'm still in the middle of treatments. Right. You can't stop treating me, can you? I mean, you wouldn't, would you?"

I gave him the private smile that was always his. "No, to both questions."

***

I found Dylan alone as he was shooting baskets thoughtfully. "I have been wondering ..." I began, in the casual mode.

"I'm flattered, but no, thanks, Tyr."

"Not that." I waved a hand. "You are going to use the antibody as a bargaining chip, aren't you?"

He dribbled and shot, and retrieved the ball. "Promise it to groups that fight with us and deny it to others?"

"That's one method. There are others." I took the ball from him and completed what he called a lay-up shot, neatly getting the ball through the basket, and returned it to him. "Some worlds aren't able to field an army, but they can provide supplies."

"Of course. Were you expecting me to hoard it here?"

"Not exactly, but you're aware that the Andromeda has better laboratory facilities than many worlds. It would be difficult for some to synthesize the antibody." Civil mode, to be practical. This was not a matter for emotional expression.

"And?" His face grew harsh. "Were you thinking that we should deny it to the Drago-Kazov? To bring them into line?"

"That was in my mind, yes."

"It's a tempting thought, especially since I'm fairly certain you would not go to them to offer your own private supply." He smiled at me, like a shark.

I relaxed and returned to casual mode. "You're thinking like a Nietzschean again. May I say how attractive I find that in a man?"

"No, you may not." Dylan flashed me a non-piscine grin and threw a perfect basket. "May I say how attractive a sense of humor looks on you? Harper is having a good effect."

"But you still won't take me up on my offer," I said, as if mourning lost opportunity.

"There's no need." He whistled a cheerful melody that might have been in tune in some scale I had never heard before. "Trance gave me the first dose of the vaccine after she finished testing it."
"And?"

"And there's no sense in making Beka jealous."

I blinked. This was unexpected. "You favor Beka."

"I would, if she favored me. However, it's up to her to decide." His smile turned wry. "I may be the only High Guard officer remaining, but I can't shake off the ethical basis of my life. As captain, I can't be the one to ask a fellow officer into a relationship, even a light one. There are considerations of maintaining professional distance, sexual harassment, favoritism ..."

"None of which should apply with a crew this small." I snatched the ball from him and made a basket.

"Actually, they might even be more important, but I see your point." He tried to retrieve the ball from me, but I dodged him and put it in the hoop again, then sent it back.

"Does she know that? Any of it?"

"I hope so."

"Does Rommie know it? Or Trance?"

"That's a good question. A very good question." This shot bounced off the rim and the wall, and he had to chase it. "And the answer is, I don't know."

"Then you'd better find out before she asks. Otherwise, you just might be safer sharing a bed with me. Trance is unpredictable, and Rommie is armed."

He hesitated, blinked, and paused. If I were keeping score, which I seldom did aboard ship as there was no point to it other than my own amusement on a dull day, I would have said I'd won completely. "And what would you say if I told you that I'd accept your offer?"

"I'd ask you to bring your own pillow. Harper keeps stealing mine."

"Ah. Yes. Well. I'll keep that in mind, Tyr, and I do appreciate your offer of ... hospitality."

"You're most welcome, though I'd ask you to knock first."

Dylan let out a short, sharp laugh. "You know very well that I'm not about to come knocking."

"Yes, I did. Now Rommie does, too."

He whirled. Rommie stood in the hall, observing the basket with the same speculative attention she had given the plant on the observation deck. "I'm sorry, was I interrupting anything?"

"Not at all," Dylan managed to say without even a glance at me. I shrugged, as seemed to be expected, and waited.

"The Hyrcanian Ambassador wishes to speak to you about information he's received." Her voice was as crisp and cool as ever. "Something about Drago-Kazov ships interfering with his interplanetary mail and shipping service, and he'd like your assistance."

"I'm sure Grand-Duke Bolivar would be interested to learn of this as well," I said quietly. "Would you like me to inform him?"
"No, I'd prefer to do that myself. Thanks, Tyr. Rommie, I'll be right there."

She left and he started to follow her. I stopped him with a word: his name.

"Dylan."

He turned back.

"I would remind you that, as I told you not long ago, I need you, sir, as captain, and you do need me as well." My voice remained steady. "Not all of us subscribe to the recorded ethics of Charlemagne Bolivar, or the historical behavior of Pride Jaguar."

"I hadn't forgotten that. However, as I have said in the past, also, I trust Tyr to be Tyr." He nodded dismissal toward me and left, running to catch Rommie.

***

I had only thought to allay his concern lest he suppose my invitation to boost his immunity would be interpreted as an opportunity for his accidental murder. With any luck, however, he would not consider my comments to eliminate the possibility of a future alliance between myself and the head of Sabra-Jaguar Pride, who had offered to introduce me to his undoubtedly beautiful and accomplished sisters.

On the other hand, as I thought it over, there was every chance that my life -- or my living body, whether under my control or not -- would become far more of a pawn on the chessboard than I would find comfortable.

I hoped, with all my strength, that Trance's antibody, created and distilled from my fluids, would be distinct enough from my person in the eyes of those who negotiated with Dylan that none of them would be foolish enough to consider obtaining the original source for private use.

Still, if Dylan could trust me to always act according to my own interests, I could trust him to act according to the obsolete code of the High Guard, which did not preclude the use of prevarication, devious behavior, outright lying or thievery as long as he personally would not be the only one to profit from the situation. He called it diplomacy; I called it practical, except when I called it foolish and ridiculous.

The end creates the means, which do not require justification.

***

"So, what are your other names?" Harper lay with his head on my thigh, playing a game on the pad he carried, while I toyed with his hair and reread Plato's account of his teacher's death.

It took a moment to register. "Excuse me?"

"Okay. Maybe I'm not supposed to ask." Harper shrugged. "Call me curious. I asked you what your other names are."

"Ah. Yes, you did."

"And?"

"It's an interesting question."

"One that you're not going to answer."
"Did I say that?"

"You're not answering it."

"Yet. I'm not answering it yet."

"So I'm supposed to conclude that, at some future time, you'll find it within yourself to finish telling me who you are?"

I gazed down at his face, at his rebellious hair and impudent dimples. "If you do not know me without those names, Seamus Zelazny Harper, learning them would not advance your knowledge."

"Okay, I get it. I stepped on your Nietzschian toes. I apologize." He rolled away from my hand.

"My toes are unharmed." I sighed. How could I explain this? "The other names are private. They are used only ceremonially. I would only say them during one of the ceremonies in which they are appropriate, such as a coming-of-age ritual. Since you are already an adult, and not a Nietzschian, you don't need to hear them."

He was silent for a moment. "What's involved in a coming-of-age ceremony?"

Now I was startled. "Your people don't have them?"

Harper snorted. "Most of my people, what was left of them, were dead from Nietzschian raids and Magog attacks before I was twelve. Nobody left knew the old ways, whatever they were." He picked up a cracker and ate it. "The gangs I ran with had their own ways, but they were sort of neotribal; that's how I got the nice metal decoration on my neck, to help them get past security stations. Nobody asked how old I was, just whether I could do what I said I could. And it was all academic by the time I hooked up with Beka."

At some level I must have known this, but I had not realized truly what that meant before. No wonder he sometimes appeared to be younger than his years, sometimes older. He had never experienced anything similar to what I had had, four months before the Dragans destroyed my home. Now that he was an adult, and beyond the years when such rituals were done within most humanoid societies, he would never have the chance to know it.

"I'm sorry," I said, and meant it.

He turned away. "It's okay. I know I've got a lot of blank spots where other people have nice memories."

"I don't have a great many 'nice memories' of my own," I said slowly, "and I can't do the ritual for you, but if you wish I will tell you what was involved."

Harper looked up at me, hope in his face. "I'd like that. Thanks."

So I told him how it was, among my people, when a boy became a man. I told him about the calling, when one is brought from the city into the wilderness, and one's childhood name is taken away so that one is nameless, without family or pride, and how, after a time of trials and endurance one is given a new name, an adult name that includes the names of parents and ancestors for as many generations as possible. In my case, that meant twelve names to learn. Both Victoria and Barbarossa were of high lineage, which meant that their ancestors had lived very long lives and they had met all but the last two when they were children.

One had to learn not only one's own twelve names but the lineage names of both sides of the family.
Unlike inheritance names, the names of one's parents, these were not commonly mentioned unless one was a participant in certain kinds of legal cases or in a registered duel, which was no longer as common as it had been a few generations earlier.

"Wow," Harper said when I finished. "It doesn't sound like a lot of fun."

"Some of it was," I said, smiling at the memory. "Part of the ritual of manhood includes one of the women of the tribe choosing you as your first lover."

"I'll bet you enjoyed that. I certainly would have." He poured more of the spicy drink he liked and passed it to me; I was developing a taste for it. "Can you tell me about her, or is that one of those things that isn't done?"

"I can't tell you her name." I closed my eyes, remembering how her warm amber scent clung to the sweep of her hair as she showed me how a woman was to be pleased. "She was not much older than I was, and she had gray eyes and long brown hair that curled a little at the ends. She could have chosen a husband, in fact her family was pressuring her to consider my cousin, I think, but she had decided to remain independent a while longer."

"I think she taught you well, or else you were a really great student." Harper reached across the space between us and twined his fingers in mine.

"I learned more later, of course; every lover has lessons to teach." I raised his hand to my lips and kissed its palm. "Including you, Seamus."

Perhaps I had learned more of the nuances of the intimate mode of discourse than I realized; what we did together that night will stay with me the rest of my life, regardless of my fate.

***

I did not have long to wait.

Grand Duke Charlemagne Bolivar, the alpha of Sabra-Jaguar Pride, insisted on meeting with me alone, aboard Andromeda. Dylan was understandably reluctant to allow me to meet with any Nietzschean leaders alone since our encounter with the Orca Pride remnant that had tried, with my supposed help, to take over his ship. However, he agreed to the meeting as long as Bolivar's honor guard remained elsewhere and under guard by Rommie. With the civilities thus attended to, I walked to the observation deck to meet with the single most powerful man in the known worlds.

We touched arm spikes in the traditional greeting. Charlemagne studied me. "You look none the worse for your escapade."

I nodded thanks. "How are your wife and child? In good health, I hope?"

Charlemagne Bolivar smiled like a tiger over his breakfast. "That's why I'm here. I want them to stay that way."

"I assure you, I have no designs on them," I said in the civil mode. I would not take that statement into the formal mode, as it might not always be true.

"I wasn't worried. I have a proposition for you, Kodiak." Bolivar gazed out the window toward his own flagship, which rested quietly off the port bow. "Your captain has offered me the antibody serum, which I've accepted, not being a fool, but you and I both know that anyone can put anything into a bottle and say it's medicine. I want a sample of the real thing to test as well -- simply for verification."
This was not entirely unexpected. "And how do you expect to obtain that sample?"

"Oh, in the usual way. I could ask the guard to send up Paris Ramses; I'm sure you'd find him adequate to the purpose."

"And which was he?"

"The tall redhead. I wouldn't insult you by offering you someone less than perfect."

"Of course not." I let no fragment of my thoughts show in my face. I'd seen Paris Ramses when the escort had boarded the Andromeda; he was as tall and broad as Dylan and, in fact, resembled him enough that, had I not known Dylan's exact location in the cosmos about twenty-five standard years earlier, I would have suspected he'd dallied with a red-haired Jaguar queen. Had Dylan noticed that someone who resembled him so greatly was guarding Charlemagne? Or was it one of those things he would notice but never mention?

"I'd watch, of course, to make sure there was no mistake. We'd return immediately to our own ship and obtain the sample from him, of course, and test it."

I leaned a hip casually against the railing. "What's in it for me?"

"Aside from the obvious pleasure? He's not bad looking, and he's well trained."

"I'm gratified that you've taken so much care to please my sense of aesthetics. And?"

"Boudicca has expressed a strong desire to meet you. She's interested in taking a husband."

"Would you allow her to live with me here, aboard Andromeda?"

He shrugged. "Anything is possible. We are allies, are we not?"

"What is your alternative suggestion, since I'm sure there is one?"

Charlemagne's eyes sparkled as his lips curved slowly into a smile. "Myself."

"Of course. You could certainly certify the source of the sample. I would take great care not to injure you, since neither of us wants that particular war at the moment."

"And I would take the greatest care with your own health, since you are ... priceless, for the time being."

I laughed; I couldn't help it, and he joined me. "This is absurd, sir. Completely absurd."

"I know." He shook his head in amusement. "Well? Shall we?" He waved a hand toward the low, broad couch that stretched along one wall.

"I think we can do better." I thumbed the communicator. "Dylan, our guest is somewhat fatigued and would like to take some time to relax. Are the guest rooms available?"

"Of course. I'll send Rommie to escort him there." Did Dylan sound a trifle anxious?

"Don't bother. I'll see him there myself. We are continuing our discussion."

"Ah ... right. Dylan out."

Charlemagne's shoulders shook with quiet laughter. "That should give your worthy captain
something to think about."

I raised an eyebrow. "Did you really think we'd do it in here? Bend you over the conference table?"

"The thought had its attractions, but I have always preferred comfort, whenever it's available. Life is difficult enough without us making it more so."

***

I could not help the thought that this probably was a first for the Andromeda. Dylan had undoubtedly slept with Bolivar's bride while they were en route to the wedding; I was now trumping his duchess with the grand duke, and aboard Dylan's own ship, too.

I had no complaints about this mating. Charlemagne was as skilled in the fine arts as I, though our methods differed slightly. I could tell I was far from the first to part those fine-muscled ivory loins, and I took my pleasure of him while he had his fill of me. After three rounds -- he said he wanted a generous sample -- he prepared to return to his ship.

"And what will you tell Boudicca about me?" I inquired.

"Oh, nothing uncomplimentary at all." He leaned toward me and kissed me, hard and long, the kiss not of shieldbrothers but of allies. "Your technique is as excellent as your physique. And your hospitality is generous."

"I'm gratified." My eyes roamed up and down him once more, noticing the small bruises on his hips, the place on his neck, just below the collar, where my teeth had grazed him once. I carried their counterparts, for he had taken me in his mouth as he grasped my thighs, "for quality assurance purposes," he'd said then, but his eyes had glowed. The bruises would fade before he reached his ship, quickened healing another byproduct of an enhanced genetic inheritance.

"Have you any messages you'd care to send to Boudicca?" he inquired, as if this had been a normal pre-marriage negotiation.

I realized, not for the first time, that he would have his genetic sample of me for testing, as his matriarch would require. If he truly wished me to marry his sister, he was certainly covering all the bases. "Only that I send my greetings to her, and to your matriarch."

"Very wise. She would have your guts for her knitting if you did not. That's my great-aunt Messallina, by the way." Charlemagne shuddered delicately. "All I can say is that I'm glad she's in my family and not someone else's."

I smiled. "Have a pleasant trip."

***

"So?" Dylan all but pounced on me as soon as the Sabra-Jaguar delegation had left. He had, at least, waited until the rest of the crew was elsewhere.

"We negotiated." I shrugged. "He wanted an original sample to take with him for comparison, to make sure Trance wasn't slipping in poison. I gave him one."

Dylan blinked. "You ... gave him one."

"More than one, actually." I gave up all pretense of a straight face. "Several. It was quite ... enjoyable. Perhaps I have more of a turn for diplomacy than I used to."
"Perhaps." Dylan shook his hair out of his eyes again, not that it needed it. "This is ... fascinating, Tyr, but I have to ask: do you expect you'll have to do this for everyone we'll encounter?"

"I certainly hope not. Only the Nietzschians would quibble in this way, and what they have now should silence them -- particularly since it should be simple to isolate both my DNA and Charlemagne's from the sample. That alone should keep the rumors down."

"You do like to take chances, don't you? I'd greatly prefer it if you'd let me know beforehand on this kind of thing."

"Why? Did you want to watch? I don't suppose I'd mind, but I'm certain Charlemagne wouldn't have wanted such a one-sided viewing gallery. He would have insisted on his own witnesses, and it would have become much too formal a situation." I switched from the civil to the formal tone, to emphasize this. "I think, sir, that you would not want to set that kind of precedent, would you?"

"Probably not." His lips twitched, though whether from annoyance or amusement was uncertain. "Anything else?"

"I have a standing invitation to meet his sister, Boudicca, and his verbal assent to her living aboard the Andromeda, should she decide to marry me."

This made his jaw drop. "Would you do that? To Harper?"

I immersed myself in the exigencies of the formal mode for a full minute before answering. "As with every Nietzschian male, I must desire the status of husband and father. I also have responsibilities to a shieldbrother, sir. The two ... situations need neither coincide nor disturb you." I shrugged. "Rest assured, captain, you're in no danger of having to accommodate Boudicca Bolivar for the long term at any time in the near future. That would only happen if I were to meet her, or agree to the marriage, and I have no intention of journeying in that direction."

"It's good of you to tell me this, Tyr." Dylan gestured in the general direction of the bridge, and we started to walk. "Might I hope that I'd be invited to the wedding?"

"Oh, without a doubt. You would definitely have a role."

"As something other than the dinner, I hope."

"Now, Dylan, you know your Nietzschian history better than that. We haven't employed cannibalism except in the most dire situations for centuries, and a wedding would hardly qualify."

***

I devoutly hoped that Dylan had never truly studied Nietzschian social history, as opposed to the histories of conquest and battle. Had he done so, he would have discovered the concept of shikastrin.

Shikastrin were political alliances of the body, not unlike those made by shieldbrothers; however, shikastrin were made before the battle, not during or after it, and could concern whole armies, not only individuals. If a leader wished to form shikastrin, he would contact a potential ally and suggest the ritual; the suggestion could be accepted or rejected with no loss of honor. If it were rejected, nothing had changed. If one accepted, and performed shikastrin, both shikastrin were required by honor to support each other's interests a step or two beyond what might be within their individual interests.

Charlemagne Bolivar could easily have handed me a vial and stood back to watch; instead he had, through the medium of obtaining the anti-Magog serum, proposed shikastrin; I had accepted. We had
completed the contract with our bodies, to our mutual satisfaction. Neither of us were fools; both of us knew this made us closer than the alliance that Charlemagne had forged with Dylan. Should he wish to pursue an alternate course, I would be torn between what Dylan might require of me and what Charlemagne would demand.

But I accepted. Undoubtedly, I would require a favor of him, somewhere down the road, as well.

How might this affect Harper? I had no clue. I was not naive enough to think that Harper's cure, and my part in it, was not already on the lips of any number of interested parties. He was feeling better by the day; it would not be long before his body would have acquired sufficient antibodies to make him as much of a target for kidnapping as I might be.

If all went well, Dylan would spread the serum as widely as was prudent and as quickly as possible - and I would have to deal with no more politics than necessary.

***

"So?" Harper's tone in my quarters that night echoed Dylan's voice earlier. "Did you have fun today?"

I raised an eyebrow in his direction. "Fun? Actually, yes, I did."

"Good." He leaned in to kiss me and snaked his arm around my waist. "C'mon. I made dinner tonight."

"Oh?" I could smell something a little spicy. "How many ancho peppers did you put in that?"

"One, but Trance also gave me a Scotch bonnet and a habanero. Relax, they're just in it for flavor; you don't have to eat them."

"I'm relieved."

"You mean Nietzschians don't really breathe fire?"

"Not unless we're in battle."

***

I had expected to face a variety of difficulties resulting from my liaison with Charlemagne Bolivar, most of them from Harper, but he surprised me. He did not seem to share the tendency toward jealousy that I had always associated with humans. Certainly, I had seen it in both Beka and Dylan at times, though over matters other than mating. He also seemed more concerned about how I felt about the situation than was necessary.

One fact I had learned long ago, even before the Dragan attack: whatever happened in my life was never about my feelings. Emotions had to take a secondary or tertiary role in the life of a Nietzschian. They could be allowed to serve the need of the moment, be it for food and shelter or life itself, or simply to be the best at the contest we made of everyday life.

They were never the goal, and they could not be allowed to be the cause of any act but one. The only exception to the rule concerned one's attaining and keeping a wife, a situation in which emotion was not only allowed but required. One should feel so strongly about one's wife that one's life would be incomplete without her presence. That was why, when Dylan attempted his rendezvous with the past to bring his lover forward, I was entirely in favor of the venture and could understand his grief when it could not be completed.
If that is what love is, I understand it.

But it seemed to me that humans believed that love included more than simple mating or the urge to protect one's family. Perhaps this was something I might have learned if my family had lived longer; perhaps it was something I might never learn to understand.

Passion, I understood. Yearning, I understood -- for what man never yearned for someone to share his bed and his dreams? Protectiveness, concern for a fellow traveler, tenderness toward bedmates -- all these I comprehended without difficulty. It had been a long time since I'd felt jealousy, but I could discern it in others and play upon it to achieve what end I wished, if I wished.

But love, as humans understood it, was a mystery.

***

"Have I told you that you're remarkable?" I said quietly in bed, much later that night.

"The Harper is good," he said sleepily.

"I wasn't thinking of that alone."

"Then maybe I didn't do it right. You shouldn't be able to think at all." He yawned against my shoulder and buried his face in the crook of my neck so that he could nuzzle under my hair. "Should I ask what's so 'remarkable'?"

"From what I'd seen of humans, I would have thought you more prone to ...

"Jealousy?"

"Yes."


"That's good."

"Yeah. It avoids a lot of interstellar incidents." His voice sounded casual in the dark, but all voices sound casual at such times, or intimate. "I really don't think my killing Blondie Slickhair is going to do a thing for our relationship, do you?"

"You'd do that?"

I didn't even consider saying 'you'd try to do that'; the answer was self-evident. Of course his attempt would probably fail, and he would outlive it only by seconds, but that would not stop him from planning such action.

"Yeah. I would." Not casual. "If he hurt you. But he didn't. And you're still here, which means it was just business, whatever you and he did, so nothing I have to worry about, right?"

"Right." My hand strayed along his ribs and across his belly, where only one dried husk remained inside him to recall the threat that could have killed him a few weeks earlier. "How does that feel?"

"Wonderful. A little lower. Oh, yeah, right there." He sighed luxuriously, and I gave myself over to touching and stroking him anywhere I wanted for a few minutes. "So, things went well for you?"
"We have a satisfied Jaguar archduke who has just received the only cure in the known galaxies for Magog infestation -- and the proof that it works."

"Well, I hope it was worth it. Dylan was fussing worse than Beka when you were in there. I don't know what he expected to happen; maybe he thought you guys were going to have a duel of some kind."

"No, only swordplay." I smiled in the darkness, remembering exactly what moves we had used on each other. "He would say he won, of course."

"What would you say?"

"That I won."

"Uh-huh. Not gonna ask that one."

"Some business is more ... pleasurable than others."

"Is this kind of business arrangement, um, usual with your people?"

"Not common, no," I admitted, "but it's been known to happen."

"Okay. So, how was he?"

"What, you want a review?"

Harper shrugged. "Sure. Did you learn anything you can teach me? Or did you teach him anything new?"

"Trust me, Seamus," I kissed him slowly as I teased my fingers down his back to where I wanted them most, "there's nothing you need to learn from him."

"Flattery will get you laid, Tyr."

"Oh, I hope so." He rolled over and I moved into place behind him, and he rubbed against me so that I nearly spent myself before I could complete our connection. But once sheathed in his body, I slid slowly, carefully, as if that too could be a caress beyond price. His heartbeat thundered around me, and after an eon we crested the waves together.

***

Dylan being Dylan, he watched me in much the same way that I watched him. If I thought he might have forgotten my pre-empting of his alliance, his attention alone would have proven me wrong.

But he said nothing to me of it, or almost nothing.

"You all right, Tyr?"

This came from him on the bridge the next day, as I performed routine weapons checks at the place I had begun to think of as mine.

"Certainly. Why do you ask?"

"Shouldn't a captain be concerned about the welfare of his crew members?"

One point to the High Guard.
"Of course." I inclined my head toward him. "And I appreciate your concern, sir."

"Oh, Tyr can deal with anything," Beka said airily, "or so I've heard."

This was not the time I would have chosen for her to flirt. I sent her a blank gaze, meant to dampen her comments; she reflected it back to me. Had she also been fussing on my behalf during my negotiations with the Jaguar? Or had she simply been reflecting Dylan's fussing back to him so that he would not feel that he was the only one upset? I had noticed her taking that tack more than once.

"That's good to know." Dylan stood at the helm as if he were facing into a stiff breeze. "Did Charlemagne say anything about other prides that might want to join the fight?"

"Actually, he did. He offered to speak to Sirrush Pride on our behalf, and I told him we would appreciate that." This was true, although he'd phrased his comment somewhat less precisely, considering that I was into him to the hilt at the time.

"That's very good of him. Is there anything else we should know?"

I paused a moment, considering whether to throw this bomb or save it for another time. I decided to drop it gently and see whether it was live. "Well, I did observe one interesting thing about his honor guard. Did you meet them?"

A slight crease appeared between Dylan's brows. "Yes. I didn't notice anything."

"Ah. Perhaps you weren't introduced to them properly. Paris Ramses, the tall redhead? He bears a striking resemblance to you. Now, I realize you were otherwise occupied, but by any chance did you have any brothers who survived anywhere in the known worlds after the Battle of Witchhead?"

Beka raised her eyebrows but said nothing. Rommie maintained her no-expression expression.

"Now, how would I know that, Tyr? I was, as you said, otherwise occupied." He shrugged it off. "Besides, we were fighting the Nietzschians. It's not that likely."

I ignored the implied insult, which was not one in fact. "I'm sure Rommie could find out, if you were interested. It might be useful to you in later negotiations to know if you have kin among my people."

Harper, who had just walked onto the bridge with a handful of tools to fine-tune the slipstream hyperdrive for the fourth time in three days, said, "Oh, yeah. You two look so much alike."

"Actually, he has a point, Dylan," Beka put in. "I thought there was something familiar about that kid. Rommie, can you check on it?"

"Certainly. And if what Tyr thinks is so, it wouldn't be the first time a High Guard officer had had a liaison with a Nietzschian woman, I'm sure."

I mentally awarded Rommie a point, and added another when I observed the rapid flush that washed over Dylan's face.

"Ahem. If we could all get back to work and leave the analysis of my genealogy --"

"Accessing." Rommie's eyes widened. "Tyr appears to be correct. You might well be a ten-times-great uncle to Paris Ramses through your youngest brother, David ..." She frowned slightly. "Apparently he became Nietzschian? I wasn't aware that was done at that time."

"I wasn't aware that *could* be done, at any time," Harper commented.
I nodded once. "It's possible. It was more common then, after Witchhead, when our forces were so depleted. Genetic adaptation and engineering were employed."

"David survived Witchhead?" Dylan sat in the pilot's seat suddenly, as if his knees had buckled. "I didn't realize he was there."

"He was a lieutenant, third mate aboard the Altair, which was late arriving at Witchhead; when his superiors were killed, as the Altair was being destroyed, he ordered his crew to abandon ship to save themselves. According to the All Systems University Library records," Rommie nodded toward Harper, who looked abashed, "he was captured after the battle and, with the few remaining human High Guard officers, given the choice of conversion or death. He chose conversion, with the stipulation that he not be required to fight against the Commonwealth, and apparently that was accepted." Rommie blinked. "The record states that he took a Nietzschean name, but there is no further information."

New name. The thought rang a bell somewhere, but I knew I could not check it until later. I spent the rest of the shift devising alternate battle strategies, sketching out the basics of a program to give Harper later for testing and implementation, and watching the side of Dylan's face as he stared out at the stars.

***

Every suite of officers' quarters aboard the Andromeda provided an old-fashioned computer terminal that could operate both with the main ship's computer and independently. When I first came aboard, I thought the dual system wasteful, but I had had occasion since then to revise my opinion, as it allowed me to search files I had borrowed from elsewhere without letting the main computer know what I was doing. All Andromeda knew was that I was using the computer for something, by the fact that the current was on; for all anyone could tell, I might have been writing my memoirs -- as if I would.

For some time I had been transcribing to disk all I recalled of the genealogy of every Nietzschean I had ever met, from every pride, as well as what I recalled from the now-destroyed records kept by Kodiak Pride in my youth. Doing this allowed me to put my thoughts into order as well as to track the relationships and alliances among the different prides over time -- always a useful endeavor. I knew my own ancestry in direct line back to Witchhead; I knew about three quarters of the collateral lines of Kodiak Pride as well as a quarter of those of other prides, all from memory.

I typed "Paris Ramses" into the database and set it to search. Within a second I had a partial list of his ancestors through the female line. As I might have expected, they went back to a younger sister of the pride's third-in-command at the time of Witchhead; most of that family had been aboard the Prometheus, one of the thousand ships that had been wiped out by the Angel of Death. Although politically influential, Jaguar Pride had not been a large clan then; the losses from that battle would have destroyed it utterly if it had not chosen to accept "converts".

And so, to continue the name and heritage of Jaguar Pride, Grania out of Cassiopeia by Brutus had taken to husband a convert who had chosen the name of David Geronimo.

All Nietzschean names are taken from those of great warriors, fighters, rulers and philosophers. All have meaning; as Tyr, I claim similarity to an ancient war deity, and Anasazi simply means "those who aren't there any more" -- a suitable name for one whose pride was exterminated. There are several Davids among Nietzscheans, generally named for the ancient war king rather than for the philosopher Hume, but the name is little used. Geronimo, as a name, is nearly unknown among us; I found only three other references to it, all those of Jaguars later in the same line. It seemed extremely unlikely to me that a convert would have taken those names unless they meant something particular
to him.

I turned on my terminal's connection to Andromeda's computer and accessed historical records for information on Geronimo. It made sense to me, then. The historical Geronimo, who lived near the time of Nietzsche himself, had fought long and bravely, though he finally had had to surrender to his enemy. He had retained his name and his pride even when paraded before a foreign queen, although he knew he might be the last of his generation to have lived in true freedom as his people understood it.

That set me to thinking about my own people's history, and I looked for David Geronimo, who had no matronymic or patronymic affiliations that he could claim. Little was written of him, but what was there was written by Shakakhan Ptolemy, whose histories I had studied in the past. Shakakhan wrote that although David Geronimo had come late to the status of Nietzschian husband and father, his courage in defense of his family was unquestioned. He had died at an advanced age, fighting a delaying battle to keep Magog from his three remaining wives, twelve children and fifty grandchildren.

High praise, indeed, especially coming from the conservative Shakakhan. I could respect a man who had earned those words.

I disconnected from Andromeda and sent the terminal on one more search, seeking links with my own ancestry. The closest connection I could locate was a fourth cousin twice removed; this was certainly far enough away that it would put me under no familial obligation where Dylan was concerned. I could serve him, work with him, or kill him (if need be) without any thought of pride protocol; the only honor at stake that might need be considered would be mine.

Ah. I shut the machine down and leaned back in the chair, relieved. I had not wanted to believe that the overly idealistic and occasionally insane Dylan Hunt might be a direct relative of mine, if only for reassurance that his form of insanity did not run in my family. He tended to take unnecessary chances and win by a hair's breadth when he could more easily have sat back and won by a light year.

Knowledge is always its own reward, aside from everything else. It is also always the most useful tool for unlocking the minds of others as well as their pocketbooks, safes, and treasure houses. The idea that knowledge of any kind might be "useless" is alien and a falsehood; no form of knowledge lacks a use. The question always at hand is, rather, to which use it should be put in order to achieve one's goals.

I found Dylan on the observation deck, still watching the stars.

"I apologize if I upset you, earlier. I did not mean to cause you unnecessary distress."

He turned toward me. "No? Only necessary distress, then?"

"No." I said quietly. "I am sorry, sir."

He had been breathing heavily, and the tear tracks on his face, while smudged, told their own story. "I... didn't think he'd even survived. And since I wasn't able to go back in time, I didn't want to let myself think of him, or anyone else, or what might have happened to them."

I sat on the bench where I had once mourned the loss of my Orca wife Freya and our child, and the deaths at Witchhead, and watched him. He looked, at that time, as alone as I had ever felt when
faced by a sky full of stars and no other living family.

"He has a good name in our history." I took a data disk from my pocket and handed it to him; he let it lie on his open palm and gazed at it. "David Geronimo was honored in his lifetime for his courage, and is remembered even now for his wisdom as well. I thought you might like to see what our historians said of him."

"Thank you, Tyr. I appreciate it." His fingers closed over the disk and gripped it tightly before he stowed it in his own pocket.

Together we watched a comet in the distance for a while, its white-gold tail as brilliant in the light of the nearest star we were passing as that of a Sirian fox. "I don't suppose you noticed whether we're related, you and I?" he said at length.

"As far as I can tell, we are not. I haven't traced all the cadet branches or the intern marriages of two centuries ago, but none have occurred more recently than that." I let my voice soften. "You need not find me a particular present on your next major holiday, if that was the question."

"Ah. Of course, I would want to know if I should expand my shopping list. I have so many people to shop for these days."

"Dylan." He turned his face toward me as I continued. "You are not the only person who is alone on this ship. Look at us. The only one among us who has any birth family left is Beka, if she even considers her brother still to be family."

"It's not that. Well, it is somewhat. I ... hadn't thought of David in so long. Now I'm remembering what he was like as a child."

"From what I read of him, I think I would have liked to meet him." I watched his face. "You should know, it was extremely rare to allow someone who was converting to retain any part of his old life, yet your brother was permitted to keep his name. He must have been an extraordinary man, to have earned that honor."

