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Chapter 13

Chiira, 10 Keda, 4412, Faey Orthodox Calendar

Friday, 24 September 2027, Terran Standard Calendar

*Chiira, 10 Keda, year 1337 of the 97th Generation, Karinne
Historical Reference Calendar*

Foxwood East, Karsa, Karis

Prepare.

The *shaman* told him to prepare, and the moment he got back home after speaking to her, he began. The first thing he did was summon Zaa, closet himself off with her in his home office, and allow her to lift absolutely everything he had learned. Once she knew everything, they sat down and discussed in exhaustive detail the evolution of the symbiotes, what kind of threat the dark ones posed, and what they could do in order to prepare for their arrival. Their plans had to take into account the emergence of the symbiotes as a sentient species, since the *shaman* told him that their establishment in the galaxy would be the main impetus that would cause the dark ones to take notice of them and move to wipe them out. Once they had a good basic idea of how to deal with that, they spent nearly three hours just speculating with the CB units what kind of psychic powers the dark ones may possess. If they had completely replaced all technology in their civilization with some sort of psychic equivalent, from food collection to construction to social engagement to travel to combat, it meant that they

had developed abilities that allowed them to attain intergalactic capability without technology, without engines. They used those powers to build their ships, which for them was merely a conveyance that allowed them to move their physical bodies around so they could get in range to use their psychic powers. And they had already seen how they used it as a weapon, with the complete removal by unknown means of an entire *species* that they'd witnessed through getting a recording of what happened over in the B string. They had to have many more powers than what they'd seen, had learned how to expand their abilities to fulfill every requirement their society had, which had caused the CBIMs to present a list of every conceivable psychic power either proven by science or speculated may exist through fiction. They were dealing with a race that existed in a societal and development state beyond their imagination, so they searched the imaginations of writers and authors across the galaxy to see what *they* had imagined was possible.

They were there more than long enough to be missed by Dahnai and Estrella, who found their inquiries ignored as to why he hadn't come back to the summer palace. But that was the way it was going to be, since both he and Zaa didn't want to breathe a word of this to anyone else until they had time to thoroughly discuss it both with each other and with the CB units.

Once they hashed through that, they began the basic framework of what each of them could do to start preparing. For Jason, that was a hard pill to swallow, because he had to face a stark reality that put his oaths and his convictions in direct opposition to what he knew had to be done. And it was going to tear him apart to do it.

He could no longer keep the secret of biogenics from the galaxy.

There was no way the Karinnes could produce enough gestalts to arm the billions of Generations in the galaxy, and from what the *shaman* had told them, they would need *everyone* to fight the dark ones. It pained him deeply to admit it, but it meant that he had to show the others how to make biogenic crystals and then release the plans for both tactical and strategic-level gestalts so they could build them. Zaa agreed that it had to be done, just as reluctantly as he did, but convinced him that they only needed to show them how to build gestalts. The highly advanced applications of biogenics didn't have to be released, such as building biogenic architecture mainframe-level computers, or CB units. They would only release how to make the crystals to build gestalts, then force them to learn how to adapt the crystals to other applications on their own. That would at least slow down their development of biogenics and prevent the others from building highly sophisticated biogenic computer systems, which had unique advantages over moleculartonic computer architecture.

This was a fight for survival on the most basic level. The oaths meant *nothing* if they were all dead. He would just be a highly honorable corpse, whose stubborn pride had caused the deaths of *octillions* of living beings.

To protect the lives of everyone in the galactic cluster, to protect the far-flung cousins of the Faey in distant galaxies, he would reveal the greatest secret of the Karinnes to their allies so they could use them to build weapons to fight against the dark ones.

The other major decision that he made was that he would not hold back the Generation virus from Estrella and the Ulala. They had not vaccinated themselves yet, since the virus had been long dead before they started interacting with them face to face. In fact, no empire in the galaxy had started the official vaccination process yet, it had only been two months

since the vaccine was discovered. So they still had the option, and with what was coming, they may decide to take it in order to protect themselves. Or, they may decide not to take it in hopes that the dark ones would pass them by instead of exterminate them, so it was Jason's duty to convince them that that was not going to save them. Either way, it would be their choice as to what to do. He could inform and advise, but in the end, it was their choice. And it was not Jason's place to force them to do anything, no matter how much he may disagree with their decision.

In what was coming, the greatest defense against the dark ones was as many Generations as they could put in opposition to them, all of them armed with gestalts and trained as much as possible.

Again, this was a fight for survival, and he could ignore *nothing* that might increase their chances of success. If that meant allowing exogalactic civilizations to become Generations, then he would give it to them. He would deal with the consequences of violating his oaths afterward, while he was alive to come to grips with what he had done.

So, Jason was going to throw away his oaths, his honor, he was going to cause untold death and destruction in the distant future as gestalt-armed aggressive empires used Karinne technology to conquer and cause pain and misery, in order to prevent the extermination of everyone in the entire galactic cluster in the near future. Blood would be on his hands, stain his legacy, and he could only hope that those who would suffer because of his decisions could forgive him, because he felt like he had no choice. For them to even *have* the chance to live in the future, he had to seal their fate with the decisions he made now.

It made him no longer fit to be the Grand Duke. When this was over, presuming they survived, he would abdicate his position and install Rann in

his place. Violating the oaths he lived by since taking the throne was not something he could simply excuse or ignore. Even though he was doing so for a good reason, it still made him unfit to rule because it meant that he could no longer be trusted to do what was right. Rann would restore the honor of the House and the integrity of the Dukal line while Jason spent the rest of his life roaming the cluster trying to prevent anyone from misusing the technology that Jason had given them to stop the dark ones.

It was nearly sunset by the time Jason and Zaa involved anyone else in their discussions, and it came in the form of the members of the Accords being summoned to Karis in person, along with Shakizarr, Holikk, and Voss, who represented some of the largest and most powerful empires in the galaxy, and were all also Generations. The CB units represented themselves as holograms to attend the meeting. Sirri, Rann, and Shya were also called in to attend the meeting, as was Songa, who was already privy to the information. Jason and Zaa kept them waiting as they arrived, joining Dahnai and the others who were already there. Once the last invited guest arrived, Voss, Jason and Zaa met them in the only place large enough in his house for all of them, the outdoor tables out on the deck. In that nearly surrealistic idyllic setting, Jason and Zaa explained everything they'd learned from the Parri. To prove it, Jason had Songa reveal the results of her investigation of the symbiotes over the day.

"There is definitely change in them," she surmised after going over a lot of technical medical information. "They are evolving, just as the Parri said they had. The symbiotes here on Karis are *very* different from the ones in Kirri space, showing signs they've been affected by the Generation retrovirus that they carried. In a way, they have become Generations themselves," she stressed. "They haven't exhibited the behavior the Parri

warned us about, but I will say that the *potential* for them to gain those abilities is there.”

“And that’s our timeline,” Jason said after her. “The Parri told me that it will be the awakening of the symbiotes that will attract the attention of this god-like race, and that they’ll come and wipe out all life in *this entire galactic cluster*,” he stressed. “That gives us time to prepare for them. Songa, how long do you estimate it will take them to gain the abilities the Parri told us about?”

“I can’t answer that accurately, Jason,” she answered. “It may take them takirs, it may take them years. It’s going to depend entirely on how quickly they achieve the collective sentience she warned us about. We can intentionally slow down that process to buy us more time, but as to exactly when it will happen, I can’t say.”

“How can we slow it down?” Zaa asked.

“From what I can tell from what the Parri told us, they’re going to gain collective awareness through their symbiotic connection to their hosts,” she replied. “We can introduce some protein chains that will cause them to have trouble communicating with their hosts. It won’t do them any harm, and it won’t harm the hosts either. It will just make it harder for them to interface with their host’s nervous system. That will slow down their development, and buy us time. Months, perhaps years, but more time is more time.”

“And you’re sure it won’t harm the symbiotes? Remember, dear, we’re going to *need* them when the dark ones come,” Jason asked.

“I’m certain, dear. I can send my data to Krazrou’s medical specialists so they can check my research. After all, the Kirri know more about the symbiotes than anyone else.”

“That would be the wisest course of action,” Krazrou agreed. “I’ll put our entire medical division on it.”

“Cyvanne, can you transmit my research to the Kirri medical division please?” Songa asked, looking at the hologram of Cyvanne hovering near the house wall. Cyvanne was the primary CBIM in service to the Medical Service, since she was also the CBIM in control of disaster response, which involved the Medical Service.

“I’ll have it on its way in just a moment,” she answered.

“Let me warn them it’s coming,” Krazrou said, putting a finger to his interface to send a message back to Kirri’arr.

Shakizarr spoke up. “I’m sure you’re expecting this question, Jason, so I will ask it. You’re that certain of this? You trust the Parri that implicitly, that you will throw the entire galaxy into turmoil over their vague warnings?”

“Yes,” he replied bluntly. “I’ve seen what the Parri can do, Shakizarr, and I do *not* discount them. They are beings that have developed abilities that would make them look like gods to the uneducated, my friend. They simply don’t show them off. I have absolutely no doubt that what the *shaman* told me is true, to the point where I am about to do something that I would never, ever do in any other circumstance.”

“And what is that?”

“Release biogenic technology to the other Generations,” he answered bluntly, which caused multiple gasps across the deck. “The Karinnes simply don’t have the production capacity to make enough gestalts to fight off the dark ones, so I’m releasing the process of making the biogenic crystals used

in gestalts and the technical specs for all classes of non-CB unit gestalts to the other Generation empires. Everyone needs to be building gestalts, as many gestalts as you can possibly make, because we're going to need every single one of them. While you're doing that, we'll be training you in how to use them, so you can field fully combat-rated Generations. The Parri told me that the only way we're going to survive is if we unify against the dark ones, and that nothing, absolutely *nothing*, can be held back. I'd rather face the dishonor of violating my oaths and live with the knowledge that the technology I release today may cause pain and suffering hundreds of years in the future than selfishly hold back biogenics and doom us all to extermination."

"In this the Kimdori do support the Grand Duke," Zaa declared in a powerful voice. "Basic survival requires that the rules we have followed before mean nothing now."

"Maybe now all of you fully understand just how much I believe in the Parri's warning," he stated strongly. "They have never, *ever*, been wrong. About *anything*. And they have access to information that we would never get otherwise. Plus, they have no reason to lie. What gain would there be in it for them to throw the entire galaxy into turmoil, Shakizarr? They have no interest in politics. They actively reject technology. If they wanted to conquer us all, I'd bet that they could pull that off any time they please, but they have no interest in power or rule. They spend their entire lives looking within, not without, walking what they call the path of truth. Simply put, they *don't care* about the world we occupy. But they *do* care about us as people, as living beings, and they're warning us now to give us a fighting chance. I'm not discounting that warning, and neither should you. I know it may be a little crazy, but be honest. You've known me for years, Shakizarr.

You've seen the things I can do that some people call magic. You've seen that I don't cast a reflection. Since the Parri taught me those things, doesn't it stand to reason that they can do far more than me? Don't dismiss their mystical powers just because you don't understand them. If you trust me, Shakizarr, trust them. Because I trust the Parri with my *life*."

"Jason makes an important point," Sk'Vrae called, stepping over to stand behind Jason, and she put her massive clawed hands on his shoulders, looming over him with her sheer size. "Jason has ever been an honest and true friend, to all of us, but especially to the Urumi. He spoke for us, defended us, even after we wronged him and his people by attacking them at the deceptive behest of the Consortium, and he has our unwavering support. He wouldn't be making these claims if he did not believe them. And though I don't understand the Parri, I trust Jason enough to put my trust in the trust he has in them. The Urumi are with you, Jason," she told him, leaning over him and looking down into his eyes. "The kindness you have showed my people over the years is a debt that I will be happy to repay in your hour of need."

