

# RAGNARÖK

The End Of A World

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## **Ragnarök**

*(Old Norse: Doom Of The Gods)*

*In Scandinavian mythology, the end of the  
world of gods and men.*

# 1

Amy leaned back in her faux leather chair at Lowell Observatory, Arizona, shook her head and looked at Ed in disbelief.

“How can you possibly not like coffee? You spent two years on secondment at the SONEAR Observatory in Brazil. You know, the country where coffee comes from?”

This was a battle that Ed had fought often, especially when he'd been living in Brazil. Most Brazilians had thought him a freak for not liking coffee, especially when they saw him putting milk in his cups of tea. He'd lost count of the number of times he'd had to explain that it wasn't the same tea that they were used to — what's known in England as herbal tea — but a blend that's best with added milk.

He took a sip of his tea, deliberately emphasizing the slurp to annoy his colleague.

“When I was a kid, there was a coffee shop on the main street. Not where you'd buy coffee like Starbucks or Costa but where they had a machine grinding coffee beans in the window. It stank and I've been traumatized ever since.”

Amy put her coffee mug back on her desk and walked over to the bank of computer monitors. She peered at the screen of one of

them.

“Ed, come and take a look at this, will you?”

Amy’s project partner strolled over to the screens, placing his mug of tea next to hers on the way, and taking care to slip a piece of paper under the mug first. He knew Amy had a pathological dislike for coffee mug rings on furniture — even at work.

“What am I looking at?”

Amy pointed at a blob on the screen.

“Have you seen that before?”

Ed stared at the blob.

“That particular blob? You mean amongst all the other blobs on the screen?”

He looked closer.

“No, I don’t think so. I’m pretty sure it wasn’t there yesterday.”

Amy tutted.

“I don’t think it was either. Better run a historical. If it wasn’t, it must be going fast to suddenly appear out of nowhere like that.”

Ed went back to his laptop and brought up the previous day’s images.

“Nope. Not there yesterday. I’ll bring up the rest of the week’s data, in case we missed something.”

Amy stood behind Ed and watched him pull up the week’s images of that particular part of

the cosmos. There were thousands of similar blobs on the screen but not the one that Amy's keen eyes had spotted. She peered at Ed's computer.

"So it's just popped up today, out of nowhere? How's that even possible?"

Ed scratched behind his ear, wishing he hadn't overslept that morning and had had time to shower. He hoped that Amy hadn't noticed. He didn't think she had — if she had, she surely wouldn't be standing so close to him. He promised himself that he'd nip home at lunchtime and freshen up.

"It *isn't* possible. Or, at least, it shouldn't be."

Amy peered at the screen again.

"And yet, there it is."

Ed grinned.

"Maybe it's a Romulan Warbird that's just uncloaked."

Amy chuckled.

"Yeah. And I'm Captain Janeway."

She made her way across the room and stared at the large screen monitor.

"Post the details to *The Astronomer's Telegram* and send a report to *The Minor Planet Center*."

She paused for a moment.

"Hold on. Check the latest *Minor Planet*

*Electronic Circular* first. We don't want to duplicate a discovery."

Ed drained his mug of its contents and took it over to the sink. He sprayed a little washing-up liquid into it, topped it up with water, and used his hand to swish the mug clean. After another rinse under the faucet, he turned the mug over and tapped it on the plastic drainer to get rid of any water residue, before placing it on the drainer to dry.

"One thing that bothers me, Amy, is how and why it suddenly appeared on our screen. I mean, we should've seen it coming in, surely?"

Amy shrugged.

"We should've. And I have no explanation for why we didn't. I mean, it must have been around all the time. We just didn't see it until it arrived at those specific coordinates."

Ed leaned back in his chair.

"The mysteries of the universe. Will we ever know them all?"

Amy cleaned her coffee mug.

"I doubt it. There'll always be one more thing we don't know."

Ed checked the most recent *MPEC* and saw there was no mention of any Near-Earth Object at the location they'd specified so he completed the online forms and sent news of their

discovery to the two reporting agencies.

The next day, Ed was up with the lark. He'd been too excited at the discovery to fall into a deep sleep, his mind instead preferring a series of power naps. He arrived at the observatory bright, fed, and freshly showered.

"Is the kettle on, Amy?"

Amy had arrived at work a couple of minutes before him.

"Of course. I know you're useless until you've had your morning cuppa."

As if to confirm its presence, the kettle's switch clicked up and the small red light went out. Ed took his mug out of the cupboard and carefully placed a PG Tips teabag inside, holding it down with a teaspoon as he poured the boiling water into the mug. At first, the liquid was a rather insipid light golden color but a little prodding of the teabag with the spoon soon remedied that and the tea turned a deeper richer shade of brown.