"You said his new name was David Geronimo?" Dylan smiled suddenly, and I knew he was seeing a time and place I could not even imagine. "When we were children on Tarn Vedra, we used to yell 'Geronimo!' when we did something dangerous, like jumping off the high rock into the quarry to go swimming. I'd forgotten that until now."

"So he managed to keep that much of his past." I nodded. "A very clever man."

"Yes, he was. I don't have any pictures of him any more; at least, I don't think so. It's possible that Andromeda has a few." He leaned on the railing, as if talking had restored his usual demeanor. "I'd prefer it if you did not mention this to the Sabra-Jaguars; I'd like to keep this information to myself for now."

"I understand. However, should you be inclined to keep it to yourself permanently, you should be aware that David Geronimo was a hero to Jaguar Pride, and pointing out your relationship to him cannot harm you."

"I'll keep that in mind." His face softened slightly as he tapped his fingers against the pocket that held the disk. "Thank you, Tyr."

***

The ship's avatar materialized and walked next to me on the way back to my quarters. "That was a
very kind gesture."

"Do you even comprehend the concept of privacy?" I asked her.

"About as well as you do, I think." She shrugged. "I'm just doing my job."

"As am I."

"I see. Now your job includes buttering up Dylan."

"I need not flatter Dylan in order to get my work done. It was my duty and privilege, once I
determined that he had kin among my people, to provide him with his genealogy."

"I would be the last to say you should not do your duty, Tyr."

"How are Harper's life signs, then, since a good portion of my duty lies in improving his health?" I
refrained from telling her what a privilege I felt that to be as well.

She tilted her head toward me. "He's sleeping in your bed, and his life signs are excellent. I suspect
that the last husk should be destroyed within a few hours. You should send him to Trance for a
check-up tomorrow."

"I'll do that."

She shimmered and disappeared, and I shook my head. I had never met a Nietzschian matriarch who
did not want to run the universe -- as well as any males within immediate range -- or who did not
have the wit and ability to do so if given the chance. Andromeda was no different, though her
appearance belied her age and experience. As long as her 'concern' for Harper and Dylan did not
interfere with my plans, I appreciated it. However, I always had to consider her a tool of Dylan and
his Commonwealth, a virtual servant rather than a free agent who could choose whether or not to
work toward his ends.

***

Harper woke when I moved the covers enough to get into bed next to him. "Hey. How's it going?"

"How do you feel?" I noticed he was wearing an old sleep shirt; I hadn't noticed the temperature in
my quarters growing cooler so he must have felt cold.

"Fine, fine. After I retooled the hyperdrive twice to get it up to what Dylan and Rommie wanted, I
had a headache the size of a Udari melon, but it went away." He snuggled closer and reached out to
hold me. "Mmmm. You're so warm."

"Were you chilled?" Trance had warned me that one sign of his being healed would be a change in
his perception of heat and cold. As long as he was infested, his body would not feel the cold because
the larvae would generate their own warmth, despite their dormant state. Once he was free of them,
though, his body would revert to its natural adjustments toward heat and cold, which might be a
shock.

"A little. You weren't here. You always keep me warm. Come up." He pulled at my arm until I
rolled on top of him, bracing my weight on my thighs and arms. "Mmmm. A Tyr-comforter. The
height of luxury."

I felt amusement bubbling up from inside me. "You're a rare creature."
"The Harper is rare. That's sweet." His eyes, slightly unfocused in the dark, sought mine. "Why?"

"You think that having a Nietzschian lying on you is comforting. Most of the last three galaxies we've visited would consider you insane."

"Well, that's their problem."

I nuzzled his ear and whispered, "Go see Trance tomorrow. She thinks you're almost free of passengers."

"Really?" His arms tightened around me. "Oh, man. It's a good thing you stand when you're working on the bridge."

"I shall keep that in mind when I'm on shift." I rolled off him. "You should go back to sleep."

"In a minute. Are you really Dylan's great-great-nephew or something?"

I shook my head. "The family lines don't run in that direction. He is, however, related distantly to Charlemagne Bolivar, through four separate lines of descent, which may be more of an advantage to us than to Bolivar if it becomes known."

"Oh, yeah. Won't the Dragans and the other prides lose respect for Nietzschians who are that close to the rest of us lesser beings?" His sarcasm was palpable. "Present company excepted, of course."

"Of course. That's part of it. All of us, though, are descended from humans many generations back; some just wish it were further back than it is." I was starting to fall asleep myself. "I am content with my heritage."

"Tyr," Harper said hesitantly, "what about the effect on Dylan? How was he when you went to talk with him?"

"How did you know about that?"

"I asked Rommie where you were."

"The lack of privacy aboard this ship is shocking," I murmured sleepily. "He was glad to know that his brother survived Witchhead; he felt nostalgic for his lost youth, something like that."

"Well, that's good. I mean, I think that's good. It might keep him from thinking of what's in the cargo bay."

I awoke slightly, but I had already weighed the possibilities before I mentioned Paris Ramses on the bridge.

"I doubt he'd try to sell my property to the highest bidder; he couldn't accurately claim it was his as well." I ticked them off on Harper's ribs. "However, he might well use it as a bargaining chip with the Jaguars and the Sirrush. He's not likely to let the Dragans get their hands on it; he would forfeit respect from all the other prides and would also lose his biggest bargaining chip. If he lived that long."

"You'd take on Dylan for it?" A whisper.

"I would."

Silence.
"I hope it doesn't come to that, Tyr."

"Much as I hate to admit it, I have acquired a certain amount of respect and liking for Captain Dylan Hunt. The galaxy is a much more unpredictable place with him in it."

"So you gave him knowledge he didn't have to put him off balance? Sneaky."

"A precaution. Do you think Charlemagne Bolivar was unaware of the connection when he brought Paris to this ship? He knew it beforehand, or we would never have seen the boy." I closed my eyes. "Better he should hear it from me than be blindsided by a Jaguar."

I had known something was in the air from the way in which Charlemagne made his offer. Why offer a lesser bargain at all, unless it held hidden advantages? One advantage, in that case, would have been the tangential insult to Dylan, at least in a Jaguar's mind. By turning aside that choice and opting for Charlemagne himself, I had shown a modicum of respect for Dylan as well as affirming for Charlemagne that I was still a man of tradition who did not shirk from making my own bargain with a convenient devil. The devil, of course, was one of those mythical concepts we had discarded along with gods, but the concept remained.

***

We were traveling through a section of space that the old Commonwealth had named the Mobius Strip, for the odd shape of its galaxies, when the Dragans attacked.

It was a small contingent, a dozen ships, well within our capabilities, but Dylan told me only to fire warning shots while he tried to hail them. They gave no response and continued the attack. He shook his head, with regret, I thought, and gave the order to fire at will but to bring aboard any survivors for questioning.

I destroyed the ships. There were no survivors. When we examined the wreckage, we determined that the ships had been flown by A.I.s only or otherwise automated; no live beings had been aboard.

"This is a warning, Captain." I reconfigured the battle array to re-arm the weapons that had been fired.

"I agree. Beka, send a copy of the battle record to Charlemagne Bolivar for his consideration, and ask him to meet us at his convenience."

Beka sent the message. "Why would the Dragans want to waste ships like this? They're not a wealthy pride any more; they've had too much internal strife," she mused. "Every time we've encountered them, we've seen only a fragment of the group, working autonomously. It makes no sense."

"Perhaps the Dragan groups have reassembled into a consortium," I said. "Or maybe they've heard about the Magog and wanted to impress you with their ability to wage war without sacrificing men."

"Tyr, you have an interesting sense of humor." Dylan moved away from his command station. "How likely do you think it is that the Dragans would form an alliance?"

"Not very. They're not that intelligent, and everyone else knows it."

"Such language," Beka murmured. "You'd think you were discussing ordinary mortals like the rest of us."

"Considering the idiocy of that last group of Dragan allies that were eaten by the squorm, I think..."
your intelligence and ability to compete and survive is far superior," I told her.

"Hmm." Dylan turned back to peer at the display of readings in front of him. "Any word from Bolivar?"

"Just in now. He'll meet us near Salamanca Station."

"Make course for Salamanca, then, please." Dylan waved a hand at the door. "Tyr? Beka? Harper? I need to go over some things with Rommie. I'll catch you later."

***

There were almost no fresh vegetables in the galley. When I arrived at the hydroponics garden, Trance was picking tomatoes and peppers and string beans into an old-fashioned market basket.

"You know," she said, as if we had been conversing for a while, "the trees really miss birds. Birds would make them happy. So would bees. I'll have to see about getting a hive of bees, or maybe two, the kind that are just pleased to make honey and keep plants happy."

I sat down on a bench beside where she was working. "Wouldn't the birds eat the fruit?" I asked.

"Probably. I don't think the trees would mind that much, though. It's hard on them, being out here in space. They miss having real dirt under their roots."

"What would make the birds happy?"

"That's a good question." She moved over to an espaliered apricot and began picking its golden fruit. "Other compatible birds, I think. Someone to talk to, something to talk about. They'd be amused by the salmon in the water tanks, and I don't think the salmon would bother them." She looked back at me. "What would make you happy, Tyr?"

"You know, you're the first person in a long time to ask me that question." I had learned not to doubt Trance's perceptiveness, though I was never sure how much she saw as opposed to how much she guessed. Her predictive ability was more than coincidental; I did not need to know how it worked in order to be careful of it.

"It's an important question." She finished with the apricots and moved over to the dwarf pear trees that had borne the fruit I'd prepared for Harper, a few days ago. "I don't think you look for happiness in the same places as people might expect."

"What do you think they expect?"

"Oh, the usual. Money, power, fame, control." She blinked at me, long eyelashes fluttering. "I think you value these things -- I would never say you didn't -- but I think you want something more than that."

"Perhaps I want to become a philosopher."

"Perhaps." She handed me a blushing pear. "Here. That one wanted to be enjoyed immediately."

I bit in. The fruit tasted perfectly ripe, the juice like nectar, almost intoxicatingly sweet. "Delicious."

"Does it make you happy?" she asked. "You look happy."

"It certainly pleases my taste buds," I said, between bites. "Does that translate into happiness for you?"
"You see? You're already a philosopher; you don't have to wait to become one." She beamed at me.

"What about striving to do what is right? Shouldn't that make me happy, rather than simple physical comforts?" If she wanted to discuss philosophy, I was ready.

"Yes, of course it should." She tilted her head, observing me. "The question isn't whether it should, though, but whether it does. Does doing what is right for yourself make you happier than doing what is right for others? Or is it the same thing?"

I smiled at her, delighted. It had been so long since I had enjoyed a conversation in the philosophical mode. "What do you consider the highest good that one should seek? I noticed you separated power and control in your list."

"Oh, Tyr, you know they're not the same thing." She perched at the foot of the pear tree and started to nibble on a ripe pear of her own. "As for money and fame, they're ... illusions. They come and go. Are you a better person because you have money or because someone knows who you are? I don't think so."

"I could argue that money and fame enable a person to do what he only can dream of without them." I dropped the core into the container Trance kept for collecting seeds for planting. "If I owned my own ship, I could battle the Magog on my own terms."

"This is true, but you couldn't do it as effectively as you can from the Andromeda, in the alliance that Dylan is creating. In this case, your work on the crew is more valuable than money for getting you what you want. Try another example."

"All right." The artificial sun in the garden felt warm; I leaned on my elbow to bask in its light. "We've disposed of money. Power and control are not equal, I agree; both may depend upon alliances but power may be ineffective without control, and too much control can strangle an alliance's utility. I think that leaves fame."

She swung her legs back and forth like a child on a tall chair. "You're already famous. So am I. So are Beka and Harper. So is Dylan. What difference does it make? When I go to a market, the fact that they know my name doesn't mean they'll give me better prices."

"Is fame an end in itself, or a means? You seem to think of it as a means."

"It could be either. Or neither. I don't think it really exists, any more than money does." She smiled suddenly. "Of course, because I don't think they're important, they're much easier to handle."

"Is that why you win at the gaming tables, whenever you're near them? Because you think they're not important?"

"No, I win because they're fun." She hopped down, picked up her basket and moved to the other side of the area where I was lounging, to peer attentively at several flowering bean vines. "Whether something is fun doesn't determine whether it's important or not. That's not how fun works. You know that."

"Are you going to tell me that love makes the world go around?"

Trance shook her head at me. "I shouldn't have to tell you that."

"It's a very pretty sentiment. I don't see that it has a place in formal philosophy."

"That's odd. I mean, isn't that what Plato and Socrates and Hume were talking about? Weren't they
discussing how a person can make a rational choice in order to increase happiness?"

"Yes, depending on your definition of happiness. Some would call my choices self-interest."

"Ah, but if they're only beneficial for you, and they make other people unhappy, how can they really be choices that promote happiness?" She bypassed the beans and moved on to grapevines, where she selected three clusters and said something under her breath as she picked them. I would have sworn she apologized to the plant, or perhaps asked its permission. "Isn't happiness one of the things that's a universal good? If you have an increase in happiness, it has to benefit everyone in order to be true happiness."

"Where did you study philosophy, Trance? Your dialectic is extremely Old Classical."

She glanced at me. The cagey, knowing expression was back on her face. "Oh, here and there. I like to read a lot, sometimes."

I leaned toward her to engage her attention. "What do you think would create the most happiness for everyone on the Andromeda right now?"

"That's not even a hard question: making the Magog worldship go away."

"But that causes a lot of pain and distress to the Magog. Does their pain negate the happiness that their deaths would cause?" Ah, the pleasures of the philosophical mode, in which one could ask the most difficult questions as if they were merest speculation.

"I don't think that's something I could answer," she said carefully. "All they do causes pain and death; I'm not going to say that they're good to us, or beneficial to any systems. But I don't know if, in a larger sense -- a pan-universal sense -- they're without merit of any kind."

"That's the same rationale that was used for maintaining supplies of virulently contagious diseases centuries ago -- until someone loosed the diseases on an unready populace."

"No, you're wrong. That's not the same thing at all." She flared at me. "Diseases aren't sentient."

"Are most Magog, other than Rev Bem, truly sentient? Do they comprehend good and evil? Do they even comprehend that there might be something other than their own devastation?" I picked up a small rock, running a finger across the crystals that gleamed in the light.

"If you're asking me whether I think we should destroy the Magog worldship, you're wasting your time." Trance set the basket down carefully and reached for another one. She walked purposefully to the herb garden and peered at the plants, pinching back a little here, a little there. "I'm not pleased at all when innocent people are harmed, like you and Harper."

I dropped the rock. It bounced once before coming to rest on the moss beneath the tree. "You think of me as innocent?"

She nodded toward a tall, bushy basil plant, but I knew who her gesture was meant for. "Yes. You didn't do anything to annoy them. None of us did. You didn't make them come to destroy us; they did it on their own. That makes you innocent."

Ah. We were still in the philosophical mode, of course. It had been so long. "I agree with you, as long as you are not considering me 'an' innocent."

This jibe gained me a triangular smile from behind the dill weed. "Oh, I would never do that, Tyr. I know you too well. But I think we've strayed from our topic, which was happiness."
"I think we've come close to concluding that beings that are solely destructive of other's lives and others' happiness are guilty of causing unwonted distress, and therefore should be eliminated. Hmm. Is there enough basil for a good pesto?"

"I think so. If you want to make it for all of us, I think I know where Harper hid the good cheese."

"Harper likes cheese?"

Trance pinched back the enormous red opal basil in three places and added the deep maroon leaves to the basket. "Oh, he loves cheese."

"That's good to know. I do think good cheese contributes in a positive way to happiness."

"I think I could be persuaded that good cheese might be a universal good -- it benefits the cows and goats and sheep and such that give milk, it benefits the people who make it and the people who eat it. That's pretty universal, I think." She handed me an empty basket. "Choose what you like and I'll take the rest to the galley."

As I picked and chose from the bounty she laid in front of me, I noticed her frowning at two plants off to the side. "What's going on there?"

"Oh, this one's a pepper plant and this one's a tomato. They don't like each other."

"They don't?" I peered at the plants. "They don't look that much different."

"They're not much different at all. They just don't get along. When they're together nothing really happens. They don't have flowers or fruit, because they send antagonistic chemicals at each other. It's very sad," she said soberly. "I'll probably have to move one of them, but there's really no other place for it."

"Can't you just put a barrier in between so they can't contact each other any more? Would that help?"

"I might try that. Thanks." Trance blinked at me. "You know, you're changing. This isn't a bad thing."

"I'll try to remember that as I grind up pesto for you," I said. I had filled the empty basket full of herbs, mostly basil but also oregano and thyme, with the remainder of the space taken up by fresh fruit. "I wouldn't say that good food was the highest good, but I'd never argue against it; I've had too many bad meals."

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"Let's talk," Dylan said as he walked into the galley. "Rommie, privacy mode." He closed the door behind himself. "I'd ask you to walk with me but you appear to be busy."

"Yes, I am." On Kotyra, I had been taught to grind pesto as one would grind cornmeal, in a trough with a stone. The difference was that pesto could be ground while standing rather than kneeling; courtiers such as myself were only sent to grind corn as punishment. Later, I had found a bowl lined with narrow serrations and an accompanying wooden tool for rubbing nuts or leaves across the ridges. On Andromeda, three centuries ago, someone had gone to the trouble to provide a genuine stone mortar and pestle, which worked admirably.

"I'm glad the old stuff is useful."

"Oh?" I glanced up at him as I added a handful more pine nuts. "You know where this is from?"
"Not really. I think I remember someone bringing it aboard from a shopping trip on Tarn Vedra. But that's not important." Dylan sat on a tall stool across the counter from where I was working. "I want to talk to you about your cargo."

He sounded far too casual. It put me on alert.

"Yes?"

"It's occurred to me that my locking it away from you might have given you the wrong idea."

"Such as?" I wasn't prepared to move into the formal mode when the civil mode so neatly expressed my feelings.

"Killing me and taking it, and the Andromeda."

I reached for the first batch of basil, tore the leaves and dropped them into the pestle. "Believe me, sir, if I wanted you dead you'd already be dead. I learned some time back just how difficult it would be to take the Andromeda from you alone, and I'm not interested in the impossible."

"It's a sign of wisdom to be able to distinguish the unlikely from the impossible," Dylan said with a smile that I could read as either amused or cautioning. "Can I do anything to help with whatever you're making that smells so wonderful?"

"It's pesto. Here." I pushed a block of cheese, a grater and a collecting bowl toward him. "If you want to help, fill the bowl with ground cheese to this level." He took them and unwrapped the cheese. "So. What did you have in mind in regards to my ... cargo?"

"I've been thinking, since you gave me the information on David's descendants. That connection doesn't make me Nietzschean, but it should give me more leverage in a few places." He rubbed the cheese energetically across the grater, scattering cheese crumbs across the counter. "Sorry."

"And this has what to do with me?" I raised an eyebrow and continued to pound the torn basil leaves into the already pounded garlic and pine nuts, drizzling a small amount of olive oil into the pestle to ease the job.

"I'm going to go out on a limb here and guess that you stole the body back from the Dragans because it gives you an advantage, not just because you wanted to piss them off."

My words were as peaceable as I could make them. "I recovered the box from the people who had stolen it from my pride because that was the right thing to do." Perhaps Trance's ideas were rubbing off on me, though our discussion had strayed from love to happiness more easily than I'd expected.

"Because the Dragans killed your family."

"Because I'm the last member of Kodiak Pride, and guarding Drago Museveni is my pride's right. You know that already."

"Well." Dylan brushed the back of the grater to free the last few curls of cheese from it. "If this were still a High Guard ship of the old line, it would be part of my job as captain to make sure there were paths to advancement for my crew. I've been thinking about this a bit lately, ever since we encountered the Magog worldship. It's a lot harder to do that in this century than it used to be."

He handed me the bowl of cheese, which I accepted with a nod, and set the grater and the diminished block of cheese aside. I threw the last of the basil, the dark-ruby opal basil, into the pestle and continued to grind, adding a little more olive oil.
"Career advancement. I knew you were an insane optimist when you climbed into the worldship to rescue three dead men." I crumbled the cheese between my fingers and nodded. "Let me see. What would you advocate? Harper of course should have his own design shop and assistants, not to mention whatever legal backing is available to protect his inventions. Beka could probably choose between becoming an admiral and a fascinating career in diplomacy, or international commerce." There were times when I couldn't restrain the sarcasm I felt in dealing with Dylan-the-relic as opposed to Dylan-the-strategist. "We don't have careers any more, captain. We have lives. We try to survive from day to day, and if we're doing better at the end of the day than we were at the beginning, it's a success."

"Now, that sounds like the Tyr I met when he tried to 'salvage' the Andromeda with me on it, not the Tyr who just put Charlemagne Bolivar into a position where the most powerful Nietzschian leader in this quadrant owes him his life and any favor he wants to request." Dylan's eyes narrowed, as they had in his cabin when we played go.

I felt the ground shift under my feet. Dylan knew something. Did he know of shikastri or understand its implications? Or was he simply taking a chance in the dark, as he so often did, to see how I would react? I shrugged a shoulder. "As you say."

Dylan rested his elbows on the counter and steepled his fingers, peering at them as if they were a compass to chart his path. "What would you say if I offered to help you regain a pride of your own, as well as the status of husband and father, and keep the body of Drago Museveni from anyone else who might want to take it?"

I blinked at him. I could not help thinking I'd strayed into an alternate dimension. "Let me get this straight. You -- the creator of the New Commonwealth -- are offering to help me become the new leader of the Nietzschian people?"

"Hmm, not in so many words, but the meaning is still the same."

"Why?"

"Because we can work together? Because we have similar goals? Because, despite your tendency to go off on your own, I can trust you to watch my back when we have a mutual enemy? Because I think you have a better sense of what the rest of us are capable of than most modern Nietzschians I've met?"

"Those are ... interesting reasons, if they're true. I have my doubts about some of them."

"I'm sure you do."

"Why now?" I tipped the grated cheese slowly into the pestle, added more oil and some tomato paste, and continued to mash the contents together. The fragrance of the pesto bathed the room. "It's not because of my superior culinary efforts, I'm sure."

Dylan swirled around on his stool. "Oh, I could say that, but it wouldn't be true."

"I see. You do like my cooking."

"You've been kinder to Harper than I'd ever have expected. You saved his life. You contributed the remedy for Magog infestation; in fact, you contributed far more than I would have expected." He slid off the stool and stood facing me. "I think we can work together. Are you interested?"

"You offer me what I've been working toward all my life -- what do you think?" I returned. My heart pounded with a wild joy at the thought of what he offered, but my mind was spinning through
labyrinths of precaution and doubt. "You're entirely insane, of course. When the Jaguars learn that I have the Progenitor, they'll be as avid to steal his remains as the Dragans were, and the same with the Sirrush. The only thing that will keep them all at bay for a while is the Magog invasion. Are you sure you want to do this?"

Dylan shrugged. "Well, I could just offer it to Charlemagne Bolivar, but I don't think I want to do that. For one thing, I doubt I'd live long enough to get it off my ship."

"True."

"We don't need anything to divide the focus of the alliance until the Magog have been destroyed."

"Agreed." I ran a fingertip over the mortar and tasted the pesto. "Not bad." I held it out for Dylan.

"Oh, this is terrific." He nearly moaned as he tasted it. I carefully kept my expression neutral.

"You might consider letting the rest of the crew in now; they're going to wonder what we're up to."

Dylan nodded an acknowledgment as he said, "Andromeda, unlock the galley doors, please."

Beka nearly tumbled through the door, followed by Rommie. Harper was one step behind.

"Do I smell a conspiracy?" Beka glanced sharply from Dylan to me. "Or were you just trying to steal the recipe?"

Rommie leaned close to sniff the mortar. "Mmmm. Pesto. You need whole-grain pasta to go with it. I'll see to that." She moved purposefully into the cooking area behind me.

"Oh, wow, Tyr, more good food. Are you going to become a master chef instead of a mercenary now?" Harper sneaked a finger into the pesto for a taste. I smacked his hand playfully.

"Nothing of the sort, Beka. Tyr and I were merely discussing the future."

"Ah. The future." Beka reached toward the pesto. I glared at her. "You know, that tastes absolutely wonderful on a sandwich, with good sausage and cheese."

"If that's what you want to do with your share, you're welcome to remove some for yourself. I believe Rommie is making pasta for the rest of us, though."

"But Rommie doesn't eat," Trance put in, as she reached toward the bowl of the mortar as well.

"Just because I don't eat doesn't mean I don't appreciate the smell of good food," Rommie said. "I assume you want your pasta al dente?"

"Of course." Dylan seemed delighted to have something to answer that would not incriminate him in some way.

Harper's eyes met mine over Trance's shoulder, and I knew I would hear from him later.

***

It didn't take long. He caught up with me after my next shift and walked with me to his shop, where he shut the door and asked what Dylan had said. I gave him the abbreviated version.

"He offered you what?"
"You heard me."

"Yeah. I heard it. I just don't believe it." Harper paced from one workbench to the other and back.

I nodded. "What does it gain him? He's already got the most powerful Nietzschian army as an ally."

"He'd lose the Jaguars for sure if he does this, wouldn't he?"

"Unless he can persuade Bolivar that it's in the best interest of Sabra-Jaguar Pride to go along with what he plans."

"And we don't know what he's planning." Harper chewed his lip. "I don't like this at all."

"Welcome to the club," I growled.

His glance caressed me. "I could go seduce him and see if his pillow talk's any good."

"Oh?" I crossed my arms and leaned a hip against the workbench.

"If you can have Charlemagne Bolivar, I can have Dylan."

"I have no argument with that, but does Dylan want to have you?"

"He watches my ass all the time. You have no idea."

I concentrated my gaze on his altogether admirable ass, as he turned. He almost blushed. "Actually, I have a pretty fair idea."

"Well?"

"So. You go to Dylan and offer to ... please him --"

"That's diplomatic of you."

"What's to keep him from thinking of it as a spying expedition on my behalf?"

"You're right. But aren't you more the do-it-yourself guy? I mean, if you wanted to listen to Dylan's pillow talk, you'd be getting after his ass yourself."

"I might point out that I've offered and been rejected." I let it be matter-of-fact. "I don't take rejection well."

"You don't take rejection at all, from what I've seen. But that was different. So, he turned down a chance at the finest alternative-health-care delivery system this side of Antares. That's his loss. Unless you asked him at another time?" Harper speculated.

"He was not precisely unimpressed with my charms, but I suspect he was still more interested in what Beka might offer."

"Then why in the name of Albert Einstein hasn't he made his move? He's driving Beka nuts."

"I would have thought the estimable captain of the Eureka Maru would be capable of asking him anything."

"Yeah, you'd think, wouldn't you? But Beka's a little odd that way. She'll go after someone that she sees as her level, but not if she has him up on a pedestal or something, and she's definitely got Dylan
on a big one."

"He doesn't deserve it." I recrossed my arms.

"Look." Harper stopped in front of me. "You want me to go let Beka in on Dylan's attitude, I can do it. But that's still not dealing with what he asked you."

"I don't want to deal with it right now."

"Well, what do you want?" He'd crossed his arms, pugnacious as ever, and his chin rose. "I've been having this fantasy about you in this room, this non-surveilled room."

"Oh, have you?" I let my eyes caress him, knowing he would feel them as if they were my hands. "And what would you do with me here? I assure you, I don't wish to become an android."

"Nothing like that at all. In fact, what I've thought of is a whole lot more human than that." He pushed a section of work out of the way on the work table behind me. "What would you say if I told you I'd had dreams of pushing you down on that table and having you right here?"

Had I been most other Nietzschians, I would have killed him for even suggesting that. Had he been another Nietzschian, I might well have reversed his scenario for him and had him on his own workbench. But my life has not followed the prescribed course of a Nietzschian warrior for some time.

And we were shieldbrothers.

And he owed me this.

"Oh, really?" I towered over him. "You'd push me around?"

"Yeah. I'd push you around. I'm tougher than I look." He grabbed my vest and pulled me in for a hard, hot kiss. "You think you can take me?"

"I can take anything you deal," I said, my voice slipping into its lower range. I knew this had an aphrodisiac effect on him, as it had been designed to do. "Show me what you've got."

One of his hands slid down to cup me, an exquisite tease. "Drop 'em and turn around."

"I assume you mean my clothes and not my jewels?"

He let out a laugh. "You know exactly what I mean." His hand moved a little lower. "Do it."

"And if I don't?"

"Then you'll have to wait until I feel like it." Insouciant tease.

Without a word I unfastened my trousers and turned around, the leather dropping between my legs. The trousers were specially made to unhook on either thigh and slip across, so that the lower portion of the leathers functioned as leg protection even when the upper section was missing. It had been a while since I'd made use of this feature for any good purpose.

"Oh, man." Harper, behind me, sounded as if he were invoking deity. "You have such an amazing ass." He put one hand on my back. "Down."

I leaned over the table, reaching to grab the other side. I could feel his fingers on me, then a slicked one in me, and I held my breath until he brushed the gland; I felt the reverberations of that touch
through every inch of my body.

"I told you I wouldn't have any mercy on you." Harper's voice sounded almost as low as mine.

He was blunt behind me, hot and wet, and then as I drew a breath he was in. We both gasped. I arched my back, pushing myself toward him, inviting him. His hands anchored themselves on me, and he moved slowly at first but strongly, without hesitation.

And then he kept moving, on and on, sending lightning bolts through me. My dangling cock hardened, rose, brushed my belly with wetness, and he ignored it and kept on, pounding.

"If you want mercy from me, Tyr," he whispered, behind my shoulder, "you're going to have to ask for it."

In response I pushed back at him and tightened myself just a little, and he smacked my thigh with the palm of his hand and held on, slowing his strokes and making them longer, deeper, taking me in a way that I had not felt in more years than I wanted to contemplate, learning me, knowing me. And when he came, he came as hard as I had come in him, that night when he had not tightened his legs around me.

He was leaning over me, panting, after he finished, and I was lying on the table, holding on to anchor myself to something concrete in the spinning, throbbing universe. I felt him kiss my back as I returned to normal consciousness; I realized I had spent myself twice on the floor under the workbench and had not even noticed, so intense was the pleasure he'd given me.

"I told you I'd keep my word," he whispered.

"Yes, you have," I said, "my shieldbrother."

As we pulled ourselves together, and he took the time to admire the design of my clothes, his eye caught my offering. "Hey, a little something for me to remember you by," he smirked. "But I think I'll make it a bit less controversial, just in case Dylan walks in."

"By all means," I said.

"Great." He reached behind himself and tossed most of a can of what looked like sawdust or wood shavings -- antiquated as the thought might be -- onto the floor over it, then swept them back up again. The stain was gone. "Now I've got you, my pretty, and you're not getting away."

I took his face in my hand and kissed him. "You've been watching entirely too many old videos."

"There's no such thing." He tilted his head as he looked back at me. "You can consider that to be phase one in the celebration of the closing of The Harper's Transportation Line. No more passengers. Trance certified it today."

"I assume there'll be more celebration later on?"

"You can count on it."

"In that case, I suspect your seduction of Dylan will have to wait a day or so."

"Why? The Harper is very good."

"Oh, all right." I let my hands drop. "I'd assumed, perhaps wrongly, that you'd wanted to share your good fortune with me. But by all means bring in the rest of the crew. You'll simply have to find a
larger bed."

"Well, if you're worried about getting cold, you could bunk with Trance. She's really warm to sleep with." His eyes sparkled. "And fun, too."

"I didn't think she liked men."

"Trance? Oh, she likes everyone. Well, everyone who doesn't have claws and fur."

"Thank you for clarifying that."

"What, you don't want a celebratory orgy?"

"Is it really necessary, now that Trance has given everyone on board the antibody?"

"When you put it that way, it makes you sound sort of old-Earth Puritan."

I straightened my back and glared. "I most certainly am not."

"Yeah. I know. Weird that you want to sound like that, but hey."

It was more of the teasing in which he specialized; two could play at that. He leaned over to pick up a couple of tools that had fallen during our most vigorous efforts, and I moved in behind him, grasped his hips in my hands and rubbed myself against him. "Does this feel 'Puritan' to you?"

"Um. No. No way no how. Ohhhh."

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As it turned out, Charlemagne Bolivar had indeed noticed the spate of unmanned fighters; his own ships had been attacked by them. To term him merely displeased would be to deprecate the ancient and honorable Nietzschian tradition of battle oratory. Fortunately for Dylan, Bolivar confined himself to the major theme rather than composing an extempore lyric epic. Dylan appeared to be impressed with Bolivar's oratorical skills as well as his solution for the situation: an improved sensor, which he shared with us, that would both detect a ship's crew and trace any transmissions to their source, however remote or disguised, and tag the source with a signal at the molecular level that could not be erased.

Bolivar ignored my presence on the bridge, an hour after my encounter with Harper, during his discussion with Dylan. I listened, and thought, and noticed that, rather than have his second in command behind him during the transmission he stood there alone. Had he subdued a mutiny? Was he now only a figurehead on one ship instead of the commander of an enormous fleet? The mystery was solved as the lens pulled back to reveal a small group entering the bridge -- a tall older woman with silvery skin and raven-black hair, a young woman whose face resembled Bolivar's but whose cascading hair was a stream of red and gold, and several men with no particular similarity to one another, including Paris Ramses.

"I believe it is time for us to introduce ourselves to each other," Charlemagne said, in the most formal tones possible. "The matriarch of Sabra-Jaguar Pride, Messallina. My sister, Boudicca. My brother, Suleiman." He inclined his head toward a man with skin like my own and Charlemagne's features, who stood next to Boudicca. "My wives will be pleased to entertain you and your crew, should you come to our home world when this is finished. I believe you have already met Paris Ramses."