"It's not just my need, Sk'Vrae, it's the need of us all," he told her, patting her hand fondly.

"I doubt any of us are going to say no," Kreel said seriously. "Just the sheer threat of his warning should be enough for all of us to take it seriously. Sk'Vrae does make a good point, though. If Jayce says it's true, then by Grimjara's whiskers, it's true. He'd be insane to lie to us about something like *this*. And I've had enough talks with the Parri *shaman* to respect the fact that she's not the primitive that she pretends to be. I don't know exactly just how much her people can do, but I've seen too much of what they can do to not believe them now."

“What have you seen, Kreel?” Voss asked.

“The *shaman* who lives here can separate her soul from her body and send it out to roam the universe,” he answered. “She once used that trick to read a letter on my desk back on Grimjar in real time, which just about blew my fur off. I’ll bet my whiskers that the Parri that can do that saw these dark ones coming, and they had the common decency to warn us.”

“Truly?” Voss asked.

Jason nodded. “It’s called Astral Projection, and it’s something that experienced Parri *shaman* can do,” he answered. “And that’s just *one* of the things she can do. Like I said, the Parri have evolved as a species in ways the rest of us won’t attain for hundreds of thousands, maybe millions of years. They are truly on a different level from us.”

“And to think, all this time, I thought they were just noble savages,” Grayhawk said quietly.

“Can *you* do that, Jason?” Holikk asked.

He snorted. “I *wish*,” he replied. “I still haven’t mastered the first skill she taught me, the one that’s why I no longer cast a reflection. I may learn how to astrally project in like fifty years, if I’m lucky.” He turned a chair around and sat down, leaning his arms on the back, and Sk’Vrae stepped up behind him and returned her clawed hands to his shoulders, almost as if protecting him. “We’re drifting a little off topic here,” he said. “The point of the matter is that we know they’re coming, and we have time to prepare. The *shaman* did tell me that our technology *will* be useful against the dark ones, so our ships, our mecha, our weapons, they’re going to matter. The Generations that engage them with gestalts will tie up their resources and leave them open to being attacked by conventional weaponry. That’s why

I'm going to build up as large a military as possible so we have as many assets as we can put on the field when they get here. Anyone not using a gestalt will be fighting using conventional arms, and quite a few that *will* be fighting using tactical gestalts will also be using conventional arms. Every ship, every mecha, is going to have a pilot fighting conventionally and a striker using the mecha's gestalt. We're going to build a two-pronged military on the model we use in the Navy, with conventional weapons supported by Generations using strategic class gestalts built into the ships, just expanded to *everything*. It was damn effective during the Syndicate War, and the Parri told me it will also be effective against the dark ones."

"It certainly was effective," Shakizarr agreed with a nod. "And it's a model that the rest of us should follow as we prepare."

"So you're on board then?" Kreel asked him.

"Yes," he replied simply. "Even if Jason turns out to be wrong, it only hurts my fiscal budget. Better to be ready than be dead. The consequences for ignoring this are too dire."

"All of you can send your shipbuilders and engineers here and we'll show you how we incorporate gestalts into line vessels and conventional mecha," Jason told them. "There's a bit of an art involved in installing gestalts into a mobile unit, due to power requirements and the stress it can put on the ship's superstructure. The gestalts in my larger ships aren't just one unit, they're an amalgam of many smaller units placed at strategic locations throughout the ship to maintain power balance and prevent the gestalt from putting too much stress on one section of the ship's superstructure."

"How would they do that?" Magran asked.

“Because TK has to obey some physical laws, and one of them is that the force the gestalt exerts is applied to the ship holding the gestalt. The law of equal and opposite reaction,” he answered. “The way biogenics works allows us to more or less chain together a bunch of smaller units in series, which allows them to combine their power into a collective whole. They don’t have to be right beside each other to be part of that chain. That also serves to distribute the reactive force on the gestalt throughout the ship, which reduces stress.”

“Which is what the *shaman* said the symbiotes would eventually learn how to do. They’ll learn it from the crystals,” Songa said.

Jason looked in her direction. “That’s a good point,” he said. “Using a tactical gestalt in a mecha puts stress on the mecha, and it’s even more important that the user understand how physical forces are going to affect him and the mecha when he does, since the mecha isn’t anchored. That’s handled with training, and it’s something we’ve already learned. Send your people to us, and we’ll teach you how it’s done. We can start training your riggers and pilots on our own gestalt equipped mecha, and they can take that training with them when you start producing your own. While they’re doing that, send people you want trained on strategic class gestalts, and they’ll be trained. They can then go home and train others, which should get your militaries ready for when the gestalts start being produced.”

“That sounds like a good start to a plan, but we’ll need an actual plan,” Krazrou said. “And we’ll need the CCM involved in the planning.”

“I fully intend to do just that,” Jason said. “But you have to know first, so you can explain it to your officers.”

“No, Jason we need a *plan*. For everything,” he elaborated. “From logistics to resource management to handling any unrest from our populations. This has to be a communal effort, where we pool everything we have and make sure that everyone has what they need to get ready. We’re going to need one of the largest logistical systems ever devised, so we’re going to need the Kizzik,” he declared, which got him universal nods of approval. “A situation like this is exactly what the Confederation and its offices was meant for. We put this to those whose job is to coordinate between different empires. Our job is to make sure our governments don’t get in the way of that effort. We stamp on the bureaucracies and the opportunism and make sure our governments are doing what needs to be done.”

“We can talk about that in a little while,” Zaa called. “What matters right now is everyone on this deck openly supporting Jason’s call to mobilize. Let us make sure that all of us are marching in the same direction here and now.”

“I think we already made the clear, Denmother,” Kreel said.

“Silence is not support,” she answered. “So I will hear it from each of you. I will hear the words.” She got what she wanted quickly, as every leader on the deck openly voiced their support. “Very good, then,” she said, obviously satisfied. “Now that the Accords are in agreement, we must move to the Confederation and the Coalition. Once we have their support, we sign on those outside. Every spacefaring civilization in the entire galactic cluster, and even beyond if we can manage it. We will need them all if we want to survive. Every single one. And that task will primarily fall to Jason,” she announced. “If there is any one of us that can talk the others into joining the

effort, it is him. We have no one more persuasive when he believes in what he says.”

“And I’m going to start that effort with the *Syndicate*,” Jason added. “I know that everyone at this table has issues with them, but the simple fact of the matter is, their gigantic military and their nearly unlimited production capacity is going to be needed. They alone could field *millions* of ships, and the gestalts we could build on their super-ships would rival a CBIM without using CB technology. I’m also going to recruit the energy beings of the Syndicate to help with recon, since their clairvoyants should be able to see the dark ones. I won’t ask them to fight, they’re in no position to contribute, but they can help where they can. That should give you an idea. When I said everyone, I meant *everyone*.”

“Wait, you’ll give the virus to the Benga?” Dahnai demanded.

“Yes,” he replied bluntly, looking at her. “Hold nothing back *means* hold nothing back, Dahnai. We’ll deal with the consequences of arming the Syndicate with biogenics after this is over, while we’re all *alive* to have consequences to face. The death and destruction that decision causes will be my burden to bear,” he said with grave sincerity. “And I may never be forgiven for what I am about to do. Rann.”

“Yes, Dad?”

“I’m going to be too busy with this to handle the day to day responsibilities of the Grand Duke,” he said. “Effective right now, you are out of school and taking over. You will be doing my job while I focus on preparing for the coming of the dark ones. Shya, you too. Rann is going to need your help,” he said, looking at her. “You two work best together, so

you're going to need each other. You'll just have to tutor your classes as best you can in the spare time you have, kids. I'm sorry."

"Don't apologize, Dad, I'll make sure the house runs just fine while you're busy," he answered. "You do what you need to do, and I'll keep your seat warm for you until you can take it back."

He said nothing about his plan not to take that seat back. It was best if Rann believed he was only a temporary caretaker, it would make it less stressful for him.

"Don't even *think* of putting me in your chair, Mom," Sirri said forcefully. "My place is with my company and my girls. You keep the Imperium going, and when the time comes, I'll be doing my part in the only place I want to be. On the line with my riggers, defending my Imperium, my home, my friends, and my family. This is what I've been training for, and I'm ready. I will make you proud of me, Mom."

Dahnai gave her daughter a look that was both hot disapproval and grudging pride. "By remote merge, yes. In person, *not in your life*," Dahnai retorted intensely. "Your partner can be in the mecha using the gestalt while you pilot it."

"That is how Kyva trained her," Jason said mildly. "And she'll do just fine. She's one of the best riggers in the entire CCM, the KBB standard on her armor is not a decoration. She *earned* the right to use that heraldry, to stand shoulder to shoulder with the best riggers in the entire galaxy," he said, which earned him a glowing smile. "And it's only fitting that the crown princess show the Imperium that their future Empress will fight for them. Sirri will be an inspiration to the entire Imperium."

“There is one thing we are missing,” Zaa said. “The Parri warned us not to forget to *live* while we prepare. So we all need to make sure that life remains at least somewhat normal within our territories. Business must continue, trade must continue, our usual activities need continue. We just fit them in with our preparations.”

“Which is why the Academy isn’t going to close,” Jason nodded. “The main change will be that all resources not devoted to the day to day operations of the house will be devoted to the war effort. There will also be some paring back of unimportant projects, to free up more resources. That’s part of what you’re going to be doing, Rann. Go through the entire budget, identify things we can cut back or delay until after this is over, and shift those resources over to the preparation effort.”

“Not a problem, Dad,” Rann answered confidently. “I take it we focus on gestalt production and training?”

“Yup,” he nodded. “That means your first order of business is getting with Trenirk and Maaeth and coming up with a plan to renovate existing suitable facilities to grow gestalt-quality biogenic crystals. We can’t keep all crystal production centralized at the Shimmer Dome anymore.”

“I’ll have a plan ready for you in three days,” he promised.

“When you have the plan, son, act on it. You don’t need my authorization. You *will be* the Grand Duke,” he told him strongly. “I have complete confidence that you will do the job just as well as I could. I wouldn’t be putting you in the chair if I didn’t. You *are ready for this*,” he said in a powerful voice.

Rann gave him a long look, a mixture of surprise and a tiny bit of trepidation, then pride. “I won’t let you down, Dad,” he declared with

complete sincerity.

“I know you won’t,” he answered. “Tomorrow morning, report to my old office. That’s *your* office now. I’m going to be taking an office in the KMS headquarters building to serve as my headquarters for the recruitment effort. And no doubt getting into Myri’s hair far more than she’ll find comfortable,” he grunted. “I’ll contact everyone that needs to know tonight and warn them of the change. Tomorrow morning, Chirk and Brall will have everything ready for you.”

“We’ll need to make it official, Jason,” Cybi warned.

“Then let’s do that right now. Cybi, I hereby declare that Rann Karinne will be assuming the ruling seat of the House of Karinne as the Grand Duke until such time as the current emergency situation has passed. I make this declaration willingly, and under no duress. Do you recognize this declaration as valid and legal?”

“I do.”

“Do the other CB units agree that it is a valid order?”

One by one, they gave their assent.

“Then by my authority as the Grand Duke Karinne, I transfer all power of my title as ruler of the House of Karinne to Rann Karinne until the CB units agree unanimously that the emergency has passed. Rann Karinne is from this moment promoted to the rank of Grand Duke. Until such time that I return to the throne, I will assume Rann’s title of Duke, Heir Apparent and be considered next in line to the duka throne should Rann for some reason need to step down. As my final act before this takes effect, I hereby officially abdicate my claim to the title of Grand Duke in favor of Rann

Karinne, and may not take that title back without the consent of Rann Karinne and the unanimous consent of all active CB units that I am fit to rule.”

