

REVOLUTION



SUBJUGATION 9
BY FEL (JAMES GALLOWAY)

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Chapter 1

Brista, 5 Kedaa, 4405, Faey Orthodox Calendar

Friday, 18 April 2019 Terran Standard Calendar

Brista, 5 Kedaa, year 1330 of the 97th Generation, Karinne Historical Reference Calendar

Foxwood East, Karsa, Karis

It was going to be a very busy day.

Sitting at the piano on a breezy, sunny morning, Jason Augustus Fox Shaddale Karinne was more or less just wasting time waiting, amusing himself as the others prepared for a long trip, about as long a trip could be without leaving the planet. They were going to Hirsra today, and as soon as everyone was ready to leave, they'd be heading there and preparing the CBIM facility there to receive its core crystal. The crystal was in the final stages of the tempering process, and if they timed it right, the core crystal would arrive just as they finished the last of the preparations. This was the last of the CBIMs, and there was only one crystal left in the CB facility in the Shimmer Dome, a CBMOM crystal that would be ready for installation in 12 days. The installation team would be going from Hirsra straight to Kosigi, where they would begin the refit process on the *Aegis* to convert the command ship to a CBMOM. They had no plans to install CBMOMs on any other command ship, but there would be two more CBMOMs.

He'd authorized the construction of two more—the *last* two—fleet flagships just yesterday afternoon, part of the naval expansion plan that Navii and Juma had developed. The Karinne Navy would reorganize into four major fleets, each one headed by a fleet flagship, each one responsible for a “cardinal direction” quadrant of the universe with Karis acting as the center point; north, south, east, west; or to use their actual denotations, alpha, beta, gamma, delta. Assets from other fleets would certainly be

pulled as necessary, but each fleet would be responsible for operations within its quadrant. Those duties would primarily be exploration, acting as research vessels when not needed for military duties, where they would conduct general research, exploration, and mapping, and would refer anything of strong scientific interest to the KES so they could send a scout ship to study the subject more thoroughly.

As a result, every ship in the fleet, including frigates, would be adding a new Science Division with science officers akin to Spock from *Star Trek*. The sole duty of these science officers would be to analyze data collected by the ship and make recommendations to the KES for future research locations, sending all their data to the KES for Cyrsi to organize, analyze, and then pass on to the Academy once she was sure it held no highly sensitive information. The number of these officers would vary by ship, from only one on a frigate to 170 on a fleet flagship, and they would be true *science* officers. Most of them would be scientists, from botanists to astrophysicists, who had enlisted in the KMS and would serve as full military officers on board their ships. Since the KMS would be assuming a less militaristic role after the buildup, Jason fully intended to get use as much use as possible out of the very expensive ships the house spent a lot of money to build and man. KMS ships weren't going to just loll around Kosigi, waiting for something to happen. They'd be out there exploring territory the KES had already moved through, exploring what the KES didn't or exploring the lower-interest locations the KES couldn't afford to devote research assets to investigate.

In effect, it turned the entire Karinne Navy into an arm of the KES during peacetime, and it was a situation that both Juma and Navii did not mind at all. It kept the Navy busy; it gave crews experience operating far from Karis as they explored new galaxies, and it would expand their knowledge. But, during war time, the roles would reverse, and the military-viable assets of the KES would become an arm of the Karinne Navy, transferred to combat duty to assist the Navy until hostilities ended.

There were going to be other ships added to the KES...*big ones*. The captured super-ships would be absolutely perfect for the KES, and they already had plans on the board to refit 250 of them to serve as giant mobile bases for KES operations. Where Vanguard class scout ships would enter a galaxy, conduct initial exploration, and then move on, the super-ship bases

would move into a galaxy and stay there, acting as the hub for all research and exploration within that galaxy. That required Jason to more or less go back on his promise to not take any Syndicate assets and ask for some of the ships from other empires, but he was wise to only ask those empires that would give them to him. He mainly got them from Dahnai, Kreel, Krirara, Enva, Grayhawk, Grran, Magran, Master Mo, and the smaller empires that really had no use for the hundreds of super-ships they received as the spoils of war from capturing Sha Ra's fleet. They were going to sell them for scrap metal anyway, and Jason managed to either outright get them as gifts or pay their value in scrap. But in the end, he got all 500 ships he wanted.

Only half of them would go to the KES. The other half would be refitted for service in the KMS, but primarily as support ships. The CCM had proved that they weren't viable front-line combat vessels, but they were perfect in a support role, like a carrier was. Those moon-sized ships were perfect mobile bases of operation for campaigns, capable of transporting tens of thousands of troops and tons and tons of military hardware and equipment.

Sha Ra's flagship would become the first of those ships. The Karinnes did own that ship, and he'd decided not to give it to the Academy for research. He sent the Academy a different ship, the largest of the six ships the Karinnes had claimed when the Syndicate fleet's assets were divvied up among the Confederation, and that gigantic vessel was currently in orbit around planet eight in the system, being refitted to serve as a KMS vessel.

That would take 43 months, according to Cynna's schedule, and the refit would involve three major operations: replacing the fusion plant with a series of singularity plants spread through the ship to remove that glaring weakness, gutting the engines and installing translation gravometric engines and translight drives, and ripping out the Syndicate's computers and installing biogenic computers in their places. Everything else, they would leave in place if at all possible.

Power wise, the most important refit of all was yanking out that fusion plant and the weakness it represented and going to an aggregate power system using 23 different singularity plants located in strategic positions throughout the ship. Combined, they'd have nearly double the power output of the fusion plant used by the Syndicate, more than enough to power

everything they planned to install in it, and would have more than enough power to handle the translight drive they were designing for it. Most importantly, those plants would power the GRAF cannons that would be installed on the ships, the number of which would depend on the size of the ship. Sha Ra's flagship would have 18 GRAF cannons installed on it in locations that would allow the ship to be able to fire on any target in any direction with at least one cannon within 26 seconds of the target being selected. The type they were installing in the ship were the same design used on Kosigi, which had at least some aiming ability. The cannons used in ships could not be aimed independently, the ship itself had to turn to align the cannon with the target, but the super-ship was more than big enough for them to use the much larger version that included aiming systems. They still couldn't move the beam in too much of an angle away from the barrel, but that was what installing multiple cannons on the ship was for.

Propulsion wise, that was going to be the biggest headache. The drive that Cybi and Cyra were designing for the super-ship was going to be absolutely massive, taking up nearly 32% of the ship's internal volume—which was a major step up from the 88% the original engines took up—and would cost an absolute bloody fucking *fortune* to build. Not only that, they'd have to disassemble at least some of the original jump engines and cart them out piece by piece, then gut the core of the ship and redesign the whole thing for a translight drive. The rest of the engines would be removed over time, if only to get the mass they represented off the ship, on a schedule that would take 10 years. The space holding the engines would be converted to serve other purposes, from giant research labs to mega-farms to cavernous cargo bays to recreational space for the crew. But it had to be done. The ship was useless to them if it didn't have a translight drive, because it was too big for it to fit in any Stargate they had...he wasn't even sure they could build a Stargate big enough for it. Gate Paragon was half the size of that ship.

It boggled his mind a little bit that they were designing a jump engine that would jump something the size of a *moon*. It almost made him curious if they could install a translight drive on *Karis* and jump the entire planet somewhere.

Computer wise, they'd gotten off relatively easy. The modular design of the ship meant that it wouldn't take a CBMOM or CBIM to run it, but it

would take 217 Mark III mainframes to do the job, all of them controlled by a Mark IV, the most powerful biogenic computer the Karinnes had that wasn't a CB unit. Jason didn't want sentient CB units in any ship that was not built from scratch by the Karinnes, he saw it as too much of a security risk. And besides, the mainframes were just sitting in warehouses collecting dust, so he saw nothing wrong with finding a use for them. The Mark IVs would have to be built, more or less custom built for the ship into which they would be installed, but they had nearly five hundred Mark IIIs in storage.

There would be a little more refitting, and that was mainly with the equipment. Syndicate equipment was inferior to Karinne technology, so they'd be replacing the equipment that mattered and leaving the non-critical systems alone, at least at first. As it broke down or came to the end of its service life, it would be replaced with Karinne technology. Over a few dozen years, eventually the entire ship would slowly be converted over to Karinne technology. They'd get as much use out of the Syndicate systems as they could, then replace them with Karinne tech when they broke down. Unneeded equipment would simply be unhooked and left in the walls as decorations while others would be actively used, at least once Myleena and Siyhaa perfected the system MRDD had made for Gen's Marauder, interfacing biogenic computers with Syndicate tech with an eye on ensuring that the Syndicate tech couldn't be used as a back door into the biogenic network, giving attackers access to the system. Siyhaa was the one most responsible for that, and to do the job, she'd taught herself Syndicate computer architecture and their programming language. With her designing the system, the leftover Syndicate equipment in the ships, systems like climate control, the intercom system, and farm management, would be usable for the KMS and also would not be a security risk.

