

Imagine a world where lost civilizations thrive and alien beings play games of war.

A GAME OF GODS

by Sean Michael Paquet

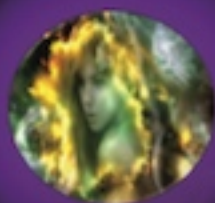
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SEAN MICHAEL PAQUET

A GAME OF GODS



A world where
everything you wanted to believe
is real.



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Chapter One

Early Years

For as long as I can remember, I have always been different. I also know that for as long as I could remember that I hated being different. Never mind that I figured out how to escape from my crib at nine months old, or that I had memorized all of my letters and knew my numbers up to one hundred by my third year. All who knew me knew I was different

By age four, I was always perusing the books in my father's vast library and asking questions of my mother that she would helplessly not be able to answer. My father, being the Jarl, was an educated man, and he collected books from all the lands with which we traded. For all the ferocity of our culture, we were tradesmen, craftsmen, and surprisingly, we were foremost scholars and poets.

So by age five, I was reading stories of faraway lands, and those who lived in them. The oddest thing was that no one ever taught me how to spell or count or read. Such things seemed to come naturally to me.

Now for all of my bookishness and odd behaviors for being so young, I was by no means an isolated boy. I had the opportunity to play with anyone I chose to, but often, the games played seemed childish and annoying. I wasn't trying to be isolated; I just knew I was different.

Playtime for me was running through the forest so close to our keep. That's where the voices would come to me. Voices that spoke to me from realms faraway. With these voices, I would commune and find comfort. In the forest also I found friendship.

A Game of Gods

A great Raven named Schrock would visit me on my forest walks, and I found that he could speak after a fashion with images that came to my mind. He taught me how to talk to animals and how to observe them.

I discovered that all things in the forest had a voice if one only listened. I made friends with a wolf cub I named Growl because even in a good mood, he sounded fierce. He taught me how to track and how to move silently through the forest while hunting.

I would also play with a Cave Bear cub I named Bumble because he was fat and rolled around in the grass. He taught me to live off the land.

It never occurred to me to tell my parents about my animal friends or my forest adventures. I knew I was different, and I did not want to add to their concerns. To tell them I talked to animals and heard voices would cause more attention than I wanted.

That was me. From the age of five, until I was ready to begin my training at age seven, I was a child of the forest—more of a wild thing than a boy. Being a curious child, I would scour the library on everything I could find regarding animals and living in the wilds.

We were a hardy people, and for many generations, all Ostmen knew from birth that we were part of nature. We only took from it what we needed, and as often as we could, we gave back to nature. While the game was plentiful, the people of Numitgart were careful never to take a life unless we needed to.

What I didn't know was that my parents were very aware of my roaming and of the playmates I had found. Being wiser than I gave them credit for, they did not stand in my way. Instead, they ensured I was able to spend as much time in the forest as possible.

Father even went so far as to fashion a bow and a good knife for me, which he presented to me on my sixth birthday. My father, while a Jarl, was also an

accomplished craftsman and worker of wood. The knife he gave me had the hilt designed like a running wolf. The handle of the bow was a carving of a standing bear. When he gave me the presents, I knew at once that my parents were aware of Growl and Bumble.

I lowered my eyes, not sure what to say, and I felt tears run down my face. "Father, I..." "Hush boy," said my father coming down on one knee till he was of my same height. "What you have is special." My father winked at me. "For us, being special is something that just is." Father waved at my mother.

"Did you know your mother is special too?" My mother nodded and came over to me, also kneeling. Being so close to both of them, after I had spent so much time absorbed by my pursuits, brought up feelings in me that made the tears run even more.

My father suddenly grabbed me in a big bear hug and held me close. My mother wrapped her arms around both of us. "Don't cry, my son," my father whispered. "Being different is a gift from the Lady."

Father broke from our embrace, and my mother lifted my chin with her fingers. "Jon, we know you can talk to them, all the voices you hear, the animals. I can do it as well, but for me, it's more like a feeling." Mother looked at me. "That's how I knew you were communicating because I could feel it."

My father stood and looked down at me. To me, he seemed like a giant, but his eyes were kind. He ruffled my hair, "Jon, be thankful for your gifts. Don't try to hide them. We didn't tell you earlier because most of our people don't even know about being different until their twelfth or thirteenth year."

He stood up tall and announced to the many people who had assembled for my birthday. "This is my son Jon!" He announced. "Many of you know him and of his travels in the wildlands already. You have seen him in the Keeps

library. He has asked questions of the well-learned among us. Knowing his curious nature, he will ask many more."

Father laid his hand on my shoulder. Instead of feeling heavy, it felt like warmth and kindness and strength all at once. "My son Jon has the gift of speech with animals and the spirits of the forest! It is a rare gift and rare even more so that he has discovered his gift so young." Then my father gathered me up in his powerful arms so all could see me. "I am proud to be blessed with such a son!"

My father was a man of few words, and to hear such praise from him was exceedingly rare. "Enough of all of this!" My father exclaimed at the applause and shouts. "My belly is empty, and I could drink a barrel of beer! Let us feast!"

As the night went on, I quietly retired to a spot high above the celebration. Schrock joined me there after a while, and we sat in silence, observing the ways of men. Any occasion to celebrate was appreciated, and my father was generous to all.

Food and drink aplenty were provided. Both men and women engaged in games of chance, and there was always at least one good fight. Ostmen by nature and upbringing were rough people, and all who were my age practiced Glima and with weapons.

I was always fascinated to watch them fighting. It was all so fast and fluid. As I sat up above, Schrock fluttered his wings beside me. He sent me an image of a Raven in the air circling an Eagle.

In addition to Glima and other weapons training, I found that I had an uncanny grasp of archery. As hunting was part of our daily lives, my father ensured that I excelled with the bow and arrow.

The intense practice involved drawing and holding on a target for as long as I could before launching my arrows. Training occurred with both longbows and short bows.

My father also provided me with bows and arrows captured from different raids in case I needed to pick up an enemy's weapons on the field.

In time, my practice with the bow became part of me, like walking or running. In my hands, the bow became a living thing, an extension of myself.

In regards to other weapons, it was evident early on that I was competent with an axe. My father was pleased to no end as it was a very versatile weapon. "However," he cautioned, "one must be proficient with as many weapons as possible. You never know what kind of situation you will find yourself in."

The daily training and hunting, as well as time on the oars when fishing, added hard-earned muscles to my frame, and I was quickly gaining strength. It always felt good to be out in the open air, at sea, or in the wilderness, using gifts I was blessed to have.

However, I never considered my muscles as more than tools for me to fight, and run, and hunt. Father ensured that I was just as proficient in my studies.

I learned from books and scrolls, songs, and sagas. I was required to quote at random anything I had read or studied for my parents, and by my tenth year, I had read everything our library had available.