I noticed he had not phrased anything beyond his introductions in the formal tone. Suleiman looked annoyed at being introduced to mere humans, but Boudicca's eyes traveled until they found me at my
post. A small nod from her confirmed her interest.

I felt far too warm, suddenly.

"I'm gratified that you have introduced us," Dylan said. "Let me introduce my crew: Beka Valentine, captain of the Eureka Maru, my first officer; Seamus Zelazny Harper, my chief engineer; Trance Gemini, life science officer and medical expert; and Tyr Anasazi, fire control officer and weapons expert."

Oh, Dylan had certainly noticed Charlemagne's lapse in protocol, and had returned the favor by putting his own introductions into the most formal mode available in the common tongue. The startled expression on several Jaguar faces amused me, though I kept my amusement behind a very sober face.

"And I see one of my own kinsmen there as well," Dylan continued, "Paris Ramses, out of Lucretia by Geronimo. It's good to know that I still have family in this time and place."

"Indeed." Charlemagne inclined his head. "You have a prodigious family in my pride. We will have to take the opportunity to get to know one another much better, very soon. I'm quite looking forward to it." His eyes found me, and his voice dropped into the formal mode. "Tyr Anasazi, out of Victoria by Barbarossa, last of the Kodiak, I present you to my sister Boudicca."

I stepped out from behind the weapons station; it was only fair that the woman should see all of what she was offered. "I am honored by your notice, and I offer my arm for you, should you ever wish it." Formality required the prospective husband to make the offer. "I also offer wishes for good health and long life to Messallina, whose wisdom and prudence are certainly in evidence in the wisdom and prudence of your pride's leader."

From the side, out of lens' range, I heard, "Stuffy much?" from Beka.

Messallina inclined her head graciously. She seemed far more interested in Trance Gemini than in myself, for which I could only be grateful. Boudicca stepped forward. "I am Boudicca, out of Nefertari by Subotai. I would like to meet you in person."

"My lady," I began, but Dylan interrupted me.

"I'm sure we can take a few hours to get to know one another a little better, and I'd certainly like to meet David Geronimo's descendants. Paris, you look very like my brother."

Charlemagne recovered his composure admirably, far more easily than his brother. "We would be pleased to offer our hospitality to you for, what, high tea? Come as you are, I'm sure. Bolivar out."

"Dylan, are you insane?" Beka hissed at him. "You go over there, you're not coming back."

"Beka, I have to show that I have faith in my allies. Charlemagne Bolivar has been on this ship twice, and this is our chance to allow him to return our hospitality."

"Just as long as you're not on the menu for high tea," Trance said.

"Oh, he won't be. I'm the main course." Now that I was no longer under the watchful eyes of the Jaguars, I was free to speak my mind. "If they even let me out of the women's quarters, that is."

"Tyr, Tyr, your fame goes before you," Beka chided gently. "It's only a few hours. Even you can't --"
"I'm in no mood for an inquisition from Messallina on the details of my upbringing and experiences."
I turned back to the weapons station controls. "Why can't you just find me an enemy out there that I
can blow up? A nice explosion would feel so gratifying."

"Hey, you're famous. Suck it up," Harper advised. "Go over, have tea, make nice with the pretty
ladies for a couple of hours and come back. How hard can it be?"

I glared at him to remind him just how hard I could be, and he blushed, fortunately behind Beka's
back. But his eyes watched me as a line formed between his eyebrows, and I knew his teasing was a
ruse.

"Come on, Tyr, let's go if we're going." Dylan was already on his way out. "Beka, you have the con.
If we're not back by dinnertime, target their thrusters but not their life support. I'd like to have some
chance of getting back alive."

"No problem, Dylan." She faked a sniff and a tear. "I'm miffed they didn't invite me."

I followed him out, mentally rehearsing the lecture he'd get in the Maru on the way over -- not that
he'd listen to a word, but at least I'd have had the chance to say what I thought of this foolishness
before he could put both feet into his mouth up to the hip.

***

"Summarize, Tyr. What are the three most important things I need to know?" Dylan angled the Maru
toward the dock in Bolivar's ship.

"Don't use the formal mode unless you intend not to lie in any way whatsoever. Lying while in the
formal mode is a crime -- "

"Got it."

"Bolivar is non-traditional in many ways but we don't know if his matriarch agrees with him. Watch
her and follow her lead as well as his."

"Got it."

"If any Nietzschian women offer to take you aside for a personal tour, go with them. Do what they
ask of you."

"What?"

"We mate before a battle. If you're asked, and you don't, it's an insult, a killing offense of honor."

His jaw dropped. "You must be kidding."

"Captain, would I joke about my people's longest-standing customs? You were the one who claimed
Paris as a kinsman; you may well be required to prove your own prowess." Dylan shook his head.
His hair was almost long enough for that to be a useful habit. "Oh, and that gesture you just made
will be very attractive; hair like yours is a fetish to some of the women of my people."

"Oh, just shoot me." Dylan cast his eyes up at the ceiling. "Don't."

"I have no intention of robbing our allies of the opportunity to share their most generous hospitality."
I snorted, enjoying his discomfort.

***
We were greeted by Charlemagne and his honor guard, who escorted us politely to a lounge in what I assumed was the family section of the ship. Charlemagne appeared to be in good spirits; he spoke with disgust of the Dragans.

"Is it true that you fed a party of Dragans to a rock-eating squorm? It's no more than they deserved; their bloodline has degenerated ridiculously in the last few years." Charlemagne shuddered artistically. "We Jaguars, however, practice the old ways to keep ourselves strong."

"It appears to have worked admirably," Dylan said politely. I had coached him on the civil mode briefly on the trip over.

"Yes, I'd say it did. Ah, here we are." Charlemagne waved a hand at the banquet laid out for us on tables along the wall. "Help yourself to whatever you wish; I don't want it said that I gave you only a leftover buttered bun."

For the sake of politeness, and staying out of trouble, I responded as if I took his statement only at face value, and in the civil mode. "I would never say that of you."

He laughed and turned aside as the door opened. What appeared to be a small regiment of women entered, as if in formation, with Messallina in the lead.

The matriarch of Pride Jaguar went directly to Dylan to greet him. She drew him aside as soon as he had filled his plate, and even chose a few sweets for him, a mark of great favor. "I've been reviewing your bloodline, and I must tell you that your family's genetic contribution to the pride has been strong. We are proud of the descendants of David Geronimo. I, myself, am descended from that line through Linnaea, his great-granddaughter."

"I would not have presumed to comment, if you hadn't brought it up, but you bear a striking resemblance to my aunt Claudia," Dylan replied. He caught my eye when she looked away, but I shook my head. I was not about to rescue him from what he so richly deserved for having claimed kinship with a genealogically attentive matriarch.

"Really?" Messallina looked immensely pleased. "You know, it's been said that I look like Brunhilde, Linnaea's mother. Would you care to view some of our historical family pictures ..."

"So." Charlemagne stood next to me again, sipping wine from a cup. "Would you be willing to place a bet on how long it will be before your captain is taken away by one or more of my cousins? There appears to be enough of him to go around." He tilted his head toward a group of women who stood a few feet away from Dylan, who appeared to be sizing him up. "My bet's on Portia to be the first."

"No bet at all." I finished the tasty bit of something on bread and picked up another. "What have you heard from elsewhere across the galaxy?"

"Rumors only, but it seemed a good idea to do this now." He scanned the room. "I believe my youngest sisters would like to speak with you as well. You've met Boudicca, of course. Ygraine, Morgan, this is Tyr Anasazi."

Ygraine and Morgan were twins, possibly identical, with the same interesting red-and-gold hair as Boudicca. They looked a few years younger, but were by no means children. One can tell these things by scent if nothing else, and like the pears in Trance's garden they smelled ripe for picking.

"I will speak with him first," Boudicca said quietly. She led me to an adjoining room, where she gestured for me to sit down on a long couch, next to a table that held a pitcher and cups.

"I'm told you prefer your speech blunt, though I believe I saw otherwise on your ship," she said. She
sat next to me, within the zone of friendship but outside that of intimacy. "Shall I be brief? I know war is coming. I know we may not survive." She lowered her head, and when she raised it again I saw tears in her eyes. "I have not yet taken a husband, only lovers, and I want children."

"You have lost someone, haven't you?" I asked her. I knew the look in her eyes; I had seen it in my own mirror, often enough, the first few years after my family was slaughtered.

Boudicca nodded. "Too many, to the Dragans, to the Magog. Once I had six brothers and eight sisters; now I have two of each, that's all." Her eyes were hazel, with gold in the center, and they almost glowed. "I think you would give me children that would help to rebuild the pride after the war. And I think any child that we created would be very beautiful."

"What of the formalities?" I had to ask; such naked honesty as hers required equal honor from me. "I cannot join Sabra-Jaguar Pride. I cannot live with you as husband and father, or help you bring up children until this war against the Magog is over and my own future is settled. And I have other obligations, to a shieldbrother." I thought of Harper's face on the bridge as we left, as he carefully put aside his feelings to smile at me.

"I'm aware of all this. As my brother may have told you, we follow the older ways; we bring good genetic material into the pride consciously, rather than only marrying among ourselves." She laid her hand on mine and traced a pattern on the back with a fingertip, the shape of a flower known for its receptiveness. "Also, I think my brother wants to ensure that his family will have a bit greater protection against the Magog."

Of course. It made abundant sense.

"We have about four hours," I told her. "Where would you like to begin?"

Her hand slid up my arm and across my chest to curve her fingers in my hair as she pulled me to her for a kiss.

***

"Well, sleepyhead," Beka greeted me on my first shift back on Andromeda more than two days later. "They must have put you and Dylan through quite a lot of hospitality."

"The Jaguars are known for their generosity," I told her. "You'd be surprised."

"I guess I would. Dylan's still a bit wobbly too, though I don't think I've seen him bumping into walls." She finished the drill she was preparing and pressed the controls to reset them. "You two look like you've been on a hell of a bender."

"Let's just say the exigencies of diplomacy can, at times, be all-encompassing."

"I know what that means," Harper piped up. He crawled out from under an open panel in the back. "You partied hearty and now you know it." His face looked carefully neutral.

"Well, all I can tell you is it was a good thing Dylan called to let me know everything was well, because my finger was getting a little itchy on that button." Beka frowned. "How was I to know you were going to be wined and dined until you couldn't walk straight?"

I shrugged mildly. "We usually only share that sort of formal hospitality with our own people. This was a great honor for Dylan."

"And for you?"
"Hey, war is hell, or so they tell me. Personally, I think hell is hell and war is war and you shouldn't get the damned things mixed up, you know?" Harper picked up his tools, intent on his work. "Beka, try that again. It should be working better. Rommie?"

The ship's voice spoke. "I don't know how to tell you this, Harper, but it itches."

"You're not supposed to know what an itch is, let alone ask me to scratch it. No, I take that back. Let me rephrase." He dived back under the panel, out of sight.

I did not have to look at my arm to feel the new tattoo. The Jaguars had, indeed, held to the older ways, and employed tattoos rather than armbands that could be lost or broken. It could only be seen under ultraviolet light, but that made it no less real. I wore the double helix again. This time, however, I had not married only Boudicca but her two younger sisters, and had tried my best to get them all with child; pregnancy is something our women can discern almost immediately. My feelings about this were mixed, at best, but I would not have undone it; I knew my bloodline would continue, and my children would bear the genetic stamp of my Kodiak ancestry into the future, whatever that might be.

I had also, in a brief but apparently arranged encounter on the second day, spent pleasurable time with both Charlemagne and Paris, whom Charlemagne favored as a successor to leadership and whom he wanted to have the highest degree of protection against the Magog. Paris was, as Charlemagne had promised, well educated and a treasure in bed; he had served Charlemagne with his mouth as I filled him, and I would long remember the view of Charlemagne's sculptured muscles moving as he leaned forward to kiss me hard over Paris's back.

When I returned to the ship, I reported immediately to the med deck, where Trance pronounced me in fine shape, except for exhaustion. I'd told her to be sure to check on Dylan, and she assured me that he was in the next room waiting for her, but had fallen asleep. Her smile went triangular and wickedly humorous.

Dylan came on deck, and I smiled.

"Glad to be back to work, Tyr?"

"I found it an interesting interlude."

"It was that, indeed." Dylan yawned. "You must tell me more about Nietzschian customs when you have time; I think I'm going to need to know these things."

***

In the lift, later, I asked him, "How many?"

"Three the first day, four the second, I think."

"Messallina must think very highly of you. You do realize that this is unprecedented since the time of Witchhead."

"I gathered that. And I'm aware of the irony involved."

I brushed against his arm and he winced slightly.

"You married them? All of them?" I checked the swollen section of his arm; it was at least twice as long as mine, with all seven repetitions of the double helix. I shook my head. "Dylan, Dylan, when will you ever learn?"
"Let's just say it sounded good at the time. Besides, you got married, too."

"I only married the three sisters, though. I did not marry the five cousins or the matriarch's favorite great-granddaughter."

"You're kidding."

"Do I look as if I were kidding?"

"You never do."

"I'll tell Beka to take it easy on you tonight," I told him as the lift doors opened and he got out.

"Thanks ... what?"

I nodded to him, smiled and went to the next floor.

***

Harper was busy.

Not only that, but he was busy in Workshop Five, which was locked against anyone but himself. I found that out by testing the lock -- it didn't matter how -- with Beka's and Trance's codes and coming up dry.

Andromeda materialized next to me. "I thought you'd learned by now that some things aren't for you."

"For someone who's intent on invading other's privacy, you have an interesting view of secrets." I moved on down the hall.

"Secrets are what you make of them. Oh, by the way, nice tattoo." She shimmered into nothingness.

***

I had almost become resigned to sleeping alone again -- the empty bed felt like a vast country -- when Harper showed up at my door carrying a bottle of wine and two glasses.

"What are we drinking to?"

"Oh, I don't know. My health? Your return? Dylan walking bow-legged for the past two days?"

"Oh?" I counted hours; we'd been back from the Jaguars for four days. "Let me guess: Beka?"

"Yep. She cornered him in his quarters and told him that if he was going to provide his services to the entire Nietzschian fleet he should start with a little generosity at home first." He smirked. "I could hear them from two floors away"

"Well, it's about time. They've been dancing around each other far too long."

Harper was opening the wine. He kept his eyes on the bottle as he poured. "Won't that make a problem for him, being married to the Jaguars now?"

"No more than for me."

"Yeah." He handed me a glass. "I was wondering about that, myself." He leaned back against the
wall, his arms crossed casually, the wine glass in one hand.

I took a deep drink; the wine tasted cool in my throat, slightly acidic. "By our laws I cannot ally myself with a woman from any other pride, although I may, at my whim, take lovers or concubines when I am not in the presence of my wives."

"Wives. Hoo-ooo. You do look a little ragged around the edges. How many? Are they pretty? Do you think they'd like a pet? I'm housebroken. I can prove it." Was he joking? I had to be more tired than I realized; I couldn't tell.

"Three; Charlemagne's sisters. They're beautiful." I handed him a holo they'd given me, the sisters shown posing as if they were the classical Three Graces from an ancient art work. "Trust me, you'd never survive them."

"Oh, but I'd die happy, I know I would." Harper handed the holo back. "So. Does that include shieldbrothers, or should I just sit by the side of the road and watch you ride off into the multimatriominal sunset?"

"I'm here, aren't I?" I sat on the bed, stretched out and sipped the wine. "I have not left the Andromeda."

"There's a war on. Of course you'd be here."

"True." I watched him, seeking his real feelings under the layers of protective emotion. "At some point I will bring my wives here, or I will go there, or I might bring back Kodiak Pride if I can find a home for it. Probably not his ship, though; I think Charlemagne would prefer that I start another pride over here, if only to lower the risk of temptation."

I had been thinking aloud; I should not have said that. Harper turned his back to me and stared at the bookshelf.

"How's Dylan going to feel about you bringing three wives aboard?"

I shrugged. "They can keep his wives company. He has -- was it two or three of them? No, I think it was seven." At Harper's turn and gasp, I added, "It's that High Guard sense of honor -- he felt he had to marry them."

"You mean he didn't have to and he did anyway?" Harper slapped his hand against his head, as if to knock his brains loose. "What a guy. What a guy. Same deal as you, though, right?" His eyes went round. "Dylan can't exactly claim Beka as a shieldbrother, can he?"

"Is Beka the type to settle down?"

"No, but she can be possessive. I remember the time she caught me and Trance and this blackjack dealer in the back room -- "

I set my wine aside and put a hand on his arm, which trembled under my touch. "Are you going to spend the whole night talking?"

"I ... thought that's what you wanted."

"What I want with you requires no words at all." I took his wine glass and set it next to mine. "Unless it is something you do not want?"

"I'm not sure that what I want matters at all," Harper said, his tone almost as bitter as his words.
I let my hand drop from his arm. It felt as though someone had cast a tight net around my heart, making it impossible for it to beat without pain. As calmly as I could, as quietly as I could, I asked, "What do you want?"

"You know, I'm not even sure." Harper sat on the edge of the bed, leaning on his arms, but stared across the room at the blank wall. "I mean, I know it's your business, what you do with the other Nietzschians, and you have to do what will benefit you most ..."

I lay back a little, giving him space, trying not to watch him so hard that it would keep him from speaking. My lungs twinged, as they had when the water rose aboard the Maru when I lay strapped to the metal cot while he wore the only working survival suit and breathing apparatus. When I closed my eyes, however briefly, I saw the water rising around me again in the cold darkness. I forced my eyes open, concentrating on his voice.

"And I respect that. I understand that. You have to survive; you're the last Kodiak. You have to have wives and children. I understand that. I know that." His voice broke off.

"And?" I said, after a long silence.

"And all of this matters, and it doesn't matter, and I just can't sort it out." His face turned toward me now, and I saw how reddened his eyes had become, though I had heard no crying. He was still trying to be rational, to follow logic regardless of its effect. I wanted to take him in my arms but could not. I waited to hear him out.

"So much has happened. I wanted you to talk to me about what was happening," he whispered. "I wanted you to tell me you were going over there to marry Charlemagne's sisters. I would've sent you off with a party. Hell, I would've given you the best party I know how to do. You deserve it. But I didn't know. I thought you were over there getting hacked into little pieces, until Dylan called back to tell Beka things were good and she shouldn't blow up the Jaguar ship." He picked up a glass, drained the wine, and set it down again.

"I am sorry for that," I said, as steadily as I could. "I could not contact you from there, but I should have spoken beforehand. To be honest, I did not know what would result from my going there, or from Dylan accompanying me. But I should have talked to you and told you about our customs."

"Customs. Oh, right. Like it's normal to get laid a dozen times or more before a battle. I wish."

"It was an honor for them to ask us. We would have violated the contract that Dylan and Charlemagne had made if we had not gone, and we would have done so again had we not accepted every form of hospitality that was offered." I willed the rising waters away, though they seemed to persist just beyond the edge of my vision. "Had I not slept with Charlemagne's three sisters, and every other female there who wanted me, I would have been killed on the spot."

"Would you?" He turned to look at me, his face still sober, still uncharacteristically quiet. "Did you even think of me while you were there, or is that another question I shouldn't ask? We never said we were exclusive, and I don't care about that. That's not what this is about. But you didn't talk to me. You left me out, when I've been trying so hard to be there for you."

I dared to reach a hand out to touch his hand, and he allowed it. "I thought of you," I said. "I thought of how you must have felt to see me leave without a chance to talk. I thought of how you might feel when you found out I had become a husband and father without speaking to you about it. I thought of how you would feel when you learned that I had not spent my time only with the women of the Jaguar Pride. And I thought that, when we returned, I would be able to indulge myself in talking with you, because no one on that ship was able to tell me stories or make me laugh as you always
"Why didn't you talk to me when you got back? I know, you were exhausted, yadda yadda. But it's been two days since you went back on duty." His voice sounded hard. "I had to find out you were married from Trance. At least she was nice about it." He picked up the empty glass and toyed with it.

"I tried to find you," I said earnestly. "I went to Workshop Five, looking for you."

"I saw your face when you left. I didn't think you were coming back. Do you have any idea what it's been like, waiting to find out if you were alive or not?" He pushed himself away from the wall and stalked across the room and back. "And now? You're married. Dylan's married. Beka's got him but that's her problem. What are we, you and I?"

I bowed my head before his voice. "We are whatever you want us to be. I want us still to be shieldbrothers, still to be ... lovers ... but I will not hold you against your will."

"Lovers. Is that what we are." Harper shook his head. "I'm sorry. I'm not doing as well as I expected. I should go." He started to pull his hand away.

"Please."

"What?"

"Please stay."

"Why?" The word burst from him. "Why should I? I was ready to celebrate being well again, and then I was terrified that I'd lost you forever and I'd have to go attack the Jaguars and get killed." His fist clenched at his side, and his fingers tightened on the stem of the glass. He set it aside, and it clattered a little against the table. "And when you get back I have to find out from Trance that you've gotten married to three Nietzschian babes in some political scheme. You didn't think enough of me to tell me yourself."

I was no longer concerned about propriety, or about privacy, though I'd asked Andromeda to consider my quarters as off limits to all surveillance but the most limited life-detection. I could not stand to see him tear himself apart like this, and know it was my fault.

The words clogged my throat, as if my heart had moved there and would not let them past. "I spent two days among people I cannot trust, spreading myself as widely as possible because it was the right thing to do politically. I did not have a moment to myself when I did not have to remember where I was, and who I was, and think about who might be around the next corner. I cannot trust my wives; they do not know me. I cannot trust any of those who shared my body there; they may be allies but they are not ... friends."

"And I thought you liked it." His voice was quieter, less strained, but still distant.

I shook my head, waved a hand, tried to break the wall that stopped my words. "Only a fool would have denied them. And they are beautiful; I won't say otherwise. They are beautiful and intelligent and clever and wise. I lay with women until I could do no more, and slept, and when I woke there were more women to feed me and attend my comfort until I was able to serve them again, and again, and again. And there was Charlemagne, and his favorite."

"And Dylan was somewhere else, doing the same thing." The clouds were clearing from his eyes.

"Should I lie and tell you it was not enjoyable? Should I tell you how it felt to have woman after woman, each of them desperate for a child in case I might not survive the war? Or to be asked by
Charlemagne to attend personally to his successor?" I wrenched myself away from the memory of that long pale back before me, the narrow hips working, the muscles enclosing me, the sounds we made as I fucked Paris and Paris sucked Charlemagne. "I won't lie about that. Nietzscheans were made to find pleasure in sexual union, regardless of the circumstances. We were genetically engineered so that pain becomes a stimulus to further pleasure -- and I violate every custom of my people in telling you that." My voice shook. "It does no good to beat a Nietzschean, as my owner on Kotyra learned; it only makes us harder."

The wall in my throat crumpled; I turned away lest I ruin myself entirely by giving way to the emotions that racked me. But his hands found their way into my hair and pulled me close, and he held my face against his belly as the sobs broke me.

He said nothing more. His arms wrapped around my shoulders, and I held him as if he were my last hope of sanity. Perhaps he was. How strange my life had become, that living with my own kind had brought me to a point where I could only find ease in the arms of a man who had nothing in common with me except the will to survive.

I started to speak again, but his fingers on my lips stopped me. "Enough." He pushed me back against the bed and I went, pulling him with me, and suddenly it was not enough to feel his weight on me. I wanted the touch of his skin. I yearned for it the way the plants in Trance's garden yearned for the light to sustain them.

His hands reached out to strip me, and I pulled his clothes from him. When we joined, his kiss opened me, as if my heart were connected to my mouth, and I rolled him over and went down on him so quickly he could not stop me, needing him, needing to taste him in my throat and know he was there, know it was him and no one else. He yielded to me at first, but pushed me back as soon as he could and worked his way down my body, licking and kissing, rubbing muscles stiff with emotion and warming himself on me. I curled around him, reaching, nibbling, until I found my target, and he whimpered and writhed with pleasure as my tongue parted him, circled, teased, pushed, teased again. When his fingers entered me I moaned aloud -- please -- yes -- please -- and gave myself over to him as I could not give myself in all that time on the Jaguar ship.

And he took me. He shoved my thighs apart and opened me, as I braced myself against the wall, and he pushed my back down so that the angle was better for him, and he took me over. He felt solid in me, so hard, so -- right -- and he filled me and rode me steadily, rock solid, without brutality but without mercy, striking the gland with each stroke so that I whimpered and cried and shook as he moved, on and on. I had already been hard; this made me titanium steel, and wet with need, and he reached around my ribs to slide his hand over and around me and grip tight, his hand moving in counterpoint to the rhythm of his hips, the slap of his belly against my back. I felt his crescendo take him as he speeded up, pounding me, opening me beyond anywhere I'd been with any lover I'd ever taken or been taken by, and my mind went blank as my body convulsed under him, around him, as the bed came up to meet me and fire washed over my skin and through every muscle and bone.

I felt my lungs move. One of my braids brushed the end of my nose; it tickled a little. I could not move a muscle to flick it away. Harper lay on me, filling me still, covering me with his body like a blanket. All that told me he was alive was the constant small pulse of his cock within me, still moving a little, still hard.

My eyebrow rose of its own accord as I turned my head. His face lay against my shoulder as he watched me.

"I'm not done yet. You ready for round two? Two for you, one for me." His voice sounded husky in my ear. "I told you that I'd have no mercy on your ass."
I knew I would feel it later on, as the leather trousers rubbed against me. I didn't care.

"I deserve none," I whispered. "All that I am is yours."

This time he moved more slowly, steadily but without speed, so the sensations washed over me, but I knew I was not drowning alone. He leaned against my back, skin on skin, little movements inside nudging my gland, sending electric ripples through me, charges that began to accumulate slowly. The longer he went, the slower he moved, so that toward the end I could feel every micron of him as he moved, every tremor -- I would have sworn I felt every corpuscle in his blood as it flowed in him, in me. The edge came slowly, steadily, and this time he came with me as we collapsed together.

"You talk to me," he said. Although I could barely hear him, I knew it wasn't a request and in spite of the lack of honorifics was spoken in the most formal mode possible. "You talk to me about what's going on with us. I don't want to get that mad again. I felt so left out. I wanted to beat down the door, but you weren't here. I would've put my hand through a wall at one point if Trance hadn't come along and stopped me." He sighed. "I don't like to feel like that. It makes me mad, and I know I can't take you in a fight."

"Seamus Zelazny Harper, if ever I give you cause for that anger again, and you want to beat me, I will let you." I whispered. I doubted he ever would. I could not imagine him willingly flicking a lash, but a year earlier I would not have imagined him creating the weapon that destroyed a thousand Nietzschean ships at Witchhead. It was a good thing there were no gods; I would have had to credit them with far too much of a sense of humor.

"Ah, you'd just get off on it."

"It's not the most pleasant experience." The last wall I could feel inside myself started to crack. It started to crumble. "It takes a while for the pain to transmute, and release brings no ease."

"I'll keep it in mind. You notice I'm not granting you the same right, not because I don't have the same opportunities as you but because you'd find it too easy."

Did he really think it would be an easy thing for me to strike him? I had threatened it in the past, when I was angry, and each time the unease on his face had stopped me. The last time I'd seen that look of vulnerability had been when he tried to thank me for making sure he had the breathing apparatus aboard the damaged Maru, and I had brushed aside his thanks roughly; the physical memory of my fear as the waters rose around me and of knowing I would die alone then and there was too great for me to allow myself to accept anyone's gratitude for it.

"I would not find it easy at all," I murmured. "Now, I could kill you if I had to, but I'd give you a painless death."

"That's all right, though. I can respect that, and appreciate it." He chuckled once, a wordless sound that held sarcasm as well as affection. "I don't even really care about the marriage thing, you know. It's the not talking that hurt."

I rolled over to face him, our bodies still touching all the way down. "I thought you knew about battle mating, from where you've been before."

"Are you kidding? I never even saw Nietzschean women except at trading stations, where they ignored me, or the time when Charlemagne's pissed-off duchess Elssbett was here." His lips brushed mine. "I guess they're not all like that, are they."

"Many are, but not all." I recalled my time with Boudicca and her sisters. "Boudicca, I think, was
different. She knew what she wanted, and what she could offer me, and she gave as much as she could. If I had said no she would not have taken it personally. Ygraine and Morgan were younger; they would not have taken enough lovers yet to have achieved the necessary emotional distance."

"So you always have to keep that distance? Sheesh."

I could not help the sigh that escaped from me. "No. Had Kodiak Pride survived, had I married within it or within one of the affiliated clans within other prides, it would be different. I did not speak of trust; naming the matter was unnecessary. "As it is ..."

His hands, which had held me so roughly, smoothed me in long sweeps from shoulders to knees. "It is what it is. And we are what we are."

"Whatever we are." Was I crying? My face felt wet, slightly chilled in the cool air of the room. I could not remember starting to weep.

"Whatever we make ourselves. Whatever we want to be." He brushed the tears away softly. "You sound like a Nietzschean."

"Yeah. Surprising, isn't it?"

I laid my head on his shoulder. "I am so sorry, Seamus."

"But you're here. That counts."

I knew he was still in pain that I could not assuage, despite his best effort to make me sore. It made me wish he had beaten me, selfish as the thought was; with the exhaustion I'd endured, my body would have taken longer to transmute physical punishment, and it would have made me feel that I was paying in some way for having hurt him so badly. Undoubtedly, we would hurt one another again, without trying; I hoped for his sake it would not be soon. Neither of us could see the future well enough for gambling to become certainty.

I could not disavow my marriage or my wives; to do so would be un-Nietzschean. I could not deny the place that Harper had found in my life or my growing need for him to stay with me, in that place, as if we had our own small haven that none could harm. How foolish it had been of me, to think that nothing we could do would ever hurt each other.

***

The next morning when I showed up in the galley, Trance took one look at me and sent me to med deck. Beka seconded the move and told Dylan, through Andromeda, that I did not look well. "I'm fine," I said, as civilly as possible. "Let me just do my work." In truth, I felt a little stiff and sore, but nothing more.

"I might have missed something the other day," Trance said. "Please, Tyr. We need you healthy."

"I'm fine."

"It will only take five minutes," she insisted, her hand on my arm.

I tried to shake her off, but Dylan arrived and planted himself in front of me. He looked very little better than I did.

"Go to med deck, Tyr," he said. "This shouldn't be a big deal."
"Right. You need to be there more than I do." I flicked my eyes from him to Beka and back, and watched them lift their chins defensively in unison. That certainly made the situation crystalline.

"He's right," Beka said unexpectedly, as she scanned Dylan with the laser gaze she usually reserved for malfeasant shopkeepers. "We've got a few hours. Go."

"Okay, okay." Dylan plastered a simulated grin on his face and got out of my way. "Beka, let me know if anything happens. We're not meeting with the Enochian delegation until tomorrow, right?"

"Yes, at Denali Station. You've got twenty-four, no, twenty-eight standard hours to get back into perfect condition for negotiations."

As if by accident, Dylan's eyes met mine and we both groaned softly.

"Now, now." Trance chivvied us into med deck, sorted us into adjoining beds and started her scans. It seemed to take her much longer than usual. She frowned and tried again.

"Tyr." Dylan was leaning up on one elbow. "Just as a thought, was there anything in particular that we were supposed to do at the end of that little diplomatic session to help, um, recover?"

"You think I'd know? I've lived outside my people's culture for half of my life, and when I was within it I was hardly old enough for that level of diplomacy."

"You think I'd know? I've lived outside my people's culture for half of my life, and when I was within it I was hardly old enough for that level of diplomacy."

"Well, it seems to me that we might have been missing something." He noticed Trance's frown. "What are you finding?"

She tapped the scanner with a mauve fingertip, as if the motion would change the reading. "You both seem to be suffering from an extreme shortage in trace minerals, and your electrolyte balance is wildly off." Her eyes opened wide as she talked; I knew she wasn't that much of an innocent, but perhaps the look would fool Dylan. "Perhaps your recent activities have been more of a strain on your systems than you expected. I can synthesize a booster for you but it'll take a few minutes."

"Do it, please," I asked her. "I'm not fond of feeling like a mewling child."

"Oh, Tyr, you're not mewling. You've just toned down your roar." Annoying purple girl. She went off to work on the booster and I lay back down, trying to remember whether there were any ceremonial foods missing from Charlemagne's banquet.

I had almost drifted off when she put the sprayer against my neck. Almost immediately I felt as if I'd drunk a liter of kaffe, straight. My eyes flew open. "Trance, could you identify which plants might supply those substances to us in our food? I'm curious to know what they're found in."

She nodded as she treated Dylan. "I can look it up."

"You think this is something we could have avoided by munching down more before we left Bolivar's ship?" Dylan asked.

"It's possible. Certainly, our failure to do so will probably earn us interesting reputations among the Jaguars for virility and stamina." I pushed myself up to a sitting position and turned toward him. "However, it would be wise to know what to eat next time to maintain those reputations. After all, you have seven wives to provide for now."

"Treaty wives," he corrected me. Behind him, Trance raised an eyebrow. "Seven treaty wives. I'm not required to live there all the time or give up the Andromeda, am I?"
"No, not at all. You are required to share yourself equitably with all of them when you and they are in residence, though." I snorted mildly. "There's a reason I only married the Bolivar sisters."