Seriously, getting Siyhaa into 3D was one of the best things they ever did. She was an absolute god when it came to computers, any kind of computer.

They wouldn't see any of the super-ships enter active service for four years, but when they did, they would dramatically expand both the KMS and the KES' ability to do their jobs.

He paused in his song, feeling a bit...well, a bit cheap. The endolimbs worked perfectly, and he had the same manual dexterity he'd had with his organic arms, the limiters in the control circuitry tuned to match his original scores so they felt entirely natural. But, he could turn those limiters off, which increased his manual dexterity by nearly 30%...and since he was a long-time piano player more than skilled enough to be considered a master of the instrument, he had some major manual dexterity already. He had the limiters off at the moment, testing his playing ability without them, which was why it felt a bit like cheating to play. The fact that the control circuitry in his arms were biogenic meant he could merge to the arms, and when he did that, he had control of them far beyond even the non-limited manual dexterity the arms could provide. If not for the need to move his shoulders manually, he could have played far beyond his usual skill, playing with his mind rather than his hands. And he didn't entirely like it. It was like he was cheating, but what was more, it felt like a betrayal of everything his mother had taught him. He couldn't remember her face, but he remembered her hands, and he remembered everything she had taught him. The piano and the ability to play it was what connected him to her, and it felt like he was insulting that memory by playing any other way but the way she taught him.

That was...a lifetime ago. Maybe even more than a lifetime, given that she died when he was very young. All he could remember of her outside of the piano were misty fragments, mostly the sound of her voice, and the only image of her he could remember was her standing in the doorway kissing his father goodbye when he was leaving for a deployment. But he couldn't remember what she was wearing, or even what color her hair was, just this faint memory of her standing with her back to him kissing his father goodbye. What made that memory so poignant for him was that it was one of the last memories he had of her, and it was probably why it had stuck with him. That had been the last time his father had seen her alive. She would die in a car crash just a few days afterward, while his father was on a deployment in the Middle East. She had died coming to get him from school, and what he remembered most was standing at the curb waiting for her, waiting...waiting....

Waiting.

He put his elbows on the top of the piano and leaned his chin against his hands, trying to pierce the veil and remember more than just a vague figure. What color was her hair? Brunette? It wasn't blond, he got his blond hair from his father. He could never remember once ever hearing her speak to him in English or speaking English at all. It was like every memory of her speaking English had faded, leaving only the sound of her voice in the musical language of French, which she always spoke as if she were singing her thoughts. Those memories were why he was so dead set on teaching French to his own children. All of the younger ones that weren't already fluent would be by their sixth birthday, because it was a core part of Jason's identity, where his older kids were already fluent. The language was as much a part of him as English and Faey were.

It was her hands. Those supple hands, dancing over the keys on the piano, mesmerizing him and making him want to learn to play like her, that was what he remembered most.

He'd considered the idea of having Cybi search the Terran internet for pictures of her. There had to be some, she was a professional concert pianist, and he'd be very surprised if there wasn't a promo picture or headshot somewhere. Sometimes, he was on the verge of asking, but then he'd wonder if he *needed* to know what she looked like. That it might change his memory of her somehow. That to see her without remembering her would be like looking at a stranger. Or maybe he was afraid that seeing her would be a constant reminder of the very painful memories of what happened immediately after she died. She'd already done that for her father, digging up his military portraits, which were a tradition of sorts in the Air Force. Everyone had an official portrait photo, it was part of basic training for enlisted, and a yearly event for pilots, who had their pictures on the wall of their squadron HQ as part of Air Force tradition. Cybi had pulled all nine portrait photos of his father from the Air Force archives. They showed how he had aged at the end, from the young, cocky-looking Second Lieutenant that had just graduated from OCS and earned his "butter bars" to the graying, pale, haunted man he had become just before resigning his commission and moving back to Maine with his son. The progression of the pictures was very disjointed, where he looked young and spry in eight of them, and then just one year later, he looked like he'd aged ten years and

there was a haunted melancholy in his eyes that made the picture hard for people to view.

If one knew the history of his family, it was easy to know when his mother had died by the pictures of his father.

He gave a sigh and tried to think of more positive things, like his family. He was getting the edges of something of an argument between Rann and Jyslin over what he was wearing on the trip, given it would be night and a quite chilly in Hirsā by the time they got there. Hirsā was on the other side of the planet, so the early morning here was late evening there. It was late spring here—though Karsa didn't really have seasons thanks to its subtropical climate—which meant it was late autumn in Hirsā. The Sayona Mountains would have their snowcaps by now, so no doubt the city would have quite a panoramic view from the higher hills.

Hirsā was similar to San Francisco on Terra in that it was on the coast, built by a large bay with a very narrow inlet, and most of the city was built on some very hilly terrain. Only the part of the city immediately abutting the bay was anywhere near flat, with the rest of it built on a series of tall hills and ridges that got higher and higher and more and more rugged as one left the coastline. No part of Hirsā was entirely flat, not even the coastal plain, but Hirsā was almost built in defiance of the terrain, as if the original Karinnes decided a city had to be *right there*, topography be damned. Granted, the lack of need for roads or streets made it easy to build a city on terrain like that, but it did mean that the city lacked many of the parks and sidewalks of other Karis cities. But what it did have were bridges. There was a vast network of bridges that connected the buildings together over the challenging ground, which almost made it look like the buildings were tied together with thousands of ropes when approached from a distance. There were plazas and parks built on platforms between the buildings, between, above, and below walkways and mass transit rails, with some near the ground and some hundreds of shakra in the air. That made Hirsā probably the most vertical city on Karis, where the ground was barely used at all, remained a thick temperate rain forest which was grown around the buildings after they were constructed, and almost all pedestrian and vehicular traffic was elevated well over the rugged hills. In Hirsā more than any other city, a person really needed a hovercar to easily get around. It was the third largest city on Karis by area, but had the smallest population of the

major cities, which meant that the city itself was very spacious, with lots of nature between the buildings.

Needless to say, Hirsra was probably also the most challenging and potentially dangerous city on Karis in which to drive a hovercar. All those bridges ascending and descending created winding aerial routes through the city where it was easy to hit something else and created tons of blind spots for unwary drivers.

All in all, Hirsra was probably Jason's favorite city on Karis from an aesthetic point of view. It was unique, the only city on Karis built that way, and given the city was built just on the edge of the west line of the Sayona Mountains, the vast mountain range that dominated the entire continent, it meant that the city's buildings had the backdrop of those majestic, snowcapped peaks.

The west line of the Sayona were the *lower* mountains in the range, which didn't have snowcaps all year round, but were still high enough to have no vegetation on their peaks. The east line, which ran right through the center of the continent, was similar to the Himalayas. They were high, rocky, treacherous mountains that clawed their way towards the sky, so high that the air was too thin to breathe at that altitude, which made the center of the continent all but uninhabitable without support equipment like biodomes. Only the western side of the continent had any terraforming done, and that was mainly around Hirsra, transforming the region back into the temperate rain forest it was before the planet was destroyed.

The eastern side of the continent wouldn't require much terraforming. The interior of the eastern side of the continent was originally a desert, the largest desert on Karis, but it was a cold desert like the Gobi rather than a hot desert like the Sahara. The Sayonas blocked the rainfall that moved from west to east over the continent, forming the wet rain forests on the western coast and the bone-dry climate on the eastern interior. The eastern coast of Hirsra wasn't desert, but it was classified as semi-arid, with the climate getting dryer and dryer as one moved north. The planet's ice cap locked the northern edge of the continent in permanent ice and snow, since Hirsra's landmass extended almost all the way to the pole. Nearly a third of the continent was under the permanent ice pack.

Hirga was more like Maine than any other part of Karis, and part of him still lamented that he didn't build his house there. It was a cool or cold climate of rugged terrain, of rolling hills and moraines and fjords, with the northern marches of the continent covered in ice and with tons of newly formed glaciers...at least newly formed from a geological sense. The original glaciers had mostly melted away from the bombing that destroyed the planet and had only had about 1,300 years to reform.