“The declaration is valid. Official recognition of the command is recorded. From this moment, Jason Karinne is abdicated from the rank of Grand Duke, Rann Karinne is recognized by all CB units as the Grand Duke Karinne, ruler of the House of Karinne. Jason Karinne assumes the title of Duke, Heir Apparent, and is recognized as the next in line to the duka throne. By duka law, official public announcement of this change must be made within the hour. No doubt, Jason, the house members will demand an explanation,” Cybi warned.

“And they’ll get one,” he answered as nothing but silence met him on the deck. “Congratulations, *Grand Duke* Rann Karinne,” Jason said to his son, giving him a gentle smile.

“That’s not even a funny joke, Dad,” Rann said seriously. “This is all just legal maneuvering that you’re doing for some reason I can’t figure out yet, nothing more. You will *always* be the Grand Duke.”

“It’s simple, Rann. With you holding the title, it makes it abundantly clear to *everyone* that you are in charge,” he answered him simply. “Trust me, son, you’re going to need it. There are members of the Confederation that won’t even deal with you unless you have that title. You need it for the political clout it gives you, both inside and outside the house. You’ll find that out very soon,” he said with a slight, sly smile. “And this also completely frees me to focus on what’s coming. If I still had the title, people would still be coming to me, completely ignoring the fact that you’re the one that’s making the decisions now. This way, they have no choice but to go to you. It tells everyone beyond doubt that *you* are in charge of the

House, and that I'm doing something else and don't want to be bothered by stupid inane bureaucratic bullshit."

"So you're just getting out of the paperwork," Enva teased.

"Damn right I am," he replied shamelessly. "Now Rann gets to want to murder Chirk at least twenty times a day. I'll be here if you want advice on a particularly tough problem, son, but I don't really think you'll need me. You've been trained for this. You're ready for this. You will make us all proud."

Rann was quiet, looking at his hands. Shya put a comforting hand on his shoulder, giving him a reassuring smile. "You'll do great, Ranny," she told him with gentle dignity. "I believe in you."

"Now if you'll excuse me, let me make the announcement to the House, then talk to Chirk and members of the cabinet to go into more detail. So I'll probably be a little while," Jason said, standing up.

He went up to his home office and sat down behind the desk, and thanks to the CBIMs, within ten minutes his face was on every vidlink and holo throughout the entire house. "Good evening, everyone," he began. "As I'm sure a few of you have noticed from the duka civnet site, there's been a big change. I have temporarily abdicated my title and position as the Grand Duke in favor of Rann," he declared without preamble. "This is obviously a very big deal, so let me explain to you why I've done this, and my reasoning for it."

He then went over at least a portion of what the *shaman* had told him, warning the house of the coming of the dark ones, and playing the viddy of them wiping out the feline species over in the B string as he explained. "*This* is what is coming for us," he finished. "These beings, these dark ones

as the Parri call them, have developed their psychic abilities to the point where they almost seem godlike, and they see the Generations as a threat to their supremacy. When they take notice of us, they will come. They will come to exterminate us, our friends, anyone even remotely connected to us, and every sentient being in this entire galactic cluster just to make sure they completely purge every trace of the Generations from the universe. They have absolutely no regard for the lives of others. To them, we are insects, and they won't feel a thing when they squash us.

To prepare for their coming, I have abdicated the throne and title in favor of Rann so I can completely focus on this threat,” he told the house. “Rann will be managing the day to day operations of the house, a job he is ready to do, while I focus all my attention on our preparation efforts to fight off these dark ones. So, needless to say, friends, you're going to see the effects of this shift in policy within the next few days. You're going to see changes in policies, changes in budgets, the moving around of assets, and a vast increase in the production of gestalts and military hardware. And I'm asking you, my people, to take this threat seriously. If you feel you're capable of fighting against the dark ones, either in the cockpit of a mecha, the action station of a line vessel, or in the controller's seat of a gestalt, then contact the KMS recruitment center. We're going to need everyone, every single being in this entire galactic cluster, to fight against these godlike beings. Everyone counts. Every single person matters,” he said in a powerful voice. “The only way we can beat these beings back is to present such an overwhelming force of both numbers and power that we can match their godlike abilities. Alone, we are weak. Together, we are strong,” he told them.

“Those who are coming aren’t like the threats we’ve faced in the past. They’re not motivated by survival, or power, or greed, or ambition. The only thing they want is to kill us all. Every last one of us, everyone around us, everyone within the entire galactic cluster, and all because they are offended by the fact that we dare to exist. There will be no negotiating with the dark ones. No diplomacy. No bargaining. This is survival on a primal level, my friends. We either kill or be killed. There is no gray area. There is no alternative. We kill them, or we all die. That is why every single one of us matters. Every soldier, every sailor, every pilot, every rigger, increases our odds of survival. Our only answer to their overwhelming power is overwhelming numbers, so every single one of you *matters*,” he repeated in an intense voice. “Cybi will be putting up a site on Civnet that has more information on the threat we face, so you can fully inform yourself and decide if you are ready to fight for the right to live. I won’t force you, my people. That is not how we do things in the House of Karinne. I can only ask you. So I ask you now, as your former Grand Duke, to join me in the defense of our lives, our society, everything that we’ve built, to stand against the dark ones and fight for your right to exist,” he called in a powerful voice. “We will stand against the coming darkness armed with the light of our love for one another and for the house that we have built together and we will defeat them!

“And we won’t be alone. The other members of the Accords have already agreed to fight, and within the next few days I’ll be presenting this to the Confederation and the Coalition, to anyone and everyone that the dark ones will target for extermination, including our past foes in the Syndicate and the Consortium. They too are in danger of being eradicated by the dark ones, and it is only fair that they be warned of what is coming and given the chance to fight back against them. The old politics no longer

matter. The only thing that matters is survival, and it is our responsibility as decent sentient beings to warn the others what is coming and give them the chance to defend themselves. That is why I've abdicated, because I'll be too busy running to every corner of the galactic cluster gathering up as many allies as I can find to tend to the day to day operations of the House. Rann will take up the job he's been trained to do while I focus all my attention on the coming threat. Rann is ready for this responsibility, my friends. I have full confidence in him. I wouldn't have installed him as the Grand Duke if I didn't believe that he is ready.

"More information about the threat we face will be uploaded to Civnet within the hour. I want everyone to read what we've learned and decide where you stand in what is to come. But in the interim, remember, everyone, that we go on. We will continue to be who we are, even as we prepare. The Academy will remain open. Businesses will continue to operate, services will continue, trade will continue. Life will continue. We will not forget to *live* while we prepare, from the mundane day to day routine to not forgetting how to have fun. We will further show our defiance to the dark ones by not allowing their threat to change who we are or how we live," he declared. "Life will continue as normal on Karis and throughout the House. We will *live*, but we will also prepare. And when the dark ones come, we will drive them back into the hole from which they crawled and make them afraid to poke their heads out of it ever again," he declared in a near hiss. "I think that covers everything. Tomorrow morning, Rann will make his first official announcement as the Grand Duke Karinne. He's going to make all of you proud of him. He's ready for this," he said confidently. "And with that, I bid all of you a good evening. May all the gods who look down on us smile upon us and lend us their strength to face the trials to come," he finished, then the transmission was cut.

He called Rann into his office, who still looked very unsettled, and had him sit at the desk while he stood behind it as he got holos of the cabinet up, Chirk, Brall, and Admiral Dellin. When the last one appeared, Dellin, Jason got to the point. “I’m sure all of you saw my announcement, and I’m sorry for dropping it like that without warning you,” he began. “But this more or less came out of nowhere for me, so I’m kinda trying to catch up myself. The short of it is exactly what I said in the announcement. There’s something coming that’s such a dire threat to all of us that I’ve decided to install Rann in my place so I can focus all of my attention on it. I’ll go into much more detail with you tomorrow. I’ll be attending the cabinet meeting I’m sure we’re going to be having in the morning,” he said dryly. “That’s because all of you have to fully understand what’s coming, and how we’re going to respond to it. It’s going to be up to all of you to carry out the plans we make to prepare for the coming of these dark ones,” he said calmly. “For so long as they threaten the house, Rann will be managing the day to day operations. I’ve installed him as the Grand Duke to make it clear to *everyone* that he is the one in charge. Unless it deals with the dark ones, it no longer comes to me. It goes to him. My job from here out is completely and purely about preparing us to fight off the dark ones. Does everyone understand?” he asked calmly.

There was silence.

“Chirk. Brall,” he said, looking towards their holograms. “Rann is taking over my office instead of moving everything over to his office. He’ll be there in the morning. Help him settle in and catch him up on those things that his office hasn’t seen yet. Chirk, I want you to reassign Rann’s staff to me for the office I’m going to take. I don’t know exactly where that’s going

to be yet, but warn them and have them start preparing to take up their new role.”

“*It will be done, revered Hive-leader,*” Chirk answered, her insectoid head bobbing slightly.

“Everyone else, catch him up. His office usually lags a couple of days behind when it comes to the paper trail. I keep him in the loop, but it’s mainly in the form of a twice a takir report explaining all actions my office has taken for the last five days. So get him up to speed on what he hasn’t seen yet.”

“I take it we’re still going to be dealing with you for a lot of issues, Jason?” Trenirk asked.

He nodded. “But I want everyone to understand right here, right now, that I no longer have the *authority* to make decisions on anything outside of my new office. I’ll tell you what I need, or what I need you to do, but it’s *Rann* that will green light my requests. The request will come from me, but the order will come from him. He is *in charge*, in *all* ways,” Jason declared. “My authority begins and ends with the office I’m setting up that will focus on preparing for the dark ones, which will primarily be about me gathering allies to fight against the dark ones and being involved in the organization of our combined forces. That office will be attached to both Myri’s department and Yeri’s department, since it’s going to involve both military readiness and diplomacy. Since I’ll be traveling all over the entire string in the near future, I installed Rann to manage the affairs of the house in my absence. I simply won’t have time to properly attend to the daily affairs of my office.”

“Don’t be silly, Dad,” Rann piped up. “Everyone, if Dad says do something, do it. No matter what he says, as far as I’m concerned, he’s still in charge. I’m just holding the chair for him until this is done and he can take it back, that’s all. I’ll do the best I can to manage the House from day to day, but I’m nothing but a regent.”

“That’s not a wise idea, Rann,” Yeri told him. “Your father is setting it up this way for a reason. There can be absolutely no doubt as to who sits on the Grand Duke’s throne. You can set up a rubber stamp in your office that automatically approves anything Jason asks for, or delegate the authority Jason wants to him so it doesn’t require your direct authorization, but either the authorization or the decision to delegate does need to go through you. Your father is doing it the right way.”

Rann flushed slightly, looking almost angry at being told that, but said nothing.

“Listen to Yeri, son, she’s much better at this than we are,” Jason told him. “I know it feels weird to you to be in a position where you tell me what to do, but that’s part of what being the Grand Duke is all about. I may be your father, but right now, you *outrank* me. I follow your orders because you are the Grand Duke. I can separate my political obligations from my personal life. And that’s something you’d better learn how to do, son. The fact that I’m your father means nothing. You *are* the Grand Duke, and right now, I am one of your subordinates. I am at *your* command, at least when it comes to official matters. When you speak as my bratty son, I’ll put you in your place. But when you speak as the Grand Duke, I will obey. That is what it *means* to serve the House, son. I serve the House. The House does not serve me. And right now, it’s in the best interest of the House of Karinne for you to be the Grand Duke. It will need the stability and

continuity that you can offer while I'm busy recruiting allies to fight off the dark ones."

"Jason doesn't have an ego to bruise, Ranny," Kumi told him. "He's not going to get mad at you for giving him orders. If anything, he'll be mad at you if you *don't*. It means you're not taking your responsibilities seriously."

"Surprising to hear so much wisdom out of you, Kumi," Jason teased.