It was during my fourteenth year when my studies started having more practical applications. With my ability to remember well, all that I read, my father decided to have me learn the Great Knowledge.

My private tutoring consisted of Runecraft and Sigil application. Skalds, Galdre, and Seidre from all over Numitgart would come to teach me. I found I had an unusual skill in this area as well. Tracing a rune on an object or in the air would nearly always render a result.

One would think that with so many blessings, I would be happy. However, I never felt happy within the walls of

our home. The hours I spent immersed in my books and my daily training served only to distract me from the voices. No, not voices so much. They were more like images and sounds.

The creatures of the forest were always speaking to me and me with them. Even with my heavy load of studies, I would still spend many hours in the forest. Sometimes the Skalds caught me sneaking out in the night to run with the wolves or forage with the bears.

Such activities were considered a bit odd even for one with the gift to speak to the forest creatures. At times it scared my mother to no end when she would see me walking with a full-grown Cave Bear or when wolves would make their presence known near our home. My father saw it as a real blessing since we always had an escort of enormous and intimidating animals on expeditions. That is how my story begins.

It was ten days before my assumption ceremony, which was to coincide with my birthday. Given what I understood of time, I had lived now in this world for seventeen years. My father, my brother Adnar, and I were on a hunting expedition near our northern borders.

On that clear, cold day, with a chill wind in the air, we were out hunting and stumbled across the most unusual creature. It was a total surprise as we crested a hill, and this massive and hungry-looking creature, with great long fangs, reared up and let out a roar. My brother and father instinctively brought up their bows to fire. "Wait!" I shouted and jumped between them and the cat. My father was angry. "Get out of the way, fool!" He bellowed. "Father, please wait, please!" I turned toward the snarling beast.

I stepped forward and presented my hand palm down and low. "*Well met traveler,*" I thought in my head. I immediately received back a jumble of images and

feelings. Surprise and confusion and pain. *"Slowly friend,"* I assured the great cat, *"I am Jon, and we hunt here."* To an animal, a hunting area is the closest thing to a territorial boundary. An image came to me of confusion combined with fear. "He's lost," I called back to our hunting party. "I've never seen anything like him before," stated my father. "Is he friendly?" asked my brother.

Cats don't usually make friends," I recalled from experience. "He's not used to talking like this to people, so it's a bit garbled. Closest I can figure is he was chasing something he had caught the scent of, and next thing he ran into us." I turned to my father. He's hungry and hasn't eaten for several days."

The Jarl dismounted from his horse, sat down, and pondered. "Makes no sense. Look at the size of him and those teeth!" Adnar agreed, "We would have had a sign of him if he was local." "He's not local," I confirmed. "I've never seen anything like him in the wildlands, and my training takes me out here often."

Rayneck still looked perplexed." We would have known about him and his kin long ago. So unless he wandered in from the unknown northern wildlands, I do not understand why he is here."

"What if he's an Arrival?" I interjected suddenly. "Aha!" my father exclaimed, "another acquisition of the Benefactors, no doubt!" "That would make sense," I replied, carefully observing the now quiet beast who seemed to be listening to our every word.

"Just one animal?" my brother countered. "The Benefactors haven't staged a transplant within our borders for years." "Aye," responded father, "and they always send some kind of message." "I doubt he's a random arrival," mused Adnar. "Aye, and what do we do about him?" exclaimed father. "An animal, his size will ruin the hunting!" "You speak the truth, father," I replied. "We must have him located elsewhere."

Turning to the enormous cat, I attempted to relay that he must go to another place to hunt. The image I received was of an open plain with long grasses and herds of what looked to be some kind of deer and or wild cow. In the distance, massive shapes moved.

"His home looks like a vast grassland. Perhaps somewhere past the Northern Range, such a place exists." "By Odin's beard," exclaimed my father again. "That's five days ride north on horseback."

My father turned to me. "We can't have him here, and the way north is known to few. We are under a mandate never to go past the Northern Range. What shall we do?"

I pondered for a bit and then looked at the quite hungry beast. I simply said, "let's get a belly full and think on it," Adnar laughed. "Just like your woodland friends, always thinking about food."

I shrugged, "Got to eat sometime," I answered back. I sent my new friend the thought image of a deer, and he growled, bobbing his head in agreement. "We hunt," I stated, whilst unfastening my bow.

Now my bow was a remarkable piece of work that I had made as part of my training, and it was hard to string even for me. With a flip behind my leg and a downward pull, I strung the bow with great effort.

Upon inspection of the weapon, it always impressed me how the darkened steel and weathered ivory weaving seemed to blend into whatever background there was. I faced the giant cat, "*Well, what do I call you?*" He made a sound that was somewhere between a spit and a snarl.

"*How wonderful,*" I thought back at him. "The cat has the attitude of an angry serving wench, but for lack of a better word, we will call him Splar." Both my father and my brother laughed at this. Even the cat gave a guttural sound that had to be a chuckle.

"Come on, you oversized house cat," I said and thought of a small and very fat version of my new

companion laying by a hearth. The cat returned an image of him gnawing on a human-looking leg bone.

"Father, if you would be so kind as to make a camp, I will be back in just an hour." I started into the wilderness in what would have appeared to anyone else as a random location. However, I had been watching for animal signs since we had crested the bluff where we had found Splar.

As Rayneck and Adnar watched Jon disappear in the wilderness with his new friend Rayneck shook his head, "Been like that all his life, and it still bewilders me." "Aye," replied Adnar, "my brother is a strange one, but imagine how that encounter might have gone had he not been with us?" "Hard truth, lad." Rayneck retorted. "That cat is twice the size of a horse and scared the shit out of me!" Rayneck pointed to a clearing nearby. "Good a place as any for a camp."

We were now within the deep wilderness. For all of my young life, I had always been most at home here. I was moving at a quick saunter, and my new friend was right next to me. Training to the point of instinct had honed my step as I went through the forest.

As the twilight rolled in, my eyes adjusted to the forest shadows, and I became one within them. I crouched low behind a tree and closed my eyes. With a thought and a focus, the sounds of the wildlands became far sharper and more pronounced.

One by one, I sorted through the sounds: Splar's deep breathing nearby, Owl's were hooting in a tree fifty faðmr away. Two squirrels were arguing in a hollow log one hundred faðmrs away. Two hundred faðmrs to the east was a swiftly running brook. *Listen, breathe with no sound. Become the Forest.*

Then I heard the snorting of a buck who had caught a doe's scent. In one fluid motion, I pulled an arrow, drew back, and loosed. My target was unseen, but I sent the

arrow up at a slight angle, perhaps a handspan back from the sound of the snort.

I counted four of my heartbeats, and then there was the hard smack of an arrow striking a body. As soon as the first arrow struck, I had another ready and heard the sound I was waiting for, the surprised grunt of the doe and her rapid exit from the area. Moving my bow to the left slightly, I let loose my second arrow and crouched again. Four more heartbeats, smack!