"Trance? You think you could figure out that food thing really soon?"

"Sure thing, Dylan. Do you want me to post something in the galley to remind you what to eat?"

"Um, no, thanks. Just let me know and tell Tyr, and we'll work something out." I swung my legs down and stood, feeling immensely better than when I'd come in. "Does this mean you're nominating me ship's chef, or is this something I'm supposed to volunteer for? I warn you, I'm not prepared to take on another job without an increase in salary."

"I'll take that under advisement," Dylan said. He stood, stretched, and started back toward the bridge. Trance stood nearby, watching him leave. "I'm glad to know it wasn't just Beka doing that to him. I know she's been, well, horny lately, but even she wouldn't wear someone out that quickly."

"Well, he is more than 300 years old," I reminded her. "You know what they say about age and recovery time."

"I know what they say about age and experience," she countered, "which leaves you second-best."

"In your dreams, little goddess."

"Oh, Tyr, what an un-Nietzschian thing to say."

"What?" I drew back, annoyed. "It's a joke. Doesn't anyone besides Harper think I have a sense of humor?"

"Of course you do," she soothed, instantly herself again. If I hadn't seen that suspicious look, I might have thought it imaginary.

***

Denali Station has never changed since I first saw it as a child. It is still the sprawling market it was then, where one could buy, sell or barter anything from a spool of thread or an infant's teething toy to a pet, a wardrobe, a ship, a planet or any number of lives by any means possible.

On this visit, Dylan hoped to barter and bargain to save lives, ours and the Enochians, if they could only be brought to see where their self-interest lay. I was unneeded for negotiations; Beka and Dylan wore their most official-looking clothes and went off to the High City to speak to the Enochians. The rest of us prowled the promenade and market in the lower city; Rommie, Harper and Trance set off to look at clothing, and I ventured off alone, to see what I could learn.

Clothes were all well and good -- I had my eye on a new jacket that hung in a shop entrance -- but information was far more valuable.

The layered aromas that met my nose had not changed, though my tastes had matured to where I found the scent of turgon gyros appealing, and followed it to the booth where I tossed the owner a coin and was handed lunch. Turgon tastes sweet, after one gets used to the texture, which at first is reminiscent of a chunk of foamed insulation. I ate it as I strolled, viewing the wares offered for sale, and listening in every direction I could.

Nothing interesting came to me, only the usual buzz of people of many species conducting business. I paused under the awning of a weapons dealer to look more closely at a knife with an interesting
curve to its blade. When the voices rose, to my right, I had the knife in my hand and was questioning the seller about the molecular structure of its materials.

"Now, wait a minute," Rommie said. She sounded annoyed.

"You get out of my way." This was a man's voice, with a slur that told me he'd had throat surgery at some time in the past, probably by means of a gauss rifle.

"She wasn't bothering you. You're bothering her," Rommie said again.

"Get away from me," Trance said, unease in her voice.

Unease from Trance? I could not ignore this.

"Hey, we can settle this peaceably. I'm sure there's a misunderstanding." It was Harper, coming to the rescue, unwilling to leave the situation to Rommie.

"You're the one who misunderstands," the man said again.

"Kludge. Get out of my way before I use you to wipe up her blood." A second man, unknown.

I dropped the price of the knife on the table, grabbed it and its sheath and made my way through the milling crowd to where two Nietzschians, Kazovs both, had cornered Trance and Rommie, with Harper edging in from the side. As I reached them, Rommie neatly swung one man's arm around behind him, easily dodging his forearm spines, and dislocated his shoulder. He howled in pain.

"Are you going to go away nicely, or do I have to get rough?" Her elbow threatened to dislocate his spine next if he gave the wrong answer.

Harper had pushed himself between the other man and Trance, who was starting to look more angry than afraid. I had never seen her truly angry before, and from the light in her eyes I was grateful not to be the object of her concentration.

The idiot ignored her, probably too high on flash or wire to care. As I came up behind him I saw the dataport on his neck: it was wire, then, probably hyped to the point that any further wire contact would fry his gray matter like an egg on a hot rock. I decided to help the cooking process along by slapping the flat of my new blade against the dataport.

He shrieked, released Trance to clutch at his neck with numbed hands, and dropped in his tracks.

"Idiot wirehead." I stepped over him. "Are you all right?"

"I am now," Trance said. "Thanks."

"Any idea what I should do with this one?" Rommie still had an armlock on the second idiot, who had finally realized that struggling only caused more pain to himself.

"Denali used to have decent security." I set a foot on the back of the unconscious wirehead, in case he should wake suddenly and decide to resume his activities. "Ah. Here they come."

A trio of A.I.s arrived, exclaimed over the insult to our persons, apologized for the inconvenience, commended us for preserving the peace and preventing any further incident, and carried the two idiots away, all within a minute.

"They're efficient, I'll say that for them," I murmured. "You notice they didn't ask you to give a statement."
"Total surveillance? Hmm." Harper glanced casually about the area. "Thanks for reminding me."

"This would not be a good place for you to practice certain skills, Harper, particularly when Dylan is in negotiations," Rommie said, as if Dylan's slightest word were as indisputable as natural law.

"Yeah, yeah, I know. Let's go look at something interesting," Harper suggested.

Trance's eyes were bright again. "Thanks, Tyr." She put two fingers to her forehead in a mock salute.

"Yes -- what was that you did that dropped him?" Rommie's frown betrayed professional interest. "That would be handy to know."

I showed her the new knife. "It carries a small force field, as a result of the molecular structure. I used it to short out his brain through his dataport."

"Oww. Keep that away from me." Harper eyed the knife warily.

"It won't harm you as long as it's not near your port," I told him. He seemed shaky, perhaps a little too pale. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine." He brushed me aside and followed Trance and Rommie. I watched him go, shook the doubts from my own mind, and went back to prowling the market.

When I checked in with Beka, a few hours later, she told me they were taking a short break. The Enochians had brought along several Shaperans, which had surprised Dylan. As traders for centuries, Shaperans had no homeworld to guard, but lived their lives aboard their cargo freighters. They appeared interested in the theory of a compact to fight Magog, but seemed inclined to quibble about the details far too much.

"How's it going with you?" she asked.

"No real problems. A couple of Kazov wireheads tried to harass Trance and Rommie, but Security took them away."

"I'm sure they did. In how many pieces?"

"One each."

"Really." She whistled softly, impressed. "How'd you do that?"

"I picked up a field knife in the market. It works admirably on data ports."

"Show me when we get back to the ship? Better yet, tell me where the dealer is so I can buy my own?"

I could respect a woman who liked the right kind of knives. "It's the second booth past the leather shop with the lizard-hide jacket hanging in the door. You can't miss it."

"What, old Nerat is still there? I'll have to pay him a visit. Thanks, Tyr."

"How much longer will negotiations take, do you think?"

Beka sighed audibly. "If it were up to me, I'd tell them 'take it or leave it', but Dylan is much more polite. Too polite."
"Would you like me to hurry things along?" I leaned against a convenient wall, out of the direct view of the six cameras I'd seen, though there had to be a few more I hadn't found yet.

"Thanks, but no thanks. Dylan's got this silly idea that having live people to sign the compact makes a difference. Beka out."

Denali afforded those who were interested, and had the proper coin of exchange, an opportunity to obtain rare treasures, if one knew where to look, and listen -- not that I was planning to do anything to attract the attention of the androids, or their cameras. My plans were more private, and, I hoped, less predictable.

***

An outsider, looking at Nietzschian culture, might conclude that we were barbarians tamed by a powerful network of custom, ritual and forms. Another outsider, viewing the same culture from a different angle, might also conclude that we were a highly educated, highly civilized people who just happened to like to play with sharp objects and dangerous toys.

My personal view -- were it desired -- would be that both were incorrect because they ignored the most powerful incentive sustaining our lives: survival. Or, to put it another way, passion. Many Nietzschian children have been named after leaders and warriors from thousands of years ago, such as Arthur, Hector and Kliopatra, because their passions still inspired us, regardless of whether that passion was for a woman, a community or an idea.

I was unsurprised, as I traveled the galaxies, to find similar passions inspiring all truly vibrant cultures. What I had missed most, as I wandered, was the depth of commitment to ideas and passions that I had learned during my childhood. After nearly twenty years, I had found only one group of outsiders who shared that depth of passion and commitment -- those of us who lived aboard the Andromeda Ascendant.

Did that shared commitment make us a pride? No. But it did give me pause, whenever I thought of any action benefitting myself that might break the largely unspoken compact we had with one another. Perhaps our cooperation was the single great experiment that proved that Dylan's dream of restoring the Commonwealth was possible. Perhaps it was also his greatest folly, and mine. We had come close almost to blows more than once over the best course to take as a ship, as a group. He had condemned what he termed my 'extracurricular activities', and I had been angered by his insistence on negotiating with simpletons rather than bypassing them or dispensing with them completely.

It felt, at times, as if we were mirror images of one another, like Zoroaster's Ahuramazda and Ahriman. But which of us was 'good' and which was 'evil'? He had condemned a hundred thousand of my people to a fiery death; in terms of mass murder, that far outweighed any combination of events in my own history. I could still count the number of lives I'd taken. I doubted that he even knew the total of the deaths he'd caused any more.

Over time, I had come to rely on his judgment even when I mistrusted his reasons. I hoped that he would do the same for me, but I had no great reliance that it would happen. Even in the Dark Night, he was still an officer of the High Guard, and I was still the renegade mercenary whom he would not trust to understand a joke.

***

I found what I was looking for on a back street, in a tree-shaded alley where an old acquaintance ran a small kaffeshop. We sat at a table under his favorite tree, and exchanged information and money, and when I left I took with me a few bits of information I had not known, and a few trinkets with
It was late afternoon, as Denali reckons time. I checked with Beka again and found that she and Dylan were staying at the Imperial Suites for the night, and that rooms had been booked for the rest of the crew as a diplomatic courtesy. I passed back through the market, which was starting to change over from daytime to evening custom, and purchased the clothing and personal goods I'd noticed earlier, then made my way to the Imperial and was shown to a suite of rooms on the third floor.

Hotel rooms are always under surveillance, I've found. Therefore, I was not surprised to see Harper lounging on a couch in the common area between bedrooms, tying an array of miniaturized cameras into a sort of posy by their antennae with a spare bit of wire.

"Isn't this pretty? The management left us a flower posy; I only had to put it together." Harper waved it in my general direction.

"Lovely. You got them all, I hope?" I cast a glance at likely locations in the room.

"Yep. Oh, I left a couple in place for the cleaning people, but I disabled them." He bounced to his feet. "So, where have you been all day? Did you find anything interesting?"

"I believe so." I took a data chip from an inside pocket and flipped it to him.

"You like movies, don't you?"

"Take a look."

The chip held a small connection that could be plugged directly into his dataport. He plugged it in and blinked. "Wow. This is amazing. Really amazing. I've got this enormous file of movies that I can play on the back of my eyelids."

"I think you mentioned, at one time or another, that you'd missed a birthday or holiday. Is it the custom with your people to give presents on events like that?" I asked carefully. I had not felt entirely comfortable with him in words since I returned from the Jaguar ship, in spite of our air-clearing discussion.

"Yeah. Yeah, I did. They do, um, did." He unplugged it. "Thanks. I mean it. This is wonderful."

"I thought you might like to have something to look at without getting out of bed, when you can't sleep." I started toward a room and paused. "Which is mine?"

"You get your choice. I'm assuming that Beka will bunk with Trance, or with Dylan, in the rooms on that side. On this side, there are two rooms and there's just you and me." He raised an eyebrow. "You want to share, I've got no complaint."

"Would you care to share a little at the moment, or did you have plans for dinner?" I walked into the room with the larger windows and set my purchases on a chair. Yes, as I'd thought, the trees immediately outside would provide a relatively safe escape route to the labyrinth of the promenade, should one be necessary.

"If that's an invitation, I can get behind it. Or in front of it." Harper wandered in. "Actually, I found
something for you, too. Give me a minute; I didn't want to leave it out in public." He disappeared into the adjoining room and came back with a small wrapped package, which he handed me. "It's not much, but I thought it was sort of in your line."

I turned the package over and took off the wrapping paper. At first I had thought it was an antique hardbound book, for it had that shape, but as I looked at it I realized that what had originally been a book of philosophy had been transformed into a complex monkey box, with hidden drawers and files. Yet it still worked as a book of philosophy. I noticed that the more intricate changes had been wrought starting at the page labeled "Self-Reliance" and could not help chuckling.

"It's interesting. Thank you."

"There's something in one of the pockets for you, too." He sat on the bed, waiting.

I played with the toy until I found the edge I sought, and out popped a small data disk. "What's this?"

Harper looked away from me, and back again. "I was thinking about how much you've lost. I mean, Earth is still there even if I can't live on it, but Fountainhead, where your family was from, was pretty much destroyed before you were born. So I dug into the All Systems University Library for anything I could find, and I came up with some pictures of the place the way it used to look. And there's some other stuff as well a couple of historical books I thought you might like. You don't have to look at it now."

"I'll wait until we're back at the ship," I promised him, knowing that he would understand how insecure the hotel-supplied data-reading system would be. "You're putting me in your debt again, you know."

"Nah, we're even. You gave me movies." His hand snaked around my waist, and I countered by tumbling backward onto the bed with him and sliding my fingers below the band on his trousers. "We could do worse things until the girls get here for supper."

"I'm not inviting them to share my appetizer," I growled, and licked my way down to my goal. We snacked on one another until Trance knocked at the door, and then went down to the hotel's restaurant for dinner.

***

Beka and Dylan were dining with the other ambassadors, hoping to make points casually over the meal that had not been made over the conference table. Rommie had gone on her own casual tour of the evening market, to report any useful information to Dylan on the spot. I wondered how well she was taking Dylan's liaison with Beka, considering her own apparent feelings for him. Dylan should have learned, both before and since his three-century jump, the folly of disregarding the emotions of A.I.s concerning those they worked with.

Dinner itself, while tasty, was uneventful but amusing. The Enochian restaurateur, who said he prided himself on providing for an eclectic palate, managed to supply even the most outre requests that Trance and Harper could devise. Only they would even consider eating the pulverized emulsion of a smelly underground seed along with sugared crushed purple fruit on bread and calling that a delicacy, or insisting on a table-sized hibachi so that they could roast small white sticky pillows and eat them with chocolate between crackers. I was personally amazed the restaurant would even stock such an odd food, though Harper swore it had been highly regarded on Earth. I dined more conservatively on rabak steak, poached cholingam and roasted tfitfi, with irenie fruit for dessert. As for entertainment, I ignored the musicians provided by the restaurant, though they were capable. It was enough to watch Trance and Harper discovering odd food and discussing the things they'd
bought or looked at.

The problem arose when we left. We had sat in a secluded area of the room, behind curtains, for the sake of privacy and courtesy, but on the way out we happened to leave at the same time as several parties from other tables, and in the crowd Harper slipped -- or was tripped -- and fell against me. I put out a hand to steady him, and from behind my shoulder came a man's voice saying, "This kludge bothering you, Kodiak?"

I turned quickly, putting myself between the man and my shipmates. "Far less than you, Kazov. What business is it of yours?"

"Oh, what you do always interests me, thief," the Kazov replied. I was unsure if he was Sauron Juarez or his brother, Telemachus, but it didn't matter; both were annoying beta males, always pushing for advantage without the nerve to follow through and actually take it.

"Thief?" I looked at him with surprise. "I've committed no crimes on this station, Juarez. You must be mistaken for someone else." A quick glance aside showed me that Harper had put himself in front of Trance but was watching closely. "Perhaps you were seeking Napoleon Rastafarian?"

"Who?" Juarez had never had a quick mind. Charlemagne could easily have used him as an example of the degeneration of the Drago-Kazov without exaggerating.

"Napoleon Rastafarian. Oh, yeah. That's probably the guy you want." Harper jumped in.

"How would you know, boy?" Juarez sneered. "Who's Napoleon Rastafarian?" he asked his partner, who appeared as confused as he was menacing.

Trance opened her eyes wide. "Oh, Napoleon's very dangerous. He's a thief and a killer."

"What pride is he?" the other Kazov asked.

"Rugrat." Trance ran the syllables together so that it sounded like an exotic, dangerous growl. "Roogrratt. It's a cadet branch; you probably haven't heard of them."

"Oh, really?" Juarez asked. "And what would that boy or -- or whatever you are -- know about Nietzscheans? Out of my way, boy," he ordered Harper.

Harper stood his ground. From the corner of my eye I saw him give Trance the signal to call Rommie. "I have as much right to be here in the promenade as you have," he said.

"You've got no right to be anywhere, kludge." He moved to push Harper aside, perhaps to get closer to Trance, whom he had been watching the whole time he insulted us.

I stepped in between them again. "That boy, as you called him, has fought by my side and survived the Magog, with more courage than I've ever seen from any of the Kazov. If you want to take him on, you're taking me on first."

"And me," Trance said. "Get out of our way."

Sauron Juarez growled and reached for a weapon, but Trance's tail whipped past Harper and snapped it out of his hand. Harper caught it in midair. "Hmm. What an interesting pistol. Isn't this one of those new Hyperion models that's proscribed on Denali? I'm afraid I'll have to turn this over to Security."

"Ah, just in time," I said, as the Security A.I.s arrived. "Would you be so kind as to take custody of
this weapon? Our friend, here," I indicated Juarez, "found it lying nearby and was asking us if we knew whose it was."

"Of course. Thank you for keeping the peace," the A.I. said, pocketing the pistol. "You will receive a commendation from Security for your prompt obedience to our laws. We appreciate your conscientious commitment to public safety. Thank you."

"Don't think this is the end of us, Kodiak," the second Kazov said. "We're watching you."

I snorted. "Take it elsewhere. You're boring me." And, under the watchful eye of Security, I bowed to them courteously and followed Trance and Harper out of the room.

"I'm beginning to think you two shouldn't be let out alone," I told them. "That was a clever move, Trance, considering you both narrowly escaped death back there."

"From them?" Trance brushed the thought aside with a wave of her hand. "They weren't even smart enough to know who Napoleon Rastafarian was."

"They may be more bluster than brain, but that doesn't make them house pets."

"Where's Rommie?" Harper demanded in undertone. "She should have been here."

"I don't know," Trance looked far more worried suddenly than she had been by the Kazov thugs.

I glanced over the heads of the crowd in the promenade. "She's down a level, and moving oddly."

Harper pushed past me to the railing and followed where I was pointing. "Something's wrong. Let's get there."

By the time we reached her, Rommie was sitting on a bench staring vaguely at the crowd. If she had been human, I would have said she'd been drugged. "What's wrong, Harper?" I asked.

He scanned her quickly. "It's as if someone has tried to dose her with wire. She's in bad shape. We've got to get her back to the ship."

"Dylan," I said into the communicator.

"Dylan here," came into my ear. "What is it, Tyr?"

"Rommie's behaving oddly. Harper wants to take her back to the ship."

"What's wrong?"

Harper answered, "Somebody tried to turn her into a wirehead. We're heading for the Maru."

"Right. I'll send Beka to meet you there. Dylan out."

Between them, Harper and Trance supported Rommie until we reached the Maru. Beka met us at the dock. "She doesn't look at all good. Where did this happen?"

"As far as we can tell, somewhere on the promenade between the Imperial and the market." Trance pushed a package aside; I was unsurprised to notice that Beka had brought all our purchases with her.

"No sense in going back for them," she said. "We're pretty much checked out."
"Good thinking." I went to Harper, who was kneeling next to the seated android. "What do you need?"

"This is bad. Get us back to the Andromeda, quick." Harper's voice shook.

The crowd had thinned enough that we could move quickly through the winding streets to the slip where the Maru waited. Toward the end of the trip Harper and I, between us, half-carried Rommie; Harper's mouth set in a thin, hard line as he saw her weaken.

"What's happening?" Beka demanded over her shoulder as she headed for the bridge.

"If she were human, she'd be going into a coma. Something's erasing her memory."

"Eureka Maru leaving Denali Station," Beka said into the communicator. "Please clear for liftoff."

"Liftoff cleared," an automated voice said. "Your commendations have been transmitted to you so that you may place them in suitable frames, should you desire to display them as souvenirs of your visit. Thank you for visiting Denali Station. Have a pleasant voyage, and do plan to return to visit again --"

Beka flipped the circuit off. "Shut up. What commendations?"

"Apparently, we were so law-abiding that the Security service has given us a commendation or two," I told her.

"Right. Tell me another one."

"It's true, Beka." Trance tried to assure her. "You know I wouldn't lie to you."

"I'll believe it when I see it." Beka muttered. "It'd be a first, for sure."

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"What *is* wire?" Dylan leaned an arm on the table and stared at the readings on the pad Trance handed him. "I don't think I've ever heard of it before. Is it only on Denali?"

Harper shook his head, his fingers deep inside Rommie's skull. "That's right. They didn't have wire back when dinosaurs roamed the Internet. Wire's an electronic drug. Think of the hardest drug you can, from before, and raise it by a factor of ten."

"Make that a hundred," I added, "if you're thinking of the old opiates."

Dylan's frown would have curdled fresh mare's milk, had any been present. "Who did this? Why?" he snapped. "Harper, can you --"

"Two 'we don't know's' and one 'yes', but it will take time." Harper loosed his own frown toward Dylan. "And I work a lot better without everyone in the world hanging over my shoulder."

"I'm sorry." Dylan backed off. "I just don't like the timing." He turned to Trance. "I hear you had some trouble in the market this morning."

She nodded unhappily. "A couple of men tried to harass me. Rommie and Tyr stopped them. They were wireheads."

Dylan looked as if he were about to ask stupid questions again, so I decided to answer them first and save time. "They had dataports, like Harper's, but they had inserted vanadium wire into the hole; it
vibrates on a frequency that gives them euphoria, almost unlimited endorphins, and a sense of absolute power."

"And you stopped them ... how?"

"Rommie armlocked the first one," Harper said from across the room. "Tyr shorted out the second guy with a force knife."

"Good work, both of you. I didn't know force knives were legal on Denali," Dylan commented.

I shifted my weight, annoyed at his line of questioning. "They probably aren't, but I bought it in the market there, so any illegalities aren't my problem."

"So I understand." Dylan spared me a quick, grateful smile. He started to pace in a small oblique shape resembling a circle but avoiding the area of the workshop where Harper labored over Rommie. "This will give me some interesting leverage in the negotiations with the Enochians."

"How was that going?" Beka walked in, her arms crossed, looking worried. "As I recall, the Shaperans were enjoying being picky."

"About the same. But the Enochians were playing their 'more-knowledgeable-than-thou' card. I doubt they knew about this little matter, though, or arranged it. I think I can persuade them that if they know so little about what's happening on their own station, they certainly won't be able to prevent the Magog from finding them before they know it." His jaw set hard. "I don't like to use this kind of thing, but I will if I need to."

He was thinking strategically again. Good. I glanced at Harper, but received in return a small head shake; there was nothing I could do to assist.

"Tyr, Beka, walk with me. I want to hear your assessment of what occurred down there."

I rendered them a detailed account of the two encounters, leaving out my activities between those events. Let them assume I shopped only for clothing and for Harper's movie chip, should he choose to mention it to anyone. In any case, I doubted that my other purchases had anything to do with what had happened.

"What about the second pair of Nietzschians?" Beka asked. "Were they just being assholes, or did they have a purpose? Don't look at me like that, Dylan, I'm not at a negotiating table now. I'm aboard ship and I can say what I want."

"As far as I know, they were just looking for trouble," I said. "The Juarez brothers are from a Kazov sub-pride that never accepted the Drago-Kazov alliance; they're probably so out of touch they haven't heard about the Sabra-Jaguar alliance, either. They knew who I was, but since I'm the only Kodiak left that's not surprising."

"I see," Dylan said. "Then you don't think there's a connection between the Juarez brothers and what happened to Rommie?"

"Truthfully, Captain, I doubt they're intelligent enough to even have considered it."

"If we leave them out, what's left? The wireheads?. Where are they now?" Dylan turned toward the shimmer of Andromeda's avatar that had materialized in the hall. "Andromeda, please check on the whereabouts of the men who tried to attack Trance this morning on the station."

"They're still being held by Security on misdemeanor charges of harassing tourists," Andromeda
said. "Captain, Harper is asking for you in the workshop."

"On my way."

Beka and I turned in unison to follow Dylan, who had lengthened his stride.

"I can't speak for the others, sir," I said formally, "but for myself, I can assure you that I broke no
laws of Denali Station while I was there."

"You know, Tyr, that's a very comforting thing to hear from you," Dylan tossed over his shoulder. "I
don't even want to know what laws of other jurisdictions you ignored."

I shrugged. I seemed to do a lot of that around him, on occasion. It deflected criticism by making me
seem to take whatever he said with several grains of salt, while still maintaining sufficient interest in
the conversation to avoid the semblance of rudeness.

"Dylan, the three of them received two commendations for law-abiding behavior from Station
Security; doesn't that even count with you?" Beka inquired.

"I'll have the certificates framed and post them in the conference room," he retorted, "to show what's
possible when you all put your minds to it."

"Ouch." Beka raised her hands in a gesture that on Antares Six would have meant she was
disavowing relationship with Dylan and claiming all of his property as hers in the settlement. "See
what happens when we don't follow our natural inclinations and obey the stupid laws? We still get
insults from our fearless leader."

"Shameful," I agreed with her.

When we reached the workshop Rommie was sitting upright, a distinct improvement, and looking
around the room as Harper continued to work in the back of her skull. "Dylan! I had something I
was supposed to tell you, but I can't remember what it was."

"That's all right, Rommie. How's she doing, Harper?"

"Way, way better. I did a complete wash on the damaged parts and uploaded everything from the
ship again, and I should be done in a few minutes." Harper looked unhappy. "However, she's got a
short-term memory loss and I'm not sure I can fix that." He dropped a splinter of metal on the floor.
"And I pulled this disruptor chip out of her hair. It was activated remotely; that's what launched the
virus. It probably got there during the fight with the wirehead."

"Let me know if there's anything I can do," Dylan told him. "Rommie, you rest. When you
remember what it is, let me know, but don't worry about it."

"Are you going back down there?" she asked him, worried.

"Not until tomorrow. I told them I needed time to examine the information they sent me for review; I
can do that here as well as there." Dylan turned to Trance, who had stayed to hold Rommie's hand.
"Would you come to the bridge with Beka and me and tell us what you saw?"

"Sure. Can you manage without me?" she asked Rommie.

"I'll be all right. I really appreciate you staying."

"It's no problem. You took care of me this morning."
"I wish I remembered that."

"Tyr, hang around a bit, would you?" Harper's mouth was set in an unhappy line. "I'd like to talk to you when I get done."

I pulled up a stool and sat down. "Would it help you if I told you what I saw this morning?"

"It might," Rommie said. "I remember walking into the market with Trance. She wanted to look for a new outfit in case we had any more formal diplomatic receptions."


Rommie closed her eyes, her hands palm down on her thighs. "I walked with her to the first shop she wanted to look at, but it didn't have the right color, so Harper pointed out another one on the other side of the street. We were almost there when I thought I saw ..." She put a hand to her forehead. "I know this sounds stupid, but there was a booth full of fur rugs, all sorts of fur rugs, and I thought I saw one of them move."

"Perhaps some animal the shop owner kept as a pet?" I asked, hoping she was wrong.

Androids are never wrong about what they observe, any more than surveillance cameras.

"It was reddish brown, shaggy, and it had claws ... no. No. No!" She screamed. The sound, full of fear and rage, seemed to rebound the walls and launch back at us, seeking a target.

Harper touched something in the back of her head so that she stopped, all the while patting her on the shoulder. "You're safe. It's all right."

"Of course I'm safe. I'm aboard myself. ... you know what I mean." She glared at me, but I knew I was only the substitute for what she really wanted to loose her anger at. "It was a Magog -- in disguise, some kind of odd armor or headgear, but you can't disguise the claws or the fur. After seeing Rev Bem for months, I could hardly be mistaken."

"Where was I?" Harper asked her. "Where was I when you saw it?"

"Next to Trance, almost in the booth. I don't think you had even seen the other shop." She turned back to me. "It was across the street from the one with the strange reptile coat in the doorway."

I punched my fist into my other hand. "I knew I should have gone back to check out that coat."

"You saw the Magog too?"

"Unfortunately, no. However, I've had dealings with that leather-shop owner before, and I would have no problem persuading him to inform me of anything I wanted to know. It would, of course, have required me to break a few of Denali's laws."

"Oh, gee, you'd give up your good-conduct medal and certificates," said Harper. "Andromeda, get Dylan and Beka and Trance back down here, right now. And Tyr, I guess we get to talk later."

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"The question, of course," Dylan said an hour later, after Harper had all but sedated Rommie, who had been as near to hysterics as any human, "is who is working with the Magog there, besides the wireheads. It's plain to me that they were sent to intercept you."

"They didn't expect Rommie to fight them," Trance said. "They figured I'd be an easy target, and
maybe they even figured they'd get her in enough trouble for Security to take her away too." She shivered. "You don't want to be in the Security lock-up on Denali. I've seen it, and it's not very pretty."

Something about Trance's reply bothered me, but I had other things to attend to before I could think about that.

"And they didn't expect you, either." Dylan cocked his head at me. "You didn't see it, did you?"

"If I had, captain, there'd be a dead fur rug in that booth." I could barely contain my frustration at having let a Magog escape from so near. "What puzzles me, though, is how one could be there at all and not rampage through the market on a killing spree."

"That's an excellent question. Beka, there's not a chance it was Rev Bem, is there?"

Beka shook her head decisively. "He should still be at the Wayist gathering. I had a message, voice only, from him just before we arrived, and he said he'd been asked to stay on for a while and had accepted. Besides, he'd hardly have shown himself at an open market in a region that has suffered from Magog attacks for the past fifty years."

"And we know that gathering of his is nowhere near Denali. You're pretty close to him, Beka. Have you ever heard Rev say anything about any other peaceable Magog?"

"Other than the founder of Wayism, no. Never. I couldn't tell you the number of times I've heard him mourn the fact that he was the only Wayist follower."

"I don't know about this," Harper said hesitantly, "but is there any chance that the Magog god would *make* one of them behave differently, to sucker someone into thinking that everything we say is just fake?"

"That's a really scary thought," Trance said, her skin fading to lavender.

"Who would they be dealing with? The Enochians? The Shaperans? Not the Kazov, certainly?"

"The Kazov are stupid and careless, but not stupid enough to align themselves with Magog," I said, "unless they're being played for fools by a third party -- which is certainly possible."

"I don't like this at all." Harsh lines settled into Dylan's face. I realized, seeing them, that he looked as if he had aged a goodly part of the three hundred years he'd been in the black hole, just in the last hour.

"Did you approach the Enochians or did they call you?" Beka said suddenly. "Is it a trap, or are they being played for fools as well?"

"The only way I'm going to find out if it's a trap is to spring it," Dylan said. He turned to me. "Tyr, I want you to come back to the station with me, with whatever weapons will not violate the Denali market treaties. I'm going back to negotiations tomorrow, but tonight I'd like to do a little hunting. Care to join me?"

"With pleasure," I told him, and meant it.

***

It was relatively easy, once we were near the station in the Maru, to park off to the side of a remote landing slip and walk in. We appeared to be just another pair of rough characters, perhaps miners
from Atholi or dock hands working on a freighter; nobody noticed us. We, on the other hand, noticed everything.

Dylan waved me off to the back of the booths as he went around the front, staying to the shadows. I half-drew the force knife and kept it ready. If I ran across those wireheads again, they would spend their extremely brief future talking to me. The shadows behind the canvas booths and rough-built shops seemed to cling to the bottoms of walls and curve around the corners.

Nothing moved around us. I reached the corner behind the booth where Rommie had seen the Magog, and crouched to check the ground. No odd tracks, nothing different here than anywhere else -- except for a small clump of reddish-brown hair that had stuck to a splintered post. I picked it up, and sniffed at it, and all but gagged.

Magog. No mistake. After the worldship, I would never mistake that odor again.

Rommie had been right.

I whistled, soft and long, like one of the local night snakes -- Denali Station residents ate almost anything, but the local reptiles had poisonous meat, so they were the preferred pets and rat-catchers - - and heard an answering whistle from two booths up. As I glided toward it, staying near the shadows, something about the shape of the shadow along the edge of a tent flap made me flinch away cautiously, just in time to avoid the flick of the claws aimed at me.

They'd moved too slowly; I severed the arm with one slash of my knife. When it fell, bloodless, dangling from a wire, I knew it had been a set-up. I ducked back from the booth and took off in search of Dylan.

He was gone.

No blood on the ground, nor signs of a scuffle. Either they had taken him by surprise -- not an easy task -- or he had seen the trap and sprung it, and had moved out of its way, waiting for me.

But there were no bodies of others, either, or signs of any being hastily hidden.

I moved into shadow and became still, listening, and at last heard the small sounds of movement on the next street. As I arrived, Dylan was dispatching the second of four assailants in as pretty and vicious a knife fight as I'd ever seen. I took care of the other two for him and went to him, but could not get his attention. I waved a hand and he whirled, blade at the ready, and relaxed only when he saw me.

He was deaf, and mute. Both his ears and mouth had been covered by hastily-slapped-on synthskin, which bonds immediately to any living flesh. The synthskin had just missed his nose; he was fortunate to be alive at all.