"Bite my ass, Jayce," she retorted, which caused some chuckles.

"So, there it is. As of about ten minutes ago, Rann is the Grand Duke. He needs to catch up, so everyone needs to prepare to get him up to speed. He'll be taking over my office while he's on the throne, and I'll be setting up an office over in the KMS HQ building. I'll be at the cabinet meeting tomorrow to explain everything in much more detail."

"Don't fret too much about it, Rann, there are ways you can set up Jason's office so you don't have to approve everything he does," Lirren told him. "This cabinet exists to allow you to delegate authority without having to personally approve every little thing. I have no doubt Jason already knows how much power he wants this new office he's creating to have."

"Which I'll go over with Rann tomorrow," he affirmed. "And will be restricted mainly to my mission of building the alliance and helping to prepare it for war. I don't *want* any additional authority, because it discourages people from bringing things to me that don't apply to my new office's core mission. I want the authority of my office to be narrow and specific."

“Probably a smart thing, given people are going to want to bring it to you out of pure reflex,” Bunvar noted.

“If I’m even here. I’m going to be traveling a lot in the near future. I’ll probably all but move onto whichever ship gets pulled to ferry me around. That’s the other half of the reason why I set things up this way. Rann needs the full authority to do things without me, since I probably won’t be here for takirs, maybe months at a time. About the only way you’re gonna be seeing me in the near future is as a hologram or in a bionoid. I’m not even gonna try to manage the House from the stateroom of a ship. It’s best for everyone if Rann has the throne and the title, so he can make the decisions. After all, he’ll be *here*. I won’t.”

“It makes more sense when you add that in,” Rund said evenly.

“I set it up this way for a reason, Rund,” Jason told him lightly. “Now if you’ll excuse us, we need to get back to the meeting with the Accords rulers.”

“Jason dear, you don’t have the authority to end a cabinet meeting anymore,” Yeri reminded him lightly.

He had to laugh. “So I don’t,” he said, looking expectantly at Rann.

He glanced at his father. “We’ll meet again first thing tomorrow morning,” he called. “Chirk, please schedule a one on one meeting with every member of the cabinet over the rest of the day tomorrow so they can brief me on the details they won’t have time to go over in the meeting. Those meetings will start when my meeting with Dad in the morning after the cabinet meeting is done. We have a lot to go over before I’m ready to talk to the others.”

“I will arrange your schedule, revered Hive-leader. Members of the cabinet, please keep your schedules tomorrow open and be ready to answer my call.”

“Thank you. Until tomorrow, then,” Rann declared. The holograms winked out one by one, and Jason stepped back and allowed Rann to stand up. *[Dad, this is so weird,]* he complained privately.

[I know it is, son, but trust me. I’m doing both what needs to be done and what’s best for the House. It needs you on the throne more than me right now, and we always do what is best for the House. The moment we don’t, we no longer deserve to sit in that chair.]

[I think you’re wrong. It needs you, Dad. What would the House be without you?]

[It would still be the House,] he answered. *[Much as I love the House and our people, Rann, there’s something else I have to do. I’m counting on you to keep the House happy and prosperous while I take care of that business.]*

[I will, Dad, I promise.]

[I know you will. You’re ready for this, Rann. I’ve already said that, but I truly mean it. You are ready to sit in that chair. Just remember what I’ve taught you, and you’ll do just fine. It’s going to be a little scary at first, and you’re certainly going to make a few mistakes, but that will only make you better. After all, only God knows how many mistakes I made when I first took the throne,] he communed wryly. *[So don’t expect perfection, and don’t let those mistakes discourage you. Mistakes are learning experiences. They teach you what not to do. Expect them, don’t obsess over them, learn from them. It’ll be a bit rough for you for the first couple of takirs, but once*

you get into the groove of it, son, you'll be just fine. I'm certain of it,] he smiled, putting his hand on Rann's shoulder. *[Now let's get back to the others.]*

Back down on the deck, Rann sat back down beside Shya, who immediately took his hand. Jason looked to Mrri, whom he had avoided up until then. "Mrri, I think you know this is coming, but the Masters are going to be one of our biggest trump cards in this poker game," he told her. "Their abilities, their training is going to matter here. What they've learned will be one of our biggest defenses against the dark ones. You're going to need to talk to them and see if you can at least have them loosen their standards a little bit on what they teach to who. They don't have to teach everyone everything, but they do need to be willing to teach people what they can handle knowing so they can fight when the time comes."

"I've already thought about that, Jason, and I agree," she answered, speaking Pai. "I think I can impress upon them that basic survival trumps pickiness. We can pick up the pieces and fix things after this is over."

"Good, I'm glad we agree on that," Jason nodded. "Because God knows I'll have my own massive share of regrets to shoulder after this, since I'm handing the entire cluster biogenics. Speaking of which, is it up yet, Cybi?"

"It's been placed on the Academy mainframe," she answered. *"I haven't released the locks yet. So it can't be seen by anyone without access, but it's all in place and ready for when those locks are removed."*

"Unlock it for everyone here," he ordered. "And all of you, don't bandy this about until I have a chance to address the Confederation Council and the Coalition Congress. And make sure to include the Republic on the

access list,” he added, looking at Estrella and Dakiru. “And add in the process to make the Generation retrovirus.”

“You’re serious,” Estrella said in a low tone.

“I meant what I said, Estie. Biogenics do you no good if you’re not a Generation. It’s up to you and your people if they want to walk that path, and I want you to have everything you need to move forward if you do. Even if you don’t take that path, the conventional weaponry the Republic can provide is going to matter. So whatever you decide to do, we need you either way.”

“I’ll be honest, Jason. You’re going to have a very hard time convincing the Grand Council to join in the war,” Estrella told him. “They’ll see this is as a *local* problem, one that won’t affect us.”

“And the fact that the dark ones will target the Republic because of the Ulala?” he asked simply.

“Why would they?” Dakiru asked.

Jason and Songa glanced at each other. “I don’t think we fully explained that part,” Jason noted.

“We did skip over most of it. It didn’t seem important at the time,” she agreed.

“What do you mean?” Estrella asked.

Jason sighed and leaned his arms on the back of the chair. “That was my mistake, Estrella. Let me backtrack a little bit. The dark ones will wipe out everyone even remotely connected to the Generations, and by extension, the race they see as the origin of the Generations. The Faey. But the Faey

are just one *subspecies* of the general species that the dark ones will target. The Faey, the Dreamers, the Ulala, you already know that they're one species. Well, we got confirmation that it's true. All three of you, the Iri, and whatever others we haven't found yet, you're all descended from a single species. But what we didn't know is that the *Terrans* are also a branch of that species," he announced. "We're just a whole lot more genetically diverged than you guys are. All of us, we originate from the same planet. We're all descendants of the same ancestor species."

"And which planet is that, Jayce?" Dahnai asked. "Draconis?"

"Terra," he answered evenly, looking at her. "The Faey are *transplants*, Dahnai, just like the Ulala. We all came from Terra. The big difference is, the Terrans weren't taken off the planet."

"And you can prove this?" Estrella asked curiously.

"Not in a way that will make you happy," he replied. "But it's really a moot point exactly where we all started. What matters is that we're all related, and that is why the dark ones will come after you. The Terrans will be targeted too, because we are related to the Faey. And the Faey are the origin of the Generations. The rest of us will be wiped out because of that connection. Like I said, the dark ones will purge anyone even *remotely* connected to the Generations. And since the Ulala are members of the Republic, *they* will also be targeted. So this will not be a local affair, Estie. You need to impress upon them that as soon as they finish here, they'll come there. You will be one of the loose ends they tie up after killing everyone in this entire galactic cluster."

She frowned, but said nothing.

Jason sighed forlornly, raising a hand as he used his telekinetic gift. Particles of light started to swirl around his index finger as it twirled in the air, then it coalesced into a small ball of soft yellow light. It was one of the many tricks that Mrar had taught him over the years, the use of TK to generate pure, heatless light. “It’s almost insane to think that these dark ones want to kill anyone and everyone that learn how to do things like this,” he lamented openly, looking at the gentle light. “I guess though that even highly advanced beings who have had millions of years to evolve can still be ruled by their base emotions. But, I suppose...they’re afraid that this... will turn into *this*.” He turned his finger down towards the table, and the soft ball of light narrowed down to an intense, hair-thin bar of light that sizzled and scored the surface of the table as Jason moved his finger, drawing the laser beam across it, scoring a black circle into the tabletop... something that was going to get him quite a scolding from Ayama.

“I didn’t know you’d mastered light manipulation to that extent,” Estrella said quietly.

“Mrar is a good teacher,” he said without much emotion. “I finally figured out how to do it without a gestalt. And this is a good example of just what the Masters can do for everyone else. I’m nowhere near a powerful TK, but thanks to Mrar, I’ve learned how to work around my shortcomings and do some pretty advanced stuff. More proof that sometimes, skill matters more than strength. It does in telepathy, and it can in TK as well. If they can teach TKs far stronger than me ways to go beyond the limits of their strength, then it gives me hope that we can beat back the dark ones.”

“We’re going to be okay, Dad,” Rann said earnestly. “We didn’t get this far only to lose *now*.”

“Amen.”

They were there for another five hours going over the details of the first stages of their response, going deep into the Karis night, to the point where it was nearly midnight when they finally broke up to start work. The other Accords rulers were going home to get their engineering people to download the specs for biogenic growth tanks and to send people here to see them and get a briefing on how they worked from the experts in the Shimmer Dome. Estrella had a whole lot to discuss with the Grand Council, and she left Dakiru and her kids at the strip, mainly since they'd all fallen asleep in the house waiting for them. Jason was too worried to sleep, and ended up sitting out in the backyard with his back against his tree, eyes closed, making his plans for the next couple of months...which would be him going to virtually every spacefaring race in the galaxies closest to them and Andromeda to start building the alliance. But his journey was going to start in Andromeda, with the Syndicate, and then he would detour out to where the Consortium had settled and enlist the aid of the clairvoyant members of their leading race. The Syndicate had mind-boggling production capability, on top of having a standing military larger than the entire armed forces of every spacefaring civilization in the home galaxy *combined*. Getting the Syndicate into the alliance would vastly increase their resources, both in military assets and production potential.

For years he'd cultivated a relationship with the Syndicate, even after all the death and destruction they wrought against him and his allies. And here he was, about to recruit them into a fight for their very lives against the dark ones. He'd done it because he promised E Chaio to try to help her children, and now that promise was turning into a humongous bit of serendipity. He had a good relationship with both the Board and the Benga as a people. He didn't like them as a society, but he understood them as a people. He knew how to talk to them. And that was going to matter, because

now he had to convince them to join the new alliance so they all could fight for their very right to exist. But there was pain in that decision. If there was any one government he would *not* want to become Generations and get biogenics, it was the Benga. But he was going to give it to them. He was going to turn them into the monsters that the Karinnes had always been capable of becoming, and he was doing it willingly. He knew that it was going to cause death and destruction. He knew that they very well may have to strike down the Syndicate in the future because of their aggression and greed. But those were problems for his descendants. Right here, right now, the only thing that mattered was survival, and the only way they were going to survive was to give the Syndicate the retrovirus and the secrets of biogenics.

And it was this decision more than any other that had convinced him that he no longer had the right to sit on the throne of the House of Karinne. That future war, that death, that pain, that would be *on him*. And he would spend the rest of his life trying to atone for the pain that his actions were going to cause later.

As if attracted by his heavy thoughts, Jyslin settled herself beside him and put her hand over his, lacing her fingers through his and closing them. She leaned against him, put her head on his shoulder, and said or communed nothing for long moments, just lending him her strength and support. *[It's going to be okay,]* she finally communed, her thought radiant with her love for him.