I turned to Splar, *"Next time you do the hunting."* I thought at him, to which he responded with an image of himself holding an antler in his mouth and me looking hungry. "Yeah, c'mon," I said as I low trotted to the area where I had placed my shots. There was the buck with an arrow piercing the skull. The doe was nearby with an arrow through its heart.

As always, a sadness came upon me, and I crouched down, praying, *"Thanks be to The Lady for this blessing. I pray for the souls of these gentle creatures. May they find peace in the next life."* I stood up and looked at Splar, *"the doe is yours."* Splar pounced on the dead animal, nearly biting it in two, and I turned my back. Cats are messy eaters, and I wasn't in the mood for a gorefest.

With a bit of rope, I tied the buck's front and rear legs together and, with a long-practiced move, heaved the beast upon my shoulders. *"Come find me when you are finished with dinner and bury what's left further away. The smell of blood will spook the rest."* I heard a sloppy wet sounding grunt in return.

As I trudged back through the dense forest with my load, I pondered recent events. *"This giant cat with knife-like teeth just appears? Highly unlikely."*

All the peoples of Threa knew of the Benefactors and how they had saved millions of lives from inevitable catastrophe. My ancestors had survived a natural disaster, having arrived here after being snatched from

the settlement of Eystribyggð now twenty generations ago. Six hundred people had survived.

My forebearers had upset the course of natural events. In short, our ancestors were not supposed to be there. Overgrazing and inadequate understanding of the land would eventually destroy the balance. Therefore, our ancestors had been whisked away to this new land.

I went back through my mind and all of the reading I had done about what we still knew of Earth and what we now knew of Threa. There were some ancient tales sang by the Skalds of giant cats and hairy long-nosed beasts who roamed vast stretches of grassy plains.

Although I remained watchful and alert while moving through the woods, my mind perused maps. Such had been given to my ancestors when they had first come to what they ended up calling Numitgart.

While scanning the maps in my mind, I found that which I sought. According to the charts, there was an open valley five-days journey by horse to the North, just on the other side of the Northern Range.

I broke out of the woods and spotted our camp up ahead. As I broke into a trot, I formulated my plan. Now, to explain it to my father. I dumped my load by the fire, and two of our escorts busied themselves skinning and butchering our buck for dinner. Our hunting expedition numbered twenty men, and we would make quick work of the fresh meat.

Rayneck was sitting in front of his tent, smoking his long pipe. "Well?" he asked as I walked up. "Buck and a doe," I replied simply. Rayneck knew that already. He had seen the carcass of the buck. The angle of entry and what he knew of his son's skill led him to estimate a shot at nearly three hundred faðmrs. The old Jarl shook his head, shrugging.

I settled down to my haunches with my father and breathed deeply. "So," my father peered at me over his

pipe "what of your new friend?" "He's having dinner," I replied as I unslung my bow and nocked three arrows into their respective slots. It was never a good idea to be unarmed out here in the wildlands.

"Father, I think I know where I can take that beast, and he will be more at home."

"Oh?" Rayneck remarked, "and just where would a cat the size of two horses fit in around here?" "It's not around here," I replied, pulling a stick from the kindling.

From memory, I drew a map on the ground. "This is the area around the Northern Plateau. There is a stretch of grasslands, nearly fourteen Vei long. There might even be more beasts like him there."

Rayneck pondered this and looked intently at the map his son had drawn. "A long journey," he stated. "One I am well capable of taking father," I replied.

Rayneck's eyes looked sad. Although he was very proud of his son and his accomplishments, he never liked it when Jon went on long expeditions. Not because he feared for his safety. No, Jon was more than capable of making the journey. It only made his heart heavy when one of his children went afar.

"If you go, then I will give you a secondary mission," said Rayneck. He gestured at the map. "The maps you memorized show the boundary lines of our lands, but we know little of the land to the North. We only know there was another colony there, and we were not to interfere."

He looked at me with a piercing gaze. "You are to add to the map as you go. Show me landmarks, water, mountains, easy passage if there is any." I nodded. "It will be as you say, father." "Make your preparations," replied Rayneck. "You have an hour."

My heart was racing! What an opportunity! Running to my tent, I hurriedly gathered my gear. I picked my bow, arrows, and the two long knives my brother had made last year for my birthday, the two hand axes which were part

of a Wardens trappings and my woodland cloak. After a stop at the eating tent where I collected trail bread and dried meat, I came back before my father.

As I laid down my equipment piece by piece in front of him, my father inspected each item with care. "Good choices, son," he remarked as he tested the edge of each blade. "How many arrows carry you?" "Twenty-five," I replied without thinking. I always knew how many arrows I carried. Rayneck grunted. "You have food?" "Enough for a fortnight father. More than that would be a waste."

I looked at my father, who seemed to be rooted in his thoughts. I watched as he slowly stood up and walked over to the chest that always accompanied him when he left the Trelleborg. He returned with a leather coin purse and a heavy, oddly elongated bundle.

My father placed the coin purse in front of me. "Gold,?" I queried. Rayneck shrugged. "A group of miners went up north about fifty years ago. There might still be settlements out that way." Rayneck placed the bundle in front of me. "These were to be yours at the end of your training," Rayneck stated. "The final test of a Warden is a lone journey. I feel as if they are yours now."

I pulled back the leather cover, and there in shimmering glory were two of the most beautiful weapons I had ever seen. The first was a long-handled, single-bladed axe of remarkable artistry. The blade's shape was of the type many used in battle and for routine use, but the similarity ended there.

The edge was of dark metal with shimmering red lines running through it. Both the pommel and the head were forged into the likeness of an open-mouthed Dragon. On one side of the blade was a rune that signified fire. On the other was a combined rune that spelled out the word "Vulcanfang."

My head was swimming with the thought of carrying such an axe when my father reminded me, "take up the

sword Son." I reluctantly put the axe to one side and picked up the sword.

Now, this was something different. It was unlike the broadswords with which I had trained so much. This sword had a single edge, was heavy at the front, and had a vicious looking serration along the thick backside of the blade. The odd-looking metal gleamed in the light, seeming to change colors.

Ancient runes decorated both sides of the blade, and the script was so old I had difficulty reading it. "I am the Warden's Promise," I read on one side. Turning the sword over, I read the other inscription. "Draw me for blood only." On the hilt was inscribed the Rune Tiwaz, which ensured victory in battle.

I shuddered at the inscribed warning. By the oath written on this weapon, I could never pull this blade without drawing blood. Looking up almost tearfully, I uttered, "Thank you, father, such gifts I do not deserve," and then I bowed my head gravely.

"Look up, boy!" exclaimed father. "Wardens bow their heads to no man! Not even a Jarl." Rayneck swept his arm out to the nighted forest. "You pay respect to the land now and no one or nothing else."