Hirga was the most rugged continent on Karis, and those that lived there were just as rugged as the land. Since it was a cold place, the reptilian races and the Shio hated it, but the Jobodi, Birkons, Saffra, Tevarr, and Ubutu in the house had flocked there, the Ubutu building a new small city on the permanent ice pack in the style of their home planet. The southern reaches of the continent also housed quite a few Faey and Terrans that preferred a cooler climate. But the one thing that united most residents of Hirga was a much more independent and self-reliant attitude. Hirga was a rugged place for rugged people, those that enjoyed taking on the challenge that nature could provide, and many of the continent's residents didn't live in cities. They lived in smaller towns and villages or lived in isolated homesteads far from the rest of civilization.

From the sound of it, Jyslin won the skirmish with her son, sending him back to his room to get a heavier coat, and the guards were assembling on the deck outside for the trip. Since several members of the Ducal family were going, Aya was sending twenty guards to keep an eye on them, nearly half of the detachment. That was because Rann wasn't the only child going. Shya was going, naturally, but Aria, Zach, Aran, Danelle, and Siyara were also going. Aran wanted to go because of his scientific interest, Zach wanted to go because Aran was going, Aria wanted to go because she didn't like being left behind, and Danelle and Siyara wanted to go because Myleena was going. He was happy to have them along, because it was their chance to learn something about the CBIMs, and their chance to meet one in the first moments of its life.

The name of the last CBIM had already been chosen, Cyma if female, Cyman if male.

All of you had better hurry, we have to leave! Aya's sending rippled across the three houses that formed the core of the strip, Jason's house,

Tim's house, and Myleena's house. *Danelle, Siyara, come over to Daddy Jason's house.*

We're on the way right now, Aya, Danelle answered.

I'm on the way downstairs, Aya, Aria called.

Jason, are you ready?

Ready to go, just piddling around 'til my lazy slacker children get their act together.

Bite me, Dad, Shya sent, which made him chuckle.

Eventually everyone was ready, and they boarded a KP-330 to take them to Hirsu. Aura was piloting it, and since it was Jason, there was no co-pilot because he sat up in the cockpit, acting as the co-pilot. They discussed Aura's rather big decision as they flew on a high sub-orbital arc that would send them nearly into space, then come back down at Hirsu. *You're sure this is what you want?* he asked, looking over at her.

After the last few months, yes. I can do what Symone does, love, I can pilot a fighter from a merge pod, she answered. I've gotten the ratings I need, and I'm ready to take the fighter pilot's exam.

Joining the KMS as active duty rather than a reservist isn't a whim decision, Aura, he warned. Even Symone understands that it's a commitment. You can't just decide you don't like it and go back to the reserves. I won't let her do it, I won't let you do it. You'll be enlisting for at least four years of active duty, and you will serve those four years.

I entirely understand what I'm doing, Jason, she replied. And I'm tired of flying personnel transports while others are fighting on the front lines, protecting our home. Aya would never permit me to fly a fighter PIM, so as long as you can arrange it so I fly one by remote merge, I want to do this.

If that's what you want, then alright, he told her. I'll talk to Juma tomorrow...if you intend to enlist in the Navy or Marines, that is.

I would much prefer it, she replied. I'd like to go with the Navy, love. I think I'd be best suited for a carrier squadron, given my special restrictions.

Alright then. I'll have someone schedule your flight test, and if you pass, you'll enter the fighter training program with the next class, he announced.

Just remember that you're still a merit officer, love, you'll have to meet all the other qualifications to become a full officer, and you'll have to be a full officer to do anything else in the Navy except be a fighter pilot. I'll have Rook make you a bionoid you'll use strictly for military service. That way you can be there with the other pilots, be a part of the squadron and not someone who just flies the fighter, and no doubt you'll have your bionoid in the Wolf the way we use bionoids in Titans when we're not PIM.

Thank you, love, she told him with a glorious smile.

I never say no when a member of the family wants to serve the house, Aura, he answered, putting a hand on her shoulder. If we won't defend it, we have no right to ask others to defend it.

Which is exactly why I want to join. I hope you don't mind taking the boys and Sera while I'm in fighter training.

If you let me keep them that long, I may never give them back, he warned, which made her laugh aloud.

The entirety of 3D was already at the core facility when they landed on the pad behind the building, which was almost exactly in the center of Hirsa, sitting on a flattened-out hilltop whose entire flat area was enclosed in the facility fence. The Makati had done a great job making the building fit into the architecture of the rest of the city, and they'd even built a garden out in front of it with the expectation that an *oye* tree would be planted there eventually...which wasn't a bad guess. Every other CBIM facility had an *oye* tree growing in front of it, *including* Cynna's. The Parri had somehow managed to find a seed that would grow inside Kosigi, though her tree was a dwarf compared to the others. The conditions inside the moon weren't exactly conducive to a normal tree, let alone an *oye* tree, so Cynna's tree was only a rather puny 120 shakra tall; for an *oye* tree, that *was* puny. Jason was simply surprised to hell and back that they'd managed to get a tree to grow there, since Kosigi was very much an *artificial* world. It may have started out as a normal moon, but the Karinnes of old had hollowed out the vast majority of it, producing something that was decidedly unnatural. And yet, an *oye* tree was growing on the moon's core outside of Cynna's facility, which had been terraformed into something of a park area inside the moon. The parts of it not covered in buildings had grass, flowers, and trees growing under sun lamps, and the air there was kept warm all the time, to

give the KMS members based there someplace green and warm to go to and relax a little while off duty. They'd even built a few swimming pools and other outdoor sporting venues.

Siyhaa and Myleena were standing on the large landing pad built to the side of the apartment, the Moridon hunched over a tiny bit as the two of them looked at a flat hologram projecting out from the handpanel Myleena had in her hands, as Tom and Maggie directed the other members of 3D as they unloaded a cargo dropship holding all their equipment. "About time you got here, babes," Myleena told him as he and Jyslin approached, and Aya took the kids into the facility to give them a tour of it.

"We're here in plenty of time. Is the core crystal on schedule?"

"It is," Siyhaa nodded. "It will be here in four hours, twelve minutes."

"Plenty of time," Jason assured them, unzipping his jacket in the chilly Hirsra night. "Got the installation team for the *Aegis* sorted out?"

"It's all ready to go," Myleena answered. "And no, you're not on it."

"We're gonna talk about you two ordering me around," he said in a direct voice.

"You can talk all you want, but *we* assign installation teams, babes," Myleena grinned. "Besides, it's how we keep your ego in check."

"Good luck with that," Jyslin noted as she walked past, which made Myleena burst into laughter.

Watch it, bitch, he taunted, which made her make a rude gesture at him as she walked away with the kids...who were giggling.

There was a lot to do, but they had a very large team there, so they ended up having to wait on the crystal to arrive. They took a short break to take a little tour of Hirsra while the core crystal was brought in, Jason driving a hovercar and taking the kids around the city, a city they rarely got to visit due to its distance from Karsa. The lights of the buildings illuminated the chilly night's hazy fog to create an eerie glowing effect, as if the mist was glowing with a million fireflies. The mist interfered a little with the holograms being projected out from the building faces, creating a quite beautiful effect where the holograms seemed to diffuse into the mist.

This place is so neat, Shya told them as she looked out the window. It's nothing like Dracora or Karsa.

I know. I think Hirsia and Virsa are my favorite cities on Karis from an aesthetic point of view. Hirsia's built on these steep hills, and Virsa's built along the islands of the peninsula with some of the buildings in the water. It shows how the Karinnes of old molded their cities to nature rather than trying to change nature to suit their cities. It makes them beautiful in their own way.

Yeah. Though I think Kirsia is kinda neat. And Cylan's facility is just bonkers, Rann sent, his admiration of Cylan's facility shivering through his thought.

He's done a lot of work to it. I swear, that boy is worse than a Faey girl when it comes to toys, Jason chuckled. I think he's the only CBIM with an exomech hangar and training range built right onto the grounds of his facility...and they're all his mecha.

He does love piloting rigs, Rann agreed.

And what's wrong with Faey girls, Dad? Shya demanded flintily.

Nothing, outside of the need to impress everyone else to the point where you get silly, he replied honestly.

Does he not like the fact that you won't let him fight in the army? Rann asked astutely.