[I keep telling myself that. But it isn't easy. I know the Parri said we can win, but you saw the video. That kind of power, that kind of absolute disregard for life...that won't be easy to counter.]

[I believe in you, my love. Think back, some twenty years ago, to a young college student who decided to declare war on the House of Trillane in order to protect his people from being exploited by them. Alone. That headstrong student built the Legion, went to war with the Trillanes, and they won. A college student and a ragtag group of working class Terrans with the aid of a few Faey rebels took on one of the most powerful noble houses in the Siann, and together, they beat them. Six years later, a new threat emerged, a vast galaxy-spanning empire from Andromeda, who had come for the secrets of the house and to build a safe haven from their foes back home. That young college student, now a Grand Duke, built an alliance of empires who all united against a common foe, and together, they met this vastly superior foe head-on and beat them. Years later, another threat emerged, the Syndicate. Again, the intrepid Grand Duke sought out allies against this even stronger threat, building an alliance that spanned the entire galaxy, and both from the shadows and from the cockpit of an exomech, he led them to victory. The House of Karinne exists because of you. The Academy exists because of you. The Confederation exists because of you. The Consortium has a new place to live in safety, because of you. The Syndicate is now prospering and is an ally of the House of Karinne, because of you. And this new alliance that will come into being to protect us from the dark ones will exist, because of you. This is what you do, my love. If there is any one person in this entire universe that can stop these dark ones, it is you. Your greatest strength isn't your intelligence, or your cunning, or your leadership, or your fighting ability. It's your ability to sway others to your side, to build alliances and turn enemies into allies. Like the shaman says, love, your strength is that when you speak from your heart, speak words you believe, others believe them too. You will storm out from Karis and build an alliance so vast and powerful that the dark ones

won't stand a chance. You will gather the alliance, and we will prepare them for the war to come. And together, we will win. I believe that with all my heart, because I believe in you.]

He couldn't reply to praise like that. *[I love you, Jyslin Fox Shaddale Karinne.]*

[And I love you, Jason Augustus Fox Shaddale Karinne. With all my heart. With all my soul. With everything I am, everything I will ever be.]

She communed nothing more. She just sat with him, their backs against his tree, and gave him all the love and support and companionship he could ever want.

Koira, 11 Kedaa, 4412, Faey Orthodox Calendar

Saturday, 25 September 2027, Terran Standard Calendar

Koira, 11 Kedaa, year 1337 of the 97th Generation, Karinne Historical Reference Calendar

The White House, Karsa, Karis

There was a reason that the executive office of the Grand Duke Karinne was run by Kizzik, and that reason was no more apparent than that moment. The moment that Jason, Rann, and Shya walked into the outer office, and Chirk had everything already arranged and organized to allow Rann to take over Jason's duties as the Grand Duke seamlessly, even down to moving all of Rann's personal effects from his old office into his new office. In many ways, who occupied the office behind Chirk's desk didn't

really matter. In practicality, it was Chirk that ran the House of Karinne. The Grand Duke only existed to sign the forms she put on his desk.

So, when they entered the inner office, Jason all but pushed a reluctant Rann to sit in the chair that was brought from his old office down the hall and take up official residence as the Grand Duke Rann Brian Fox Shaddale Merrane Karinne...such a long name for such an unassuming, modest young man. Shya's desk had also been brought from their old office and set on the side of the left wall just back from the door into the private room he used to hold his merge pod, an L-shaped desk that was set so she faced Rann when sitting behind it, which was the same layout from their old office. Shya did do real work in their office, acting as Rann's aide and advisor and helping him with some of the paperwork. Miaari padded in behind them, putting a hand on Jason's shoulder and leaning against him a little bit, and he put his arm around her waist as she watched Rann put his hands on the top of the desk. Shya moved to her desk as Cybi manifested a hologram in the office, already sitting on the corner of the desk, leaning on her hand and her legs crossed demurely, in that pose she had always favored. The other CB units manifested much smaller holograms that hovered in the air behind Rann's desk, near the window.

This is the way it was meant to be, Jason thought, to which Miaari gripped the back of his shoulder a little more tightly. With her making skin contact, she was privy to his thoughts through her connection to his nervous system. *Rann was always meant to sit in that chair. I was only the placeholder keeping it warm for him until he was old enough to take his rightful place.*

You are both right and wrong, Miaari's thought drifted through his mind, conducted through that connection. It was something a Kimdori

wouldn't do with anyone but those who knew their secret. And that amounted to maybe five people not Kimdori on Karis. Among his children, only Rann knew that secret, and by extension Shya because Rann could keep no secrets from her. It was that much of a secret. *That chair does belong to Rann. But it also belongs to you. When will you tell him you don't intend to take it back?*

When he's comfortable enough not to be afraid when I tell him, he thought. My time is done. It's Rann's time now. It's best for everyone this way. And I'm surprised you're not complaining.

It's not my place to complain. Besides, you have always said that you only wanted to sit on the throne for thirty years, to set the precedent that no Grand Duke or Duchess remain on the throne until they die. This just means your plan to retire comes ten years early, that's all. In thirty years, it will be Rann's turn to step down in favor of the next ruler, whoever that may be. You can spend that extra ten years doing some other job. After all, no Karinne noble is allowed to be idle until they serve the House for thirty years. That is the rule, and it even applies to you.

I'll be spending the rest of my life trying to fix the mess I'm about to make. And I doubt even that will be enough time. I'll die trying to atone, and it will never be enough.

You're too hard on yourself, my dear friend. You do what you do because it must be done. No more, no less.

I can only pray that you're right. Jason enabled the House-wide broadcast system, because he wanted *everyone* to see and hear what was about to happen. Rann blinked when he realized what his father had done, and took a very sober expression. "The first rule of that chair, son, is to

remember that you are nothing more than a temporary caretaker. It is yours for the next thirty years. No more, no less. When the time comes, you will step down and pass it on to whoever best embodies the ideals of the House, whoever will best serve the House of Karinne as its steward for the next thirty years. That may or may not be my grandchild that Shya's carrying," he said, looking to her, which made her smile and put her hand to her belly lovingly. "We are caretakers, Rann. Our job is to pass that ring to the next generation and give them a House that's better than the one we inherited when the ring was given to us," he declared, pointing at the dukal ring, which was sitting in a glass case on a stand in the corner behind the desk. "We serve the House of Karinne. The House of Karinne does not serve us," he chanted, one of his favorite sayings. "Never forget that, son. That chair does not belong to you. It doesn't belong to me. It belongs to the *people* of the House of Karinne, those whom we serve. No matter who occupies that chair, their job is to make the House a better place for the people of the House, and work to pass on a better House to the next Grand Duke than was given to us. By remembering that we don't own that chair, it reminds us of our place and our duty to the House. That is the most important thing you can teach your children, nieces, and nephews. We are *servants*, not *rulers*. Now then, people of the House of Karinne, I present to you the Grand Duke Rann Brian Merrane Karinne, the duly recognized executive of the House of Karinne. Wisely may he serve," he called.

"Wisely may he serve," the CB units, Miaari, and Shya mirrored.

"I apologize for not being in formal robes, or us having a ceremony," Rann began, looking at a floating icon that represented the camera lens. "But formality and ceremony is not the way of our house. I will continue that tradition, because I believe that this succession is nothing to celebrate. I

have accepted this grave responsibility only because of the crisis facing our House, our galaxy, and our entire galactic cluster. My father has been called to an even more important duty, which is going out to serve as a diplomat to recruit allies to aid us in the coming fight against the dark ones. Because he will be gone from Karis for extended periods of time, he felt he was unable to fulfill the duties of the Grand Duke sufficiently to serve the people. For that reason, I have agreed to stand in his stead and serve the House as the Grand Duke so long as he is unable to fulfill the responsibilities of the role. But I make it clear here and now that this is a seat I *do not* want,” he announced. “When this crisis is over, I fully intend to abdicate the title of Grand Duke back to my father so that he may return to his proper role as the Grand Duke Karinne. I am nothing more than a caretaker, whether I serve for three years or thirty. But I promise you, people of the House, I will do my best to live up to the standard of excellence that my father has set during this time that I hold this seat. I’m sure I’m going to make mistakes, so I ask that you please bear with me and allow me the chance to learn from them, so I don’t make them again. I will do my best for you, people of the House. It may not be enough, but know that it will always be everything I can give.

“There will be no changes in the structure or the staffing of the House and its government,” Rann continued. “Things will stay as close to the same as they were when I was given this job. My father built something that works, and I’m not going to change what works. There will, however, be changes to some projects as we shift our focus to preparing for the coming of the dark ones. The Academy will remain open, our research and science projects will continue, but only those projects that the Department of Science believes might be useful to us in the times ahead. Everything will go back to normal when this is over, so anything that’s suspended in favor of the war effort will only be suspended temporarily. The only other thing I

really feel the need to announce is that we are going to need as many soldiers as possible to stand against the dark ones. We can build thousands of ships and tens of thousands of gestalts, but they do us no good if we don't have brave, patriotic Karinnes operating them. We need you, people of the House, we need you now like we have never needed you before. So I ask you, I implore you, to consider enlisting so you can do your part in the coming war. My father will. I will. Shya will. We will be there with our forces when the time comes, and we ask you to be there with us. Together, we will face the dark ones and we will beat them. In the coming war, *everyone* will be needed to protect our homes and our lives.

“That’s really all I have to say. I have a lot of work ahead of me catching up so I can do this job, so I need to get started. Thank you, everyone, for your support and your patience as I get used to sitting in this chair. May I only hold it for a few short months,” he said earnestly. “I hope that everyone has a pleasant day.” Rann ended the broadcast, then blew out a sigh of relief. “Well, that was nerve-wracking,” he admitted.

“It never gets easy, but it does get less terrifying,” Jason told him. “I’ll leave you to settle in before the cabinet meeting, son. I’m going to go take a look at my new office. Mee, is Kem there?”

“She’s waiting for you,” she answered.

“Good deal. Stay here and help Rann. He’s the Grand Duke now, so you’re *his* problem, not mine.”

Miaari smacked him on the butt, which made Rann laugh despite himself.

He took a short walk across the White House campus to the building holding KMS headquarters, and in a small office suite on the third floor, he

found his staff waiting for him. Two Kizzik secretaries from the main office pool were staffing the outer office, Kr'shk and Thr'krek, who would be handling all official paperwork and business dealing with his new role, and would be going with him when he began his recruitment trip. He had one final main aide, his executive assistant Kemaari, whom he had pulled from Miaari's office because of both her skills and her abilities as a Kimdori. She would be going with him when he went out there, and how he was going to be getting around was also set up.

He would be doing that journey aboard the *Aegis*. Myri had decided that he needed a CBMOM to assist him on his mission, but she didn't want to devote a fleet flagship to a mission like that. Coja and the *Aegis* was the only CB unit not either static or on a fleet flagship, which made her the perfect choice for this mission. Coja was also probably the best suited for this, because she was the most adventurous of the CBMOMs. She loved to explore, to venture out and see new things, have new experiences, and was at her happiest when she was doing exploration missions for the KES. The command ship would have two frigate escorts for the mission, there if the need for stealth popped up while they were out, but that was it. The key to being mobile was to be small and nimble, so there would only be three ships. The *Aegis* supplied the raw firepower, the frigates the speed and agility. However, the frigates would be docked to the *Aegis* when not actively needed, which both the command ship and the frigates were refitted to do easily. The two frigates would attach to the main body of the command ship under of the aft wings in a way that made them look like part of it, and would only separate when needed to perform a task or mission.