"Yes, father," I replied. I felt consumed by many emotions; the chief of them was a strange misguided fear. Why was my father acting this way? I had been on longer journeys than this and with far less protection. My father held up a hand at my questioning look. "You wonder why I'm giving you these now?" Rayneck stood up, packed his pipe, and lit it from a burning ember in the fire.

"I dreamed of this," stated Rayneck. "Ahhh, I see," I responded. My father's talent was dreaming. While unable to see all things in the future, he would dream of things that were often of importance. Rarely were his dreams wrong even if they were cryptic.

"I take it your dream was not a good omen?" I asked. "No!" responded my father severely. "It showed me that you and your big friend disappeared through a pass somewhere along the Northern Range and disappeared." I sat there quietly, contemplating his words. "That was the end of the dream," he replied to my questioning look.

"A most concerning portent of my fate," I replied with a smirk. "Aye 'tis the truth," chuckled my father.

My father stood up. "Come with me," he said as he scooped up the weapons and gold. "We have to make it official," and together, we stepped outside the tent.

Our whole hunting party had assembled. My brother, Adnar, the Bear, was in front. He towered a head span or better above the rest, dressed in his typical garb. Adnar was bare-chested, wearing a wolf fur kilt and bearskin cloak. His booted feet were wide apart, and his hands rested idly on his Warhammer.

I was never much on ceremony, so I felt more than a bit embarrassed by all of the attention. Father guided me by the arm to the middle of the party near the fire. "Stand before me and face me, Jon Raynecksson." My father said in his booming voice.

Heeding my father's words, I held my head high and moved in front of him. "Raise your arms high!" commanded the Jarl of Numitgart. As I did so, two of my father's men at arms came forward carrying between them a finely worked battle harness.

At a glance, I could see the embossing on the cuirass was of numerous runes and symbols. An excellent example of leather and ring mail combined.

The men fastened the cuirass around me, and one of them showed me the mechanism at each side, which would detach the harness so I could remove it.

The armor fit very well and had evidently been custom made for me, leaving my arms bare but covering my torso. Looking down, I noticed a series of loops and hooks. Upon

these, my father started attaching my gear, knives to the rear with handles pointing outward. He then slung the hand axes low to my sides and strapped them to my legs.

My father produced another kind of cloak. It had a deep hood and an unusual slot at the back with a drawstring around it. Once the cloak was draped over me, my father took up my bow and slid it into the hole. I heard a thunk as the bow slid into place.

Next, my father slid the sheathed Warden's Promise in at the same angle, and reached up under my cloak; I felt him fasten it tightly to my back. Vulcanfang nestled in at an opposite angle into a sheath designed to keep the head of the axe exposed.

Finally, my father placed my helmet on my head. It was a close-fitting leather and metal cover I had made with curved ram horns emerging from it. Father stepped back and looked at me, admiringly.

I flushed from all of the eyes on me. "How do I look?" I asked sheepishly, "Like a Warden," laughed my brother, "just like the ones in all those books you keep reading." The rest of the party laughed as well.

"Aye!" my father roared, "full of weapons, piss, and ale!" He thrust a mug of beer into my hand. Now I have never been much of a drinking man. Strong drink dulled my senses, making me feel as if I were underwater.

I held my drink as my father then brandished his greatsword, made especially for him, by my brother. Named Reaper during forging, its blade was as long as a man was tall, and it had a double-handed hilt.

My father held his sword above his head and uttered a series of words that must have been from a formal text. "A Warden bows to no man, not even his Jarl. A Warden protects the borders of his lands. A Warden defends the weak, the oppressed, and those who cannot defend themselves. Raise your mug Warden."

I raised my mug high with my left hand, and my father lowered his greatsword and rested it on my right shoulder. The whole scene seemed suddenly very surreal, and everything seemed to slow down like I was looking at everything moving through a jar of honey. In my head, I heard a voice that seemed to move through me like water.

"I am you, and you are me," a voice like distant thunder whispered. At the edge of our circle, a figure appeared. It was a many-colored shimmering visage that seemed to change shapes and faces. A young girl, an ancient man, a bald, pointed eared being I did not recognize. The figure was solid, then swirling mist as it moved closer until it stood before me.

The assembly had disappeared in a strange purple fog that seemed to be everywhere. The figure finally coalesced into a stunning and rather small woman with blonde hair and silver flowing gown. The woman spoke, *"Do you know who I am, Jon?"* My mind was struck dumb by the beauty of this woman, and I could feel her power. I had never felt such power, even during my most in-depth training of the Great Knowledge.

"You can only be The Lady of the Lands," I whispered, bowing my head and starting to sink to my knees. *"A Warden bows to no man,"* remarked the woman with a wave of her hand. *"No, but a Warden will always bow to The Lady,"* I replied as I came to one knee with my eyes low. The woman laughed, and her laughter was like waves crashing in my ears. *"Arise noble Warden."* Slowly I came back up to my feet, but I kept my eyes low, not wanting to look upon the surreal beauty of the specter before me.

The Lady spoke. *"I have come to you Warden just as I come to all who wear that title. Among many peoples, your kind exists by many names. Whatever the name, the vocation is similar. I come to you because You are about to*

embark upon your Warden's Journey to that place which you call the Northlands."

The woman crossed her arms. *"You call them this because you have no idea what's out there beyond a series of basic maps given to you by the beings who brought your ancestors to this world."* The Lady waved a hand, and a map of Numitgart, the midlands, and the Southlands appeared out of thin air. Next to it, another less detailed map showing Numitgart and the Northern Range manifested into being.

"Notice the space here?" asked the Lady as she gestured towards an empty gray space that seemed to cover the top of the map. *"Y-yes, My Lady,"* I replied, stammering. *"By all that is sacred enough with the subservience Jon!"* The woman snapped. *"My name is Mymran Gaia, and long ago, I was very much like you."*

The woman looked directly at me. *"If you want to call me something respectful, you can call me Mother."* *"Mother,"* I whispered. *"Yes, that will do even though I am no longer either man or woman. I am all around you, Warden. I am all that you see. I am everything you hear and feel, and I have come here at this time to give you my blessing and a gift. Two gifts, actually."*

"Mother, I deserve nothing from one such as you," I replied quietly. *"Nonsense,"* replied Gaia. *"All are deserving of my gifts and my attention. You only need to believe that I am real and that you, Jon, are one of my special creations."* My mind was reeling from this exchange and the presence of this shimmering ghost.

"I don't..." *"You don't think very much of yourself, do you, Jon?"* The woman made it a statement as much as a question. *"Think back upon your life. That brilliant mind of yours, the ability to speak to animals, to speak to spirits!"* The woman raised a hand in an almost prayerful attitude. *"Many of my children are now gifted, but some, like you, are very special indeed. You have a complete gift. It*

manifests in all that you are and all that you do. I am very proud of you, Jon." *"Thank you...Mother..."* *"Yes, that's it! Mother!"* The woman looked very pleased.