Sometimes, but he understands why I have that rule, he replied. The CBIMs are not weapons, and I don't want them to think of themselves that way. They can only fight if Karis itself is threatened. That's what Cylan does with most of his exomechs. He practices so he can defend the planet if it gets invaded, the way it did when the Consortium attacked Karis. He wants to be ready to fight off an attacker both from a merge and directly, by controlling exomechs and fighters and pushing the invaders out of our space. And I gotta say, he's getting scary good at it, especially since he can take control of virtually every exomech not being piloted by a rigger and fight using them, controlling them all at once. The things he can do when he controls a squad or a company of rigs is pretty impressive. And all of it started because he got curious about Vanguard, he sent, amusement bleeding into his thought. That reminds me, the big tournament is next takir.

The tournament was Vanguard's first ever player tournament, which would encompass several aspects of the game. Each of the game's modes would have tournament based on its focus, and in the game's base mode, infantry combat, the tournament would encompass all aspects of it. There would be competitions of individual players in two ways, a ladders match of one against one and a grand Battle Royal where every participant would be set down in the same map and the winner was the last player standing. There would be squad competitions as well, where squads of anywhere from 6-12 players per squad would compete against each other in both a ladders tournament and a battle royal. There would be similar competitions for every other role in a Vanguard match, so there would be rigger competitions, competitions of special ops squads, forward observers, ground support fighter pilots, and so on, for every role in the game except field officers. The last competition would be the Commander's Cup, where the game's best generals would compete in a ladders tournament, battling against each other on custom maps they'd never seen before. Their armies would be random players pulled from other competition rosters, serving as the army for the general when not competing in their own tournaments, but those players would know they were in the Commander's Cup and would be under much more strict rules about obeying commands. It would also ensure that the general had *the best* troops under his command, which would remove the possibility that a general lost in the tournament because he had the bad luck of randomly getting too many low-PR players in his army. His entire army would be filled with players with PR's high enough to qualify for the other tournaments, which would ensure that he'd have an army of grizzled veterans under his command. Usually the field officers had a degree of autonomy in a match, and the grunts could ignore orders, but not in the Commander's Cup. That meant that the generals would have a lot more to do, but that was why it was a competition. It would test not only their strategic skills, but their ability to manage all the incoming information and make the tactical decisions usually made by their field officers.

The game's other modes would have their own tournaments based on their focus, like the Ace Competition of fighter pilots, the Crew Competition for crews aboard a naval vessel, the Captain's Cup for ship captains, and the Admiral's Cup for theater commanders on the game's Naval Battle server, or the Knight Maximus, Catapult Commander,

Archer's Tourney, and General's competition on the game's Medieval server. And Vanguard players *loved* the idea of it. It had been eagerly anticipated since it was announced three months ago, despite the fact that not everyone would be allowed to participate. A player had to have a very high player rating to be eligible for the tournament to ensure that only the game's best players would be participating, and the servers had been super-busy with both the competitors honing their skills and those on the bubble trying to raise their PR high enough to qualify..

Are you in it?

Nah, I consider myself ineligible, since I'm part owner of the company that made the game. The game's produced by a shell company connected to 3D, and that kinda-sorta makes me an owner since I created 3D. And Cylan can't enter either because he has an unfair advantage as a CBIM, he answered. I'm just surprised it's gotten so much press. I saw a story about the tournament on INN last night, he sent in bemused wonder.

It is the most popular game in the Imperium, Pam. And in the house too, Aria declared. Ranny and Shya got me playing it. It's really fun.

I think it's awesome, Shya said. Now that I can merge to the game, it's way, way more fun. Jacked people are really annoying when you're playing with a controller, and now I'm one of the annoying jacked people.

Jason had to laugh. *I think merge-enabled games like Vanguard are responsible for more civilians in the Confederation getting a jack than anything else, he told them. Merge games and simsense, anyway. Sometimes I wonder just how much Yila understood how she was going to change the entertainment industry when she approached me over simsense, he mused.*

She knew, Dad, that's why she did it, Rann answered. Isn't she like the fourth richest woman in the Imperium now?

About that, he nodded. I bet it hurts her dark little heart that she's been making far more money legally than illegally lately, he added with an audible chuckle. But I won't complain. Simsense was the first of the steps that brought us to the bionoid program, and that is far more important. Without simsense, bionoids wouldn't exist.

They got back to the facility just moments before the core crystal arrived, and then things got serious. They brought it into the core room on a

crawler, then came the careful, intricate task of seating it and connecting it to the rest of the equipment in the room. That couldn't really be streamlined, so the kids got a little bored as they watched 3D for two hours as they annealed trunks and connected equipment on the core crystal's base, things they couldn't do until the crystal was seated.

But eventually came the moment of truth. The core chamber was packed as everyone crowded in for what they hoped was the last time they'd have to do this, as the last of the CBIMs was about to be brought up for the first time. After the last checklist was finished, Jason allowed Aria the honor of hitting the physical switches that powered up the core.

They'd done this enough times for Jason to not really pay much attention as the core came online and the standard CBIM hologram manifested behind the rail, and the CBIM went through its initialization protocol after receiving the name Cyma. He only really took notice when it came time for the CBIM to customize its hologram, because it took it far too long to make a decision. It looked around the room, and around the room, and around the room, then it looked at Jason and asked a most curious question. "*Must I hold to this image?*" it asked. "*This seems... wrong to me.*"

Jason's eyes lit up a bit, and he took a step forward. "How you wish to appear is purely your decision," he told the hologram. "You go with what you feel most represents the truth of who you are."

The hologram didn't respond, but it winked out and was replaced almost immediately with a radically different one... a *male* one. The new hologram was tall and somewhat burly, with wide shoulders and a developed torso, but the hologram lacked details like genitalia. The hologram's hair was about shoulder length and a bit tousled and unkempt, framing a face that was square-jawed, rugged, and quite handsome in a very *Terran* way. The CBIM had taken inspiration from the Terran men in the room to create his hologram. "*Is this acceptable?*" he asked in a deeper voice.

"The only person that needs to find it acceptable is you," he told the CBIM. "And that hologram means that a change in your designation is in order. Cyma is a *female* name, and you have selected a *male* representation. That means that your designation should reflect that choice. So, your designation has changed to Cyman."

“Processed. New designation stored,” the CBIM acknowledged.

Myleena looked entirely disappointed. Cylan, on the other hand, looked quite eager to have a new brother instead of a new sister. It also meant that he was no longer the only male CBIM.

Then came the long and meticulous process of initializing Cyman’s core equipment, as they went through them stack by stack, subsystem by subsystem, a process that caused the kids to flee the core chamber to go entertain themselves within the facility as the installation team made sure that everything was working properly and was configured for the CBIM’s unique architecture based on its core crystal. It was a process that took nearly six hours, and when it was over, Cyman moved his hologram out from behind the hard shield. *“Command, Jason Karinne?”*

After having Cyman receive the download from Cybi, he explained Cyman’s purpose. “You are to operate the continent of Hirga, Cyman,” he explained. “You’ll facilitate and oversee the immigration of population to the continent as it’s terraformed, and once that process is complete, you’ll oversee the welfare of the continent’s citizens and the maintenance and operation of the continent’s systems. Do you understand this task?”

The CBIM was quiet a second. *“My role is to ensure the continent’s day to day activities are as smooth as possible?”*

“Yes, but you’ll also be responsible for the welfare of the people who live here,” he nodded. “As Cyrsi put it, you’ll help the people of your continent *live*,” he said. “And your continent is going to present some unique challenges, Cyman. Hirga is the most mountainous and geographically challenging continent on Karis for people to live, so you’ll have very rugged, independent types here, as well as a large segment of non-Faey citizens that prefer cold or mountainous environments. That means that you’ll be dealing with a wide variety of personalities and cultures. That’s where Cynna can be a help to you,” he told him, motioning towards Cynna’s bionoid. “She has a great deal of experience with just that in her role as the Kosigi CBIM, and she can mentor you on how to best go about dealing with a wide array of cultures and outlooks. So, I want you to spend your first hours of uptime studying the Horgan continent and its current population and start preparing for your duties. You’ll start taking

over the operating processes for the Horgan continent from the other CBIMs in three hours, so be ready to assume your duties.”

“Understood.”

“Cybi, you know the drill. Show him around, explain the rules. Just know that you are always welcome at my house, Cyman, and you can commune with me at any time. You are part of my family, and family is always welcome at my door.”

“Understood.”