Synthskin was created to bond instantly to the body to heal wounds; I could do nothing for him. We returned to the Maru and then to the Andromeda, where he went straight to the med deck and remained there. It would not do for the Commonwealth's chief representative to be unable to negotiate in the morning.

***

"You wanted to see me?" I walked into the workshop.

Harper sat at his bench and seemed asleep, but his eyes opened as I spoke and I realized he was jacked into the ship's computer. He held up a hand to bid me wait, and disconnected himself. "Had to
check on how Rommie's reprogramming was going, from the inside. No problems. What's up?"

I repeated my question. He shook his head.

"That can wait. What happened on the station?"

"Someone armed with synthskin attempted to silence Dylan permanently."

Harper shuddered. "Ew. Oh, I hate that. Is he okay?"

"Trance has him."

He nodded. "Good." His fingers toyed with the computer jack, and he looked everywhere but at me.

I decided to chance saying what I was thinking. "Did you happen to visit the Street of Silk and Incense, down at the station?" He jumped. "That's not an accusation, Seamus."

"Well, yeah. I did."

"Did you enjoy yourself?" I asked. The pleasures to be found in that street are almost incomparable, if one has the wit to ask for them. "I have always found the third house to the left to be a particularly good choice."

"I didn't have enough thrones for that; I went to the next one. The House of Tapestries, with the tobine awning."

"Also an excellent choice." I relaxed, smiling a little. "Did you think it would bother me if you sought pleasure elsewhere than in my bed? We are each other's shieldbrothers, not each other's captors."

Harper shrugged. "I wasn't sure. I mean, I may be damaged and all, but I didn't want to screw things up on my side of things the way they were on yours, so to speak."

Damaged. I had never spoken that word aloud to him, though it was true that he and his ancestors had endured more years on the failing Earth and he on the Maru than would have been safe. My mind shifted and I thought I knew where his thoughts lay.

"Did I ever mention that the Juarez brothers are so unintelligent that they have others clean their weapons for them? Nothing they say is worth warm spit, for they certainly are not." I shook my head. "In fact, were it not for their forearm spines, I would wonder if they were actually Nietzschians at all."

"It wasn't them," he said quickly. "It was one of the other patrons at the House of Tapestries. You know, the usual stuff, guy looking down his nose at the dirtcrawler. He made comments in front of the staff there." His head came up and he looked at me. "I made sure I gave the ladies nothing to complain about."

"Seamus, Seamus. I would not consider your abilities to be 'nothing to complain about'. The House of Tapestries is fortunate that you visited; you probably taught at least one of their staff several techniques that none of them knew before."

Those who worked on the Street of Silk and Incense were there freely, as their vocation honored any of several regional deities. I had even run across some who had knowledge of the Sylphidian mysteries, whom I had visited in the past when I felt particularly nostalgic. They charged what the market would bear, but beyond their own needs they donated generously to any down-and- out
spacer who came along. I had been the recipient of their kindness more than once when I was younger.

"Well, yeah. I mean, I was partying. First time in ages I've even felt that well, so I had to go pay my respects to the ladies."

"I hope they appreciated it."

He nodded, much more happily. "And then, as I was about to leave, I heard someone talking with a heavy Shaperian accent, only a few words." Anxiety replaced happiness. "I didn't know the words, so I wrote them down phonetically and looked them up after I got back here." He handed me a pad. "Is it what I think it is?"

I was not a classical linguist; although I learned six languages at one time or another, and portions of several more, my knowledge was primarily pragmatic as it assisted me as a mercenary. Shaperian, linguistically connected to classical Vedran, was one I had only skimmed, as I had never been hired to work for or against the Shaperans and they had produced neither great literature nor valuable art that could be stolen. They were small-time merchants who trafficked in low-quality reproductions of other people's goods, but because of this they peddled their goods everywhere, and wormed their way through the back door into every planet and station they could find.

As I stared at the pad, willing the nonsensical sounds he'd transcribed to become sensible words, the symbols took shape as fragmentary words: Morajan, dark moon, locusts, eating fire.

It was too familiar; I'd heard those words and more in the marketplace, as part of the information I'd purchased. "It's a quotation, but it's misquoted. Have you run this past Rommie?"

Harper shook his head. "I wanted you to see it first. Something tells me there's more going on than a literary society."

I handed him back the pad, and he touched the 'translation' key. Andromeda shimmered into visibility nearby. "This is a section of the fourth book of Mertu, as translated by Sikander A'urigas of Chiyo. It is a fragment of the seventh stanza in the poetic form known as bittete:

'Dark moon grasps
stars, in the time of Morajan.
Locusts flutter to earth

Call forth dreams
call visions, call Mertu's seers
but forget the past.

Old dreams only
blind you to reality's bite
in Morajan's realm

Soon they come
soon, eating fire and storm
when night descends..."

Harper's face reflected the horror that must have shown on my own. "Andromeda, who or what are Mertu and Morajan?" Harper asked warily.

Andromeda said, "Mertu is the legendary prophet of the pre-Shaperan society known as the Arisiani. He -- or she, it's hard to tell -- is said to have predicted the future in ten thousand verses. Only a
portion of Mertu's work has been translated, and the various translations disagree with one another about any meanings that may be found there."

"Are the predictions accurate?" I asked.

The embodiment of the ship's intelligence tilted her head to one side, considering. "For the translated sections, there is a correlation of approximately sixty-five percent, depending on the reliability of the translation, with a five percent margin for error. Nobody has actually studied all of it, Tyr."

"Sixty-five percent." Harper's face paled. I pushed him toward a stool and he sat down hard. "With error, sixty to seventy percent. That's way too close for comfort."

"How is Dylan? Is he awake?" I asked. Harper's eyes locked with mine, and he nodded, slowly.

"Trance has finished healing him in the med deck. I believe he's relaxing right now," Andromeda said. "Should I tell him you're coming?"

"Yes, and send him a copy of what you've shown us." Harper said.

"And the time of Morajan?" I asked.

"The Arisiani version of the Old Norse term Ragnarok, the end of the world."

Harper and I ran all the way to med deck.

***

As our philosophers observed long ago, religions act as a drug that first enchants people and then enthralls them. However, those who lead any religion are seldom enthralled; administrators and businesspeople tend toward practical pragmatism, regardless of their nominal faith.

One must beware of the leader who believes in what he has been taught, and who will blindly work to bring his reality to fruition. If the religion's myths and legends teach of peace and plenty, such leaders are usually harmless. However, if the legends speak of conquest, one must either find ways to bend them to one's advantage or remove oneself from their path in order to survive.

The only real weapon against unthinking, ignorant adherence to idiotic predictions is truth, which is ignored so often as to be ineffective. Secondary weapons, such as bombs, are useful only if every adherent to the belief is destroyed, as well as all record of the prophecies -- but these create their own unpleasant side-effects, such as martyrs and saints.

History has shown that manipulating the outcomes of predictions is a thankless endeavor, especially when chance is against the result. However, low-probability events often follow their own rules, which have little to do with the laws of chance. I would not have bet on the probability that an apparently dead Commonwealth battle cruiser, floating inert near the rim of a black hole, would become my residence or that its captain would have survived three centuries of suspended time. Nor would I ever have chanced money on the idea that an unenhanced human could be cured of a Magog infestation by any means whatever.

***

"You're sure the speakers were Shaperans?" Dylan said. He ran his fingertips over the pad as if by smearing the words he could change them. Of course he could not even do that, as they were electronically generated.
Harper nodded. "I got a look through the door as I was leaving. I didn't want to stay around."

"I don't blame you," he said.

"Dylan." I needed his attention. "Isn't it clear enough for you? The Shaperans are in league with the Magog, calling down their own version of the end of the world. You're not going to get anywhere here. Almost everyone on the crew has been attacked since we've been here."

"I'm aware of that." Dylan's mouth set in an unhappy line. "But do the Enochians know this? I have to give them a chance to clean their own house. I can't just write off millions of people."

"Might I suggest that you bring the rest of the discussion here, instead of going to the station?" Rommie proposed.

"That would be safer for us," Beka agreed, "though I'm not sure we want to give them the impression that we find Denali unsafe."

"Even when it is unsafe?" Harper put in.

"I'll think about it." Dylan said. "Rommie, let me have everything you've got on relevant Mertu prophecies and Arisiani history, including known Magog attacks. This could be just a literary allusion to something that happened in the past."

"Similar to the early Christian Apocalypse of John, which was written during a time of war and occupation? Possibly." I considered the notion unlikely, but worth examination.

"Tyr, I didn't think you believed in religion," Beka said.

My eyes strayed past her toward Trance, who was busy putting away the tools she'd used to work on Dylan. "Knowledge and belief are not the same."

***

"I'm going to get some sleep; long day tomorrow," Harper said, adding softly, "Do you want me to leave the light on?"

"Rest wherever it will do you the most good," I told him. "I'm tired, but too awake. I'll be in after a while."

His glance touched me as if it were a kiss. He walked toward my quarters. I waited until he was around the corner and moved toward the hydroponics gardens. Trance always went there after she had been doing medical work; she said she found it restful.

I sat under her Eden pear tree and waited. She saw me as she entered, and her eyes widened.

"Tyr, are we out of fresh fruit already? I'll pick you a pear, if you like." She reached toward a branch. I would almost be willing to bet that the branch leaned down to her to offer its fruit, but I was not in the mood to analyze odd behavior in plants.

"I've been wondering something," I said, accepting the pear she handed me. "Why were you afraid this morning, when the wireheads attacked? They were large, but I've noticed that the size of other beings never frightens you. You've confronted fighters twice their size and forced them to back away. You've faced me down. Why now?"

She sat next to me, and bit into her own pear. "They could see me."
I raised an eyebrow and chewed the juicy fruit. "So? I'm seeing you now."

"Are you?" Her eyes looked darker than usual. "You see the surface of me, just as I see the surface of you. Tell me what you see."

"It's been a long day, Trance. I'm not really in the mood for the philosophical." But she continued to challenge me with her stare, so I added, "I see someone who comes from no planet or people I've ever known, who understands plants and philosophy, and who has an uncanny ability to ride the winds of fortune."

"That's good. You see a lot." She leaned on one arm. "When I look at you, I see someone who's so strong and so capable, and who really wants to make things better even if he has to justify it with his people's philosophy in order to think he's doing the right thing." Her voice softened. "I also see someone who was a frightened boy watching his family slaughtered by people they'd trusted, and his only home destroyed forever. I see a wild runaway, and a former slave as well as a warrior ... and a lover. You live many lives at once, Tyr Anasazi. Am I mistaken?"

"You're not mistaken." I put the half-eaten fruit aside. "Let me ask the question another way: what did they see in you that I do not see?"

"Do you really want me to show you? You have to promise not to tell anyone, especially Dylan." She put her fingers to my lips to stop my words until I nodded agreement. "It's really important that he doesn't know, ever. Do you promise, formally?"

"I give you the word of Tyr Anasazi, out of Victoria by Barbarossa, that I will not speak to Dylan of whatever transpires here, my lady. Will that do?" I said quietly, beneath her touch.

She nodded. "Look at me."

At first I saw no difference from one moment to the next -- and then I realized that I was seeing the herb garden through her body. She had not become transparent, like glass, but translucent, as if a brilliant light were shining out of her in all directions. The brilliance that shone from her body felt warm and inviting, but I knew, somehow, that I dared not touch it or I would be lost.

"It's just me, Tyr," Trance said. "That's all they saw."

"There is more?"

She nodded, and the light within her body changed, so that I could see what appeared to be the shapes of galaxies and nebulae as if they moved within her. When she pushed her hair out of her face, I saw through her hand something small and delicate, shining, almost in the shape of a human ribcage, near what appeared to be a feathery spindle ...

The Andromeda herself, circling Denali Station.

Before I could speak or even think, she was her usual self again, the little purple girl who made plants grow and came back from death as if it were nothing unusual, who could tell which planet Dylan was imprisoned on because it looked pretty and who always, always was in the right place at the right time whether anyone realized it or not.

I closed my eyes. The loss of that lovely light felt like a blow from a club. "What are you?" I whispered.

"Something your people don't believe in."
"You know," I said slowly, "I think I can believe that." It felt as if I could see her with my eyes shut, but for my own peace of mind I opened them.

She sighed, slumping against the tree. "Usually people see what they want to see, so it's not hard to just be someone from another place that nobody's heard of yet. And everyone knows that people on drugs see things that don't exist, so they're no problem. But wireheads seem to get past that too easily."

"Do they know what kind of deity you are?"

"Tyr, I don't even know how to answer that question. I am what I am. What else can I say?"

My mind tried to capture everything at once. "So they see you as what they want to see, am I right?"

Trance nodded. "And this time, they wanted to make me their own Magog god, to fend off the one that's coming in the worldship."

"They are allied with Magog, aren't they?"

"The Shaperans are, but not the Enochians." She rubbed her eyes with her hands, briefly, and sighed. "I know there's a perfect possible solution out there for this, but I can't see it."

I pushed myself to my feet. "You know, this is a new experience. I don't know what to say to you. I don't know whether to ask for a blessing on my endeavors or a curse on my enemies. I don't even know if you want anything from me, or what I would do if you did."

"Oh, Tyr." Trance's eyes filled with tears even as she smiled, heartbreak in her expression. "You don't have to say or do anything you wouldn't have done before. You shine with your own brightness, and that blesses your work. Your enemies are already accursed by their hatred; I don't have to do anything to make that happen. And all I want from you is that you not tell anyone else what I've shown you."

"Do any of them know?" It was possible. I had come late to the Maru, years after Beka and Harper had met Trance.

"Harper knows, a little. He found records in the All Systems Library. I asked him not to say anything, and he hasn't."

"Blessed is he who has not seen but who has believed," I quoted, and she smiled more widely. "I don't know if I can believe in you, but I do believe the evidence of my senses."

"I'm not asking you to believe in anything, except in what Dylan is trying to do, and I leave that to your good sense." She came to her feet and eyed me speculatively. "You're thinking of something, aren't you?"

I nodded. "Harper said he'd slept with you. I was just wondering what it was like to make love to a deity."

Trance put her hand on my arm. "You can find out if you want." Her voice teased me, reminding me of my youngest sister's voice when she wanted me to search for where she had hidden a treat. "But I think you know, from the one you already worship on your knees."

I felt the blush wash over me; I couldn't help it.

"Love is still love, no matter what, Tyr, and it's always divine even in the most unexpected
circumstances." She reached up on tiptoe to kiss me softly, warmly, and walked away, her tail waving to me as she left.

***

Nietzsche's god died centuries ago. Did that mean the demise of every immortal deity, because a mortal man proclaimed it so?

I found it difficult to come to grips with the concept of a deity as anything more than someone else's myth. True, she had neither confirmed nor denied anything, nor had she asked for my belief. She had not required me to change my behavior, only requested that I support Dylan's project -- which I already did, since remaining alive and unmolested by Magog was definitely in my long-term interest.

If I had gone with her, to her bed, I would have violated no rules or laws. For my Jaguar wives, she would not have counted; for Harper, it would not have mattered. Yet I hesitated, and I wondered, later, if I should have gone. One is seldom invited to share the bed of someone more enhanced than any Nietzschian could dream of being -- at any rate, none of us have come back from the dead, which she has accomplished at least twice that I know of.

I don't know why I hesitated. Perhaps it was the feeling, as her warm light washed over me, that if I were to touch the source of that light I would be changed so utterly that Tyr Anasazi would no longer exist. I was not ready for that.

But as I went back to my bed, finally tired, I felt grateful that she was aboard the Andromeda and working on the same side as Dylan.

Harper was asleep when I arrived. He murmured something low in his throat as I lifted the covers, and reached over to hold me as soon as I lay down. I slid into sleep thinking of what Trance had said, and of what she had not said at all.

***

In the morning, Dylan informed the Enochians that he was gravely concerned about the safety of his crew, and about the lack of seriousness with which the Enochians apparently took their security precautions. In a measured, judicial voice, he described for them the attacks on Trance and Harper, on Rommie and on myself, and ended by asking why, when they were attempting to negotiate a defense against Magog, Magog had been seen in the Street of Traders the previous day. At that point he showed them what Rommie had seen -- for that section of her cybernetic mind had been unaffected by the disruptor chip.

Harper, hidden from the view of the communications array, mouthed "stuffy bastard" at me as Dylan spoke. I maintained my severe expression while I was in communications range; fortunately, I had discovered long ago that my efforts to suppress humor often resulted in what others considered a truly ferocious scowl.

The Enochians, pale hands waving in front of pink-striped faces, stammered and apologized at length, as the Shaperans watched, whispering among themselves. Dylan let this continue for a few minutes, then told them he saw no need for further negotiations, since he doubted that good faith was involved on their part. He let the Enochians persuade him to commit to one more meeting, this one to be aboard Andromeda, using our security instead of theirs, and set it for the next day.

As soon as Beka cut the signal, Dylan turned to us. "Opinions, people?"

"They're lying through their teeth," Beka said, turning from her control panel. "Do we have any idea
what the Shaperans were saying, behind each other's backs?"

"Something about preparing for the day to come." Rommie frowned. "That sounds uncomfortably similar to several lines in the Mertu books."

Dylan nodded. "I thought so, too. Harper?"

"We're back in shape here, no problem with security. I've put a little something extra on the personal translators they'll be wearing, so that even if they take off the equipment we can still track them." Harper nodded, his mouth a serious line. "No way am I going to let them pull any more little tricks on Andromeda."

"Good. Tyr?"

"If you have no objection, since we are not hosting the meeting until tomorrow, I'd like to return to the station this afternoon for reconnaissance." I paused briefly before adding, "With Beka, if you can spare her."

Dylan nodded. "Be careful. I don't want to lose either of you."

"Oh, Dylan, it's so nice to know that you care," Beka mocked, but with a smile on her face. "Any time you're ready, Tyr."

I nodded to Harper, who followed us into the hall. "I'm not all that happy about this, you two," he said. "Our track record down there isn't the best."

"Don't I know it," Beka muttered. "What did you have in mind?"

"Actually," I turned from Harper to Beka, "I thought it was time for Napoleon Rastafarian and his lady to tour Denali Station on a little shopping spree."

"Whoo-ee! This is going to be fun." Beka tilted her head, visually measuring me. "I know I can disguise myself in a dozen ways you haven't even seen yet, but what are we going to do with you?"

"I've had a few ideas," I told her, and as I described what I'd been considering both of them burst into laughter and then outdid each other by suggesting alternatives and improvements to my ideas. As one, we headed toward Beka's quarters in the Maru, where she had kept a supply of less-than-reputable clothing and equipment.

***

Three hours later, Harper dropped us off in a different sector of the port than any we had used before, and we wandered into town, the effete Napoleon Rastafarian and his delicate and spoiled lady, Clothilde SittingBull.

"Stop mincing," Beka told me in an undertone. "You look more femme than I do."

"Wasn't that the idea?" I whispered back. "These trousers are too tight."

"Don't complain. From the looks I'm getting, I'd bet there's a lot of jealousy out there because I get to play with your very nicely wrapped package."

I snorted, then tittered, just to balance the impression I was making. After all, it was not every day that I wandered through a spaceport with my skin lightened and my hair carefully refashioned into the semblance of a tall wig -- though I'd wager any amount that most wigs did not contain half as
many throwing knives artfully hidden among the hairpins, not to mention the omnidirectional microphones and vid cameras beaming information back directly to Andromeda. Nothing could be done to disguise my physique, but a change of boots, and a loose-sleeved shirt provided a hint of clumsy movement and disguised my gauntlets and forearm spikes. A vulgar amount of jewelry -- all genuine, as far as I could tell, and taken from Beka's emergency stash -- completed the effect.

If anything, Beka outmatched me, her skin tinted darker than my normal shade, her hair a smoky deep cobalt to match her eyes, and her clothing a dozen layers of fluttering silk that gave the impression that she might, perhaps, be as dangerous as a small untrained puppy if it were not for the foot-long force knife she wore casually on her belt.

We blended into the market as if we were nothing special, and I suppose we were. Beka tiptoed over to the leather-workers' booth and exclaimed over the reptile jacket as if it were the first one she'd ever seen, while I stood in the road, making rude comments about her taste and stooping to dust the dirt of the road off my chartreuse boots.

"Hey, tone it down," Harper said into my ear from the courier boat we'd come in, which waited for us off the station. "I'm laughing too hard to steer."

"Oh, my dear Clothilde," I said to Beka, "I do believe I see something truly fascinating in the next street. Would you care to accompany me?"

"Nappy, darling, I'd be so delighted," she said, tossing a thousand-crown cloud lizard belt over her shoulder as if it were fake and ignoring the merchant's anxious dash to keep it from the muddy ground. "Isn't this just the most fascinating market?"

And as we made our ridiculous way through the market, pausing at various places on every street, the station security bots ignored our progress completely. We could have been murals on the tent walls for all the notice they took of us.

I kept myself alert, under the light tenor patter I affected, and saw what I hoped I would not see: in three places, reddish brown fur on arms, moving in such a way that I could not find the wearer's face to check its identity. Beka noted them too; and annoyed two shopkeepers by asking specifically for "one of those rusty bhaer-fur coats, my dear, so fashionable down in the Lower Magellanic Cloud, oh, you have no idea ..."

As she blathered, I glanced behind us. The Juarez brothers were talking with the Shaperans in a kaffeshop two blocks away, while behind the kaffeshop I could finally see the full length of one of those fur coats -- on its original wearer.

Under normal circumstances nobody but one Magog can identify another Magog; they were as like one another as walnuts from one of Trance's trees. But I had fought Magog face to face, and had lived on the same ship with one for more than a year. I knew that face, and it was troublingly familiar. If Rev were not here, someone must have gone to the considerable trouble of cloning him, or else of training other Magog in polite manners.

The mere thought of a trainable Magog chilled me to the core. I caught Beka's attention, and we headed gradually back to where we could meet Harper and the courier boat.

"What's the hurry?" Beka said, annoyed, as we moved away from the market. "I agree, you saw three Rev Bems; that's enough to upset any of us."

"Yes. It is." I reached into a pocket and handed her the medal I'd found in the marketplace the day before, the one-of-a-kind medal that had been created for Rev Bem by his teacher when he embraced
the Way. The chain from which it had hung was gone, and the ring that attached it to the chain had been twisted aside and hammered back into place. "I think your Rev is no more, and we're seeing his clones."

Beka took one look at the medal, gripped it tightly in her fist, and said nothing more until we reached the privacy of the Maru. Once aboard, she turned on me, anger and pain in her eyes. "Why didn't you tell me earlier?"

"I had to be certain." I said. "I'm sorry."

"Certain of what?" Harper cocked his head to the side, watching up. "Beka. What is it?"

She held out her clenched fist, and when his hand opened beneath it she laid the medal gently on his palm. "Rev's gone."

"You're sure?" His eyes went back and forth between us, and his shoulders slumped. "You're going to have to tell Dylan."

"I know." Beka was crying, silently. Harper put an arm around her shoulders. "There's no way we can get out of this meeting tomorrow, is there?"

"I think not." I leaned down to take off the absurd boots that Beka had insisted on, too low and uncomfortable for proper fighting gear. From the top of the left boot I brought another scrap of fur, like the one I'd seen the night before; this one had come from the mud between tents where the Street of Traders met the Street of Silk and Incense, near the kaffeshop. "I believe this should be checked against the genetic record of Rev aboard the Andromeda."

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Rommie verified the scrap of fur as identical to Rev Bem's DNA. She traced the last transmission from him, and found that it had a faulty address of origination. When she inquired at the Wayist gathering, she learned that Rev Bem had left there more than two months earlier for a second Wayist convocation -- shortly after he had said what a miracle it was that Harper had survived for so long. They had assumed Rev Bem had found his way back to us, and until then had been unconcerned that they had not heard from him although he had promised to report back to them on the convocation's theological discussions. Whatever had happened to him since then we could only conjecture, but with the damaged medallion in Beka's hand, we knew he had not survived.

Dylan's face was set in granite. Trance was curled up crying in a corner of the observation deck, behind a large-leafed plant. Beka had managed to wipe her tears, though her eyes still welled and overflowed without warning, but for the most part she had subsumed her grief into anger, as had Harper, who had simply stormed out to one of his workshops to be alone.

"They're not going to get away with this, Dylan." While she paced the deck, her hair changed colors as fast as the nanobots could flicker through the spectrum, all but throwing sparks off its waving ends. "You're not going to make an alliance with these people, are you? I won't work with anyone who was involved in killing Rev."

"We can't just abandon the Enochians," Dylan argued. "We have to tell them about what the Shaperans are doing."

"Fine. Do it from here. Don't even let those traitors aboard," Beka snapped.

"Considering the number of places and peoples the Shaperans trade with, sir, I think it would be wise for us to notify our other allies as well," I said, in as neutral a tone as possible.
I would not mourn Rev Bem to the degree that Harper and Trance would. There had been times when I had been frankly wearied by his insistent harping on the syncretistic Way. However, he had worked with us and fought for Harper's life as I had -- and provided the means to keep Harper alive until our unexpected remedy occurred -- and I would not deny that.

Dylan caught my eye and nodded. "Go ahead. Contact Charlemagne and tell him what we've discovered. Rommie, contact the other allies and inform them as well."

I composed and sent a diplomatic message for my wives' brother.

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Charlemagne's response was pithy, witty and suitable savage. Within the day we had a report back from him, a summary of information culled from the Shaperans whom his fighters had interrogated, across the galaxy. From the tenor of his message, I was certain that none of the Shaperans who had provided the information would be peddling second-rate home decorations any longer.

Yes, the Shaperans had entered an alliance with the Magog, in which they would receive preference (translation: they would be eaten last) in return for information on troop movements, migrations and suitably rich planets for pillaging.

And yes, as we had suspected, the Shaperans admitted to seeking out and slaying the only known peaceable Wayist member of the Magog, in order to quick-clone him and use his clones as spies and messengers. They felt safe from molestation, since it appeared that a genetic accident had contributed to Rev Bem's ability to react peacefully to provocation. More than that, they enjoyed the thought of having a 'pet' safe Magog to do with as they pleased. When word of this reached us, Harper shut himself into Workshop Five for three days, not even leaving for food. Trance went lavender with shock. Beka let loose a spate of swearing and cursing that even I could not have surpassed.

Dylan, so angry he could not trust himself to speak, went to the observation deck and paced for two hours straight, then returned to the bridge where I had kept watch in his absence. He faced down the Enochians and forced them to choose their allies. The Enochians, apparently shaken to the core by their nearness to the double-dealing Shaperans, signed Dylan's pact to fight the Magog and agreed to outfit and refit any ships of any allied group as their share of the battle, since they had no actual warriors other than their automated security force. Before they were allowed to receive their share of the antibody, they expelled the remaining Shaperans and closed any Shaperan-related businesses on the promenade or the market. As the Shaperans left, I noticed a handful of Kazov tactical fighters following them; it appeared that the Kazov were serving as fighter escorts rather than preying on the Shaperans.

It was just another thing to mention to Charlemagne. He was pleased to receive the news, as it gave him even more of a reason to show no mercy to any Kazov his men encountered.

And we went to the next planet, and the next, and the space station after that, working with Dylan to collect as many more allies against the Magog as possible before they reached the nearer edge of known space. Between us, Dylan and I put an orphaned boy on a throne in Ne'Holland and made as much of a man of him as we could before his coronation, so that he would know when to use might and when to use guile, and when to use neither or both. His new parliament's first motion approved an alliance with the renewed Commonwealth and against the Magog; the second invited several Perseid scholars and scientists to visit to update the planetary library and oversee improvements to the university -- and to the military's technology.

We gained a little, each time, for our cause, but I saw the strain on the faces of the crew from repeating the message we brought. We found people in peace-loving societies and were forced to
harden them, to show them what they faced, and in turn to face their shock and anger and fear, and finally gain their assent to alliance. In any time or place this would be a triumph, this dizzying forced progression that we pursued through the galaxies, hoping to gain time to stave off the darkness. But each time we left a new ally that had been made to see how its paradise would soon be devastated, Dylan looked a little older, a little more grim.

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Considering how expert my people were at war, it appears odd now that there were few if any ritualized ways of expressing grief. Or, perhaps it was that we never arrived at only one ritual. Each pride had its own practices, its own public memorials, but private expressions were unmodified by any sort of expectation.

Of course one grieved, publicly or privately, with dignity -- and dignity, in our case, could be stretched to cover anything from silent tears to a full-blown rage at the fates. It was not unusual for someone whose family or shieldmate had been killed to take a vow to slay the killer -- our vows were made to the leader of the pride, if public -- or to bring about the killer's downfall in other ways. Feuds were common in early times, though they decreased over the years as the low survival rate made them impractical for a future-minded people. Duels were less common, more often employed when for one reason or another there appeared to be no other way to bring balance or justice to a situation.

From what I saw, most of the others were turning their grief, for whatever reason, into fuel to sustain them as we forged on to build the alliance. But the fuel was running out. Anger and pain only take one so far along the road before they either dissipate or fragment the one who bears them. We needed a time of renewal, in some form. By the time we signed up the twentieth world, I would have been willing to sponsor and stage a full-scale orgy, complete with the entire staff of the Street of Silk and Incense, could I have afforded them, if only it would have lifted the emotional miasma that had fallen upon the ship.

None of us smiled much, any more, for any reason. Harper, in my bed, seldom told stories or made jokes. We came to each other seeking refuge from the storm around us, unable to relax in any other way. Often, afterward, I would feel the silent tears running down his cheeks, and know that all I could do was to hold him and give him my presence. He would have to come to terms with the way the world he knew had changed in his own time. It seemed that a shadow had fallen across him that even my most tender loving could not dissipate.

Beka, of course, attempted to take everything in stride as a professional challenge, but her relationship with Dylan was suffering; it was obvious in the way they behaved around one another, never quite allowing themselves the faintest touch on each other's arm. In better times they had flirted casually across the bridge; now they did their work, and the lines in Dylan's face grew deeper. When I saw Beka watching Dylan without a smile in her eyes, and noticed silver streaking her hair that was not put there by her nanobots, I knew that as a group we were coming to the end of the time when we would be effective at all, and soon would be unable to defend ourselves from despair -- the one killer that would defeat us more quickly than the Magog.

I heard Trance talking to her plants, but even she was quieter. I dared not ask her if a perfect harmonious future were still possible, or how we might come to find it. If she knew of one, she would certainly have told us.

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And then we needed to meet with Charlemagne again -- not to mention our wives -- to discuss strategy. The Magog worldship had been sighted, ravaging uncharted worlds on the outer edge of a
spiral galaxy in a direct line to the Commonwealth. We could wait no longer.

This time Dylan offered the Andromeda as the host ship. He asked Rommie to outfit guest quarters for as many Nietzschians as might come aboard, and set aside special suites of rooms for his wives and mine, and for Charlemagne and his bodyguards.

Rommie oversaw the work with her usual efficiency; she consulted Beka and Trance concerning matters of taste, and left the work to the A.I.s. Beka appeared to take professionally, rather than personally, the advent of Dylan's battle brides and mine, and followed to the letter the custom of outfitting their quarters equally well.

I had no idea of how to discuss my own family obligations with Harper, but I knew I must do it. I owed it to him, just as I owed it to him to be honest with my wives about his place in my life.

***

"They're coming tomorrow, aren't they?" Harper whispered in the dark.

"Yes." I kissed his shoulder and neck. "You need not leave unless you wish it."

"Will you be here?"

"Sometimes. It will depend on what I find when I see them." It had been many months, after all.

"Oh."

"I may have ritual obligations as well, to my children." I rolled onto my back, staring at the ceiling. "There is a naming ceremony, in which the father officially claims the children."

"What happens if they are not claimed?" His voice was tentative, full of memory.

"The father is discarded. We love our children, Seamus."

"That's good. Not that I want you discarded, but it's good for the kids. They have to have someone who cares about them."

I remembered my father's deep-voiced presence and his warm hands as he moved my arms into the right position during a martial arts lesson. "Believe me, we care. Our lives have come at too high a cost not to care. Most women would rather abandon the father than the child, once it is born."

"Ah."

He understood, as I knew he would. It was always the woman's choice, as it should be, for the child was hers first and the father's only after that, although we traced both matrilineal and patrilineal inheritance.

"Will I meet any of them? I mean, not as one of the crew, but as me?"

"I don't know." Charlemagne, of course, knew of Harper's place in my life; he could hardly feign ignorance, considering his care to obtain a sample of antibody untouched by Trance. His attitude appeared to combine polite disdain with tolerance of a sort; I did not think he would stoop to the casual cruelty his bride Elssbett had shown during her visit here.

Would I even have seen that as cruelty and not simply as a recognition of the way things were in the Nietzschian worldview if I had not been working with these people for so long?
"I suspect that you may be asked to play host to Charlemagne's brother and his bodyguard, perhaps, on tours of the armaments." I rolled back to my side to put an arm around him. "Need I mention that you should never tell any of them everything?"

"Tyr, I don't even tell you everything."

"A wise choice. Do not stray from that course." My fingers measured the hard bone under his jawline. "What I do not know, they cannot pry from me, should they wish it."

His hand slid under my hair to cup the back of my head. "What are you not telling me, Tyr?" His voice was barely twenty centimeters from my ear. "Are you going to take over the ship for them? Because if there's any chance I'm going to end up as somebody's plaything, I'd like to know about it ahead of time. I want a clear path to the escape pods and airlock."