Suddenly I felt a wave of dizziness come over me, and emotions filled my being. I felt overwhelmed and felt myself falling. Suddenly the woman reached out and caught me, and I realized that this ghost was indeed quite real and substantial. *"You! You're real!"*

"Yes." the woman laughed. *"I'm just as real as you are, only a few millennia ahead of you."* *"Mother,"* I whispered. *"So many questions..."* *"Time enough for that later,"* replied Gaia. *"Now, I have gifts to give."*

Gaia made a gesture, and an ancient-looking book appeared floating before me.

"I have been observing your rune craft studies. You handle the words and gestures well, but what you are learning is a pretty decadent system. A good friend of mine by the name of Bestla wrote this ages ago. It's written in a much older version of your language, but I think you will be able to understand it. She wrote it for her son Odin, of whom I'm sure you have heard. It contains many things, including ways to create changes in reality."

The woman looked at me with laughter in her eyes. *"Such as what we are doing now,"* as she waved her arms wide around her. *"Not bad work if I do say so myself."* She commented with a satisfactory air.

I looked around me. *"What are we doing? What is this place we are in?"* I could see out, but it was as if I were looking through water. I could see the shapes of my father and our men, but they seemed frozen.

"We are in a displacement pocket." Mother said simply. *"It looks like we are inside of a dream, and that is the real world out there,"* I observed. *"That's quite a good analogy, Warden,"* quipped the woman. *"Such things are merely a process of thought and mathematics."*

"Am I dead?" I whispered, a fear rising in me for the first time. "No, Jon, you are very much alive. I needed to speak with you alone, and this was the best way to do it."

Gaia gestured to the book floating between us.

"Learn that while you travel. I would hate to see that brilliant mind of yours go to waste." "Yes, Mother, I will do my best." I reached for the book. Surprised yet again, that it indeed felt authentic.

"Now, for your next gift." The woman opened her hand, and a peculiar looking red stone appeared. "This is called a speaking stone. It functions like your ability to speak with animals. With this, however, you will be able to understand anyone who speaks to you. You will also be able to speak to them, and your speech will sound like theirs. It will meld with your natural gift and enhance it quite well, I think."

I looked at the spinning stone. "How do I use it?" I asked, suddenly feeling very much like a young child again among the highest scholars in the land. Gaia swiftly moved her hand up to my left ear, and I felt a sharp pinch on the inside. "It works without you having to do anything." Gaia stepped back. "You look good, Jon, very capable of the task at hand." She stepped back, looking me over. I felt very much like an ant must feel when observed by a curious child.

She cast an ominous gaze upon me. "Know this Warden; you are being tested by me, and by your father. Your journey will also be observed by powers greater than me." As I considered these words, Gaia stepped back and continued to do so, seeming to shrink, shimmer, and lose focus with each step.

"Learn from the book Warden. For all of your training and all of the weapons you wield, your greatest weapon is your mind." The shimmering ghost winked out of existence, and with her disappearance, the world as I knew it shifted back into being.

"Jon...Jon! Snap out of it, boy!" Father was shaking my shoulder roughly and had a worried look on his face. "Jon, what happened?" "I...I'm not sure," I replied, still stammering. "I was somewhere else, and the Lady of the Lands was with me."

My remark elicited oaths all around. In our world, all Ostmen knew of Gaia, but for most, she was a goddess of immense power who lived far away above Asgard, among the stars. I was beginning to think that it was not precisely the case. She had touched me. She was real. For all of the shimmering lights and swirling fog, she looked much as any beautiful woman would.

"She gave me this," holding the book out for my father to see. My father took the book and turned it over in his hands. Now that I had a better look at it, I could see it was a very well made book such as I had been reading with the Skalds at home in our keep.

Perhaps twice the span of my hand and half again as wide, the book was handsomely bound in dark leather with the pages being some kind of parchment that felt very thin but very tough at the same time. On the spine of the book were the words Knowledge is Power. On the face were two symbols intertwined as if there were no end or beginning to each.

"Knowledge and Power," my father said as he traced the symbols with his finger. "She said I was to read it while on my journey," I remarked as my father thumbed through its pages. "Looks to be a peculiar combination of mathematics and runecraft," he commented.

Father handed the book back to me. "She has been with us since our ancestors arrived some twenty generations past. She makes her presence known in many ways, but only one other time that I know of did she come to one man personally."

Jarl Rayneck crossed his arms and stroked his shaggy beard. "The book makes my head swim just

looking at its pages. It was not meant for men, such as me to read." Rayneck the Red, my father looked at me with admiration and something else I couldn't read. Fear? Wonder? I could not tell his thoughts.

"I had the Skalds, the Seidre, and the Galdr teach you because I felt you were special. I had no idea how special, though. Father shook his head and frowned, handing the book back to me. "It is too much for me to understand," he said. "I'm just an old soldier. You are or will be, much more, I think."

Now it was my turn to frown. "I never wanted to be more than a Warden father. Father snorted and chuckled, "to be a Warden is to be much. It is clear that our lady favors you and has for some time. How do you feel about the attention of a beautiful goddess?"

"I feel as though I am a tiny fish in a very great lake," I responded. "She felt like she was real, father! At the same time, it all felt so unreal as to make my head spin." "Aye, that is the way of Gaia. Her ways are always a mystery," my father responded simply.

A thought came to me suddenly, "you said this happened before? Was it someone you knew that she visited?" "Ha! That was long ago!" Father exclaimed, "she came to Thorvald just before our ancestors arrived here."

"So Gaia is a Benefactor?" I asked. The circle had broken up, and it was only myself, father, and Adnar standing near the campfire. "No, she is not a Benefactor," Father responded thoughtfully.

"From what the sagas tell us, the Benefactors are nothing like us except that they walk upright and have two arms and two legs." Father regarded me with his piercing gaze. "You saw her. You said she looked like us?" "Aye father," I replied. "Put her in women's clothing, and she would look much like any other beautiful woman of high breeding." "Aye, and that is how she appeared before to Thorvald," father said simply.

He looked upon me with concern. "The hour grows late. Will you retire before going on this extraordinary journey?" "Nay father," I replied, looking at the sun setting over the Northern peaks where I would travel. "I need to find our new friend before he eats a whole herd of deer or something just as damaging to the local wildlife."

"Ho! I nearly forgot about him with all of this going on!" Exclaimed father. Father grabbed me in a great bear hug, and we embraced as only a father and son understood. Rayneck then held me at arm's length with his hands on my shoulders and held my gaze with a long silence and the hint of a smile.

"What, father?" I was puzzled. The Jarl was rarely affectionate towards any of his children and certainly never in the presence of his soldiers. "Tis nothing, my son. It's just you seem different suddenly. No more a boy who is swinging his wooden sword, but still not yet a man. I am worried about your journey."