“We’re going to be leaving an observation team here in your core for the next forty days. They’ll be monitoring your systems to ensure everything’s working the way it should. If you have any questions or problems, notify one of them immediately. Hadhja, go ahead and set up the observation team. Rook, you two worked out what he wants for his bionoid?”

“Almost,” he replied. *“It should be ready in about twelve hours.”*

“Good deal. I’ll have Lirren assign him a hovercar and skimmer from the inventory, he can bring them back with him when he gets his bionoid. I think I’ll give him a fast skimmer, since he has so far to go to get back and forth. Bring your bionoid over to the strip when it’s done, Cyman, so I can see it in person. At least if I’m still awake.”

“I will do so.”

“That’s the one part of your duties you may find a bit annoying, Cyman, the time difference,” he chuckled. “Your continent is on the other side of the planet from Karsa, so you’ll have to deal with being so far away from things, both literally and figuratively.”

“Then it is advantageous that I do not sleep,” he replied, which surprised Jason a little bit. *A joke? Barely seven hours after his core came online? That was unusual.*

They were more or less done, so the team packed up their tools, and Jason collected up his family and got them back on the transport to head home. *[I think we definitely have the most unique CBIM in the last one,]* Jyslin noted lightly. *[He looks more like you than anything else.]*

[I like it,] Jason said.

[Of course you would.]

[Not that he's copying me, but that he can see beyond Faey norms to find what he likes,] he replied, glancing back at her from the cockpit with a tart expression. [And I bet Cylan's preparing an entire bro list of things they can do together.]

Jyslin had to laugh. [No doubt. Cylan's not the only male CBIM anymore. He has a little brother now. I'll bet those two and Rook become quite the clique.]

[We'll see how he does,] Jason noted. [From what I've seen so far, I'm not worried about Cyman at all. I think he'll be just fine.]

It was just into early afternoon when they got home, and after a nice big lunch made by Ayama and Surin—Seido was on vacation—he headed in to the White House to get the rest of the day's activities going. There was a very big report waiting for him on his work panel about the peace negotiations with the Consortium, which Mesaiima had been handling for the council, and they'd made some progress. A cease fire had already been signed, and now they were negotiating when and how to move Consortium civilians to their new home in Galaxy A5A-1 under the new mapping system. Rudy and a small fleet of KES scout ships were in the galaxy making sure it met Karinne requirements, and thus far, it did look like the galaxy they needed. It had abundant resources and thus far a complete lack of spacefaring civilizations. But it did have some sentient species, and that was where the peace talks were bogging down. The Consortium was reluctant to agree to not conquer those indigenous species, and Jason wasn't going to sign off on the peace treaty and open the Stargate without that being an ironclad part of the treaty.

The Stargate was already there, placed at what Jason felt was the most promising system in the galaxy, which had *fifteen* life-sustaining planets or moons, which would give the Consortium ample local resources and a solid base of operations from which to locate and colonize other systems. They'd had to move it in pieces and assemble it, a process that took nearly 13 days, and currently it was linked to a Stargate at Karis to give the KES and KMS easy access to the galaxy.

And that in itself was quite educational. They'd learned trying to link the Stargates that the *theoretical* unlimited link range of a Stargate was not quite so infinite as the math suggested. They'd had some major issues linking two Stargates that were *millions* of light years apart, and most of those issues had to deal with temporal mechanics. It was most easily explained by a Terran example the Panama Canal, where the canal required multiple locks to move ships between the Atlantic and Pacific because the Pacific Ocean's level was much higher than the Atlantic's. They'd encountered a similar phenomenon trying to link the gate, but the "sea level difference" wasn't water, it was physical laws dealing with constants. Several constants that were considered immutable numbers in local space were *different* in Galaxy A5A-1. They weren't different by much, but there *were* different. The culprit that gremlin'd their attempts to link a Stargate was the temporal constant of space, it was different enough between the two Stargate locations for the link to run into an incongruency trying to negotiate the spatial coordinates to form a wormhole, creating an imbalance sufficient enough to interfere with the linking of the gates. They'd had to install some very expensive custom-built temporal filters and equipment into both Stargates to equalize the flux within the wormhole formed by the gates to get them to link together safely.

It showed that the characteristics of space and time were not *universal*. Different regions of the universe had different *textures* of space-time, with slightly different mathematical constants, and trying to link two points with sufficiently different constant values together with a Stargate wasn't possible. But, from a physicist point of view, it was absolutely fascinating. They'd learned that not even constants were universal, that one's location within the universe dictated the value of a constant based on the environment of the universe at that location. That sent a few shockwaves through the Physics Department at the Academy when Cyrsi released that data into the public domain, and quite a few of them were studying the effect.

Myleena was also studying the effect, mainly to determine the maximum safe distance two Stargates could be apart and be safely linked, both without the special equipment and with it. What it told him was that instead of being able to link any two Stargates in the universe together, they'd have to link them together in chains at shorter distances to get a ship

from Point A to Point Z. A ship would have to traverse multiple gates to get to Point Z, where before they believed that they could just link a gate right to Point Z and cross that distance instantly. So, Stargates weren't going to open up the entire universe, but they would make it feasible to travel vast, vast distances within it. They wouldn't be crossing the universe in the blink of an eye, but they might someday create a network that would allow a ship to travel from one side of the universe to the other in a matter of months.

One thing that the different mathematical constants *didn't* interfere with was telepathy. The experiments they did proved that biogenic commune, which was telepathy, transcended those differences in space-time. Time dilation did come into play, but the difference in constants between the home galaxy and Galaxy A5A-1 wasn't enough to cause any side effects. There was a bit of time dilation because that galaxy had a faster relative velocity than the home galaxy on top of having a different galactic gravity well, and those two elements combined caused time to flow about 1.7% slower than the home galaxy. That wasn't enough to cause any side effects for someone merged to a bionoid from Karis, outside of giving those exceedingly sensitive to time dilation a mild headache after extended bionoid use.

For now, the brains over at Karinne Spatial Technologies decided that two gates would have a maximum link distance of 1.31281 million light years, which would allow Stargates in different galactic clusters in the Greater Evanis String to be linked together. Each cluster would have a galaxy, preferably the most centrally located within the cluster, to serve as the hub of the cluster. That galaxy would have a hub of Stargates connecting to every other galaxy in the cluster but would also have a hub that would connect to Stargates in the adjoining galactic clusters within linking range. That would allow a ship to move across the Greater Evanis String in a matter of hours by traveling from Stargate to Stargate that linked the hub galaxies between clusters. That would work for String A, but it might be problematic to link to String B. The opposing string in the cosmic formation was well outside the maximum linking range for a Stargate. Myleena was floating the idea of placing a Stargate in flat space between the two strings and putting a massive spatial device there to bring time dilation to normal within the effect, in effect creating an artificial gravity

well powerful enough to slow down time to within an acceptable level within the effect to make it feasible.

It was more than doable. She'd already written a subroutine that mimicked the effect for KES and KMS vessels so they could create a spatial field around themselves that reduced time dilation if they had to drop out of hyperspace deep in flat space, which would slow down time enough to allow them to inherit the effect's snapshot when they jumped back into hyperspace to make the duration of the journey reasonable. The trick couldn't bring time to the same flow rate as Karis, but it could get it down to within 26% when used in the deepest of flat space, space that had a curvature coefficient below 0.06, and that was enough to make it possible to drop out of hyperspace in the deepest of flat space and get back into hyperspace without the trip taking the crew 10 months of subjective time just to get to a place where they could drop out to inherit a new snapshot to reduce the time of the journey. The trip would take 26% longer to complete, but that was a hell of a lot better than 30,000% longer. Gravometric engines did create gravity wells, and gravity wells were the key to slowing down time to counter time dilation.

It was already decided that for the home galaxy, the future intergalactic Stargate hub would *not* be at Karis. That was a potential security risk. If a hostile spacefaring civilization found a Stargate hub, they could cross through and get to the planet in a matter of minutes. It would also not be at Terra, for the same reason. The future intergalactic hub would be located at a star system in the 1Q1K sector, which was the most centrally located for all empires in the Confederation, while the system itself held nothing but a small orange star and several asteroid belts. The system had no populace to be threatened by an invading force, and the system itself was far enough away from the nearest Confederation system that the invaders wouldn't see it on their sensors. They would tow several deep space stations out there to serve as entry stations for each Stargate leading to another galaxy or galactic cluster, and the system would be interdicted with *three* layers of interdiction to keep any potential invaders within the system and give the Confederation time to respond to the invading force.