There was already a carton of semi-skimmed milk open in the fridge and he carefully added just enough of it to turn the liquid his ideal color. A few drops of sweetener and his morning tea was ready.

"Do you want me to make your coffee?"



Amy shook her head.

“Thanks but no thanks. I’ll do it myself. Your coffee tastes like crap.”

Ed laughed.

“Hardly surprising really, seeing as I don’t drink the stuff.”

Amy took over in the kitchen area and prepared her coffee.

“Have you checked the NEO yet?”

Ed took a sip of his tea which was still too hot to drink.

“Nope. Just going to do it now.”

Ed looked at the large screen monitor.

“Amy?”

“Yes?”

“It’s moving.”

“Serious?”

“Very serious. Look.”

Ed touched the screen and a second image of the NEO displayed, a little to the left of the original image. He repeated the process and a third slightly displaced image showed. Then a fourth, a fifth, and a sixth, seventh and eighth.

Amy went to her laptop and confirmed the coordinate information that had been drawn from the image data.

“Shit. It *is* moving. And fast too. Come on, we’d better start calculating its trajectory. We

don't want any nasty surprises.”

## 2

Naeax Lurjan was a little nervous but nobody would have known by looking at her. She oozed visual confidence and her true feelings were well hidden — her six crew members needed to have total trust in their captain. She was no novice — she'd logged thousands of hours in space flights already — but had never captained a spaceship like the *Isasik* before. Then again, no Besean had — all previous flights of the Wakati class ship had been test missions manned by androids.

The Mighty Judkloren of Besea 1, leader of the planet of that name, rested his blue four-fingered hand on Naeax's shoulder.

"You'll be fine, Captain Lurjan. I have complete faith in your ability to complete the mission favorably."

Her eyes grinned feebly.

"I'd be lying if I said I didn't feel the weight of responsibility on my shoulders."

Kayorg Kayro was busy admiring the ship's engine nacelles. They'd always had a fascination for spaceship design and were proud to be the mission's chief engineer.

"It's not just Besea 1 that's depending on this mission. It's Besea 2 and Besea 3 too. Not to mention Besea 4, which is the whole reason for

going in the first place.”

Kayorg’s eyes twinkled green.

“No pressure, though.”

Naeax scowled at her ship’s mechanic.

“You’re not helping, you know.”

Kayorg laughed.

“Just winding you up, Captain. I have complete trust in you. We all have.”

Naeax’s First Officer, Ka’lit Katagon, descended the boarding ramp.

“Anybody seen Be’do?”

The ship’s medical officer, Adroi Tadso, shook his head.

“He’ll turn up. He always does. Just not on time.”

Naeax sighed.

“At least he’s punctual once missions are underway. I think he just messes with us ‘cos he knows we can’t go without him.”

Kayorg moved their attention from the ship to its crew.

“I can fly it.”

Naeax nodded.

“I know, but that’s just in an emergency. No offense but Be’do *is* the best pilot in the fleet.”

Kayorg wasn’t going to argue. Each crew member had a specific job to do and theirs was to take care of the engines and other critical

systems.

A small commotion erupted at the entrance to the airlock as Be'do ran into view. He looked apologetically at Naeax.

“Sorry, Captain. A few last-minute goodbyes to be made.”

The Mighty Judkloren of Besea 1, who had been joined by his Besea 2 and Besea 3 counterparts watched as the crew of seven strode up the ramp that led to the entrance of the spacecraft and disappeared inside.

Alongside him, the Mighty Blaraico of Besea 2 beamed with pride. His nephew had been one of the chosen few. Of course, he knew that he would possibly never see Adroi again, something that his sister, the youngster's mother, would never acknowledge, but the crew's potential sacrifice was one worth making. Whatever happened, they were sure to go down in the annals of history as heroes.

The third of the planetary leaders, the Great Terator of Besea 3, not a particularly mechanically-minded man, leaned in towards the other two leaders and whispered.

“Why's the ship so big? There's only seven crew members. Surely a smaller ship would do just as well?”

The Mighty Judkloren of Besea 1 had graduated in astrophysics and spacecraft design before moving into politics and eventually becoming the leader of his planet. He enjoyed the opportunity to show off his expertise to his peers.

“The *Isasik* is propelled by a byproduct of a neutrino-cooled disk spinning around an artificially constructed black hole.”

The Great Terator’s face looked blank.

“I don’t understand a word you said.”

The Mighty Judkloren tried a simpler approach.