Touched by his sudden show of affection, I placed my hand on my father's shoulder. "Worry not Father for Gaia is sure to be with me. I feel her even now." My father nodded and clasped my arm. "Best be on your way, the path North will not make itself. That's your job." I walked from the camp and was headed toward the woods when Adnar appeared beside me.

"On your way, then?" He queried, smiling as I jumped. It had never ceased to amaze me how my brother, a man the size of a bear with an attitude to match, could move so silently as to shock people.

Quickly recovering from his startling appearance, I responded simply, "Aye." Adnar chuckled. He had always enjoyed shocking people, especially me. Adnar's eyes were sad, looking at me. "You are ready?" He asked, looking me over and checking the fit of my gear, and the position of my weapons. "Aye, it all seems to fit well," I replied, looking up at him.

Again I was puzzled. Adnar was a man after my father. Not prone to affection or even much talk. Although we were brothers, he was ten years my senior and was never much for doing other than working in his forge or going on raids with my father.

Adnar adjusted a belt on my harness and gave me a final inspection. "A parting gift for you, brother." Reaching behind him and under his bearskin cloak, he produced a leather case and two sheathed knives.

He handed me the knives. "Stick 'em in your boots and fasten 'em into the laces," he said, regarding me seriously. "Never know when you'll need 'em." I knew that Adnar carried four such on his person. on his advice, I secured a knife in each boot as he watched.

"What's that?" I asked, nodding to the leather case. "Ah, yes! I have been working on this for a while with your sister to give you for your birthday."

Adnar opened the case and pulled out a most unusual looking bow. Fully a foot shorter on each side than our standard bows with an odd curve outward at each end. The entire bow seemed to be bound in some sort of metal wire. The notches for the bowstring were at each end, and the bowstring looked as well to be of metal. As I thumbed the bowstring testing it, there was a soft, musical thang.

"Tis quite something!" I remarked. "Aye," replied Adnar, "The wirework covers a metal fold that I saw one O' them eastern swordsmiths use. Here try it," he said, handing me the bow. "*Light*," I thought immediately. Most of the bows I had used until now were heavier and made of wood. The bow had little adornment and appeared to be built as compact and as flexible as possible while remaining sturdy.

"More a weapon than a tool for hunting," I stated as I pulled the string back. The draw seemed very light. At my questioning look, Adnar commented. "Near as I can

figure, the draw weight is somewhere around 30 stone, could be more." "Impossible," I exclaimed. "Aye to look at it, it would seem so. Adnar looked at the bow with a sense of admiration, " 'Tis a beauty, eh?" "To be sure!" I replied.

I looked down, suddenly feeling embarrassed. "Adnar, this is too much. I'm just a Warden going on a trek. Others have done so with far less than this."

"Take the bow," my brother insisted. "Consider your Trek as a test of its function. Now it was Adnar's turn to look down. " I expect great things from you. So does Father even if he does not say so."

I felt quite emotional suddenly, and it was almost shameful. "Thank you, Bear," I replied, using his childhood nickname and clasping his outstretched arm as he offered it. "I will do my best, although I do not know what you and Father expect of me."

Adnar suddenly grabbed me in a fierce hug that pushed the wind from my lungs and lifted me off the ground. "We expect you to come home safe, Jon." He whispered in my ear. With that said, he put me down and quickly turned his back and walked away.

I turned back toward the woods, carrying the new bow; I disappeared into the growing darkness.

From across the camp, Rayneck watched his son vanish into the forest like a shadow. Adnar walked up with two mugs of ale and handed one to Rayneck.

"Worried?" asked Adnar. "I worry for all of you when you are out from our lands," replied Rayneck, raising his mug in response to Adnar's. "'Tis the way of fathers I feel." "Bah!" Rayneck suddenly exclaimed. "Enough of this womanly goings-on! Let's get drunk!" "Good idea!" replied Adnar enthusiastically, and father and son strode to the campfire to drink with the men and to sing old songs, boast of battle and bedding buxom golden-haired women.

Within the depths of the woods, a silent watcher stood stock still, observing the ways of men. Then with a silent

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flap of its wings, the shadow propelled into the night. There had been a whispering voice in the wind that compelled action, "*Follow him.*"

⚔

Chapter Two

The Steward of Threa

Myrnran Gaia looked out the viewing window from her station at the Northstar Observatory. The giant spherical ship had been in orbit around Threa for as long as she could remember. *"half a million years and not a day over thirty,"* she thought as she idly looked at one of her slim, ivory-colored hands.

Although her people had achieved the highest levels of science, they couldn't stop the ravages of time. Finally, at the ripe old age of two hundred, she had consented to transfer her consciousness into a construct she affectionately called her Forever Suit.

In every aspect, she still appeared human. *"Just a little on the pale side,"* she mentally smirked for the hundred millionth time. Synthetic blood flowed through veins and arteries cleverly designed to be identical to the human circulatory system.

She could still touch and feel; she could even eat and perform bodily functions, although neither were primary requirements. She felt emotion. That was what she was feeling now. Deep feelings swam through her mind as she looked out, wistfully at the window at the planet below. It had been ages since she had stepped onto the surface in physical form. Her recent visit had been necessary.

Ever since the Benefactors had started the transplant of human control groups from Earth in the wake of cataclysms, she had been here watching. Myrnran's previous post as Steward had been Earth. However, disasters and life-destroying events had kept happening to the life-giving but unstable planet.

It was after the last Extinction Level Event that she had been transferred to Threa to monitor the social and evolutionary experiments. Her people and the Benefactors had always been interested in the events of Earth, and the North Star Observatory database had documented transplant events back as far as just before the Meteor Impact.

Earth's Steward before her time had been forcibly removed from his position for not having the foresight to warn his superiors of the coming danger.

A very hurried transplant of as many species as could be moved began at that time. The result had been that the different species had cascaded through different periods in Threa's history.

Being a planet in a nearly perpetual primal state, when was never a consideration for transplants. For the Benefactors and Myrnran Gaia, what mattered was where on Threa to place the arrivals.

She remembered her time as Steward of Earth with mixed feelings. During her tenure, the Benefactors, in their infinite wisdom, decided to seed Earth with humans of a sort. The concept and method of delivery remained in the hands of the Stewards.

An accomplished Geneticist, Gaia had decided, along with fifteen of her colleagues, to use their essence to impregnate females from the most highly evolved indigenous population with the gene strain that would grow into modern humanity.

The experiment was considered an overwhelming success, and the Benefactors started transplanting humans from different times and eras from Earth to Threa to allow the species to thrive. Myrnran, at the forefront of the experiment, was transferred to Threa to monitor the continued social evolution of the species.

There, of course, had been others before humans. The records showed whole eras and civilizations that had

been wiped out on Earth before her Stewardship had begun. Before each cataclysm, the Benefactors had come to Earth. A control group of each species from across time was plucked from Earth and given a new home on Threa.