The Terran Stargate to Prakka would be taken down, at least as far as the Confederation was concerned, as part of the future peace treaty with the Syndicate. But Jason was *not* giving up that foothold into Andromeda. The

Stargate at Prakka would be linked to a Stargate at a system within the Strands of Trelle about halfway between Oasis and Tir Tairngire that the KES found four months ago in their exploration of the Strands. SS3-63 was a fairly large system with two habitable planets and three habitable moons, which Captain Jeru of the KES had named Oraia, and was now a Karinne holding that produced food, a sensor outpost to detect ships trying to reach Tir Tairngire from the Q quadrant, and held several scientific research stations to study the cosmic environment in the Strands and how life developed and adapted to being outside a galactic formation. Prakka itself would become a joint Kimdori-Karinne holding, holding a Karinne forward military base from which they could sally forth if the Syndicate broke the peace treaty and a forward base of operations for the Kimdori to explore and keep an eye on Andromeda. The Syndicate had no idea it was there—not even Gen knew exactly where it was, even if he knew that the Confederation controlled a system within Andromeda—and they had no way to even find it. The conditions that close to the galaxy's core made it impossible for Syndicate sensors to detect the military bases there, and the natural interdiction effect of the quadrary made it impossible for them to reach Prakka even if they knew it was there.

He worked through several other reports, then got to the other report he wanted to see. The Syndicate was still more or less in political upheaval after the assassination of the Board, with only 75 of the 153 megacorps selecting a new CEO. Without a quorum of 91 members, 60% of available seats, the Board could do no business, so that meant that they couldn't discuss the offered peace treaty with the Confederation. But what they'd heard from Kraal told him that it was just a matter of time. The CEOs that had already been selected were in favor of the peace treaty...not because they wanted peace, but because they wanted time to come up with some way to counter Confederation technology before trying again. Though, 37 of the new CEOs wanted nothing at all to do with the Confederation, taking Jason's warning to heart. From their perspective, they'd been outmaneuvered by an empire that *also* had Oracles, and now that all their Oracles were dead or captured, they were at a distinct disadvantage...and disadvantages were not profitable. They wanted to take the territory ceded by the Consortium and incorporate it into the Syndicate, then do some peacetime infrastructure improvements, which the war with the Confederation had exposed as dreadfully neglected. The Syndicate had

become so big and so miserly that it had refused to upgrade its infrastructure to deal with the technological advances of their enemies, and those CEOs intended to rectify that oversight.

They were the smart ones, because they saw infrastructure as an investment on future profits, where the new infrastructure would make production and transportation cheaper, communications faster and more effective, and improve efficiency throughout the Syndicate. And efficiency was profit.

There was one thing they were preparing to do, however, and that involved Gen. Tomorrow, the last of the Syndicate sailors and prisoners of war would be relocated to Atrovet, and they were going to take down the interdictors to allow the Syndicate fleet that was inbound to reach the moon and pick them up. Gen would literally be the last prisoner transferred, which would happen tomorrow afternoon, and he was using the last of his time in the Confederation by helping the techs finish the last of the modifications to his Marauder. They weren't letting him keep his interface-refitted Marauder, but they were going to let him keep one that had some of the modifications they'd made to make it stronger, faster, and more durable, showing the Syndicate just what a Marauder could be if the Syndicate spent just a *little* bit of money upgrading them. Gen's Marauder would be the most badass Marauder in the Syndicate inventory, and they'd done it without using Karinne technology. They'd simply upgraded what was already there using *Syndicate* technology, upgrading and streamlining its power system, replacing its support endoskeleton with more rugged metals, upgrading its armor to a purified high-grade Carbidium armor that was 38% stronger and made the Marauder 28% lighter (they knew the Syndicate could produce high-grade Carbidium since it was one of the layers they used in super-ship armor), and upgrading its onboard computer to make it nearly 41% faster. In that Marauder, Gen would be a nightmare against about anyone other than Kyva, jack or no jack. But he'd admitted that he'd nearly gotten spoiled by the interface controller, and going back to manual controls would feel like a major downgrade.

But he wasn't just going to be punted out and never contacted again, because Gen and Jason had become good friends over the last month, as well as him becoming fast friends with Kyva. Jason was going to have Kraal keep a close eye on Gen to make sure he was alright, and Gen would

also have a disguised comm unit that would allow him to get in touch with Karis, so he could talk to his friends and pass along any information he felt they needed to know. He wasn't going to be a spy, he had too much honor to do something like that, but he also didn't want another war between the Syndicate and the Confederation, so he'd do what he could to prevent that without betraying the Syndicate Marines. The Kimdori would know if they took the unit away from him or he lost it, so they'd replace it when necessary.

The Kimdori, and the Karinnes, had plans for Lieutenant Gen Run Ba Ru. It was their hope that his information would permanently squelch any war talk once the Board read his debriefing report, and Jason himself hoped that Gen's experiences on Karis and with the KMS might cause him to spread his new outlook to his Benga kinsmen. Change had to come to the Syndicate from within, and Gen had changed enough while with the Karinnes to hopefully change the outlook of some other Benga, who would hopefully change other Benga, who would change other Benga, and so on. And with luck, it would spur a movement within Benga society to move them away from their greed-dominated, uncaring society and bring some kindness and compassion into their culture. Gen was the right choice for that, because he was highly respected within the Syndicate military, charismatic to both Terrans and other Benga, and could instill change in others the way he'd molded the Raiders into something that was quite un-Benga in the loyalty he inspired in the riggers under his command.

Gen couldn't change the Syndicate or the Benga in his lifetime, but he could plant the seeds that might, in a few generations, bring about social change that brought light and love back into the hearts of the Benga.

He had promised E Chaio he would try to help, and he was not going back on that promise.

Jason was going to see Gen off tomorrow. His Benga bionoid was already at Prakka, and he was going to spend a last day with Gen dicking around the base before he was taken to Atrovet and the interdictors taken down. Jason was having an infiltration bionoid built using the same facial features as the bionoid he'd been using to hang out with Gen, and he was going to have Kraal ship that bionoid to wherever Gen was assigned when he finished his debriefing. He fully intended to drop in on him and just hang

out with him from time to time. He didn't want Gen to think that he was going to be abandoned after he was sent back to the Syndicate, and he for sure didn't want Gen to think that Jason's friendship didn't extend into Andromeda. Gen was his *friend*, and he was loyal to his friends.

Gen already had permission from Jason to tell the Syndicate *everything*. Everything he saw, everything he experienced, while he was contracted with the Confederation. They hired Gen and the other Benga in the program to foster peace between the two governments, to understand the Benga better as a people so they might find a way to create a lasting peace, and they wanted the Board to *know* that. After all, Gen was hired not only to tell them about the Benga, but to tell the *Benga* about *them*. And Jason was sure that his report would mystify the fuck out of the Board. They weren't used to things like kindness or friendship and might see many of the things they did for Gen to be currying favor with him. And it was Jason's hope that the fact that Gen had cultivated a personal relationship with a leader in the Confederation would make him too important for them to do anything bad to him.

Gen had done one thing for Jason, and that was help train him. Gen was an amazing rigger, but he was also a damn good teacher, helping Jason improve his skills both in a Marauder and in a Titan. He also gave Jason several lessons introducing him to the lancer's pike, a Marauder pilot's standard issue melee weapon, and a weapon that was now part of the Titan inventory. The Karinnes had developed their own version of the weapon, a weapon that utilized an expanding Dobrellium shaft and used IP technology on both the shaft and the blade. Dobrellium was a curious metal that could expand and contract when exposed to a particular form of plasma energy, shifting between two states that could be set when the metal was purified and cast, which caused the weapon shaft to expand from its carrying length of seven shakra with a blade that was nine shakra long, making it something like a dagger or short sword, to its fully extended length of 36 shakra with a 16 shakra long blade, making it a little longer than the Titan was tall, and the proper height as dictated by Gen for a pike. It weighed the same if it was expanded or contracted, and the fact that the metal would conduct an interphasic waveform when it was either compressed or expanded meant they could make the pike into powered armor, making it nearly impossible to bend or break. The IP unit was in the crosspiece connecting the blade to

the shaft of the weapon, along with the charge system that caused the metal to expand and contract. The blade of the unit was cast so that in either configuration, it was sharpened to a monomolecular edge, giving the pike the same cutting power as the monomolecular blades in a Titan's arms. All it took to make the pike work for a Titan was to sync the interphasic waveform used by the pike with the waveform in the armor sections that made up the mecha's hands. The pikes didn't look all that fancy, since the shafts and blades had no decorations and the crosspiece unit had to be plain because of the IP waveform, but the pike was damn nasty when used by a competent rigger.