There would be four very special members of Jason's staff for this mission. The first was Kemaari, lending her unique abilities as a Kimdori

and serving as an intelligence officer and liaison between the ship and the Kimdori Empire. The second was Mrar, which put a Pai Master on the ship to serve as both protection and an example of what they were up against, since her TK skills would look like magic to the uninformed. The final two were a bit of a surprise to Jason, and that was his son Aran and his daughter-in-law Kiada. Aran had nearly thrown a fit earlier this morning to demand to be allowed to go, both to keep his father company and for the chance to go see distant wonders that a budding young scientist may never get the chance to see again. Kiada, herself a highly intelligent and scholarly young lady (which was what attracted her to Aran in the first place) wasn't about to let her husband go out there without her, so she had more or less browbeat her way onto the ship as well. Jason was honestly surprised at Aran's vehemence, but he also could admit that he'd feel much better having a member of his family along with him to help him establish some sense of normality in all this chaos.

And naturally, since Jason would be out there in potentially dangerous situations, Aya wasn't allowing him to go unescorted. She'd assigned his usual four guards as well as Piri and Iriko to go with him, to guard both him and Aran. She'd also specifically sent Ryn and Dera because she felt that Ryn's training and Dera's ability as a listener might be useful to him out there on his mission.

So, when he walked into the inner office, he found Kemaari, Mrar, Aran, and Kiada waiting for him, with Chichi sitting on the new desk grooming her face with a paw, her bed already moved into the office and sitting on a shelf on the wall to the side of the desk, and Coja manifesting a hologram sitting on the desk in Cybi's favorite spot. The six assigned guards were also in the office, Piri and Iriko guarding the door, Ryn and

Dera standing behind the desk to each side of the window, and Shen and Suri standing near the door to the personal room attached to the office. Like his old office, this office had a second room attached to it for the occupant's private use. That was a common feature of executive-level offices in most Faey office buildings. "I see everyone's here," Jason called as he and Kemaari stepped into the office, and the two Kizzik squeezed in from behind to stand behind him, nearly looming over him. "I have just enough time to go over a few things with you guys before the cabinet meeting, mainly what we're going to be doing and how all of us can contribute."

"I'm glad you're including me in the contributing," Aran said earnestly.

"You may not have an assigned role, son, but I know you well enough to know that you'll find a way to make yourself indispensable within a takir," he smiled. "Both you and Kiada are too damn smart to be anything *but* indispensable."

Kiada beamed at him over the compliment as he picked up Mrar and put her on his shoulder, which he commonly did so she didn't have crane her neck to look up when part of a conversation. "Cybi filled me in on what we're doing, Jason, and I agree that you need a Master along with you," Mrar said, speaking Pai. "You have to be able to demonstrate what the people we talk to may be facing, so you'll need me to show them what TK can really do."

"Exactly," Jason affirmed. "I know Samin's gonna murder me for stealing you, but there are other Masters he can take lessons from for the time being. I need you more right now." He stepped up to the others. "That's our only mission, guys. Get as many people as possible to join the fight against the dark ones. My job is to convince them to join, your job is

to help me do it. Kem will be our intelligence specialist, keeping the Denmother up to date and coordinating all information and intelligence we gather while we're out there. In effect, she will be our Gamekeeper. Ryn and Dera will use their training and skills to support the mission. Shen, Suri, Piri, and Iriko will be our primary security specialists, keeping all of us safe. All of the guards will also continue our training in telepathic combat to better prepare us for when the dark ones arrive. Mrar will show those we meet just what they'll be up against, as well as advance our skills in TK. Coja, as our host CBMOM, will be there to supply us with her rather impressive skills and abilities," he said, which made the hologram smile fondly. "Aran and Kiada will find where they best fit in and assume the roles they make for themselves, but at first, you two can work with Kemaari to act as her aides to help her analyze and archive all information we gather. Chichi will be our early warning system if we run into anyone hostile," he said, ruffling the tabi's fur lovingly, which made her chirp pleasantly. "We're all but going to be living on the *Aegis* for the foreseeable future, so everyone needs to get everything you think you may need and move it onto the ship today. We'll be leaving this afternoon."

"Where are we going first?" Kiada asked.

"The Wheel," he replied. "I want to explain what's going on to Gen and Bei and have Galaxy Express start preparing to fight, then we move on to E Chaio so I can talk to the Board."

"Ohh, I like Bei!" Kiada said. "I'd love to meet her in person!"

"Kem, Mrar, Dera, I want to keep this operation on the lean side," Jason told them. "So minimize the number of aides and assistants you bring. I'm only bringing Kersh with me to help coordinate with Rann, Myri, and Yeri's offices," he said, jerking his thumb slightly over his shoulder in their

general direction. “Kersh will be with us, and Threk will be here to coordinate our efforts from Karis. They’ve already been briefed on their duties. They’ll be our connection back to the House government, moving the paperwork back and forth, so if you have anything official you need to send back to Karis, you talk to Kersh, or with Threk directly if Kersh approves it. I want all of you to follow that example. If anyone is bringing any additional staff, keep it small. I don’t want us getting bogged down in a developing bureaucracy, because we will always have to move fast and work fast. Bring only what you need and who you need.”

“Four members of the pack have been assigned to me for this mission, and they should be enough,” Kemaari told him. “One of them is a trained infiltrator, if we have need of those specialized skills.”

“I won’t need any help. Right now, the Masters can’t spare another Pai,” Mrar said. “I can handle training anyone on the ship that needs it.”

[I’m going to bring in additional guards, Jason,] Dera told him. [I need twelve guards minimum to handle security for three members of the Dukul family. I’m going to bring in two additional members of Piri and Iriko’s class of the Dukul Guard Cadets and option four experienced members of the Marine Honor Guard. And I don’t think I need to say that I’ll be taking over as head of security for the ship, which puts all security staff and Tarks under my command if I need them.]

“I doubt Koye’s gonna bitch about it,” he answered. “She knows that the Imperial Guard takes over all security responsibilities wherever they operate. I think twelve is a bit excessive, but I’ll bow to your expertise, Lieutenant.”

[As it should be, you're not a security expert, Jason,] she smiled. [Just let us handle it.]

“I always do. Aran, Kiada, I want you two to go to the annex and have Songa check your jump implants to make sure they're good for extended use, since you haven't used them since the field trip.” Aran and Kiada, along with Rann and Kyri, were the only ones among his children that had jump implants. Rann needed them as the heir, but Kyri, Aran, and Kiada had had them implanted when they went on a survey expedition with a KES exploration team last year as part of a class field trip. The only way to get there was by jumping hyperspace, and they didn't want to spend the four day trip there and four days back in stasis, so they opted for implants. “The rest of you, go to the ship and settle in while I'm talking to the cabinet. Koye knows you're coming and she's set up both living quarters and work space for us. Kids, go to the ship once Songa signs off that you're good to jump. We'll be going to Andromeda and then on the Consortium's new homeworld, then back here to prepare for our first major expedition out to gather allies. So get it done and be ready to start work as soon as I get there. We have a lot to do and not much time. Kersh, I need you to go with the others and set up your office on the *Aegis*. Threk, I need you to get in touch with Galaxy Express and give them an estimated time of arrival, so Gen is available when we arrive,” he said, turning to look at the two Kizzik.

“They are already standing by and currently waiting for our message, revered Hive-leader,” her interface intoned.

“Alright then. We all know what to do, so let's get it done. Meeting over,” he announced. Kersh began by picking up Chichi's bed, holding it out and allowing the tabi to jump into it, then she turned and clattered out the door behind Threk with her passenger. Mrar transferred from Jason's

shoulder to Aran's shoulder, and he seemed quite pleased to be allowed to taxi her around as he walked out behind the Kizzik. Jason glanced at Coja's hologram, and she smiled and nodded. *[I'll get everything ready.]*

[Thanks love,] he answered. He called Coja *love* as part of an old joke about confusing her bionid with Jyslin that had settled into her permanent nickname. *[Where is Koye putting us?]*

[Koye set aside space on deck 21 section 12 for your use,] she answered. *[She knows Dera won't allow you to be billeted anywhere but the deepest and safest part of the ship, so she worked with that to put you as close to both the bridge and Astrocartography's map room as she could.]*

[Wait, there aren't any staterooms there. Just offices for department heads, a cargo bay, and Astrocartography's map room.]

[She had a team convert the cargo bay into a stateroom suite and office space for you the moment she was informed we were assigned the mission. That's more than enough room to give everyone plenty of space. The stateroom has four fairly large rooms and a full size bathroom, so there's a bedroom for you, a bedroom for Aran and Kiada, a living room, and your private office. The rest of the space was combined with one of the existing office compartments and divided into two office suites, one for Kemaari and the other for Threk. Everyone else on your team will be billeted elsewhere on the ship, with Dera and the guards assigned the closest available quarters, deck 21 section 13, to your stateroom. That puts the guards barely a minute away from your stateroom if there's an emergency. You and Aran are the only ones that have special billeting requirements. We won't need that cargo bay for our mission, so it doesn't affect the mission to turn it into your temporary quarters. The lone office

taken over, attached to Astrocartography, was temporarily relocated to section 17.]

[Wow, that was fast.]

[Doesn't take much to install a couple of walls to divide up the space into rooms, move in some furniture, and put in a bathroom. The only thing they haven't finished is installing the security features in your private office. It'll be a little spartan, but I'm sure you'll find ways to decorate the space to make it comfortable.]

[Smart placement, though,] he noted . [I'm gonna be in both Astrocartography and on the bridge a lot.]

[Which is why she did it. Koye's no fool, Jason, and she knows you well,] she winked.

[Sounds good. Do me a favor and talk to Jyslin about what I can take with me to make the stateroom more homey. And supervise loading the bionoids. I have no doubt we're gonna be carrying one for about every member of my family.]

[You're right about that,] she grinned lightly. [We won't have room to stow them near the stateroom though. They'll have to be stowed in the bionoid storage bay on deck 22 and they'll have to suffer the indignity of walking down to visit.]

[Girl, you're getting salty as you get older,] he accused, which made her laugh lightly. [Speaking of bionoids, do me a favor and load every size scaled bionoid I have on your ship. Both macro bionoids and all four mini and micro bionoids. There's no telling what we may need out there, so I'd like to be prepared.]

[I'll take care of it,] she assured him. [Do you want to bring your house bionoid? Given how much experience it has, it might be more useful to you on missions than a newer one.]

[That's not a bad idea. Do it. Move my Hall of Peace bionoid to the house to replace it.]

[Will do.]

Five hours later, after a long and involved cabinet meeting that allowed Rann to both catch up and fully establish himself as the new Grand Duke, Jason, Aran, and Kiada were stepping into their new temporary home on the *Aegis*. Koye and her engineering team had done great work in a short time, creating a private apartment that seemed quite spacious, decorated with furniture and accoutrements from his house to make it feel familiar, even with two false windows that had holos of the view of the back deck and beach he had from the living room in the house. Those holos were live, he realized, showing him the real-time view of what he would have seen if he were looking out the window back home, which he felt was a nice touch. He had a fairly large duffel floating in the air behind him holding some of his “loafing around the house” clothes and a couple of personal knick-knacks, with his formal robes and some more serious clothing shipped up from the house in boxes and cases to keep them from getting wrinkled. Chichi was nestled in the crook of his arm, looking around curiously.

[Nice,] Kiada noted as she came in around him and looked around.

[Koye's people did a good job,] Jason agreed as Aran pushed her forward. [Which bedroom is mine, Coja?]

[Door on the far wall. Aran, Kiada, your bedroom is the near door on the left wall. Bathroom is the far left door. Both your bedrooms open into

the bathroom as well. Door on the right wall leads to a common reception area for both Threk and Kemaari's offices. The other door in your bedroom leads to your private office, Jason, and there's doors in it that opens to Threk and Kemaari's private offices.]

[Koye does think of everything,] Jason noted in approval.

[She's not the captain of a capital ship for nothing, Jayce,] Coja returned lightly.

[Where is that silly woman, anyway? I expected her to greet us.]