That was not a point of concern for Myrnran. With the other races who called Threa home, Myrnran's orders were clear. She was to monitor the interaction between humans and other Earth-based lifeforms that had evolved during her previous posting. She was not to interfere unless deemed necessary.

Fortunately for Myrnran, "necessary" was a rather broad area. The Steward of Threa was often left to her own devices when it came to interfering, and she tended to interact more with humans than what her mandate required. As such, her recent interaction with the Ostman called Jon had caught the attention of the Benefactors. There was no doubt her superior would be visiting soon.

Almost as if on cue, a portal opened up in the center of the bridge. Its swirling vortex shimmering black and violet. Through the portal stepped none other than Xclatru Ral. The gangly creature looked around the bridge and approving of what he saw stepped out from the vortex, which immediately closed after him with a swirl and a flash of light.

"Speak of the Devil," Myrnran smirked. *"The Devil, you know,"* thought back Ral. The two regarded each other as adversaries. *"It has been some time Steward of Threa,"* stated Ral. "A hundred years and then some, but then who's counting?" noted Myrnran sarcastically.

"Your human concept of time after so long is disturbing," Ral replied. *"Your body was designed in such a way as the ravages of time are no longer a concern."* "Yeah yeah, I got it Bug Eyes" Myrnran looked up at the Benefactor with the closest approximation of tired exasperation that her synthetic features could muster.

"I watched your lecture the other day," Myrnran stated, changing the subject. *"Ah yes,"* the barest hint of a smile curved the edges of Ral's vestigial mouth. *"What did you think?"*

"A fair approximation of events, but I still oppose portraying the Stewards as some form of spiritual deification to the more enlightened races."

Ral shrugged his bony grey shoulders. *"People need something to believe in that is higher than themselves. Such is the way of more primitive races."*

"The Common Alliance is not a group of primitive races, Ral," Myrnran replied hotly. "They are the galactic total of all of the highly evolved life forms we now know." *"Yet they all share some form of belief in a higher level of spiritual existence,"* Ral replied.

"It has been clear to us since the beginning of the partnership between our two races that maintaining a cover of spiritual deification was necessary to satisfy the need for sentient beings to understand why they exist." Turning to the large view screen that covered one side of the ship's bridge. *"In nearly three hundred million years, we have found that only humans can achieve the same level of existence we have."*

Myrnran rolled her optics at the comment, "as a scientist; I still find it hard to believe that humans are the only race you have encountered that has the potential for reaching a higher level of being than your people have!"

"Oh?" Queried Ral. *"You have seen the research. Although much knowledge of our first encounters is lost to history, it has become clear that humans and humans alone can effectively meld with the kind of technology that now sustains your life."*

Ral held up his arms with his fingers spread wide. *"My people for all of its longevity and endeavors are still finite...still nothing more than flesh and blood tied to mortal shells."* Ral turned back to the Steward. *"In time, even we*

will cease to exist, and it will be the task of humans to continue in our absence as Benefactors."

Myrnran pondered the words. Humans. A term coined on Earth in the latter part of its current civilization. From the data and research, it was known only among the Benefactors that humans were the first race discovered when Ral's people had taken to the stars.

"So, you seriously believe that the rest of the intelligent races of the galaxy that we know of do not know the true origins of Humanity"? Myrnran scoffed. "I find that hard to even conceive of Ral!"

Ral gave a mental sigh. The argument was an old one and never really resolved even after the thousands of years that the two of them had worked on the Threa experiment. *"As I told you before, they know that humans originated on Earth because that's where humans were discovered."*

Ral raised a hand to his head. Myrnran was among the most intelligent of her kind, but her stubbornness, a trait well known among humans, was infuriating at times even for his patience.

"You cannot hide an entire origin species you Bug-Eyed Scarecrow!" scolded Myrnran. "At least ten races have visited Earth in its history for one reason or another!" *"Yes, Earth, but Earth was seeded with humans after a sort by you, Steward. As were all of Earth's higher life forms, starting five hundred thousand Earth years ago."*

Ral crossed his arms and recited a passage from his vast memory *"In the beginning God created..."* "I'm not a god!" Myrnran interrupted vehemently. "I'm a scientist who happens to have a lot of time on her hand's thanks to this construct you stuck me into!"

Ral looked down at the woman with his giant black eyes. *"Nevertheless, you are responsible for the appearance of humans on Earth. You manipulated the*

indigenous population to produce said humans, and for a very long time, had a direct influence over the evolution of humanity, often above your directive of non-interference." Ral put his hands on his narrow hips and regarded the petulant woman. *"How godlike of you,"* Ral stated condescendingly.

Myrnran lowered her eyes. Of course, Ral was right. She had meddled far too many times, and in some cases, that resulted in terrible consequences.

"It's because..." *"You have a conscience,"* Ral finished her words and continued.

"Yes, I know, so you have told us time and again. It is the reason why you meddle so in affairs better left to evolution and social experimentation. It's the reason why we had you transferred to Threa. Once we determined that the Earth was too unstable to ensure the continued evolution of the numerous species that you and your contemporaries seeded the planet with."

Ral pointed one long bony finger at her, *"and it is the reason why you are still meddling in human affairs above and beyond your mandate even here on Threa!"* Ral crossed his arms again.

"Which is the chief reason why I am here, not to engage in a debate with you over whether you consider yourself a god or not." Ral raised his hand, and a hovering globe with an image of Myrnran and Jon appeared. "I had a feeling that's what this was about," replied Myrnran, suddenly feeling very small.

"Indeed!" Ral replied with a hint of sarcasm. *"You have been meddling with this particular colony and specifically this family unit ever since they were transplanted here, and we want to know why!"* Ral put his hands back on his hips and leaned forward, not unlike a parent scolding a child.

Myrnran collected her thoughts for a moment and took a deep breath. *"As good a time as any,"* she thought.

"The Numitgart colony, while interesting, is not the focus." Myrnran reached over to touch a key on her virtual board, and a picture of two DNA helices appeared.

"As you know, the combination of solar radiation and magnetic activity on Threa has caused human DNA strains to adapt to survive. The adaptations are random and fluctuate. In nearly every case, the adaptation also modified the gene marker of the original seeding, which occurred on Earth. Myrnran keyed again, and a graph of gene marker modification over time appeared.

We placed special identifying markers to track the proliferation of humans over history. To see how different types of humans would interact with each other." Myrnran picked up a tablet from her table and handed it to Ral. "I'm sure this is all known to you, but here is the research for your reference."

Ral took the device and glanced over the material. Thorough and detailed as usual, it did indeed show where there was one original gene strand which branched into three strands, then ten, then one hundred. After several thousand variants, the marker became nearly impossible to follow.