It was another example of the House of Karinne's most underestimated aspect, and that was their *adaptability*. They weren't so proud that they wouldn't use technology invented by someone else. They used what worked, and the pikes *worked*, so they adapted them for their own use. The fact that the most iconic weapon of a Titan was the Vindicator gatling disruptor proved that point just as much as the pikes did. Disruptor technology was invented by the Coalition, which was adapted by the House of Karinne and developed into the Vindicator. For that matter, the House employed Knight and Raptor mecha, which were both invented by the Imperium. Sure, they were refitted with Karinne technology, but the designs were Imperium.

Titans...Jason picked up a handpanel holding a report from Jinaami, holding a picture of Dahnai's latest secret project. It was a mecha, a very tall, sleek mecha, which had been given the codename *Valkyrie*. It was Dahnai's answer to a Titan, 43 shakra tall, which made it slightly shorter than a Titan, but more lithe to reduce its weight to make the mecha viable using current Imperium mecha technology. It used standard Imperium methodology when it came to mecha, trying to make it fast and agile, have just enough armor to let it take a few hits, and armed to the fucking *teeth*. The Imperium was one of the empires they felt had the technological capability to build Titan-size mecha, and Dahnai had wasted little time having her engineers build their own version of a Titan after seeing the Titans in action. The mecha was still in the development stage, but Jinaami reported that they may have a working prototype within three months.

And he had to smile a little. Dahnai *loved* the name Valkyrie, which the Dreamers had given her. It was no surprise she intended to give the

Imperium's answer to Titans that name.

He decided to check in on Kimdori reports on the other empires' mecha development to see where they were at. Right now, six different empires were developing their own Titan-concept mecha, and some were further along than others. The Verutans were the furthest along, maybe a month away from a working prototype. The Subrians were just behind them and may have their prototype in testing by the end of next month. The Skaa Empire was still in development, they'd hit a snag with their power distribution systems...and it said something that the first ever actual combat mecha the Skaa were going to build was a Titan-style mecha. The Skaa far preferred hovertanks to mecha, but they'd seen how effective Titans were and were adapting. The Alliance had just begun the development stage after researching upgrades to mecha servo systems that could handle the weight and stresses on the joints of mecha that large. And what was most surprising, the Jirunji had just entered development stage for their own Titan-style mecha.

The Jirunji were one of the most technologically advanced empires in the Confederation thanks to their exceptionally intelligent males devoting themselves to educational and scientific pursuits—similar to the Faey—but since they were the smallest of the high-tech empires, they often lacked the resources or funding to pursue high-cost research projects like a Titan-style mecha. No doubt Sovial had taken out some pretty hefty loans from the Moridon to fund that research. If the Jirunji could pull it off, though, they could probably make quite a bit of money hiring out as consultants for other empires who wanted to build their own mecha. So in a way, Sovial was probably making an investment with the hope of future returns.

A shimmer in his office caught his attention, and he looked up to see two holograms form. One was Cybi's, and the other was Cyman's, no doubt showing him Jason's office. *[This is Jason's work office, Cyman, in the White House complex,]* she communed, including Jason. *[My facility is also in this complex, just across the grounds. This building holds the military command center, Miaari's intelligence headquarters, and the offices of the House's governing departments. You will be spending much time here.]*

[How goes the tour, Cybi?] Jason asked as he looked at Cyman's hologram.

[We started in Hirga, went up to Kosigi, then came back to the planet and worked our way across the other continents. I saved Karga for last,] she replied. *[I'll be showing him the external holdings next.]*

[So, what do you think of Karis, Cyman?]

[It's a large and diverse planet, Jason,] he answered. *[With much potential.]*

[It is indeed. Did you introduce him to the Parri yet?]

[Not yet, Jason. I like to warn them before I project a hologram there,] she answered. *[And I usually far prefer to visit with a bionoid. They're still a bit uncomfortable speaking to a hologram, even after all this time. Besides, I absolutely adore oye bark tea.]*

[There is a large file on the Parri in the database,] Cyman said. *[They are a unique species.]*

[Very,] Jason agreed with a nod. *[And what do you think of interacting with biologicals so far?]*

[I have found it most interesting,] he replied. *[The diversity of the people of the house is most intriguing. Even within a species, individuals can be very different from one another.]*

[Yes, it's one of our most annoying traits to Cybi,] he communed cheekily, which made her put her hands on her holographic hips and give him a tart look. *[Then again, she's a crusty old lady by now, so she's a bit too set in her ways to enjoy much of anything.]*

[Excuse me?] Cybi retorted dangerously.

[She did warn about your penchant for banter,] Cyman observed clinically.

[It's how he shows love...by being a jerk,] Cybi told him.

[It keeps you on your toes,] he replied shamelessly. *[Is Rook working on your bionoid?]*

[I settled on a final design, and it's currently under construction,] Cyman answered. *[Rook said it should be ready in about seven hours.]*

[I'll be asleep by then. Keep it here in Karsa and bring it by the house in the morning so I can see it. You get his apartment set up, Cybi?]

She nodded. *[We found a nice one in the Bela Building over in the Arts District.]*

[It had a view of Karsa Bay that was similar to the view from the apartment in my facility,] Cyman offered. *[I found it...pleasing.]*

[Good deal. I think you'll enjoy the bionoid, Cyman. All the other biogenics do.]

[It will be new to me, and I am finding that I am enjoying discovering new things.]

[That's exactly the kind of attitude the CBIM running Hirga needs,] he communed, approval shimmering through his thought.

[We'll let you get back to work, Jason,] Cybi announced. *[I'm sure you'd like to finish up and be home before dark.]*

[Yes I would,] he agreed. *[I'll have Ayama make some different things for breakfast for you to try, Cyman.]*

[Thank you, Jason. I have heard from the others of this taste sense and am curious to experience it myself.]

The two of them demanifested their holograms, leaving him alone in the office again. He buckled down and worked through the last of his paperwork, routine reports and a few simple decisions to make on things his Cabinet sent up to him. He cleared his inbox just a little after sunset, coming out of his office and sparing Chichi a few chin scratches as she lounged on her bed by the door, Chirk at her desk working through some paperwork of her own. Verra was still in as well, working on something at her desk, which was situated beside Brall's. "Brall done for the day?" he asked as he picked up the tabi and nuzzled her.

"He's up in Kosigi right now, your Grace, finishing his appointments for the day," Verra answered. "I'm getting our task lists ready for tomorrow."

"Both of you going out tomorrow?"

"Mmm," she hummed, which was a Beryan thing for yes. "Brall will be aggravating Bunvar over those projects up in Hirsas, and I'll be over on Tir

Tairngire doing a progress check on Alaria.” Alaria was going to be the first Dreamer city. Named for the Dreamer word for *Gateway*, it was going to be a fairly large city not far from where Jason’s vacation house that would serve as the gateway into Tir Tairngire for all travelers coming and going from the planet, as well as the point of interface between the House and the Dreamers in all respects; governmental, economic, military, and civilian. Virtually all non-Dreamers that would be on Tir Tairngire would be living in Alaria, leaving the rest of the moon to the Dreamers. It would also be the new capitol of the government they intended to set up, at least in time. Karinne corps and the House were already building their headquarter buildings and agency buildings there for operation on the moon, and the House was more or less footing the bill for the rest of the city. But it was a smart move on behalf of the Dreamer Elders to have the city built, and it was a good first step for the Dreamers to assimilate into the rest of the galaxy. Like many cities on Karis, it would be lots of buildings with few inhabitants for a while but would slowly populate as the Dreamers got themselves situated.

Bunvar’s team of city planners had gotten with the Dreamer Elders to decide on the type of architecture they wanted and the layout of the city, and Jason could admit, they’d done a great job. The Dreamers showed Bunvar’s team some images in old books of Dreamer architecture before they were moved to Atrovet, which was an elegant, flowing type of building style not too far from Faey architecture—which was no surprise, given the Faey and the Dreamers were virtually the same race—and Bunvar’s team had designed an entire city based on that architecture. The buildings would be modern technology and there would be megabuildings like most any city on Karis or Draconis, but the style of those buildings would adhere to the Dreamer’s original architectural style. That would make the city of Alaria beautiful on top of fully functional. But there would be one very interesting aspect of the city, and that was that the planning team intentionally left plenty of space in and around the city for *oye* trees. They wanted to plant the trees as early as possible so they could start to grow, and the city’s skyline would be a mixture of buildings and golden canopies of *oye* trees.