"You are no one's toy, Seamus, not even mine." I kissed him fiercely, pulling him on top of me. "We are under treaty peace; if anyone makes trouble, I'll be the first to show him a tour of space vacuum."

"You can't control everything, Tyr. You know that." He straddled me, playing with the ends of my hair, pulling it across under my throat as if to choke me. "I could kill you here."

"You could try," I agreed. "I don't think you'd do it."

"Not unless you asked me." His face was sober. "And it would have to be worse than on the worldship."

"Fair enough." I reached for him, for another turn at play, but he forestalled me by lying forward on his arms.

"Tell me something." The urgency in his voice stopped my hands. "If there is any reason, any reason at all, that I should not trust you while they're here, find some way to tell me. I don't know what Nietzschean politics are from the inside; I don't know what's going to happen." He smoothed my hair back from my face. "And I know that sometimes you play with appearances. You want it to look as if you're selling us out, because that's how you keep from doing it. You've done that a lot."

My heart warmed with pride. He truly knew me.

"If something happens, I want time to get Trance off the ship."

I nodded, knowing his hands would feel my assent.

"Do I warn Dylan or not?"

"Do what seems best to you," I whispered. "I'll work around it."

"Don't trust them, Tyr, even if they're your family."

"I only trust one person," I tried to pull him up so I could taste him, but he fought me playfully, and we tumbled on the broad bed, entwined as equals.

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Charlemagne was all business as he came aboard with the first group of family. He insisted on meeting with Dylan and me as soon as everyone was settled in, although that went contrary to custom. I could not blame him; the situation was dire enough that he did not cavil at meeting aboard the Andromeda simply because it was larger and more heavily armed than his own flagship.
Boudicca's eyes lit up when she saw me. She was ripely, gloriously pregnant, and her condition pleased her and made her even more beautiful than before. I walked her to her rooms and embraced her, promising to return as soon as possible to talk about names and plan the claiming ceremony. Ygraine and Morgan were to come in the next courier boat, with Dylan's wives and more of the bodyguards; Ygraine had not caught but Morgan was pregnant as well, and I wanted to see her and make sure she was well. Both of them were nearing their time; were it not for Trance's skills I would have been concerned. I knew I would also have to spend significant time with Ygraine, not only because it would be expected of me as a precursor to battle but because I would not want her to think I valued her less because she was not with child.

Messallina, who came over with the second group, accepted my greetings with a graceful nod and complimented me on my prospective status as a father. When she saw Dylan, she complimented him as well, and looked well pleased with the situation -- far more pleased than I would have expected from a matriarch of her standards.

"You appear to be doing well by my granddaughters, Dylan Hunt. I must admit that I was not, at first," she looked down her nose at Trance, who had just entered the room, "prepared to countenance such an extraordinary diversion from Jaguar custom, but I find that I am pleased with what has occurred ... so far."

"I'm gratified by your approval," Dylan bowed. "Madame, may I present Trance Gemini, our life sciences officer and chief medical officer? Trance is the one who synthesized the Magog antibody."

Trance bowed to her and said, "I'm honored to meet you, ma'am." Messallina's nose came down several centimeters as she peered at Trance.

"What an extraordinary appearance. Are all your people so elegantly colored?" she asked.

I was beginning to see why Charlemagne had said that it was a good thing she was on his side.

Trance appeared equal to the challenge. "Actually, I have no way of knowing, ma'am, since my parents died when I was a child. I know very little about the rest of my family."

"Fascinating. And how unfortunate for you," Messallina said. "I would be quite interested to see your medical facilities, as several of my granddaughters and grandnieces are nearing their time."

"Oh, I'd be delighted," Trance said, as if she meant it, and accompanied the matriarch in the general direction of the med deck.

One problem dealt with. I scanned the reception room to search out any other difficulties.

Beka, who wore a tailored outfit that appeared to be as close to the old High Guard uniform as possible without actually being official, was doing her best to avoid any diplomatic incidents in a discussion with Charlemagne's guard, near the buffet table. I wandered in that direction, long enough to hear her say, "Are you referring to the battle in which the Than admiral, Beneficence of Mind, first used the hurricane-pincers maneuver? I'd be interested to know your thoughts on its effectiveness."

Paris Ramses elbowed the guard next to him, and said, "Tyr Anasazi. I believe we've met?"

"Yes, we were introduced during Grand Duke Bolivar's last visit to the Andromeda," I said, reserving my humor for later. "I don't think I've met all your companions, though."

Paris introduced them one by one: Zoroaster Plantagenet, Mikael Selassie, and Euclid Manchu. "We've been discussing battle tactics with your ship's first officer. She has an interesting understanding of them for a --"
I interrupted him smoothly. "I have always found Beka, out of Lisa by Charles, extremely knowledgeable. Were you aware that she is also captain of the Eureka Maru?"

"I d-didn't realize that," Zoroaster mumbled. "V-very commendable."

"Why, thank you, Tyr," Beka said with a smile. "Have you gotten your family settled comfortably?"

"I believe so. I'm planning to check on them again before the meeting begins," I told her.

I have always appreciated Beka's ability to put callow youths in their place without expending undue effort.

I excused myself and walked over to Dylan, who stood talking with Charlemagne while Rommie stood nearby. "When do you wish to begin?"

Charlemagne nodded politely to me. "Soon. If you plan to pay your respects to your family at the moment, I'd suggest you make the visit brief." He smiled, all teeth. "You'll have plenty of opportunity for catching up later on."

"I'll remember you said that," I told him, my own smile broad, and glanced at Dylan, who nodded.

It occurred to me, as I left to patrol once around the ship on my way to see my wives, that I had not yet seen Harper that day.

"Andromeda. Where is Harper?"

"I'm sorry, Tyr. I can't tell you that. He requested privacy."

"But he is aboard, correct? And well?"

"Yes to both questions."

"Thank you."

I took a quick turn around my usual running path on the way to the guest quarters, passing by Workshop Five and the cargo bay. Everything appeared secure. I checked with Andromeda; Boudicca was taking a brief nap, along with Morgan, and had asked to be undisturbed for an hour. With an effort, I shook off my concerns and went to visit Ygraine, in the quarters across the hall from her sisters.

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"Tyr?"

"What?"

"Has anyone ever told you that your mouth looks like a wonderful flower?"

"No, I don't believe so, Ygraine." Absurd, sweet girl. "Should I ask what kind of flower?"

Ygraine plucked a blossom from a floral arrangement on the sideboard that included several varieties of what Trance had once told me were azaleas and hibiscus. "This one. Not quite the same color, but almost the same shape."

"Thank you." I nuzzled her breast, and she whimpered. "Do you really want to spend our time discussing flowers, sweet?"
"Our information indicates that the Magog worldship will enter known space at this point, if they continue on their current trajectory," Charlemagne pointed to a map location much closer than I'd expected. "Now, we can either wait for them to come and chew us into little tiny bits or we can go out and take them apart first. Personally, I prefer to chew the wolf's tail, not the other way around."

"How sure are you of that trajectory?" Dylan asked. "What we've found points to an entry point over here." He sketched out a section of the map near Ne'Holland, where the boy-king Eric ruled and strengthened an army for us. "If their direction has changed, why has it?"

"And will it change again?" I made the effort to appear neutral.


Paris handed us all pads. "I've tracked the path of the worldship based on the information we've secured from the Shaperans, which was more recent than any other. In any case, if the Magog enter known space anywhere between these points, there are few if any exploitable worlds for them to feed on. That will give us time to choose our territory for battle."

"It will also lose us the support of the worlds who become the next Magog meal, if we're not there in time. Gentlemen, with all due respect, that's not good enough." Dylan tapped his fingers on the conference table.

"And your suggestion is?" Charlemagne tilted his head, observing Dylan. "How many trained military units have joined the alliance? How many can be fielded at a moment's notice?"

"Enough to cover both locations fully armed. I'm not suggesting that you divide your fleet, sir, but that we position ourselves strategically in this fashion. Here, here, and here. You choose the position for your forces and the Sirrush; I'll oversee command of the rest."

Paris frowned. "You're expecting planets full of inexperienced landsmen to fight Magog?" His fingertip brushed the position of Ne'Holland.

"The situation there has changed in the past few months, I believe," I put in. "King Eric is receiving assistance from the Perseids in upgrading his military."

"Would you stand with this King Eric against them?" Charlemagne asked. "He's a child."

"Just as a matter of curiosity, sir, how old were you when you ascended to the Adamant Throne?" I said softly. It was on record that Charlemagne Bolivar, at the age of 14, had devised the deaths of a dozen or so uncles in order to wrest the Jaguar grand duchy from their power. It had taken him longer to achieve this feat than it had Eric, but Charlemagne had not had Eric's advantages.

"Gentlemen." Dylan said. "Let's take a short break and continue this discussion afterward." He glanced at Charlemagne, who nodded slowly. Rommie had a light meal brought in, including something that looked amazingly like the pesto I had made ... months ago. I nodded to her, impressed that she had been able to analyze it so effectively, and she awarded me a small smile.

"You realize," Charlemagne said, "I don't object to you two being kingsmakers; it's a fine hobby. I do have some concerns about the quality of your work as it affects my people."

"Eric is young, I grant you, but I trained him." I sipped fruit juice; too much caffeine at the moment
would be unwise. "And he listened to me."

"Then I must hope that he has continued his lessons."

"He has," I replied, thinking of our last visit there, a week before. As a result of Eric's determination, the Perseids' technology and the already-experienced fighters that had acquired more to defend from Eric than from the barons -- land and a voice in their government through a parliamentary system -- his planet would be almost as well defended as I could hope. Magog had been there before; no one in Ne'Holland required proof of their depredations to inspire them to battle.

"Excellent." Charlemagne turned to Dylan. "Let us say, for the sake of discussion, that I agree to your theory in principle. Exactly what kind of support do we have, from which planetary systems, and where were you thinking of deploying them?" His eyes narrowed speculatively. "And with what weapons? This thing is big, captain. Throwing rocks at it won't do a bit of good."

Dylan cut his eye sideways at me, a movement that made my stomach clench. "My engineer has developed a few innovations lately." I inclined my head toward him politely; he had to know how I felt, under the mask. "As I said before, the worldship appears to be able to absorb energy and apply it to its defenses; we sent a nova bomb at it without result. We do have nova bombs, I assure you, that I am willing to use once the worldship's integrity is compromised, but I plan to field something else as well."

So that was what he'd had Harper doing, constructing more nova bombs. It made sense.

"Nova bombs. My, my, you have been busy. My congratulations." Charlemagne had not missed Dylan's glance toward me, slight though it had been. "And what else do you have in your pockets?"

"A multiple-macro-implosion device. It creates not just one but several black holes, gives us the ability to move them where we wish, and when we wish -- and combine them. We can and will use that ability to tear apart the worldship."

I grew very still, thinking of Harper's long hours in Workshop Five, and of how he would shower in his old quarters after he had finished work before coming to me. I had thought it mere practicality, as his quarters had been located nearer the shop. What had he thought I might detect?

"You haven't tested it, of course."

"We've made minor tests. In principle and in small scale, it works perfectly." Dylan took another sip of coffee. "I'd advise you to update your navigational information concerning the area near the Treskigari Drift."

Beka and I had made a supply run into Treskigari, not a month ago. The tests must have happened while we were gone.

"Tyr, what's your opinion of this weapon?" Charlemagne asked.

"I believe it's quite effective," I said, nowhere near the formal mode.

"Hmm. I'll take that under advisement. If you would excuse me for a few moments, I'd like to consult my wife and check on our son."

"Is he unwell? I would be happy to put our ship's medical facilities at your disposal," Dylan said, his face concerned.

"Nothing more than a few teeth coming in, but I do appreciate your concern, cousin." And he went
off toward his quarters. Dylan raised an eyebrow at Rommie, who gave him a tight nod that meant that she would be monitoring his transmissions as well as his physical safety.

As soon as he was out the door I drew Dylan aside, out of view of my people, and said in an undertone, "Where's Harper?"

"You haven't seen him?" He turned his attention on me, the lines of concern in his face deepening. "When did you last see him?"

"In my quarters before we arrived." I toned down my glare in an attempt to make it less obvious, should Paris look around the corner. "What did you do, have him recreate the Witchhead device and add a few more tricks to it? A fleet of ships," my voice dropped further, "even Nietzschian ships, is not the same thing as that worldship."

"I know. Are you objecting?"

"No, sir. With respect, I'd just like to know whether Harper's health has been compromised by the materials you've had him work with."

He shook his head and sighed. "As far as I know, it has not. He came to me with the idea, Tyr. It wasn't something I asked him to do. I told him that I'd require him to see Trance on a daily basis after he finished work, just to make sure." His voice softened. "I can't afford to lose him, either."

"Practical." It was as close to an apology as I was willing to grant him, but he accepted it with a nod. "The question remains: where is Harper now?"

Rommie walked over to us. "Actually, I believe he's in very good hands. At the moment, he's having tea with your wives, Tyr."

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The philosopher who said that we live in interesting times should be introduced to vacuum, promptly, for being an enthusiastic optimist.

I muttered curses at every deity I didn't believe in, all the way down the long hall to Boudicca's rooms. I had put in my time as a historian, and as a practical psychologist. I knew the way my people behaved toward those they consider lesser. The encounters on Denali with the Kazov provided an extremely mild example. The Drago-Kazov had conquered more than six thousand slave planets, well over half of them human, and the Orcas, in their time, had done the same, deeming the unenhanced residents of those planets not worth their notice for anything more than target practice.

Of course Harper was interested in meeting my wives. Harper was interested in meeting anyone who would talk with him. Harper talked with people from every system and culture he encountered; he conversed with computers in their own languages, fluently and, I suspected, in slang the computers invented. I wouldn't have put it past Harper to have found a way to discuss light-speed theory with one of Trance's trees in order to get a chlorophyll perspective, if it were possible.

But he admittedly had no experience of Nietzschian women other than the spoiled Elssbett Mossadim, whom we'd transported to the Jaguars to become Charlemagne's treaty wife.

And that made all the difference. As far as our women were concerned, he was a virgin child and defenseless at that.

At some point, aboard ship, one must come to trust in the basics or else give way to insanity. I had to trust that Andromeda would have notified me if something was wrong with him. I had to trust that
she was monitoring the guest suites, and that Boudicca, Ygraine and Morgan had to be aware of it. And I had to trust that, at least for the moment, none of them would see any great advantage in taking his life.

Just because necessity required me to trust did not make it easy. I slowed to a walk at the end of the hall and forced my heart to calm itself to its normal pace. It would benefit no one if I were to arrive hurriedly, as if seeking trouble.

I went through the door casually, without knocking, as was my right.

The women and Harper were grouped around a low table on which were arranged an elaborate tea set and a three-dimensional go game, similar to the one Dylan used in his quarters. The game was in its mid-stages; black appeared to be ahead of white but there were openings where a skilled player could alter that situation if he chose.

Boudicca looked up from a long couch with a smile. Ygraine, who was adjusting a pillow behind Boudicca's back, said, "Is that better?" And Morgan, clumsily large, pushed herself up from an armchair chair and started to teeter.

Before I could reach her, Harper took her arm to keep her from falling. She accepted this, smiled quiet thanks at him, and reached for me. I put my arms around her and kissed her, gently.

"Are you well? I'm sorry I didn't see you earlier," I murmured in her ear.

"Better now. I sleep a lot," she admitted. "Sit with me?" She led me to a smaller couch, where I helped her sit and let her lean against me as I rubbed her lower back. I remembered that slump from when my oldest sister had been pregnant with her first, how she had loved to have her back rubbed to loosen the muscles that tightened unpredictably as the child within her moved.

"I should leave," Harper said, looking at my wives and not at me. "I really should get back to work."

"We're on break," I said mildly. "I wanted to see if there was anything that any of you needed."

Boudicca inclined her head. "Husband, that's so kind of you. Your friend came by an hour ago and saw to our refreshment, and we have been talking."

"He's very interesting," Ygraine told me. "Even for a human."

Harper blushed.

"He's not the usual human," I said. "Harper was the one on whom the antibody was first tested."

"As I thought," Boudicca said. "A warrior in the realm of science and technology as well as battle. Are you certain you can't stay longer, Seamus?"

Of course. He knew enough to introduce himself to them in the formal mode, with his parentage. They would hardly have used his personal name in any other circumstance. As it was, the situation was so unlike what I might have expected that I, too, felt slightly off-balance. In a rational Nietzschian universe, no woman would have allowed someone she considered lesser to touch her arm, nor would she have thanked him afterward. If this were a result of the treaty peace, I would have to revise my opinion of such matters. My opinion of Boudicca, also, had risen.

"I do have to get back to work," he said, with a sidelong glance at me, "but I'd be glad to stop back later on, if you wish. I mean, I know it's difficult, being here on a strange ship and not having your usual books and things around you."
"Perhaps my wives might enjoy seeing one or more of the classical movies you've collected. Some of
the Russian ones, perhaps?"

Harper nodded quickly, relaxing into a smile. "I'll make up a selection you can choose from;
anything you like, let me know."

"I'd be very grateful," Morgan said. She leaned her head on my shoulder. Was she watching him to
notice his reaction to her possessiveness?

He showed no particular reaction that even I could see. "I'll be back later, then, or you can ask the
ship to find me. Ladies." He bowed toward each of them, formally, and left.

"I'm pleased to see that you've been so well taken care of," I said.

"He is your friend," Boudicca said.

"He is my shieldbrother," I replied. His ability to keep his footing in a den of lionesses did not negate
their teeth or claws, or unpredictable natures.

Morgan stiffened under my arm, until I rubbed her back a little lower, when she sighed and relaxed
again.

"He does you credit. What is his parentage?" Boudicca poured me a cup of tea from an antique silver
pot I'd last seen in the historical storage on deck three. "Human, but from where?"

I accepted the tea. "I'm not entirely certain. He's certainly traveled widely and educated himself."

It would have done no good to tell the truth, since the Dragans had made Old Earth one of their
enslaved worlds for generations. I was unwilling to stretch my wives' good will to the point of
accepting as an equal someone whom, if they knew the truth, they would have discarded as an
escaped slave.

"Was he just being kind to us because of you?" Morgan asked, not quite plaintively.

"Seamus is kind because that is his nature." I looked at her steadily, and gave the same look to
Ygraine. "I'd advise you not to presume upon that. I would not have taken a coward or a fool as a
shieldbrother."

Ygraine looked abashed, but covered it with neutrality. Morgan gave me a semi-apologetic smile and
a small groan; it was clear that she felt uncomfortable.

"Sister," Boudicca said, "would you like to lie down again?"

"No, I want to be here with Tyr." Her lower lip began to push out in the kind of pout my mother
would have had no patience for. From the expression on Boudicca's face, she had as little taste for
emotional theatrics as Victoria Anasazi had had.

"Let me check to see how negotiations are proceeding, and if I have time now I'll stay here with you
until after dinner." As their faces brightened, I used the subvocal signal to quiz Rommie on the
schedule. Her voice in my ear informed me that Charlemagne had decided to review his information
before continuing the discussion, so everyone involved was free to do as they wished for several
hours.

Undoubtedly, Harper was needed to verify our own information and to make sure the ship's systems
were not being compromised by any devices that might have been brought aboard by our guests,
"Well?" Ygraine asked.

I put down my tea, untouched. "Barring an emergency, I have no duties until after the next meal."

Boudicca held out her hand to me. "I think there's room on the bed in the next room for all of us."

As I went with them through the door, I wondered what other surprises Harper might have in store for me. I felt unexpectedly pleased with his reception by my wives, and with his willingness to play the host, but it did not ease my concern for the future.

And it occurred to me again, as it had earlier, that I still did not know where Harper had been for more than a day before the guests had arrived.

***

One does not lay down the law to a Nietzschian woman. It tells her too much about where one may be vulnerable.

Instead, one makes certain that she has everything she could desire for her comfort, pleasure, entertainment and intelligence. And then one watches, very closely, without appearing to do so.

***

My efforts as a husband were beginning to pay off. I spent a pleasant, though somewhat tiring, afternoon with my family, conferring on names and ritual matters for the claiming, and then, after play and pleasure, enjoying the sensation of watching them as they slept. Morgan dropped off first, followed by Ygraine. When I glanced back at Boudicca, I found her observing me with a quizzical expression.

"Shieldbrother."

"Yes."

"Why?"

I described for her the battle aboard the Andromeda, and the horrible odyssey we had endured aboard the Magog worldship. I told her how, although he was smaller and not as strong, Harper fought off the Magog when I fell until I could rise again. I told her something of the courage with which he withstood the thought of a Magog future.

Boudicca's eyes half closed as she listened. When I finished, her expression was thoughtful. "I had assumed as much, from when we were together before, but I had envisioned someone different."

"Oh?" I wondered, momentarily, whether she knew of my liaison with her brother and his nephew.

"No, not someone like my brother." Her eyes slanted toward me, and away. "Did you think my experience of men was so limited?" She shook her head on the pillow. "He's more of a strategist than I anticipated, far more like one of us. That's interesting." She put her hand over mine. "I accept him as your shieldbrother, husband, though I cannot speak for anyone else."

"And with your acceptance and six thrones, I can buy a tall mug of ale on Denali Station," I said, half mockingly.

"This is true." She was not offended. "However, he would do well to tread carefully among my
brother's guardsmen. They are less than respectful of those without personal weaponry." She stretched her arms over her head, flexing her forearm spines thoughtfully.

"I'm not terribly impressed by their perceptiveness, either." I pillowed my head on her shoulder, my hand on her belly feeling the little pushes and twinges from within that delighted me beyond words. "The last I saw of them, they had failed to acquitted themselves well when discussing Than battle strategy with the ship's first officer."

"Well, that's what you get when the previous clan matriarch favored inbreeding rather than seeking new genetic sources." She caressed my face and neck. "Tall, pretty boys who fill out a uniform but can't remember their history lessons. I hope their ignorance will not require the rest of us to repeat it."

"How is our sister-in-law, Elssbett?" I inquired casually. "Charlemagne said something of his son being unwell?"

Boudicca scowled. "My brother could have done much better for himself."

"Oh? I had thought he was ... satisfied with their union."

"She leaves their son's care to our cousins, and spends her time making trouble. Your Dylan's wives probably know that child better than she does." She moved uncomfortably, and I helped her onto her side, facing me. "I'm not disparaging her intelligence; she can be a brilliant tactician, as long as people aren't involved. But she's short-sighted and not subtle."

From one of us, that was a devastating condemnation. "Making trouble" was a byword among Nietzschians for scheming that was too obviously clever, tripping itself up and negating any success it might have. We never expected our women to forego their intelligence while raising children; the example of an intelligent mother could be the most important training a child could receive. However, lack of subtlety would make Elssbett ineffective and cheapen her among us faster than simply playing with the guardsmen or even seducing Charlemagne's opponents. Charlemagne was nobody's fool; theirs had not been a love match, and he undoubtedly expected his treaty wife to intrigue against him. If she was fool enough not to realize it, she did not deserve her position.

"He needs the treaty with the Sabras," I said softly.

"If she survives that long," she said.

"Where is she now?"

"She's supposed to be on the home ship, but she left yesterday, saying she was going to inspect the part of our fleet in the Solaris Cluster." Boudicca closed her eyes. "It's anyone's guess, though I wouldn't put it past my brother to have put a tracer on her ship. Not on her, though. They haven't shared quarters in months, let alone a bed."

***

I stopped in my quarters on the way back to negotiations. Harper had not returned. The few personal items he had left were missing, but his clothes remained in my closet. I thought of our hurried exit from Denali and felt a chill run through me.

At first I thought to locate him through the ship's information, but realized as soon as I considered it that doing so would only notify Rommie of my concern -- and Rommie was Dylan's, first and always. Instead, I used a chip program I'd found that could track individuals through their mean blood temperature and the individual electrical signals their bodies emitted; it employed the ship's information but since the program was not stored within Andromeda there was less chance that the
ship would know what I sought.

Odd. He was still on the ship, but his signal flickered -- here, then gone, then there. It made me wonder if he'd recovered the device that Satrina Leander had used to walk between dimensions. For the sake of curiosity, I adjusted my scan to survey all the cargo holds and workshops; although it did not always indicate what was present, it would indicate the location of objects and people in those areas.

Workshop Five was completely empty, a room consisting of four walls, a ceiling and a floor.

No.

Three walls, a ceiling, a floor, and an airlock that led directly to the outside. How had I missed that on my security surveillance? Of course. That wall of the ship lay across from where the Jaguar ship rested, and hidden from normal view. Andromeda, of course, knew it was there; it could hardly be otherwise.

I went back again to the cargo bay where I had left my progenitor sleeping eternally. It, too, was empty, though still locked and secured with the devices I had added to all our private storage while we were on our whirlwind campaign tour of planetary systems, to deter the curious and unauthorized.

Drago Museveni's body in its casket was gone. The drapery that had covered it after Harper had secured it from the Magog was gone as well.

And now Harper's signal was gone from the ship.

"Andromeda. Where is Seamus Harper?"

"He is not aboard."

I had to believe that Andromeda would have said if he were ill or in danger.

Beka's voice cut in. "Tyr, we're starting again."

"Where is Harper?"

"I haven't seen him." She sounded sincere. "Dylan might know. Do you want me to ask him?"

If Dylan knew, he might not tell me. If he did tell me, he might well lie; I knew he did not always trust me. Wise man. Any lie or evasion, told within hearing of the Jaguars, would cause problems for negotiations. And if Dylan didn't know what was happening, he would be at a disadvantage that Charlemagne would certainly exploit.

"No, it's not important. I'll be right there."

***

I returned to the negotiations and stood, watching the discussion between Dylan and Charlemagne from the side with Beka, just as Charlemagne's guardsmen observed from the opposite side. At one point, when Charlemagne leaned forward to point out the advantages of a proposed plan of attack, I saw the angle of his cheekbone against the table's polished finish, and felt again the rush that had come when I spent myself inside him the first time. As I recalled the rest of that encounter, and Dylan's later thoughts on witnesses, I realized that the people in the room then were probably the ones who would have attended if we had been required, for the sake of diplomacy, to conduct the
mating in public.

I snorted, as quietly as possible to avoid it being taken as a comment on the matter under discussion, and schooled my face to stillness.

Beka, behind me, murmured, "What's so funny?"

"Later," I subvocalized.

Every crew of pirates or smugglers knew the silent hand codes, the private signals that allowed communication in public when surveillance monitors made speaking unwise. She let one arm fall to the side; I assumed what Dylan would have recognized as parade rest, with my hands resting behind my back. Beka signed: Find Harper?

I returned: Not aboard.

Her eyes cut across at me. I nodded, infinitesimally. She looked worried.

Dylan and Charlemagne continued the discussion a little longer, but it was largely completed. They had compromised on the attack strategy, after reviewing the latest information each group had acquired, and appeared to be getting along well. I noticed that Dylan's face bore few of the stress lines it acquired when he felt uncomfortable with an outcome; either he knew what Harper was up to, and approved of the matter, or else he was completely unaware of it.

Neither possibility eased my thoughts.

Beka signed: Talk Trance.

I returned: Not yet.

Trance might well know nothing of this, simply from being so busy with the various needs of the guests aboard the ship. Nietzschean women, though resilient to stress, were not immune to problem pregnancies. I did not expect that either Boudicca or Morgan would require Trance's aid until the actual birth -- and with Messallina aboard, Trance would probably be relegated to assisting, which I doubted she'd mind, since at least two of Dylan's wives appeared to have medical training as well. Of Dylan's seven wives, though, four appeared to be near their time. I had observed the two who were medically trained assisting the others. I did not know those women well I had met them all briefly while aboard the Jaguar ship -- but I did not think any of them would be likely to kill one another's children, or one another, during birth, as might have occurred had they been from different prides instead of being cousins who had grown up together. I might have been concerned for Trance if Messallina had not approved of her so publicly, which meant that no woman of the pride could go against her without unpleasant repercussions.

Beka was right; Trance should be the next one to speak with, and quickly, especially since Harper had said he wanted to be able to take her with him if he needed to escape.

Why would he need or want to leave? I could think of several reasons, none of them likely or pleasant, at the moment. What mattered was whether the choice had been his.

Andromeda had not seemed concerned that Harper was not aboard. This, in itself, told me that the ship knew and approved of his actions. If he had been aboard the Maru, she would have said so, since the Maru, while docked within Andromeda, was still a separate entity.

Beka signed: I talk Trance.
I nodded as I changed my stance, resting my hand on the hilt of my knife and ending the conversation.

As we left the conference room, I asked Charlemagne politely, "And how is your son doing?"

"Chiang is fine, thank you. Would you like to meet him?"

I raised an eyebrow. "I thought he was with his mother."

His glance told me he was well aware of several reasons he'd might wish to keep Elssbett away from Captain Dylan Hunt. "My wife was called away unexpectedly, and the boy was left with an aunt. I've asked her to bring him here so that I can introduce him properly."

I nodded. "A wise gesture. I hope your guardsmen are up to the challenge of a toddler."

"Believe it or not, Paris and Mikael dote on the boy. Excellent, all things considered. Good guardsmen are so difficult to train." He smiled. "I trust you've had time to enjoy the company of your family? I'm delighted to have been able to bring you together."

"I appreciate your consideration," I told him. "I have been thinking of gifts for them, and, since I've not known them as long as their brother has, I'd be willing to hear any suggestions you might make."

Charlemagne's eyes softened a little. "Boudicca enjoys philosophy; you might wish to check with the matriarch on what she's currently reading. I believe they were discussing the governmental theories of the first Chin emperor, Huang Ti, over dinner last week. As for the twins, Ygraine is a skilled designer."

"Designer of?"

"Anything she wants. Clothing, weapons, toys for the kids. She came up with a brilliant modification to the hull design on a cutter. Increased the in-system speed threefold."

"And Morgan?"

Charlemagne frowned slightly. "Morgan dabbles. A bit here, a bit there. She hasn't settled on any interests yet. Shows promise as a researcher, though she hasn't had the staying power yet beyond small projects. She's interested in mathematics, and navigation. Decent in a fight, too. They all trained with my teacher, Leonardo, and with Maeve of Thrace, but Morgan advanced the quickest."

A philosopher-scholar, a designer and a mathematician-warrior. Somehow I'd managed to marry women with exactly the skills needed to create and nurture a new pride, and Charlemagne had arranged the whole thing. I could tell that he knew the direction of my thoughts, for he clapped me on the shoulder.

"Come, brother, and meet my son," he said.

Beka passed us in the broad passageway, nodding to Charlemagne and shooting me a warning glance; either she had been unable to reach Trance or her worries paralleled my own. I could not escape my family obligations. When Dylan said something to Charlemagne, I returned Beka's glance with a small nod toward the med deck. She narrowed her eyes and made her way in that direction, carefully, through the guardsmen. Zoroaster attempted, surreptitiously, to run his hand over her backside as she passed; she tripped, not obviously, and her elbow struck him where it would concentrate his attention for a while. With a minimal, civil apology she continued on her way while the other guardsmen snickered.
"Boys will be boys," Charlemagne commented. I snorted.

As I had half expected, Charlemagne used the gathering as an opportunity for his son's Naming and Claiming ceremony. He raised the child in his hands above the crowd and turned so all could see him. The boy had creamy skin and pale hair the image of Charlemagne's, though his face resembled his mother.

"Behold Chiang, out of Elssbett by Charlemagne. I claim this child as my own, for Pride Sabra-Jaguar."

So far, the ceremony seemed ordinary, though it was being conducted in the presence of outsiders. Why did I sense that something else was in the wind?

Charlemagne lowered the boy and lifted him again. "This is my son, the child of the Sabra-Jaguar treaty." His eyes met mine across the crowd. "He is mine and mine alone."

My jaw dropped, and I drew a quick, deep breath. By raising Chiang a second time, he had not only validated and agreed to continue the Sabra-Jaguar treaty, but had managed to remove the boy from Elssbett's custody, in effect all but divorcing her -- and with us as witnesses.

I saw my wives across the room. Boudicca nodded as if she approved the measure. Ygraine looked unmoved by it but smiled at the boy when he looked her way. Morgan seemed confused, briefly, but covered her expression with attentiveness. Next to them, Messallina gazed on her nephew with the approval of an empress acknowledging the royal succession.

And -- I blinked and looked again. Harper stood, just behind Boudicca's shoulder, watching the scene between us politely.

He hadn't been there a moment earlier. The closest door on that side of the room was five meters away, and I should have seen him moving between people to get from there or anywhere else to where he now stood.

Charlemagne said a few more things, and then Dylan said a few things, and it was over and we all moved toward the banquet that Rommie had arranged on the observation deck.

I cut through the group toward Harper, careful not to seem overly eager. To his credit he went aside with me willingly enough and made it appear to be normal ship's business. I glanced back but Dylan was doing the official work well enough; he could spare me for a moment. I pushed Harper into a room and closed the door behind us.

"Where have you been?"

"What do you mean, Tyr? I'm right here." He was bouncing as if nothing were different than usual.

I advanced on him, and he moved backward, step by step. "You were nowhere to be found for nearly a day. Then you were here. Then you were everywhere and nowhere. My cargo is gone. Your workshop is empty."

"My job."

That was unanswerable. "Which job?"

"Oh, I don't know, Tyr. Dylan's had me all over hell's half-acre today, putting out fires. The ship's internal sensors went wonky in one place and then another. And when I had a chance to take a break
I decided to be hospitable and check on your family."

This all sounded plausible, but it wasn't truth. I knew him better than that. "What did you think of them?"