Ral shrugged. *"This is common with any species that procreate as often as humans do. It still doesn't explain why you are so interested in this one subject."*

Myrnran smiled. "That's where it gets interesting. Look here," Myrnran motioned to the gigantic view screen on the bridge, and a series of DNA strands appeared. "These are the original fifteen gene sets placed into the indigenous population on Earth.

We assumed that the strains would adapt and eventually become indistinguishable from the DNA of the test subjects. However, and for reasons, we can't explain, traces of five of the original markers have shown up in this colony, and the strongest trace was the first marker."

Myrnran brought up the image of her and Jon's interaction. She gestured at the screen. "It's in him," she stated, the wonder and admiration in her voice unmistakable. "*Indeed?*" thought Ral, "*now that is interesting.*" "Agreed," responded Myrnran. "The odds of finding five genetic markers in the same colony are a million to one. The statistics are astronomical that I found the original marker trace in this one human."

Myrnran checked her notes. "As the research will tell you, gene splicing with human DNA was still in a primitive stage at the time of the experiment. The easiest way to introduce the human genome into the indigenous population was to inseminate selected females with fertilized human eggs, accelerating natural evolution by nearly half a million years."

Myrnran brought up the picture of Jon with his specifications running in a column alongside it. "The Stewards at the time, including me, were the volunteers who gave their eggs for the experiment." Myrnran turned back to Ral. "Fifteen Stewards, fifteen eggs, each marked for evolutionary tracking. I am sure that you are familiar with this information."

Myrnran put a hand to her head. Even in her synthetic state, trying to bring the science to a reasonable level was difficult. The experiment had indeed taken on a life of its own. The melding of the indigenous species of Earth and Human DNA had worked well, too well in fact. Trying to track so many genetic variants became too difficult. Therefore, Star Observatories were built to track human evolution.

Myrnran rubbed her temple and cast her steady gaze on Ral's expressionless face. "Since I started the social integration experiment, I was also the first egg donor. I left a special marker on the DNA chain so that if my progeny were to thrive, I would know of it."

Ral stood reading through the column of information next to Jon's picture. "*This looks very familiar,*" said Ral, "have I seen this before?"

"Yes, about half a million years ago," replied Myrna, and with a wave of her hand, the giant view screen split, and next to Jon was the image of a small blond woman in glasses and a lab coat.

"*What!?*" Ral exclaimed, "*that's...that's...*" "Yeah, it's me," responded Myrnran. "Jon is a direct descendant of the first egg I provided for the experiment. Not only that, but his genetic make-up is nearly identical to mine when I was his age. We could be siblings."

Myrnran punched in a sequence of keys, and several strands of numbers came to the forefront of the screen. "Although we, of course, could not administer a traditional IQ test, I was able to manipulate events in such a way as to test his intelligence. He has read all of the current lore of his people and all of the surrounding colonies. Even material brought from Earth during colonization."

Ral now looked very interested. "*What are your findings?*" Asked Ral, now scribbling notes on the tablet Myrnran had given him. "Well, aside from being an amazing physical specimen of his race, he has what appears to be a nearly photographic memory with a recall level that rivals mine at his age.

He is also acutely attuned to sensory input from other brain waves." "*Telepathic,*" Ral queried? "In a matter of speaking," replied the Steward. "He sees images. And due to a highly developed natural empathy he inherited from his mother, he can interpret intent and emotion. At least that was until I gave him a wave translator."

Ral stood to his full height abruptly. "*You gave him tech? Seriously!?!?*" "Relax, Ral," Myrnran raised her hands in defense. "It's nearly ancient by our standards, and the

model I used is more of a focus for his ability to communicate with other lifeforms."

"Does it enhance anything else?" questioned Ral. "No, it won't," Myrnran said very positively. *"What about the other thing you gave him? The book?"* Myrnran smiled. "It's just something to help him better understand what he calls the Great Knowledge is. It's something Bestla wrote ages ago. For you, it would be rather boring, I think."

Ral eyes bored into her as if attempting to read her thoughts; thankfully, her synthetic form made it difficult to understand what she was thinking. *"Hmmm, I'm sure it's more than that, Steward. Bestla was never a proponent of our alliance. She preferred human independence."*

Myrnran raised her hands helplessly. "Look, Ral, give me a break, ok?" Jon's the closest thing I have ever had to a real son." *"Unusual time to develop a maternal instinct, it's been quite some time since you were able to bear children."*

"Hence the reason why he's so special," replied Myrnran. "In many ways, he is my child. As such, I feel compelled to not only interact with him but to assist him in the endeavor he is undertaking."

Ral clasped his hands behind him and paced for a time, considering the information Myrnran had given him. Although he did not approve of the Stewards meddling in human affairs, it seemed there was little harm in Myrnran focusing on one lone human. It might be an interesting experiment to see how this human interacted with different species during his journey.

Finally, coming to a decision, he stopped his pacing in front of Myrnran and faced her. *"If nothing else, it will keep you occupied and, therefore, out of Threan affairs as a whole, at least for a time."* Ral handed the tablet back. *"Document your findings during his journey. You are not to directly assist him unless his life is in danger"* Ral pointed

at her again, *"That is your directive, Steward! Do not meander from it due to some misguided motherly instinct."*

Myrnran stood up and gave a rather insolent salute. "Yes, Benefactor," Myrnran replied snidely.

Ral threw up his hands in exasperation yet again. With a wave of his hand, the portal appeared again, and Ral stepped into it. *"I will be watching Steward,"* Ral fired as a parting shot before he disappeared.

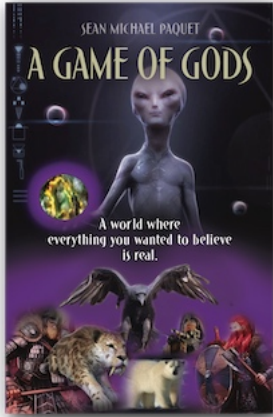
Myrnran, once again alone on the bridge, considered Ral's parting words. "Alpha to my command." There was an audible hum, and the artificial intelligence systems computer answered, "I am Alpha. What do you require?"

Myrnran pursed her lips, and her brow furrowed in thought. "Scramble a set of observer drones to track the bio-organism displayed on the bridge screen. Secondly, I want a grid satellite area five hundred miles around his location. I want optical feeds of the drones and the satellite on the main viewer until further notified."

"As you wish, Steward," replied the metallic voice. "Will there be anything else?" Myrnran thought for a moment. "Yes, I want you to forego automatic reports to Prime during this experiment. I will review and edit manually before transmission and archiving."

The computer was silent. "Clandestine Operations Protocol Steward?" The voice intoned. "No," replied Myrnran, "let's just say the information is Need to Know, and there are some things our Benefactors don't need to know." Alpha hummed again. "As you wish, Steward."

With her task finished, Myrnran turned back to the viewscreen. *"Ok, Jon. Let's get you going, the Benefactors never wanted your people to go where you are going, and never allowed observation in this region, and I want to know why."*



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