“The engine needs enormous amounts of dark energy to travel faster than light. That energy is a repulsive force and its expulsion pushes the spacecraft forwards at incredible speeds. We can travel at tens of times the speed of light using this technology.”

He paused and stared at the Great Terator.

“Any clearer?”

The leader of planet Besea 3 shook his head.

“No. Sorry.”

The Mighty Judkloren sighed.

“It’s a big engine and needs lots of fuel to make it go fast.”

An invisible lightbulb appeared above The Great Terator’s head.

“Now I understand. Why didn’t you just say that in the first place?”

On the bridge of The *Isasik*, Naeax settled into her captain’s chair, a marvel of ergonomic design. She could have quite comfortably sat in it for days on end if necessary but, on this particular ship, it was a luxurious folly. She and the crew would only stay on the bridge for the first few hours of the journey, while the ship left the dock and made its way into open space. After that, they would shut themselves safely inside the FTL cocoons so that they wouldn’t be killed by the effects of the Velocity Time Dilation that accompanies FTL flight and allows the ship to travel backward in time. She spun her chair around to bring the rest of her crew into her line of sight.

“Soon we’ll be setting off on the greatest mission that the Alliance has ever undertaken and I don’t need to tell you how important it is that we succeed. Billions of lives are depending on us.”

Kayorg clutched their chest, feigning a heart attack.

“No pressure then.”

Naeax chuckled. It was always good to have someone on board who was a bit of a joker. It

was good for crew morale. And she knew that when the time came for Kayorg to put their serious head-on, they would apply themselves one hundred percent.

Naeax continued.

“Are all the final embarkation checks done?”

A chorus of confirmation swept around the bridge.

The Captain, satisfied that everything was in order, initiated the departure protocol.

“Open space dock doors.”

The enormous twin doors of the bay slid open to reveal thousands of stars scattered across the dark vacuum of space. First Officer Ka’Lit Katagon took in the view. She loved the moment when a ship left the space dock and started its journey into deep space — especially if she was on board.

“I don’t know which view I prefer, from Besea 2 with the twinkling stars or from up here in orbit where the stars don’t twinkle but hold endless opportunities and mysteries.”

The noise of the giant docking clamps releasing the leviathan from its bondage interrupted Ka’Lit’s thoughts and brought her quickly back to the matter at hand.

“*Isasik* is free of docking clamps, Captain.”

Naeax nodded.



“Thank you, Ka’Lit.”

She turned to her pilot.

“Be’do, take us out.”

The pilot’s hands were a blur as he deftly tapped and waved his hands over his holographic console. The ship vibrated slightly as the impulse engines that would see the vessel safely to the Neutrino Drive Engagement Point kicked in, but the vibration was perfectly normal and nothing to worry about.

Thirty minutes later the *Isasik* came to a halt and the crew assembled in what was affectionately known as the Butterfly Room, as it housed the FTL cocoons in which the seven space travelers would spend the next few hours, protected from being converted into energy and spread out in the form of photons, an event that nobody wished to experience. The room housed twenty such cocoons but it was only exploration missions that utilized all of them, due to the need to accommodate a larger and more scientifically diverse crew. Seven was plenty enough for a mission such as Naeax and her team were tasked with.

With each crew member standing alongside their cocoon, it was now time not for goodbyes but *au-revoirs*. They all knew that there was always a chance of a cocoon failing and killing its

occupant but such an accident hadn't happened for nearly fifty solar orbits so they weren't overly concerned about the possibility.

On entering the Butterfly Room, each picked up an edible capsule containing *kroton* juice, an alcoholic spirit similar to champagne, and held it between their thumb and forefinger.

Naeax raised her capsule and held it up towards the ceiling of the bridge.

"I'd just like to say that I couldn't wish for a better crew and I look forward to seeing you again on the other side."

Kayorg cut in.

"Yes, but you have to say that Captain. You chose us."

Laughter rippled around the room. Naeax smiled.

"Yes, I did. But I chose you all because you're the best."

She looked at each of her crew in turn.

"To all of you."

Kayorg raised their capsule.

"To Besea 4, for Besea 4, and may we see her again soon."

She and the other six dropped their capsules into their mouths and bit down. The rush of intoxication that burst from the broken capsules was intense but also short-lived. Once the effect

had worn off, Naeax fist-bumped each of her team in turn.

“See you on the other side.”

They climbed inside their cocoon casings and lay back as the lids slid forwards and locked into place. A light blue gas filled the containers and engulfed and cryogenically froze the space travelers.

With everybody safely ensconced in their protective shells, the ship’s computer uttered three important words.

*“Initiating Neutrino Drive.”*