[She's busy preparing for our trip to Andromeda,] she answered. *[She's currently on the bridge.]*

[Koye, come see me,] Jason called with enough strength to reach the bridge, but not a tikra further.

[Certainly, your Grace.]

[Don't call me that. I'm not the Grand Duke anymore,] he returned immediately. *[That mode of address belongs to Rann, not to me.]*

[You're asking for an awful lot, Jason,] she replied lightly. *[I've called you that for coming on twenty years now, and suddenly I'm supposed to just stop?]*

[Yes,] he replied bluntly, which caused her to return pure mirth. *[I'm just one of the house Dukes now, woman. I don't get a special title, so get used to it.]*

The willowy, attractive woman stepped into the stateroom behind him just a few seconds later—it was barely a twenty second walk from the stateroom to the bridge—and he put his arm around her shoulders fondly.

She was wearing her duty uniform, which was a simple long-sleeve shirt in Karinne blue, black trousers, and black boots. Koye's rank was embroidered on the upper right sleeve of her uniform shirt, with the name and crest insignia of the *Aegis* on the left. Every flag-level vessel had its own unique crest heraldry, and the *Aegis*' crest was a shield with the outline of a giruzi's head, complete with the glowing eyes, with two swords crossed beneath it. Every member of the crew had that crest on their uniforms and armor, and all mecha assigned to the ship had the crest painted on the shoulder or shoulder armor plate. Since she was a noble and an officer, she had a gold trimmed collar, the crest of the House of Karinne under her rank insignia on her right sleeve, and gold stripes going down the outsides of the legs of her pants. She wore no special insignia or device that denoted her as the captain of the ship. He and Koye went way back, she was one of the original ship captains from the inception of the KMS. By all rights she had the seniority and experience to be on a fleet flagship, but when the *Aegis* was refitted with a CBMOM, she declined taking the command of a fleet flagship, preferring to stay on the *Aegis*. It was her personal relationship with Coja that was a good part of that reason. Koye and Coja were best friends, and she wanted to command the ship holding her best friend. When the house became Generations, she also became Coja's Primary, which was a bit of an unusual situation. Koye was the only ship captain in the KMS that was also the Primary of a CBMOM, and she was able to both command the ship and perform the duties of a Primary without issue. If anything, it probably made her even better, since she didn't have to issue commands to the ship's Primary when that was...herself.

That was how close they were. A great deal of the compatibility between a CB unit and its Primary was their personal relationship, and the

deep, close friendship between Koye and Coja created a powerful foundation upon which their compatibility was built.

Jason and Myleena's deep, deep friendship with Cybi was why they were her Primary and Secondary, because they had been the first Generations to return to the House and they had long, deep, personal ties to her.

[Great job, Koye, I like this stateroom,] he communed fondly, patting her shoulder.

[Thank you, my friend,] she smiled up at him. *[We wanted you to feel comfortable while we ferry you around from one high stress meeting to another, so we did what we could to make this place feel like home to you. Jyslin gave us a few pointers.]*

[Well, it worked. I can easily relax in this room,] he assured her as Dera and Ryn filed in behind her and inspected the stateroom. Piri and Iriko also came in, and immediately took up positions to each side of the door, establishing themselves in the room. *[We ready to go?]*

[We will be in about twenty minutes. We're loading on the last of the supplies now. The Wheel's traffic control was warned we're coming and are expecting us, as is Galaxy Express. We also sent off a message to the Board, warning them that the KMS is jumping a military warship to the Wheel on official House Karinne business.]

[Did Dai Su answer my message?]

[Miaari sent a message. She did. She's going to meet you on the Wheel when we arrive. Needless to say, the Board is more than a little curious as to why you're coming in person instead of your usual habit of using your

bionoid, so they dispatched Dai Su to talk to you before they accept your request to meet. I think they're a tad afraid of you, Jason,] she communed with a wicked tilt to her thought.

[I do have a bit of a reputation in the Syndicate my friend,] he replied slyly.

[I have arrived and taken up residence within the office, revered Hive-leader,] Threk called. *[I am now at your service.]*

[Very good, Threk. I'm sure they've already sent you half a stack of reports and missives, so let me know if anything important is in the queue.]

[I will do so.]

Aran and Kiada came out of their bedroom, and they looked quite pleased. *[I love that bedroom, Captain Koye!]* Aran told her.

[Why thank you Aran. Maya sent us some holos of your apartment back home, so we did our best to make it feel comfortable.]

[Kem, you aboard?]

[I'm in my new office, Jason, taking stock.]

[Good deal. Let me know if Mee sends anything important. I'm gonna settle in a little bit. I'll have time since we have to jump in mode three rather than use the Stargate at Prakka.]

[They have to see us coming,] Kemaari mused.

[Yup.]

With Koye and a hologram of Coja for company, he did just that, chatting with them as he checked out his bedroom and helped put away

both his packed stuff and the clothes they shipped up from the house. Aran and Kiada went out to explore the ship, since it had been a long while since Aran had been aboard a capital class flagship, and to Jason's knowledge it was the first time Kiada had ever been aboard one. The bedroom they made up for him was roomy and with furniture copied from what was in his bedroom back home, so it felt very familiar, and the bathroom was even larger than the one back home, with a hot tub on top of the usual shower and oversized bathtub facilities common in Faey architecture. He couldn't bathe while in mode three, that was against regs because of the risk of the water being ejected from the tub if the ship had to make an emergency exit from mode three, but he could take a shower.

There was no real reason to take a bath while in mode three anyway, since his sense of touch was disabled by his implants. Since he couldn't enjoy soaking in hot water, there was no reason to want to take a bath. That little issue was why he'd be wearing special sensor mesh socks and gloves for long trips in mode three. The gloves were for not having issues holding things and the socks were because it made them much more stable when they could feel their feet. It took nearly a year for Songa to figure out that one reason why people not in armor were having issues with falling was because they couldn't feel their feet, that shifts in weight that could lead to losing balance and falling registered in the feet. Once people in duty uniforms were issued sensor mesh socks, instances of people falling down while in mode three dropped drastically.

For very long trips in mode three, Jason, and anyone else not in armor, had a "onesie" sensor mesh garment that they wore that would give them a sense of touch over most of the body. The only part of him that it wouldn't cover would be his neck and head. It was standard issue for all Naval

personnel, since they didn't wear armor at all times while on duty. Duty uniforms were actually the norm, with armor only being worn when they were going into an unknown or potentially dangerous situation.

Because they couldn't feel their faces and there was a risk of biting one's own tongue or lips while eating, all meals while in mode three were liquid only. They were called M-Rations, short for *Mode Three Rations*, and despite the users not being able to taste them they still came in a variety of flavors and consistencies...just in case they were consumed outside of mode three. They could be pure liquids or have the consistency of pudding or Terran tomato paste, but all of them shared the trait of requiring no chewing to consume. They were nutritionally balanced and included a mild drug that suppressed the hunger reflex, which could still be felt for both people with jacks and the rare few like Jason, who had implants. While in mode three, the crew "ate" their M-rations on a very specific schedule to maintain both health and proper caloric intake, and thankfully the crew didn't feel hungry.

It was just one of the examples of how life was different on a ship when it was in mode three for extended periods of time. And he'd be experiencing it along with them, since they'd be in mode three for hours, even days at a time as they traveled around the A string.

Koye returned to the bridge to oversee their trip to Andromeda in mode three, a trip that took about three hours given the strict speed controls that the KMS observed while operating in the home cluster—the hyperspace wake mode three ships created could intersect the wake of other ships and knock ships in mode two out of hyperspace halfway across the cluster—the *Aegis* dropped into normal space and cruised into the edge of the E Chaio system at sublight, mainly to give Jason and the time to head to the port

bow landing bay with Aran, Kiada, Coja's onboard bionoid, and Kemaari, leaving everyone else to fully settle in and set up. He piloted the dropship as they transferred over to the main landing bay for Galaxy Express, which occupied nearly half of the upper arc of the Wheel. GE had grown over the last four years to become one of the largest and most profitable shadow corps in the Syndicate, and had gained the respect of just about everyone in both business and government...which was the same thing in the Syndicate. The success of the company was demonstrated in the lines of Dragoon and Jaguar mecha and the new Lancer tactical strike corvettes in perfect rows in the rear of the bay, with several dropships and smaller transports sitting near the airskin shield. Kraal, Gen, and Bei were standing by the space where he'd been directed to land, the two Benga dwarfing the Kimdori, and Jason spied Dai Su making her way towards them with four guards. He extended the landing skids and set the dropship down gently, then powered down and opened the hatch as Aran and Kiada unbuckled and stood up. "Bei!" Kiada nearly squealed as she hopped down the steps, then rushed to the sleek Benga female. Bei knelt down and gave her a strong hug. "How have you been, Bei? You haven't come to visit in nearly a division!" she demanded in flawless Benga as Jason and Coja left the dropship.

"I've been busy, silly girl," she smiled in reply, looking down at her with her hands on Kiada's shoulders. "I'm surprised to see you here. Jason's message said it was important."

"It is," Jason said as he and Coja reached them, then took Gen's hand...or more to the point, a couple of his fingers. "I'm surprised Kraal hasn't filled you in. I'm certain Denmother already had a long talk with him."

“I felt it best for you to explain it, cousin,” he said as Kemaari reached them, and he put his hand on her neck in greeting.

Dai Su slowed to a stately pace as she neared them, and they all bowed to her when they reached her, respecting her station as a member of the Board. “Chief Executive,” Jason said sonorously.

“Your Grace,” she returned with a nod.

“Technically I’m not allowed to be called that anymore,” he told her evenly. “For reasons I’ll explain in a little bit. Might I introduce to you Coja,” he said, motioning towards the bionoid. “CBMOM of the capital ship *Aegis*, which is the ship sitting just off the Wheel. This bionoid represents her physically both on and off the ship.”

Dai Su looked a tiny bit perplexed, as if she had heard that term before but couldn’t quite place it. “I’m afraid I’m not entirely sure what that entails, Lady Coja,” Dai Su said to her.

“I am the biogenic mainframe computer installed aboard the *Aegis*, Chief Executive,” she answered, looking up at her. “I am one of the sentient computers that Jason has told you about.”

“Ah! It is a pleasure to meet you!” she said eagerly. “Jason keeps you and your siblings quite the secret from me!”

“You’ll get the opportunity to have a long talk with her, Chief Executive,” Jason told her. “After we have a conference here aboard the Wheel, I would offer to bring you aboard the *Aegis* so we may return you to E Chaio. That will give us additional time to discuss important matters.”

“I accept your invitation,” she said immediately. “Though I doubt I’ll be going anywhere but the landing bay,” she added lightly.

“Actually, we have a special merge pod aboard the ship rigged to allow a Benga telepath to merge to a bionoid without needing a cyberjack,” he said. “We use them to allow the telepathic Benga employed by Galaxy Express to operate aboard Karinne vessels. So if you’d like to use that to merge to something able to fit in the passageways, we’d be honored to give you a tour of the ship.”

“Now I am definitely accepting your invitation,” she smiled.

“For now, however, we need to discuss why I’m here. If you and your escorts will follow us, Chief Executive, we have a conference room in the facility that would be best suited for our meeting.”

“Of course. Might I know the names of these two apprentices?” she asked, looking at Aran and Kiada.

“My son Aran, his wife Kiada,” he returned. “Greet the Chief Executive, kids.”

“Profit be yours, Chief Executive Jam Ber,” he replied calmly, bowing to her.

“Profit be yours, Chief Executive Jam Ber,” Kiada mirrored.

“Profit be yours, Apprentice Aran Karinne, Apprentice Kiada Karinne,” she returned with a nod of her head. “I see you’ve taught him Benga social etiquette,” she said approvingly.