"Besides the fact that they're all babes, you mean?" He was cocky as ever, as if I would be unable to find six ways to stop his next words if I wished. "I like them. They're smart. They're not boring."

Strong-arm tactics clearly weren't working. I decided on another approach. "They were impressed with you, too. May I ask what you discussed, or is it private?"

He grinned at me. "When I got there, I kibitzed on a go game that Morgan and Ygraine were playing, and talked about philosophy with Boudicca. Man, is she good. And I thought I was the only one who could deal with the negative elenchos in the writings of Phaedo." He grinned at me. "Morgan won, and Boudicca played against her, and Ygraine and I got refreshments for them and talked about inventions. Did you know Ygraine designs all their clothes? Beka's got to be wildly envious."

"It sounds amazingly domestic," I said, surprised and a little envious in spite of myself.

"You know, you could give me some credit for looking after your interests as well as mine." He poked a finger into my breastbone. "I mean, this shieldbrother stuff goes both ways, doesn't it?"

"Yes, it does. And Boudicca liked you."

"So get off my case. And, in case you haven't noticed, we've got an official dinner to attend and we're probably holding up the meal."

I was not to be deterred. "And where is my cargo?"

"It's safe. Would I lie to you?"

"Of course you would."

"Here." He put my hand on his throat, so that I could feel the pulse of blood in his jugular vein. "You tell me. Am I lying? Your cargo is safe."

His pulse stayed steady. I dropped my hand.

"Let's get to dinner," he said, and ducked under my arm. I followed him, not entirely pleased with the past few minutes.

When we appeared, the aperitifs had ended and people were taking their seats. I moved to a place between Boudicca and Zoroaster, as Harper went to sit next to Ygraine and across from several of Dylan's younger wives. Dylan, next to Messallina at the head of the table, raised a glass in a toast to the alliance, and we sat down to eat.

***

"That was interesting," I said to Beka quietly, after dinner.

"Oh, hadn't you heard? Of course not, you were with your wives." She checked to see that we were alone but continued in an undertone, "Elssbett left Charlemagne for Finbar, the younger brother of Cuchulain the Dragan. She's on his flagship, willingly."

"Ambitious of him. I suppose she called home to let Charlemagne know not to wait up? The woman
does have style, if no sense." This would push the time of battle closer to us than I had anticipated. Elssbett was not one to wait for events to occur; if they did not happen on her schedule she would force them.

"And someone else interesting was standing behind Cuchulain. Three guesses."

"The new Kazov leader, I suppose. They seem to go through one a week." So, now they were all allied with the Magog, against us. "Charlemagne seems to be taking it well."

"Does he have a choice?" Beka shook her head, musing. Her hair, ungathered but elegant, fell pale gold against her dark jacket. "Trance is being strange."

"When is she not?"

"I asked her about Harper and she wouldn't say a word. Very tight-lipped." Her fingers tapped against her leg. "I don't like it."

"Nor do I. I found him with my wives, but he disappeared again afterward until the ceremony."

"Did they all get along?" She looked apprehensive.

"Well enough, I suppose. They seem to be quite taken with him."

"That must be a relief. Or not. Your people's relationships appear a little more chaotic than mine." She pushed her hair back off her face. "Who am I to talk, considering the snake I've got for a brother."

"Now, now. I've known some very competent serpents." I looked her over and she scowled at me. "If you're not armed, make sure you are. Dylan's playing a game with Harper."

"And who else?"

"Who knows? Did you know about Workshop Five?"

A cloud passed over her face.

"Not until today, damn him. How many nova bombs did he have Harper build?"

"I don't know," I replied, with absolute honesty. "The workshop's empty, and someone's created an airlock in the outer wall. Do you think Harper's been toying with the interdimensional matrix that bitch used on us the first time Charlemagne was here?"

"I wouldn't put it past him. Or the estimable Dylan." She scowled fiercely. "Thanks. Fellow thieves sticking together?"

"Would Napoleon Rastafarian make a move without consulting his fair lady?" I lifted her hand to my lips in a mocking kiss, and she pulled it away, smiling, just in time for Dylan to see us. Beka, aware of Dylan, sweetened her smile and walked away past him.

"It's good to see my crew getting along so well," Dylan said mildly, a small smile playing in the corners of his mouth. "Have you met my wives yet? They've been asking for an introduction to their new cousin."

"It should wait until I've checked the security again," I said.

"Oh, come now, Tyr, if you have time to compliment Beka on her taste in clothing you certainly
have time to meet a few more relatives."

I moved my weight onto my back leg and rested my hands on my belt.

"You are aware, of course, that we're probably going into battle tomorrow? All the better that you should meet them before this." He started to put a hand on my arm, but I blocked the move.

"What is wrong with you?" I could not help my intensity. "The entire Dragan army has gone over to the enemy, along with Charlemagne's ex-wife and probably half his strategy, and you want me to ignore the ship's security? Have the Dragans seduced you as well?" I pulled away from him. "I will be delighted to meet your many wives after I have checked security and not before."

"Have it your way, Tyr. We are sending the women away for safety during the battle."

This turned me in my tracks. "We? What 'we'? You do not have the right to make that choice for me."

"Actually, as commander of this ship, I do have that right, and I'm exercising it." He appeared obnoxiously calm, as if he had made the decision hours earlier and nobody would be able to change his mind.

"And what does Charlemagne say to this? Andromeda is safer than his flagship, more mobile than a planet." I moved in closer to emphasize my point. "Where would they be safer?"

"Nevertheless." Dylan stood his ground, crossing his arms and gazing at me with an obstinate expression I'd seen on him all too often in the past.

"Dylan. Tyr." It was Trance's voice. "Please come to the med deck. Your wives are in labor."

"So much for moving them elsewhere," I told him. "Or haven't your wives told you our birthing customs?"

His face paled, and he blinked twice.

"Dylan," Trance called again, "Sofia is asking for you."

He went, at a run. I followed, pausing only long enough to tell Andromeda to patch all security concerns through to me no matter where I was, and to run a quick scan on the status of the ship. Nothing had changed.

I still had the sense of eyes on my back, the feeling that something was about to go terribly wrong, but since I could do nothing to counteract it I let it go. Better to allow it to make me more observant than to let the nervous feelings engendered push me into either paralysis or paranoia.

"Trance, is it Boudicca or Morgan?" I asked, on my way toward med deck.

"Morgan."

***

When I arrived, Ygraine was walking Morgan around the birthing room, while Boudicca looked on from where she sat on the side. Trance had been checking her, and turned to me. "We're doing fine, nothing to worry about here. Morgan's in the early stages, Tyr. Boudicca's not started yet."

I went to Morgan and took Ygraine's place, walking with her. "What's this stupidity I hear about us having to leave?" she complained.
"It's a mistake. You're not going anywhere." Over her head I mouthed "Matriarch?" at Boudicca, who tilted her head in the direction of the next room.

I need not be concerned. Messallina would preside, as she must had done for decades.

"Of course we're not going anywhere," Boudicca assured her. "This is the safest place for us in the known worlds. Nobody is getting us off this ship."

I heard quick footsteps outside the door, and saw Dylan dash past, as if checking all the rooms. He ducked back in to where we were. "Tyr, I--"

"I don't want him in here," Morgan winced. I could feel the contraction moving through her simply from the tension in her body.

Ygraine planted herself in front of Dylan. "You heard her. Please leave. Now." She brushed back her sleeve to flex her arm spines.

"I need to speak with Tyr."

"Not here. This is for family only. Go help your wives, or did they also tell you to leave?" Boudicca asked. She knew that to be an insult, though I wondered whether Dylan had the wit to appreciate it.

He was enough of a diplomat not to respond, but his expression was harried. "Tyr. Please."

"I'll return," I promised Morgan, who nodded, and turned her over to Ygraine again. As we left, Boudicca rose and shut the door behind us.

"Someone had better give you the short course in our birthing customs, or you'll never survive to see your children," I told him sourly. "What is it?"

"I need you on the bridge now. The Magog swarmships have entered Ultima Thule System."

I felt my shoulders droop. It had been a long day, and now it would not end. "Send in Rommie to assist, and tell her to do whatever Messallina and the other medics and Trance tell her, and not to argue."

He looked so relieved that I almost felt sorry for him. Almost, but not quite. I turned back to the room, and said, "I'll be there as soon as I've spoken to them. I suggest you do the same." This time he didn't object, but headed toward the rooms where his own wives waited.

Three pale faces turned toward me as I came in. "Magog swarmships have been sighted." As one they nodded, and came forward to touch me briefly for luck. Boudicca whispered in my ear, "Be triumphant." I kissed each of them, whispered the words of acceptance over Morgan and Boudicca so they would know I would accept the outcome of the battle they faced without argument or complaint, and left without looking back.

***

Charlemagne met me halfway to the bridge. "I'm taking my flagship. You make sure I have a family to come back to."

Of course, he had anticipated something like this from the moment he learned Elssbett had gone to Finbar. "As I have."

"You have more, Kodiak. Don't lose sight of one for the other." He kissed me, hard and fast, the
salute of warriors, and was gone in one direction as I moved in the other.

Beka had been at my station; she turned it over to me with a small, relieved smile and went to the pilot seat. "Trance?"

I shook my head. "Med deck."

Her eyebrows rose. "How many?"

"Two of my wives, I don't know how many of Dylan's." I glared toward Dylan's back. "They're staying here until afterward."

"Of course they are," she agreed, apparently horrified at the thought that anyone would want to move women in labor away from the most completely outfitted medical unit in the known worlds.

Dylan blew out a puff of breath, exasperated. "Am I the only one who realizes what we're up against? We're going into battle against the Magog. They should be somewhere safer than here."

"And I am telling you, there isn't anywhere safer," I replied, in more of a roar than he probably expected. He swung around, fists clenched, as if he would take me on, and I threw back my head in response to his unspoken challenge. Only Beka, at the controls, sat between us.

"If you both don't cool down, I'm going to have to vent the bridge to get rid of the testosterone -- and that will leave a scent trail as wide as a galaxy." She turned toward Dylan. "I'm willing to make allowances for a lot of things here -- you've got several wives in labor, for one thing, and that's definitely not something I think any of us expected a year ago. But Dylan, do give the rest of us some credit for sense. We've been fighting the Magog our whole lifetimes. When did you start?"

"More than three centuries back," he snapped. "I don't need you to tell me how to do my job. Set course for Ultima Thule."

"You never met a Magog face-to-face until Rev Bem came aboard this ship." Beka took the controls without fear. "I daresay you're the only person aboard who could say that. You may have fought Magog, but you did it from a distance -- and that is far from the same thing." She glanced past him. "Where's Harper?"

"Working." Dylan pressed his lips together as if to prevent further words from escaping, and flexed his fingers consciously. He turned back to his post.

I touched the controls to review our armament. One hundred nova bombs, in addition to the ship's usual weaponry, more than twice the number that the Andromeda had carried when she came forward three centuries. And something else, something I couldn't quite see that seemed to sit in the shadow of a rear vane. Ridiculous. In space, with sensors in every direction, there should not be shadows.

At that moment we entered slipstream, and I held on to the fire control station until we were out again. When I turned back, the shadow was gone, but a speck on the reading showed I had not been wrong.

Charlemagne's voice, from his flagship, crackled in. "Looks like you picked up a passenger, cousin. Shall I dispose of it for you?"

"Hey, wait a minute!" It was Harper's voice. "This is Seamus Zelazny Harper, captain of the war sloop Kali Ma. You bump me too hard, even accidentally, and nothing's going to be left of you but a greasy spot."
"Cocky, aren't you?" Charlemagne seemed genuinely amused. "By all means. Let it not be said that I kept any man from seeking his destiny." He cut transmission, but apparently signaled the Jaguar ships, arriving behind him, not to interfere with the small sloop.

"Captain?" Beka asked. She appeared as surprised as I was by this development. "Harper, what the hell are you doing out there?"

"My job, boss. Isn't that what you told me to do?" Harper's face came onscreen. He looked as chipper and bright as ever. I didn't trust that for a moment.

"A captain usually has a crew," I murmured.

"But I do, I do." He enlarged the view to show Paris Ramses, seated next to him. Behind him, along the side, lay a scratched oblong casket that I knew very well. "In the grand tradition of the Andromeda Ascendant, we have a crew of people from all over the place." Standing behind Paris was Trance Gemini.

"I'm sorry, Dylan, but Harper needs me for this," Trance said. "Rommie took my place in the med deck and explained all of our medical facilities to our guests. They're doing fine. She should be back on the bridge very soon." She smiled. "Dylan, you and Portia have a daughter. She was born just as I was leaving, and she's fine. No news for you yet, Tyr."

I nodded an acknowledgment; I could not trust myself to speak. The pieces were falling together too quickly. Did Paris have an inkling of the treasure that sat behind him? Obviously not, or he would have slain Harper and Trance to claim it for himself. What could Harper have told him it was? A secret weapon? Something that he'd been trusted to guard? My voice returned as my anger surged.

"How much did you know of this, Captain Hunt?" I demanded.

Dylan's eyes were narrowed. "Apparently not quite as much as I thought I did."

"Magog swarmships ahead," Andromeda's voice said.

In the black expanse of Thule, the sky glittered with what looked like countless thorned caltrops -- Magog swarmships, each carrying twenty or so Magog, surrounding the approaching worldship like insects buzzing on a carcass.

"Dylan, tell them to keep 'em off me while I get into position, or things will be a lot messier than we want," Harper said. "And you might tell them who else is on board with me."

He didn't have the nova bombs aboard; they were all accounted for on Andromeda. He hadn't stolen the body of Drago Museveni from me only to keep it from possible theft by the Jaguars, but as a hostage. No Nietzschian would chance any harm coming to the Progenitor's remains. I didn't know whether to kiss him or wring his neck.

Dylan slanted his eyes at me and said, "Yes, I will. Beka, send the message that's sitting on the board to Charlemagne."

Charlemagne came onscreen. "Well, well, cousin -- and brother." His glance floated from Dylan to me as he smiled with apparent approval. "It seems we'll have something to talk about even after this is over with. I'm looking forward to it." He signed off.

Dylan relayed the message. "Yes, Tyr, in case you hadn't guessed, Harper's the secret weapon."

"So what else is new," Beka muttered.
I held my peace, for the moment, contenting myself with a glare at Dylan. The only thing that was saving him, momentarily, from the full force of my wrath for endangering both my shieldbrother and my pride's greatest treasure was the realization that Dylan had not known of Harper's plan to steal the body. It was clear, from Dylan's attitude, that he'd encouraged Harper to work on the macro-implosion device and construct the Kali Ma, which looked like a collection of spare parts from the Andromeda and the Maru cobbled together into an amazingly odd-shaped creation. It was fortunate that the thing had never needed to be airborne within an atmosphere; it looked far too much like its classical namesake, a multi-armed goddess carrying death in her hands.

Destruction and creation.

"All ships, protect the Kali Ma but give Harper space to work," Dylan ordered. "And when I tell you, fall back and let the Magog in."

"What's he doing out there?" Beka scowled at the monitor, puzzled. "Knitting?"

It certainly looked that way. The Kali Ma dropped several small devices that bloomed blacker than the sky, and flew between them in a tight, careful pattern to interlace them with energy. More dark blossoms clustered around his ship.

"He's seeding black holes," I breathed.

At the front of the line, ahead of us, the Sabra-Jaguar fleet were starting to fight other Nietzschian ships. I saw the insignia of Cuchulain's flagship flicker briefly in the light of the nearest star, until the first of the Magog swarmships reached it and clung to the Nietzschian ship like deadly insects.

"Light them up, Tyr," Dylan said, "but reserve the novas."

I set to work, sending unmanned fighters to explode anything Magog and whatever fought beside it. It was not the time to think of Elssbett's treachery, or of Harper's betrayal of my trust, or of Dylan's connivance, only to fight.

For once in my life, I had family to protect.

As in any battle, things happen too quickly to recount. All that can be told are images, brief glimpses of the chaos. Space around us was alight with the bonfires of dying ships and shattered metal carcasses. Charlemagne gave the order to destroy any escape pod that came from a ship that Magog had touched; I could hear the strain in his voice. The small ships hurtled in front of us, as we fired through them to clear their path, and still the Kali Ma wove her net of black holes, each one only large enough, for now, to swallow the Maru.

And the Maru was more than twice the size of the Kali Ma.

"Give me more space," Harper demanded, and the allied fleet obeyed, pulling back and creating room around him in every direction. He was working faster now, the strands of pure energy between the holes evident on the screen, and he pulled those strands to stretch his creation out wider before us.

Charlemagne's fleet had made mincemeat of the remaining Kazov, who were pulling back. The Dragans, little better for their numbers, were under Magog attack as well, in clusters.

"Dylan. Novas."

"Yes. Be sparing. Aim them away from Harper."
"What kind of fool do you think I am?" I demanded. I released the nova bombs singly, aiming them so that their explosions would move the debris away at an angle both from Harper and from the energy-greedy worldship. New stars bloomed where they hit.

And still the worldship came on, though its swarm of vicious insects was depleted.

And still Harper wove his living net with Kali Ma, spinning the strands of energy-starved black holes and their links wider and wider, in the worldship's very path. The smaller black holes moved, slid together, grew larger, exerting a visible pull on the debris around them. One by one, the broken Drago-Kazov ships began to fall into a darkness that was starting to affect the Andromeda as well.

"Back us off!" Dylan ordered, and Beka pulled us away as we watched Harper finish his creation and cast its net at the leading edge of the worldship before he sped away toward us. "Fall back, everyone! Charlemagne, do you hear me? Fall back!"

"I didn't become grand duke on my looks alone," Charlemagne commented acidly as his ship glided out of the range of the gravity well.

Heedless of anything but its own lust to consume anything in its path, the worldship came forward, immense and deadly. As much as the Andromeda was larger than the unmanned drones, it surpassed us in size. It seemed as if Harper's net were only a whimsy of lace in its path that would be torn apart by its juggernaut progress.

The tip of the worldship, the size of a small moon, encountered the first edge of the net. It pushed on the energy fields between the holes, and the holes wrapped around the moon and ate it. The rest of the net, snagged, wrapped close around the worldship, and the holes blended into each other.

"Holy ..." Beka murmured.

The Magog worldship shuddered. It was crumpling, breaking open, live unsuited Magog spilling into space to die within an instant. There was no net of black holes now, but a canopy of darkness thrown over the worldship, eating it as its occupants had eaten anything in their paths, tearing it apart. As we watched, the fiery god of the Magog gestured angrily, reached toward the edge of the nearest hole and was shredded into hot red fragments that shriveled and vanished into the growing maw of blackness. Now there was only one black hole, and it was eating everything in sight.

As one, the allied fleet backed away. The remaining Dragans and Kazovs and the few unallied Sabras that had defected with Elssbett were either captive to the net of Kali or gone, slipstreamed elsewhere to lick their wounds and hope to remain unnoticed for a while.

"Fine sport you're giving me, cousin." Charlemagne said encouragingly. "I've always liked shooting galleries." His flagship sped off, and soon the Sabra-Jaguar ships were firing shots to tip the remaining small Magog ships into the vortex.

"Harper." Dylan's voice was hoarse, and I realized that he'd been calling Harper's name for a while. I had not heard it, so intent had I been on the battle. "Damn it, Harper. Come in."

"I'm here." And Seamus Zelazny Harper walked onto the bridge behind me, accompanied by Trance and Paris. "I'd suggest getting the hell out of the way as soon as we all can, because when that thing goes, it's gonna really go."

"What are you talking about?" I demanded, shaken. "It's a black hole. It's not going anywhere."

"It's a temporary black hole. Crushes everything it eats to smithereens, then burps it back up again. We really don't want to be in the neighborhood when that happens." Harper moved to stand behind
Beka's pilot chair, and rested one hand on her shoulder. "I'd suggest dropping whatever novas you've got left into that hole and slipstreaming the fuck out of here while we still can."

"How do we know the energy being that created the Magog isn't still in there, able to use the novas to start over again?"

"That guy had an energy signature I could track from the time I saw him on the All Systems Library records. Believe me, he's not there any more." Harper's voice carried truth that I could hear. I touched the controls and watched fifty-one nova bombs drop into the black hole as if they did not matter.

"We're outta here," Beka said. She snapped Harper's words across to the rest of the fleet, before Dylan could even respond, and we hit slipstream and skidded three jumps away from Thule. "This good enough?"

"It's as close as I want to be right now, I can tell you that." Harper patted her shoulder. "Nice flying, boss."

I felt a small hand on mine, and turned away from the screen. Trance stood next to me, her hand warm as it slid from my hand to my gauntlet. "Everything will be all right."

"Everything?"

"Yes, as long as you don't over-react." Her violet eyes sparkled, and I realized I was seeing in them the image of Ultima Thule, swirling light and dark. "I promise you, there is a perfect unique solution to this."

"Good to know," I said, my voice husky.

"Remote viewing onscreen," Dylan said.

We watched as something I would have considered impossible occurred before us. The black hole, which had swollen to exert a pull even on planets in the next system, fell in on itself, rippled, shuddered -- and exploded with a shock wave whose energies were nearly palpable even from where we were. The explosion crescendoed, repeated, enlarged, as if release from the dark pit had sparked fireworks the size of solar systems.

"The nova bombs," Harper murmured. "Hey, I like light shows. Besides, this should take care of anything else out there, don't you think?"

"It certainly seems thorough," Dylan agreed, watching the display.

"It's creating something new," Trance whispered next to me.

And Rommie's voice said, "Dylan, Tyr, your wives would like you to meet your children, at your convenience, now that the battle is over."

For the first time that day a smile truly split Dylan's face. "Thanks, Rommie. Send what we're seeing throughout the ship, so that everyone will see what's happened."

"Already done, Dylan. I thought this was an event everyone needed to know about. Rommie out."

***

Great decisions are made in the time between one breath and the next.
Small matters may take years to decide.

***

I found Morgan holding a squeaking bundle that, when uncovered, had her flaming hair coiled in curls as tight as the ones my mother told me I'd been born with. Boudicca, next to her in the great bed, cradled a slightly larger child, with my features but her paler skin and celadon eyes.

"You were right." I kissed both of them and gently touched the feather-soft newborn skin with my fingertips. "They're beauties."

"And you triumphed." Ygraine tackled me from behind, and I pulled her around to include her in my embrace.

"We can have the Naming when you like ... or not." All at once the end of the hours-long battle caught up with me, and I felt my muscles start to loosen. I collapsed onto a chair near the bed as they looked at one another and then back at me.

"What are you talking about?" Morgan demanded, with more energy than I would have expected for a woman just out of several hours of hard labor. "Don't you want us?"

I sighed and rubbed my face. "I've had a little time to think. Believe me, I am only saying this because I want to be fair to you. I know what your life was, and what it is, as Charlemagne's sisters --"

"Way better than being Elssbett's sisters-in-law, believe me," Ygraine muttered.

"-- and I must remind you that I am not Charlemagne. I have no established pride to welcome you. I have no home, except aboard this ship." I stopped myself. This was a day of victory, not a day on which I wished to recount all that I had lost or think of all that I could never regain.

Boudicca put her hand over mine. "Hold your children, and listen to what we have to say." Without pausing to allow me an answer, she and Morgan handed me the babies, laying them in either arm with care to avoid snagging their wrappings on my spines. "We have discussed this, as we waited, and we have decided to remain with you. I know," she held up a hand as I started to speak, "we are battle brides, not contract or ceremonial; if you wish to be rid of us you need only speak. But we have found you to be a good husband, and a good father, and we wish to help you refound Kodiak Pride."

More than I could have asked. More than I could have dreamed. It would have been well within their rights to take the children, return to Charlemagne's ship and never return.

"Pride Kodiak is --"

"Here, in us," Morgan said. "And in Seamus."

"Harper?" I asked, feeling somewhat stupid. Had she proposed adopting him?

"Your shieldbrother. Surely you haven't forgotten him already?" Ygraine giggled, her dimples showing. "I know, I know, so untraditional. So un-Nietzschian. Isn't our people's history founded on choosing what is best?"

"Yes." I could not have said, at that point, to what I was agreeing. It had been too many hours.

I must have fallen asleep with the children in my arms, because I did not even recall any further
conversation until much later, when Ygraine was adjusting a blanket over me. My arms were empty, and I started, but as I glanced around the room I saw the children being fed, so I relaxed again and let her tuck me in, and went back to sleep.

How long it had been since I had slept securely in the midst of my pride, my family.

***

"Ssh, don't wake him."

I had been drifting toward waking, somewhere beneath the edge of consciousness, when Beka's words brought me up into daylight. She was sitting on the edge of the bed, holding one of the babies, talking with Boudicca in a whisper. Ygraine and Morgan were elsewhere.

"Mmmm?" I said, or something like that, for they glanced toward me and immediately moved closer to me.

"Sorry. Didn't mean to wake you; I just wanted to meet the babies," Beka apologized. "They're adorable."

I would not have expected to see the world-weary Beka cooing over any child, let alone a child of mine, but it was happening. Undoubtedly, I had moved into an alternate universe and would soon be told that I owned the Andromeda Ascendant and had, through some extraordinary means, managed to restore both the Commonwealth and my own personal fortune.

And that dream, plus a few spare thrones, would buy me a cup of kaffe on Denali Station.

I shook my head to clear it, but that did not seem to help.

Beka leaned across to place the child in my arms. This was Boudicca's child, and, I found, a boy; with his newborn strength he gripped my finger tightly, as if trying to pull himself up in order to see me more closely. His eyes, hazy and unfocused, met mine.

"What's his name?" Beka asked.

"We have not had the Naming yet," Boudicca told her, "but I expect it will be soon."

"I hope so. I'd like to throw a party for you and Morgan and the babies -- if that's not out of line."

Beka looked wistful. "I don't know what you'd consider proper."

"A party is always proper, Commander Valentine," said Charlemagne, from the door. "In fact, it's a requirement." He strode in, surveying the scene with a broad smile on his face. "Nothing quite as touching as family, I always say."

"Actually, I don't think I've ever heard you say that before, brother, but I'll take it as read." Boudicca laughed. "Come to pay your respects to the first child of the new Kodiak Pride?"

"Oh, is that the way it is?" Charlemagne tilted his head toward me. "I suppose you've already told him what the rest of his life will be like? And figured out which planet you intend to colonize? Actually, who needs a planet, when you've got the Andromeda?"

Now I knew I must be in an alternative universe. If that were not so, perhaps I had been slain without realizing it at some point during the battle with the Magog, and had wakened in some thoroughly unexpected afterlife belonging to any of a dozen improbable religions.
I had been lying down on the long chair; I pushed myself up to a sitting position and tried to look as if I knew what was going on. Beka smiled and left, murmuring something about going to visit Dylan's family.

"It's not that confusing, brother." Charlemagne sat down next to Boudicca. "Actually, it's quite simple. I'm a student of history. I read and I think and I notice the way things are, and what I've noticed is that we Nietzschians aren't doing as well now, at each other's throats all the time, as we were when your pride guarded the Progenitor's bones. I know, silly concept, but that's what makes the universe turn, isn't it?" He touched a finger to my child's cheek and it grabbed onto that finger as well, holding one of us with each hand. "I want the same things you do -- I want a happy family of children and grandchildren, and the convenient deaths of my enemies, but I think all of that's far more likely to happen if Kodiak Pride is restored to its rightful place as guardians of Drago Museveni."

I blinked. "I'm not sure I'm awake yet. Would you care to repeat that?"

"Probably more times than you want to hear it. The long and the short of it is that I'm willing to work with you to create a neutral zone for the Kodiak, including a reconstructed Ayn Rand University, on New Fountainhead."

"And where would that be?" This sounded too real, too good.

"Anywhere you wish. You name the planet, we'll designate it." Charlemagne chuckled. "I'd be willing to make you a deal for any number of former Dragan planets, but I suspect you'd be happier with one that didn't need cleaning first. So you pick it, we'll secure it, and do the thing right."

"And what's in it for you, brother?" There was no way that I would not ask that question.

"Membership in Dylan's precious Commonwealth doesn't buy me much unless there's a chance that we as a people can come back to the kind of strength we had a few centuries ago. I see this as a way to build our strength -- and maybe it's time to go back to the oldest ways, bringing in some of the best-adapted humans and add their genes to our stock. I mean, look at what's happened to the Drago-Kazov; all brawn and no sense at all. I'm ashamed to think of them as Nietzschian; they're not superior to a hoppy toad, are they, little one?" he said to the baby, who gurgled at him. "Oh, look at you, listening already. A very superior being, aren't you?"

The Jaguar Grand Duke was cooing over my Kodiak child. Perhaps I had ingested some sort of drug without realizing it, during the battle or afterward, that might still be affecting me. Some manner of contact hallucinogen?

"I don't suppose you've mentioned this to your matriarch yet, have you?" I was still unsure if I was actually hearing these oh-so-welcome words from the Jaguar warleader whose army had been the scourge of dozens of systems for more than a decade.

Charlemagne and his sister exchanged glances. "We've discussed the possibility, yes," Boudicca said. "You were the deciding factor. And your shieldbrother."

"My shieldbrother?" This had to be an alternate reality. Nietzschians who had attained the position of pride alpha did not acknowledge the possibility of non-enhanced humans becoming shieldbrothers. Perhaps I was still asleep and dreaming of that odd place called Oz that Harper liked so much, and the next creature through the door would be a green witch or an animated tin man or an annoying child with a yapping puppy.

"He's really not awake yet," Boudicca apologized for me.
"Understandable. Well, I'll leave you to yourselves. You will invite me to the Naming, won't you?"

"How could I have a Naming without my big brother there?" She hugged him, unselfconsciously, and he kissed her cheek, patted me on the shoulder as if everything were already settled for the future, and left, whistling what sounded like an off-key version of the Vedran Empress Sucharitkul Ceremonial March.

"So," I said, watching Boudicca with the baby, who was enjoying a meal eagerly. "Have you considered any names?"

"A few. You should get something to eat."

"In a while. What names did you have in mind?"

"For a while, I was thinking of Ailill for him; it's a good historic name. But that lineage has fallen into disrepute, since Cuchulain came along." She shrugged, and the shawl she wore around her shoulders started to fall; I pulled it up and tucked it around her. "I considered Ivan and Malcolm."

"Malcolm was a good war leader, and a wise ruler. I like that," I told her.

She sent me an unreadable glance, sideways, over our son's head. "I had thought that you might have wanted to name him after your shieldbrother. That's not uncommon, you know."

"I -- I hadn't thought about it. Do you think he'd like it?"

"I don't know. Why don't you find him and ask him?" Boudicca shifted the baby to her other breast. "I know none of this is what you expected. You didn't think we'd like him, did you?"

"I must say, I was unsure of his welcome." I shook my head; it felt as if I were still in Cloud-Cuckoo Land, or some other improbably utopia.

"In the ordinary way of things, you might be right. But I think it takes an extraordinary human to find a way to destroy the Magog permanently, and to safeguard the Progenitor at the same time. Among the Jaguar, we have been proud to carry the genes of David Geronimo." She reached her free hand toward me, a gesture of appeal as much as comfort. "I think I speak for my sisters as well when I say that we would like future generations to have the opportunity to be proud of inheriting the creative intelligence of Seamus as well as the courage and cunning of Tyr. If you have no objection, that is..." Her voice trailed off.

I could not speak for a moment but only gaped at her. "You would want to replace me so quickly," I said, finally, for lack of anything better.

"I think you know better than that." She smiled fondly down at the child, who had released her and had fallen asleep. "I am pleased with you, and not only for him."

It seemed that I was always the one who had to be practical. "Harper's genes have been damaged from too many years unshielded from radiation."

Boudicca shrugged, careful not to disturb the child. "Our scientific abilities in that regard are much more advanced than they were a few years ago. I don't think that need concern us. And it can be a matter of science rather than one of mating, if that worries you or him. Do you think he would object?"

Nietzscheian women run the universe; we men simply exist to make their will reality. I had never known it to be different except among the Orca sub-pride of my former wife, which had followed its
own ways to destruction. "Messallina --"

"She knows as much as she needs to know. And, ultimately, what Kodiak Pride does is not the business of the matriarch of Jaguar Pride except as a matter of courtesy. Don't you agree?" Boudicca smiled slowly, the smile of a happy lioness, and that, if nothing else, persuaded me that I was, indeed, speaking to the new matriarch of Kodiak Pride. I moved over next to where she sat on the bed and kissed her. She tasted warm and sweet, her lips soft, and for a moment I rested in the warmth of her caring for me and for our child.

"I still have duties; I must go and --"

"We will be here," she promised. "Tell your friends not to be shy; I love company. And I'd be interested to find out what I can do around the ship. There's much for me to learn."

I met Morgan and Ygraine in the hall. "Tyr, we have so many plans." Ygraine bubbled over. "I'm already playing with ideas for the clothes Beka would like to market with us. And I've looked at some of Seamus' projects, the ones Rommie showed me, and I have some ideas I'd like to run past him --"

"Oh, don't wear him out yet," Morgan said, with a small, genuine smile for me. "He hasn't heard my ideas." She handed me the baby to hold as she refastened her robe. "Do you think you could invent a robe that won't fall off me at the wrong time?"

"No problem." Ygraine pushed Morgan's hands away and repaired the fastening. "You had it upside down. I'll fix that in the next version."

"And what have you been working on, besides our daughter?" I asked her. The child caught a strand of my hair in her fist and gave it a hearty tug.