“Aran and Kiada have a close working relationship with several employees of Galaxy Express, so they’re well versed in proper behavior,” Jason told her.

“And what discipline have you decided to pursue for your apprenticeship?” she asked them as Gen got them moving in the right direction.

“Science, Chief Executive,” Aran answered. “I aspire to be a scientist.”

“As do I,” Kiada confirmed. “There are many interesting astronomical features in Andromeda that we’ve been studying, and the science division facility here in Galaxy Express has hosted us for our research projects. That’s how we came to know General Gen Lun and Commander Bei Ji.”

“So, you seek to enter the astrophysics discipline? A sound investment of your time,” Dai Su told them with an approving nod. “Good astrophysicists are always in demand. You will find a profitable career in it.”

“Thank you for your advice, Chief Executive,” Aran said gracefully.

Gen led them out of the bay, down a long passageway, and into a conference room. Mez and two of her secretaries were in the room, setting down refreshments. Jason and the others stepped up onto a platform holding their chairs on one side of the table while Gen, Bei, and Dai Su sat on the Benga side of the table. Dai Su’s guards took up positions behind her and at the door. “Thank you, Executive Assistant Mez. Please put the room into secure mode after you and the others leave,” Jason told her, to which she nodded.

“I will be at my desk if you need me, Executive,” she answered as one of the guards used a handscanner to analyze the drink and shortbread-style cookies set before Dai Su, making sure they weren’t poisoned. That was entirely normal.

Jason began the conference by explaining the background of the video of the feline race being wiped out, how they found the system and then used telescopes to look back to see what happened, then he played that footage for the Benga. “When I met the Board the first time, I warned them that there were things out in the universe that even we avoided, that there were monsters lurking beyond the shores of their pond that they should fear. Chief Executive, the ones who did this are the biggest monsters of them all,” he told her, looking up at her as he spoke. “They are known only as the Dark Ones. A species within our galaxy has had prior experience with them, and they have told us that they are a race of ancient beings who have evolved psychic and psionic powers to godlike levels. They don’t use technology at all, their entire civilization is built around powers of the mind. They are feared by everyone who knows of them because they have been known in the past to wipe out all life in entire galactic clusters, and all because species within that cluster have developed their psychic powers to a level that the Dark Ones perceive as a potential threat to their superiority. The footage I showed you is an example of this activity. The feline species on that planet was exterminated by the Dark Ones. *All* of them. Some eighty-three planets by our scans. And their only crime was becoming strong enough to get the Dark Ones’ attention.

“Why this matters is simple. The Dark Ones have taken notice of *us*,” he said intensely. “And that puts the Syndicate in direct mortal peril because you are connected to us. The Generations and our biogenic technology, which amplifies our powers, has made them take notice of us. And they see us as an *actual* threat, Chief Executive, not just a species that has evolved far enough to be a potential threat, so it won’t just be a single ship that comes along and wipes us out. *All* of them will come. Because of that distinction, they will descend upon our sector cluster like a wave of doom

and wipe out absolutely *everyone* to ensure that such a threat never arises again. They will purge all life from every galaxy in our cluster and leave it a wasteland of death. That is how the Dark Ones operate. We have brought the threat of total extermination to your door, Chief Executive. We certainly didn't mean to do it, but we did it. The fault lies squarely upon us. And for that, I offer you my most sincere and deepest apology."

She gave him a long, assessing look. "And what proposal do you offer? There must be one."

"To protect our very right to exist, we do have an offer. Join us to fight against the Dark Ones. We will supply you with most of the technology that we have withheld from you, including the process by which you can convert your population to Generations and teach you the secrets of biogenic technology, which you can use to augment the new powers being a Generation imparts upon you," he told her, which made both Gen and Bei gasp and gawk at him. "What is coming threatens us all, on a primal level, and the only way we can fight back is with Generations. Only powers of the mind can defend against powers of the mind, and we possess a means by which we can bestow our psychic powers on others. We must do everything we can to repel the Dark Ones, even if it means giving the Syndicate the House of Karinne's most closely guarded secret. To repel the Dark Ones, it will take a force of *millions* of ships, all filled with Generations, and all of them using gestalts to amplify their psychic powers. Simply put, Chief Executive, we *need* each other. The House of Karinne has need of the Syndicate and its vast navy, its highly skilled military forces, its unparalleled industrial production capacity, and the Syndicate needs access to the Generations and biogenic technology to be able to protect itself when the Dark Ones come. The old political divisions are meaningless, Chief

Executive. With the Dark Ones coming, we are all united by a single common interest. Survival. And in order to survive, we all have to work together, support each other as best we can. The Dark Ones *can* be defeated, Chief Executive, but it's going to take the combined might of every spacefaring race in the entire sector cluster in order to field enough force to defeat them. That is how powerful the Dark Ones are."

"You would convert the Syndicate to Generations?" Gen asked in disbelief.

"You are obviously more familiar with them than I, General. What distinction comes with being a Generation?" Dai Su asked him.

"Generations are genetically engineered beings, created to possess formidable telepathic and telekinetic abilities, Chief Executive," he answered her. "In effect, Executive Jason is much like the insectoids the Consortium created to fight the war, created by their science to be superior to natural, unaltered beings. They did not enhance their physical abilities, they were engineered with very strong psychic powers that make them even more formidable. It was the Generations and their gestalts that were so pivotal in the Confederation War. Generations aboard their ships used their psychic powers, amplified by gestalts, to turn our weapons aside and destroy our missiles and warmechs. We mistook what we saw as some kind of spatial warping technology, but it was the *Generations* doing that. That's just one example of how the Generations can use their powers as a weapon. Their genetic alterations can be passed to others, turning *them* into Generations as well."

"The General is correct," Jason confirmed. "A Generation, when using a gestalt, is capable of using their powers on a strategic scale, able to affect line vessels, thousands of soldiers at a time, and huge volumes of space.

The pandemic that swept through our galaxy a few orbits ago was actually the retrovirus that created the Generations reappearing and spreading through our galaxy. Because of that, over one half of our galaxy have become Generations, and these converted Generations are just as powerful as we original Generations are. And we offer that same option to the Syndicate, Chief Executive. We have cultures of the retrovirus that makes one a Generation in storage and ready to be mass produced. Join us in our fight against the Dark Ones, and we will grant you our psychic powers, as well as the technology that allows you to amplify them, and teach you how to use them. Because that is the only way we can fight against them.”

Dai Su gave him a speculative look, leaning on her elbow which was set on the table. “And other support?”

“What you need that we can provide. I can’t stress enough, Chief Executive, that what is coming is a dire threat to us all. To survive the coming war, we will do whatever needs be done. Because if we don’t, none of us will *be here* anymore. Money, power, and status mean nothing to the dead. But we also won’t force you to become Generations. That goes against our ways. Even among our military forces in Galaxy Express, everyone will be given the choice to become a Generation, and also will be given the choice whether or not they wish to fight.”

“We will fight,” Gen said strongly. “That is the role of a soldier. The company is in danger, and we will fight to protect it. Galaxy Express has been good to us, Executive Jason. For many, the company saved them from being nopped, gave them a second chance. I don’t think you understand the loyalty our ranks have for the company. If you ask us to fight, we will fight. No explanation is even needed.”

Bei nodded vigorously in agreement.

“Much as I appreciate hearing that, Gen, it’s still a choice that every employee gets to make,” Jason told him. “Having your DNA altered and becoming a telepath and telekinetic is a pretty big deal, and we want anyone that undergoes the procedure to be willing. We wouldn’t do something that drastic to anyone against their will. That goes against written company policy.”

“Well, I am volunteering,” Bei declared. “I’ve seen what being a Generation means from the inside. I would have that for myself.”

“How so, Commander?” Dai Su asked.

“I’ve trained with KMS warmech companies on Karis. I’ve been allowed on the planet for social visits as well, for I have close working relationships with many of the warmech pilots I train with, as well as those close to Executive Jason, like Kiada,” she answered, smiling over at her. “I’ve seen with my own eyes what the Generations don’t show the outside world. You have *no idea* what they can do, and the wonders of the world they have created based on those abilities, Chief Executive. I would become part of that world in a heartbeat.”

“As would I,” Gen nodded. “Make the appointments for us to be converted, Jason. As soon as possible, so we have as much time as possible to train so we’re ready for the Dark Ones.”

“I’ll have Doctor Songa make appointments for both of you,” Jason told them. “And thank you for your faith in us, Gen, Bei. So, in summary, Chief Executive, that’s why I’m here. To warn the Board of the coming of the Dark Ones and try to secure their cooperation in the coming conflict.”

“Which you will need to convince them to secure,” Dai Su warned. “You come with only a story and a single holo clip, and no other real

evidence. They will be very skeptical.”

“I’m expecting that. That’s why I came in person,” he replied. “I fully expect to have to spend a couple of segments persuading the Board to join the effort. I figured I’d start here, where I’d have the hardest time, which would make convincing others seem easy by comparison.”

“Well, that’s a rational approach if nothing else,” Dai Su said with a slight smile. “Let me confer with the Board over what I’ve found before you try to arrange a formal meeting. I guarantee you that you’ll get one, but they’ll need to view the recording and discuss what you’ve told me before they’re ready to talk to you. And perhaps we can discuss this influx of new technology between ourselves before we involve the entire Board,” she added hawkishly.

“Dynamax has ever been our portal into the rest of the Syndicate, Chief Executive,” Jason said evenly, which made her smile. “I have a summary of what the Generations can do and how we use it both with and without our biogenic technology ready for your perusal. You can show that summary to the Board when you report your findings.”

“And what does that entail?”

“Telepathy and telekinesis are part of our basic genetic footprint, and it’s been engineered to have a very high baseline. The average Generation is a far stronger telepath and telekinetic than a non-Generation. Those who already have those abilities will have them increase when they become Generations to at least the minimum baseline, but can become even stronger based on how well their bodies accept the conversion process. We can utilize a specialized form of telepathy called communion that’s much more expansive than regular telepathy. Generations brains operate in parallel, to

use an archaic term, able to focus on multiple tasks simultaneously, where Benga and most other races of the Syndicate can only focus on one thing at a time. Our biogenic technology can amplify our abilities through specialized biogenic equipment known as gestalts, dramatically increasing our power. Biogenic systems communicate using communion, so we're able to understand them where regular telepaths cannot. Generations are highly resistant to viral infections, making us fairly hardy. And finally, Generations have an extremely high resistance to radiation. Generation DNA self-repairs the damage done by radiation, so we are immune to the DNA damaging aspect of radiation. That renders us immune to the effects of any but the most powerful forms of it, only radiation so powerful that it destroys cells completely can really affect us."

"So that's what you call it. Communion. I've been able to hear the connection your bionoid has since the first time I met it face to face," she mused. "I just couldn't understand what I was hearing. I've even had telepathic specialists analyze it, but to no avail."

"That marks you as a strong and well trained telepath, Chief Executive," he told her. "They're the only ones that can hear communion. You can't understand it because you literally don't have the brain architecture to process it. To use a metaphor, communion is telepathy spread across multiple frequencies simultaneously, each frequency only carrying a piece of the message. Since you can't hear all the frequencies, you can't hear the complete message, only disjointed fragments of it. And most of those frequencies extend beyond the organic range for most telepaths. We hear those frequencies because we were *engineered* to hear those frequencies. Very, very few telepathically aware species can hear those frequencies naturally."

“Ah, that actually explains quite a bit,” she nodded. “Very well, let me to go contact them.”

“I’ll be on the station if you need to speak to me, Chief Executive,” Jason told her. “Kraal, please issue the order for the workers to assemble in the main landing bay while I go talk to Mez to arrange a company-wide broadcast. I’m going to explain what’s going on to everyone.”

“I’ll handle it, Jason,” the shaggy Kimdori nodded.

“Then let’s get it done,” he said, standing up.