"Mathematics. I've been envisioning a new way to calculate space and time. Would you like to hear about it?"

***

I met Dylan in the galley, nursing a cup of kaffe, with such a combination of bemusement and pain on his face that I almost nodded to him rather than wishing him joy of the birth of his children. But after I found myself some food and a mug of kaffe, I sat down across from him at the table. This section of the galley, below the observation deck, gave diners a view of the ship's progress through space; if he wished to brood silently I would, at least, have something else to observe besides the depths of my cup.

At length he stirred and said, "Congratulations, Tyr."

"And to you. You have also achieved fatherhood."

"Not exactly." The lines on his face deepened. "Sofia, Portia and Brigid have decided to return to Jaguar Pride to raise our -- their -- children, so I will lose them after the claiming ceremony. I'm not even sure how that ceremony will go, now." He ran his fingers over the smooth ceramic cup, toying with the handle. "You know, Tyr, I never expected to marry anyone, not after I lost Sara, and this is all still a bit of a shock."

"The wives or the children?"

"Both. I do still have four wives, and one child: Nerissa, Anjali, Karla and Olivia are staying." He sighed. "A warship is no place to raise children, but I don't have another home."
"Nor do I. It seems that a great deal has occurred while I was sleeping," I told him. "Think of it another way. How many crew did this ship carry when you first took command?"

"About four thousand people, including a thousand lancers."

"Then your crew complement is a bit short at the moment." I stirred my kaffe. "Would you be willing to listen to an offer you might find too interesting to refuse?"

"I'll listen. I can't promise anything." He straightened in his chair. "Regardless of anything else, my mission is still to recreate the Commonwealth."

"I'm not about to stop you." I smiled at him; he was in pain, undoubtedly, and I was not about to ignore that, but I hoped he would be willing to consider the better side of the situation. "Let me suggest that you consider a few additions to the crew in residence: a philosopher/strategist, a designer whose work you've seen and admired, and a mathematician and martial arts instructor."

"Excuse me? Are you talking about Paris?"

He could be forgiven for the confusion; it had been as long a day for him as for me. "No, my wives. Boudicca holds six degrees in philosophy; she was Pride Jaguar's professor of strategy and the arts of thought. Ygraine likes to design things, everything from clothes and toys to the ship's hulls and weapons. She has some ideas she'd like to show Harper. And Morgan seems to be on the verge of inventing a new mathematics of space and time, from what I understand of it. She said she's been conferring with Rommie."

Dylan nodded slowly, considering. "We could certainly use the help. But are they planning to join the High Guard or the Commonwealth? I'd rather not turn the Andromeda only into a pleasure craft for our families, regardless of how advantageous that might be."

"Has Charlemagne spoken to you about the Commonwealth?"

Dylan frowned. "Not yet. He is still interested, I trust?"

"Actually, I'm interested in a great many things, cousin," Charlemagne wandered toward the table. "Oh, don't stand on ceremony; I understand we're being family at the moment, so I served myself. Have you told him any of my suggestions yet, Tyr?"

"Dylan was telling me that several of his wives are returning to Jaguar Pride," I replied, to remind Charlemagne that there was more on the table here than he might have expected.

"Are they? They haven't informed me yet. Hmm. I'll have to talk with Messallina about that." Charlemagne pulled up a chair and straddled it. He leaned an arm on the back as he sipped his drink. "No, I was speaking of my proposal to help Tyr found a New Fountainhead and rebuild Kodiak Pride as part of our contribution to the Commonwealth."

Dylan regarded Charlemagne with the concentrated attention one might give to a supposedly mythical creature that suddenly appeared in the midst of everyday life. Perhaps I wasn't the only one who felt as if he'd wandered into an alternate dimension. "Contribution to the Commonwealth?"

"Well, yes. Nietzschians were welcome citizens of the previous Commonwealth, until it made the Treaty of Antares with the Magog. We were quite happy there, for centuries, weren't we?"

Charlemagne took another sip. "Hmm. Marvelous stuff. You must tell me where you found it. Where was I? Oh, the Treaty of Antares. Commonwealth treaty with the Magog, three centuries ago. You've heard of it?"
"I believe I'm familiar with it." Dylan's lips twitched.

"Well, your Commonwealth ship and its crew just destroyed the Magog. I'd say that treaty's pretty dead, and with it gone, I'm willing to talk about bringing the Nietzschean worlds back into a peaceable situation again."

"Excuse me for saying this," Dylan began, "but you're the dux bellorum, the leader of wars, in four hundred systems, and you're telling me you want peace?"

"Don't you believe me? What can I tell you to make it more convincing?" Charlemagne shook his head. If he had ever used pretense when speaking to us, he had discarded it and was only a weary man, slumping, rather than relaxing, in his chair. "Dylan, I'm tired of wars. In my lifetime I've lost half of my family to the Magog and half of those who were left to the Dragans, and I'm sick of spending all my time tearing things apart. I think I'd like to build something that will be around for a while, but I don't know what peace is like; I've never lived in one. You seem to be pretty good at that sort of thing, so I'd like to do it with you. Are you interested?"

"When you put it that way, yes." Dylan smiled slowly, though there was heartache behind it. "You're not the only one who's tired of wars. What did you have in mind?"

"I'd like to maintain a significant -- and varied -- Nietzschean presence aboard the Andromeda to remind the rest of my people that we have a stake in the future of the Commonwealth. For now, that would be Kodiak Pride, the guardians of the Progenitor, and whatever members of Sabra-Jaguar you're willing to accept as crew. Swear them in and all -- we don't give our word often, but when we do, we keep it, despite what you might think."

Dylan looked away, out the window. "That's not what I thought at the Battle of Hephaestus, when my crew turned against me, even my first officer." His eyes met mine and I knew, from the bitterness in his expression, he was seeing not me but Gaheris Rhade, his first officer, who would have killed him had the Andromeda not slipped into the rim of the black hole.

"It's not something any of us would have told you, but it's true." Charlemagne sounded almost contemplative. "I can show you the histories. It took a great deal of discussion and thought to make any of us turn our backs on the Commonwealth, back in the days of Hephaestus."

"I'd like to see them. I've read what I could find, but I'd like to know more." Dylan finally looked back at Charlemagne, who had not stopped watching him. "What else?"

Charlemagne put his mug on the table and crossed his arms on the chair back. "For my part, I'll see what I can do to round up the rest of the renegades and keep them out of trouble; that should give my fighters something to do in a good cause, until they get used to the way things are. And, before you ask, I benefit because my family will be safe, because it will open up trade for us, and because it will give us a chance to recover something of what we've lost in the past three centuries."

"Perhaps we do have something to talk about," Dylan said, "cousin."

If I squinted a little, I could almost see spines on his arms.

"If you don't mind, I believe I have some other negotiations to see to," I said. Charlemagne glanced up, with the smile he'd had when we had arranged a pure sample of antibody for him, and I knew without words that our shikastrin bond had served its purpose. He would not ask why I had apparently allowed the Progenitor to be endangered, or attempt to take the casket from me, and I would not contest his suggestions for the alliance. I clapped him on the shoulder and he grinned, as Dylan watched.
As I stood, I said to Dylan, "You will, of course, be present at my children's Naming and Claiming, won't you?" He gave me an odd look. I continued, "You did owe me a favor, once upon a time."

Dylan leaned back in his chair and smiled, finally starting to relax. "Yes, I did, didn't I? I wouldn't miss it."

Before I reached the hall, I could hear Charlemagne saying, "Now. Let's talk about people for this Nietzschian presence on board. I'd like to suggest several of my cousins, for a start. I think you've met them? Of course, a few have just had babies, but that shouldn't bother you ...

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Beka rested a barbell against her thigh, in the exercise room. "Tyr, have you seen Ygraine's designs? We'll make a fortune on the licensing alone, not to mention on the clothes themselves. We might even open shops to market the originals to a discreet and exclusive clientele. Isn't it exciting?"

"Honest money? Are you sure you can stand the shock?" I teased her, and she pouted at me as she put the barbell into its rack.

"As if I'd never earned an honest day's fee in my life! You know better than that, Tyr."

"I should. I was probably there the first time you did, the day after Dylan asked us to stay on."

"Define honest." She threw a towel at me. "I suppose you're looking for Harper? I haven't seen him. Actually," she said, picking up the towel after I threw it back at her, "I don't think I've seen him since some time yesterday. Have you tried his quarters?"

"His, mine." I turned to go.

"Hey," she said, and I paused on the threshold. "I'm glad you're staying on."

"Am I?" Just because Dylan and Charlemagne were agreed on a 'significant Nietzschian presence' did not mean I necessarily had to be part of it, though if I were to retain my position as alpha of Kodiak Pride I would need to be in fairly close contact with my wives.

"You'd better. I've gotten used to your cooking. What do I have to do to make it happen, talk to Dylan?"

"Oh, right," I replied, and she snorted and went back to work. "Are you staying, if his wives are here?"

She gave me a frank look, not untinged with pain. "I knew that wasn't forever when it started. Dylan was fun, but that was all." A philosophical shrug. "Besides, I've got more of a future here than I have anywhere else, what with Ygraine's plans as well as the Commonwealth."

"And maybe a Guardsman or two to enliven your nights?"

"I think I'll find enough to keep me busy." She stepped onto a treadmill as I left.

Trance was talking to some manner of tall waving flowered herb when I reached the hydroponics garden. "Have you seen Harper?" I asked her.

"Not in the last few hours. You know," she confided, "you do make pretty babies."

Lately, it seemed, I spent most of my time accepting unlikely compliments when I spoke with her. "Thank you." I offered her one of her favorite crnaps that I'd brought from the galley, and she
accepted it gratefully. "How is Messallina doing?"

"Oh, I think she's probably still resting after all the excitement yesterday. She told me it's been years since she was called upon to oversee six births at once."

"It wasn't too much for her, was it?"

"Oh no," Trance assured me, "she said it was one of the highlights of her life. She told me a lot about Nietzschian customs and her family's history. Apparently she was very impressed with Andromeda."

"I don't suppose any of that would be because of you?"

"It might be. Some of it, at least." Her smile wasn't as shy as I had once thought it was.

"That's good." I considered a moment; yes, this was the time to ask. "Would you be willing to be a guardian for my children?"

Trance choked on a bite of crap and I thumped her on the back, gently. "Isn't that unusual?" she asked when she'd stopped coughing. "I mean, doesn't the pride usually act as the guardians?"

"Normally, yes, but Kodiak Pride is rather small at the moment." I watched as she realized just how small it was.

Her eyes grew rounder, and she looked uncertain, perhaps even a bit scared. "Actually, Tyr, I should probably decline the honor -- and I know it's an honor, it's a great honor -- because I don't know how much longer I'll be here."

"None of us know that." I had thought hard before making the request. "Do you anticipate leaving the Andromeda, say, in the next five minutes? The next year? The next decade?"

"No, but things happen. You know things happen. I don't want to mislead you." Her voice shrank. "I don't want to make a promise I can't keep." She reached for a seedling and tucked it into the growing medium with careful fingers. "If this grows, and stays strong, about fifteen years from now it should have lots of hazelnuts. I don't know if I'll ever eat any of them."

I leaned against the wall and watched her, as I searched for something to say. "In the best of all possible worlds, I think that having you as one of my children's guardians would be part of the perfect possible outcome." And I looked away from her as I said it, for at times Trance reminded me of a cat my sister had had as a child, who would be more likely to respond well if left to make up its own mind.

She finished planting the last seedling, dusted off her hands and stood. "What does a guardian do, Tyr?"

"Take care of the children, if we can't. Try to make things turn out well for them. Wish them well."

"Oh!" Happiness poured over her face like sunshine. "I can do that."

Her happiness made me smile as well, but so much was happening in my life that I wanted to smile anyway.

"So, how is Paris as a pilot?" I started back toward the entrance, and she came with me.

"He's not bad. I didn't work with him, though, I worked with Harper."

"How did you do it?" I asked, genuinely curious.
"I put my hands on his shoulders, and saw what should be, and I showed him, and he made it happen."

And I knew I would never have a better explanation of the strategy in the Battle of Ultima Thule.

***

Andromeda shimmered into view near me, outside the fourth workshop I checked. "He's in the Maru."

"You told me two hours ago that you didn't know where he was," I muttered.

"I know. He said he wanted to be alone, and I had to respect his wishes, but he seems to have changed his mind."

"Where?"

"The Kali Ma, in Hangar Twelve. He's opened the aft bay doors." The apparition smiled. "I think he's listening to music. At least I think it's music."

"Does it have words?" Hangar Twelve was only a few hundred yards down the corridor.

With a bemused expression on her face, she quoted, "'Scuse me, while I kiss the sky?"

"Ah, the classics."

She was still listening to the music, her head slightly tilted, as I left her behind me to take the short cut down four floors to the hanger door.

***

In a rational universe, it should have made no sense at all.

I had survived. I had guaranteed the survival of Kodiak Pride, as much as I could. I had wives and children and a place of status I had earned among the powers of the cosmos.

And it was not enough.

No man may control his fate. Nations come and go. Commonwealths fall and rise again, treaties are made or broken, alliances cling or dissipate. An evil whirlwind of destruction that scourged the known worlds for centuries is shattered irrevocably by the will of its victims, wrenched into nothing by nothingness itself made real.

For so long I had lived and waited and watched, and now that I had all that a man of my people should want, I still hoped for one thing more.

***

Wild music danced through the hangar. I found myself moving to its rhythm as I walked across the floor toward the open door of Kali Ma.

Harper sat back in the command chair, his feet propped on the pilot's seat, and his eyes partly closed as if he were watching something in his mind. His hands moved as if he were playing whatever instrument had originally made the sounds I was hearing.

Between the empty aft cargo bay, where I stood, and the helm where he sat, the long low casket of
Drago Museveni lay in state on a stand. It had a new, clean drape over it, and as I came closer I could see that the cloth carried the personal insignia of the Museveni, the same insignia that had flown over the government center on Fountainhead long before I was born, before it fell to treachery. A small spray of orchids, undoubtedly from Trance, lay on the draped flag above the insignia, its blossoms trailing across the embroidered symbols.

"Hey. You like?" Harper kicked off from the pilot's chair and swivelled the command chair so that he was facing me. "I did some checking in the All Systems University Library about the man and found out that he liked music, so I figured he might want to hear some again."

"I'm sure he'd be pleased," I said. "You did this?"

"Trance did some, I did some." He shrugged. "It was the least I could do. I mean, I was kind of kidnapping him. I didn't want to be too disrespectful."

I nodded. The scent of the orchids clung to my fingertips, and I did not try to brush it off. Now that I was alone with him, the words I wanted were evading me.

"So, what brings you here? You want to retrieve your ancestor, right? I kept him safe for you."

"Purely as a matter of curiosity, how did you manage to keep Paris Ramses from taking the casket?"

"Trance told him that he'd have to fight you for it, and he backed down." Harper grinned. "I didn't think Nietzscheans could backpedal that well."

"I'll take that as a compliment." I was not smiling. "I'm not sure what I should do with you, Harper. You stole my family's chiepest treasure and put it in the most dangerous place possible in the midst of a battle."

"What better way to keep it out of the Jaguars' hands? And give myself an insurance policy so I'd live through the battle?" He stood, crossing his arms, defying me. "Besides, I had Trance with me, so I knew nothing bad could happen, or at least not for long."

I gave him the glare that made most people cower; he glared back at me. "And you think I should be grateful for that?"

"Hell, yes. I think you should be really grateful that I, Seamus Zelazny Harper, managed to get rid of the Magog worldship. You did notice that, didn't you? It's not there any more. It's gone. Bye-bye."

"I noticed. Very elegant flying."

"Partly me, partly Paris. He helped Trance, he helped me."

"I'm sure Charlemagne will be impressed with his genius for helpfulness."

"So? Are you mad at me or what?" He took a couple of steps forward. "This is my ship; I built it and I can throw you off it if I want. Well, I can ask you to leave and call the robots."

"You're not going to ask me to leave."

"Why not?"

"Because I haven't answered your question." I rested one hand on my weapons belt.

"So? You gonna kill me or what? Get it over with. I've got a lot to do."
"Yes."

"Yes what?"

"You've got a great deal to do. Boudicca wants to see you."

This threw him. "She does? Why?"

"She wants to name our son after my shieldbrother."

"What?" If he had been startled before, he was in shock now. His jaw dropped open, and he stared at me as if I'd acquired Rev's face. "Why?"

"You proved that you can act as a true Nietzschian, and my wives want to welcome you into the family."

"Whoa. No kidding." He cast a wary glance at me. "And how do you feel about it?"

"Pretty much like this," I said. I closed the remaining distance between us and kissed him, hard and long, crunching his spiky hair between my fingers. I ran one hand down the front of his clothes to unfasten his fly and push his trousers away. He kissed me back, enthusiastically, but when he felt my hand on his clothes he shoved at my shoulder and I pulled away, confused.

"Just a sec." He reached back and flipped a switch. "Privacy screen; opaqued the windows."

"Excellent."

His hands were on my own trousers, unfastening the leather so that it came aside neatly, leaving my legs clad and the rest bare. "Do you have any idea how hot you look like that?" he whispered.

"I'm not concerned with how I look." Where to do it? Cleaning the instrument panel might cause problems. The seats looked as uncomfortable as any command chair scavenged from the back of the Maru might, although it appeared that he'd cleaned them before installation. "Here." I pushed the fine drape aside to reveal the curved, scarred casket.

"Are you kidding? Isn't that, um, like majorly disrespectful?"

"Drago Museveni was the ultimate pragmatist, and this is practical." I grabbed a cushion from one of the chairs that looked like something Trance might have brought, and put it on the casket to cushion him. "What more evidence do you want of how I feel?" I stroked myself, feeling myself lengthen and harden even more.

"Hey, that's mine." He reached across and grasped me, and I moaned with pleasure. I pushed his work trousers down and he rubbed against me, skin on skin, lining himself up so that his cock slicked a path along the line between my thigh and my abdomen, the demarcation zone for armor for thousands of years. I ran my hands along his shoulders and down his back to clutch him, kneading the rounded muscles.

He pulled back, his thumb coursing across my slick glans, and let go as he turned around to bend over the casket, his hands grasping its edges as he leaned on the cushion. "So? Tell me how you feel."

I moved behind him, lining myself up. "I feel that you owe me something for stealing my property, and for lying to me."
"When did I lie to you?" he countered. "I evaded. I avoided. I didn't lie."

"And you think that buys you what?"

"Get on with it," he said. "Don't tell me you're all hat and no cattle now?"

I ran a dampened finger around his entrance, waiting for his moan, then I slapped one cheek, hard. "That is for theft." I did the same again, intruding until I heard a moan, then withdrawing and slapping the other cheek. "That is for lies." They were not gentle slaps; his body bore red hand prints on either side. He whimpered, not without pleasure, and I slicked myself and breached him, slowly moving inward until I felt his heated skin against me. "And this is from me to you." I kissed his back, reached around to toy with him, and started to ride him.

He pushed back from the casket against me, panting hard. I braced my feet against the corrugated flooring and went steadily, carefully, making it last, until I could wait no longer and let go to spend myself within him as he spasmed around me, each of us taking the other. Afterward, I lay on his back, still in him, feeling the heat of his body, feeling the touch of his fingers reaching back to caress my flanks just above the edge of leather.

"Lots of cattle. Whole planets of them," he murmured. "All kinds of cattle."

"Are you all right?"

"Fine. Great. Stupendous. This is a day for the books; I've gotten laid over a coffin."

"Why? It was what was practical. Would you have preferred the command chair?"

"No way. That thing itches. I've got to tell Beka to get a new supplier for chair covers." His heartbeat and mine still pounded as one. "So. Anything else you want to discuss?"

"Ygraine has some designs she'd like to run past you. Morgan wants to talk mathematics." He nodded. "And both of them, as well as Boudicca, seem to think that adding a few of your genes to our genetic pool would only benefit future generations." I kissed the back of his neck as he squirmed.

"You're kidding. Your wives want me to be daddy to their next kids?" One frantic eye sought mine, and he struggled under me. I let my weight settle on him a little more. "And you're okay with me, um, usurping your prerogatives?"

"Boudicca assured me the cross could be done in a laboratory, if you felt uncomfortable with the thought. The woman is rather single-minded about children, I think." I shook my head for the pleasure of watching him wiggle as my hair tickled him.

"But I lived on Earth --"

"For a long time, and some of your genes are not what they could be. We'll take care of that. I promise you, there will only be healthy babies in Kodiak Pride." We uncoupled and I pushed myself up straight and helped him up. He reached into a closet and got out clean rags for each of us, and a tin of the same all-purpose absorbent chips that he'd had in the workshop for the spatter on the floor. I twitched the drape back into place over the casket and replaced the orchid, which had fallen to one side.

"You're really serious about this."

"Of course. I am now the head of Kodiak Pride, and it's not large; shouldn't I be concerned about diversifying the gene pool, so that our children have a better chance at survival? And this is not
unusual for shieldbrothers. There is always a pride geneticist who tracks such things, to make sure there will be no problems." I watched his face, and added softly, "It is their idea, and I won't interfere. This is between you and them — but Boudicca informs me that she admires your ability to think, and that is certainly something lacking in much of the current Nietzschian population."

"Yeah, like those Kazov idiots at Denali. Hey, I like the sound of it."

I watched his face, concerned for now and for the future. "You hated Nietzschians, when I first came aboard. You wanted to kill all of us because of what the Dragans did to your planet."

"Hey, you're not fond of some of them either. Yes, I hated them. I built the device that wiped out the fleet at Witchhead, and then I realized that hating them so much made me someone I didn't want to be." Harper looked across at me, asking without words for truth, not comfort.

I glanced out the one-way glass toward the bay doors that led to space. "If you had not done it, and the full fleet had been at Witchhead, who's to say whether any of us would be here now? I cannot want to change the past when it might have kept me from being born." When I looked back, his eyes were dark with compassion. "I regret their deaths, as I have regretted few things in my life, but I would not have changed history."

"So do I," he said softly. "And now we're making history. You and me, shieldbrothers. That's not something that's happened before, is it?"

"It's a first for the historical records." But I thought he still looked a little sad. "Do you like the sound of Seamus, out of Boudicca by Tyr?"

"Wow. Yeah. I could get used to that." Seamus the elder smiled freely for the first time since I'd entered the ship. "So, I guess this means you're not trading me in for three wives and assorted children?"

"Is that what you thought would happen?" I was amazed. "Really?"

He shrugged. "Hey, guy gets married, gives up his former life. What else was I supposed to think?"

I pulled him close, against my heart. "Listen to me. You remember Elsbbett Mossadim. She takes things to extremes, but you must understand, she is not that different from most Nietzschian women I have met."

"Your ladies aren't like that," he murmured into my neck. "They've got a lot more going for them."

"Which I very much appreciate, believe me. But they do not know me, and even if they did I would still like to have in my life the one person to whom I need not apologize for my ideas or attitudes." I felt his shock as he stiffened. "Don't get me wrong. I am still Nietzschian, but the life I have led is so different from that of most of my people that I don't find a lot of understanding at times."

"It's not easy for me, either." He kissed the side of my neck. "So. Neither of us has to apologize for what we are."

"Exactly."

"And I don't have to be a convert, do I? I can stay human?"

"You need not be anything you don't wish to be."

"Good. Because, you know, those arm spikes would really get in the way when I'm tuning up the
slipstream drive. It's kind of tight in there." He pushed me away. "You know, I thought, when I took that," he tilted his head toward the casket, "you'd want to kill me. I didn't just go to meet your wives to see if they were pretty, I went to see if they were likely to support you if you told them about having it. And I wasn't sure I could trust Blondie Bolivar either. I knew I couldn't trust Dylan; he'd already locked it away from you. So the only one I could trust was me."

"Again, an admirable bit of thinking. Why should it upset me?"

"Because I stole your Progenitor?"

"Actually," I shrugged, "I assumed you had moved him to keep him away from the Jaguars."

"Well, yeah, that was part of it. But he was insurance, too." Harper frowned. "Is that still a problem?"

"Let's say I wasn't pleased that you were endangering him. But you impressed Charlemagne. In fact, he has suggested to Dylan that Kodiak Pride resume its protection of the Progenitor -- and do so aboard the Andromeda as part of the Commonwealth." I took one step closer but disguised it by leaning my hip against the control panel. "You had to lie to me, and to Beka, in order to do what Dylan wanted. I don't like that, but any anger I feel on that account is aimed at Dylan, not you."

"Oh, so that slap at my ass was purely gratuitous."

I smiled at him. "How well you understand me."

He smirked back. "How mad at him are you?"

"Not very." I shrugged. "None of us can see in all directions at once. And Dylan has much to deal with. Half of his wives want to leave him and remain within Jaguar Pride's territory to raise their children. It's not an unusual way to proceed, considering how decimated Jaguar has become, but he's having some problems with the idea."

"How's Dylan taking the whole Kodiak-Pride-onboard thing?"

"A little better than he's taking Charlemagne's marriage counseling session, but not too badly, all told."

"Blondie doing marriage counseling with Dylan." Harper looked dazed. "Did I wake up on the right side of the cosmos?"

"You know, I've been asking myself that all day, too." I glanced around the ship. As I'd expected, it was made of spare parts from the Maru and from the Andromeda repair stores. "How long did it take you to make this?"

"A while. I did it in bits and pieces all over the ship, and had the robots put it together when I was busy with you." He had the grace, or misfortune, to blush. "It was the only way I could find that you wouldn't learn about it."

"Aha."

"What aha?"

"I knew that slap would not prove gratuitous."

"No, you just wanted to feel me up." He wiggled his ass at me. "I'm still shocked about doing it on
the coffin. You're not going to tell me that's usual, are you?"

I leveled my eyes at him. "On your planet, wasn't it the custom of some religions to hold their ceremonies over the bones of the dead? Some Christian sects, for instance?"

"Well, technically. Sort of. Kinda. It's not exactly like that."

"How was this any different? Or did you expect Drago Museveni to awaken and take an interest?"

"No to the second question. I mean, I really hope not. That would be kind of creepy. As for the first, well, it'd be the same only if it was a solemn religious event."

"I see. So, uniting with one's shieldbrother would not be --"

"Actually, I take that back. That was as close to a religious event as I want to have, these days."

I assumed a sad expression. "Does that infer that you wish only to conduct such activity during one hour on a certain day per seven-day cycle, according to the calendar of an obscure planet I've never seen?"

"Now you're just being silly."

"Nietzschians are never just silly."

"No, in my experience they're usually horny also."

***

The next few months brought many changes to the Andromeda and her resident crew. Boudicca took over Rev Bem's old study, with its records of ancient knowledge and philosophy. She spent her time learning different languages, studying the political philosophies of groups allied to the Andromeda or to the Commonwealth, and conferring with Dylan on policies and practices of various systems and cultures. As a result, he was able to triple the number of Commonwealth members within six months, which seemed to make him feel that although the universe he knew had changed he could still function within it satisfactorily.

Ygraine and Harper strengthened the Maru, to Beka's great delight, and worked at redesigning the Kali Ma. Ygraine persuaded Rommie to allow her to modify some of the Andromeda, to create an environment that would challenge our children — a holographic simulation of Fountainhead, so none of us would forget our heritage. The clothing design business with Beka brought in welcome funding for the ship, as well as for us as a pride, and put us on a better footing when we came to planetary systems that were not terribly clear on the concept of a commonwealth but did understand fashion and trade.

Morgan spent long hours with Rommie, studying astrogation charts, and comparing the records of slipstream jumps with the mathematics she was developing. Within months she had devised the theoretical framework for a hyper-slip jump, a mode of travel that leaped from the edge of one slip curl to the next within slip, unfailingy and without the jarring that would batter an already damaged ship and leave it helpless once it had left slipstream. Morgan was eager to try for time jumps; I left it to Harper to tell her why, with this particular captain, it was not the best idea at the moment and should be left for a later time when all the details had been worked out and there was no chance of marring a time line.

Dylan, who had apparently never even considered combining family life and work in a normal way, eventually adjusted to working with his wives and mine aboard ship, though he never seemed quite
at ease with the notion of a Nietzschian woman in work clothing carrying a baby in a sling around her body for much of the first year of a child's life. I saw his eyes following Beka around the bridge with regret, but I said nothing. We all make our choices, and live with them, and learn from them.

Trance added child care to her lengthening list of talents and tasks. I had a feeling that as soon as the children were old enough to want to play in the mud, she'd have an area of the hydroponics garden set aside for them to grow their first plants. I had no objection. Fountainhead had been an arid planet, a good place to create a strong people, but times change. It would not hurt Nietzschians to learn to grow food as well as to kill it, to understand ways of repair and healing as well as warfare and defense. We had done these things in the past, and lost the knowledge of them over three centuries of warfare; it was time we regained them.

Beka took her position of chief negotiator and businesswoman seriously. Dylan joked that the next four systems joined the Commonwealth purely because they could get better prices on Ygraine's clothing; it wasn't entirely untrue. She became a friend to those of Dylan's wives who stayed aboard. Anjali, a physician, took over many of Trance's duties on med deck and conducted general scientific research with her sister, Karla, a xenobiologist; Nerissa, with Morgan, upgraded the ship's exercise facilities and conducted defense and weapons training for everyone aboard -- including Dylan; Olivia shared child care duties with Trance while writing an historical account of the events culminating in the Battle of Ultima Thule.

Paris Ramses and several of his cousins stayed aboard as well. Dylan devised a rotation of responsibilities so that each of them would acquire experience in every area of ship's operations. After Paris realized that I was unlikely to pursue him, considering that I was already fairly occupied with family obligations, he turned his attentions to study and his eyes toward Beka, who looked back at him and seemed to like what she saw. When I heard passionate, delighted sounds coming from a residential area of the ship I'd thought unoccupied one night, and recognized Beka's voice and his, I was glad they had chosen an area so far from Dylan's quarters or her own. Dylan had been awake for two nights with a colicky son; he would not have been amused.

And one day, on the bridge, as I watched Harper wrestle a recalcitrant section of repair work back into place with the assistance of Morgan and Paris, I said idly, "Dylan, what's the latest news from Charlemagne about his clean-up operation?"

"Actually, there's a transmission coming through now; onscreen, please."

Charlemagne wore a mocking smile, though a new and livid scar marred his brow. "Greetings, cousins, sisters, and brother Kodiak. It's taken a bit longer than expected, but we've managed to deal with the Dragan remnant fairly nicely. Along the way we've run across more possibilities for the Commonwealth -- a couple of colonies of Atreus Pride that settled farther away than I'd ever imagined."

"That's wonderful, Charlemagne. I'll look forward to hearing more about them."

Charlemagne smiled back at Morgan, and at Ygraine, who had just entered the bridge with a pad in her hand. "I see the family's doing well. Always pleased to know that. I hope to be back fairly soon. However, there's one area that's still Dragan-held that seems to want to hold out and give us a bit of difficulty."

Beka raised her eyebrows and exchanged glances with me. "I wonder where that might be." She knew, as I did, how unlikely it was for Charlemagne to consider any challenge impossible that included the Dragans.

"It seems there's a bit of a stand-off coming up in Milky Way Galaxy, over a funny little planet that's
third out from its star. For some reason I didn't think you wanted me to just dust the place off, so I
thought you might be interested in coming over to give us a hand with it." Charlemagne turned, as if
someone had called his name. "I believe it's called Earth? Might help if someone besides a
Nietzschean shows up to talk with the original residents. They're not fond of us at all."

"Dylan -- " Harper started.

"We're on our way there, Charlemagne. And I appreciate your forbearance." Dylan said.

"Not at all. I've heard too much that's interesting about the place to want to just blow it away,
regardless of the idiots who are in charge of it at the moment." Charlemagne smiled again, with less
sarcasm than truth. "Bolivar out."

"Dylan --" Harper repeated.

"It's the least we could do, don't you think?" Dylan said. "Harper, I'm appointing you and Tyr chief
negotiators for the Commonwealth on this one. You'll be in charge of arranging a settlement with
both the Dragans and the humans."

"You don't ask for much, do you?" Harper shot back, but he'd begun to bounce on his heels, and the
smile I loved to see curved his mouth.

"Just miracles," I said, but I couldn't help smiling as well. Peace was all well and good, but a man
needs a challenge now and then after nearly a year of quiet, and I looked forward not only to dealing
with the Dragans from a position of power but to seeing what was left of the planet that Harper had
once called home.

"I've noticed that you two seem to be rather good at them, so I figure you wouldn't want to miss the
chance to do another one." Dylan turned back to the controls.

Harper said nothing, but his face glowed and he looked so happy that Ygraine hugged him
impulsively. "It'll be all right," she told him. "It will." He hugged her back, his arms wide to
encompass her swelling body; her child and his would be born in a few months. Her first, with me,
had miscarried, and we had all mourned; I could only be pleased when Harper returned the
happiness to her face.

Behind them I saw Trance smile suddenly, that odd, slightly angular smile that told me that all
would, indeed, be well, whether I wanted to believe it or not. All would be well, and all would be
well, and all manner of things would be well. How odd that I would think of the words of an Earth
woman who had never seen anything outside her own town, let alone her own planet, but they rang
true in my mind.

And we set our faces toward the planet from which all humans once came, and headed toward our
future.

End Notes

This story begins during Season 2 (2001). I was surprised and pleased that it received the
awards for best orgy/mixed pairing. Unfortunately, after migrating the story through several
computers since then, I no longer have the small award banners to link to the story.

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