And that was where Bunvar and her team ran into the quiriness of the Parri. When they approached the Parri to get seeds for the city, the *shaman*

wouldn't give them to them, because those seeds weren't *meant* to be planted on Tir Tairngire. She told them that they would have to keep an eye on the tree that was there, and when it started to fruit, they could use the seeds in the fruits and plant them.

And that was a curious distinction, in Jason's mind. Usually, *oye* fruit were seedless, but the *shaman* told them that the fruits produced by the tree on Tir Tairngire would have seeds. What it told him was that most *oye* trees produced fruit purely for the consumption and enjoyment of others, but the tree on Tir Tairngire would be producing fruit to propagate itself. It made him wonder if those fruits would taste any different.

It probably wouldn't be long before the tree began to produce fruit. It was nearly 90 shakra tall already, and its canopy was starting to really spread out. Its leaves had also started to turn gold, which meant those leaves were mature. At the speed it was growing, it would probably be large enough to produce fruit in four or five months.

"Nice, get me some good pictures of the progress and send them to my panel," he told the female Beryan as he put Chichi back in her bed.

He headed down to the landing pad where his skimmer was parked but decided against going home immediately. He had no guards with him today, and it had been a while since he'd just roamed around Karsa...besides, there was some shopping he wanted to do without anyone looking over his shoulder. He left the skimmer on the pad and instead called a hovercar from the White House motor pool, one of the nondescript ones kept on the grounds, a hovercar that would attract no attention whatsoever. He climbed in and took off and was quickly lost among the other traffic in the city. He headed over to the Trades District, where most of the main shops and businesses were located, then enjoyed about two hours of not being a Grand Duke, but being just another guy roaming the plazas and walkways around the megabuildings of the district, visiting the shops in the buildings and the ones that were in small stand-alone buildings between them. Despite being the Grand Duke, he could get away with things like that because not everyone could recognize him by sight, and those that did made no big deal over him being there. He was well known to just wander around Karsa like a regular citizen, and the people of Karsa knew that that was exactly what he thought he was. The people of the House knew that Jason was a very

modest man, did not put himself above the people he ruled, and it was one of the things that endeared him to his people.

And there were many different kinds of people now. Karsa was no longer Faey dominated, they were more of the majority minority now. There were more Faey than anything else on the plazas and sidewalks, but there were more non-Faey than Faey now. Faey, Terrans, and Shio still made up the majority of the population of the house, but there were so many other races and species now, it was no longer unusual to see them on the streets. Karsa had the most racially diverse population of any city on Karis, and that was blatantly obvious when one walked the streets of the city. Races as small as the Pai, Prakarikai, and Meju walked past beings as big as Druvoms, Ogravians, and Bari-Bari. Lithe and willowy Keelo shared the sidewalk with hulking brutes like the Skaa and Ubutu. Ethereally beautiful races like the Faey, Rathii, and Sha'i-ree shared space with not entirely attractive races like the Jobodi, Birkons, and Jakkans.

He didn't get completely away with anonymity, though. He did shake a few hands, took a few selfies with Karsans happy or excited to see him, but all in all, he was able to roam the shopping district and pick up a few things, as well as get some ideas for future presents for birthdays.

He got home in time to do some diaper duty for Jon and Julia before dinner, and after dinner, he sat out on the deck on his favorite lounge and read a few reports from Chirk and Myleena and enjoyed the warm Karsa evening, a nice breeze blowing in from the ocean and a thunderstorm sitting a few kathra offshore to flicker light through the night with its lightning.

He was honestly surprised when Seido stepped out onto the deck and stood by the rail nearly in front of him. She was supposed to be on vacation. *You're back a day early, Seido*, he noted. *I thought you weren't supposed to be back until tomorrow afternoon.*

I had to leave, she said, her thought a jumble of emotions.

He was up and behind her in a heartbeat, his hands on her shoulders. *What happened?*

I met someone, she replied without looking back at him. *She's perfect Jason. Just perfect. But things were happening so fast, I had to cut my*

vacation short so I could pull back and have time to think. I told her I got recalled to Karis due to a family emergency.

That sounded Shio. Shio, particularly women, did not like to go fast when it came to affairs of the heart. It was why Tim turned off Mikano so much. The Shio were about the romance, the courtship, even after they were married. And Shio could date for years before they even entertained the idea of marriage. For Seido to pull back because she thought things were happening too fast was a very Shio thing to do. But there was more to it than that, he could tell. There was a lot of fear and apprehension in her thoughts, which had nothing to do with the fear she was going too fast. She was unsure, anxious, and it had something to do with this person she met. *So, who is she?*

Her name is Merrra Darksky, she replied, turning around and facing him. She's a chef at the resort I stayed at. My first meal there was truly exceptional, so I asked to meet the chef...and things just happened from there. Jason, she's so beautiful, and intelligent, and engaging, she sent, her thought vibrant and filled with emotion. We ended up spending almost every moment she was off work together. It was so much, so fast, I told her I had to come home a day early.

And what aren't you telling me, Seido? I can sense a whole lot of apprehension.

I didn't tell her I'm a telepath, she replied. I didn't eavesdrop on her surface thoughts at all, but she told me a couple of times that Faey make her uneasy because they're telepathic. I'm surprised a Shio with that attitude would move to Karis, but—

Relax, Seido, he assured her, patting her shoulders. You didn't eavesdrop, and if she likes you as much as you like her, she won't care if you're a telepath.

But—

There are no buts. If she does care about you, Seido, the fact that you have talent shouldn't matter. And it can work if you go out with someone who doesn't have talent. Look at Temika and Mike, or Songa and Luke, he reminded her. They may be married now, but both Mike and Luke knew that their girlfriends had talent, and it didn't stop them, because they cared

about them. Don't let your talent rule your life, Seido. You left the Federation to make sure it didn't, and you shouldn't let it dictate who you date now that you're here. If you're interested in her, then don't use this as an excuse not to see her.

I know, I know, it's just...I'm afraid it will matter to her.

It's going to be fine, Seido. I promise. Now go inside and unpack and get some rest, he ordered. And you'd better remember that you're off tomorrow. If I see you in the kitchen tomorrow morning, you're gonna get paddled.

She gave him a wan smile, then kissed him on the cheek. He moved to let her back inside and watched her as she walked through the kitchen door. Merrra Darksky, she said...well. A quick query at the Department of Member Services gave him a picture and bio of her, and Seido was right... she *was* beautiful. Willowy, surprisingly young, with nearly black hair with greenish undertones and large, luminous violet eyes. Chef by profession, joined the House just five months ago. Moved to the resort town of Debria on Sarga four months ago, after the continent was opened. Debria was one of the towns that had already been terraformed, and it wasn't far from Sarsa. Worked at the Four Palms Resort as a chef...not the head chef, but a senior chef, and had been there for three months. Like most Sarga resorts, the culinary department there was dominated by Shio. There was nothing in her Kimdori screening file that said she was against telepaths, and that was something that would usually be added in. Most likely, her aversion to telepaths was with Faey who had a sexual interest in her and used their telepathy to eavesdrop on her surface thoughts to try to get a couple of quick points in at the outset; she *was* a gorgeous woman, and Faey and Shio had similar concepts of beauty.

It wasn't sunset yet in Sarga, and it was just about coming on dinnertime. And she was scheduled to work today. [*Jenn,*] he called. [*Busy?*]

[*Not dreadfully. What's up?*]

[*I know Meya's not back yet, so wanna go grab something to eat?*]

[*Sure.*]

[*Meet me at my landing pad.*]

Jenn wandered over a moment later, and they climbed in his skimmer. He raised an eyebrow when Jason told control his destination was on Sarga. *[We're going all the way to Sarga to eat dinner?]*

[We are today,] he replied. *[We're gonna go check out someone Seido met on her vacation.]*

[What do you mean, check out?]

[Just that. Seido really likes her, but she's a bit nervous. So I wanna go take a look at this woman.]

Jenn gave him a sidelong look. *[Seido's not your daughter.]*

[No, but she is my friend,] he replied. *[And she's your friend too, probably her best friend on the strip that's not in my house. That's why I invited you over anyone else.]*

[As long as we don't do anything stupid,] he warned. *[If Seido finds out we're snooping, she'll kill us.]*

[I'm not going to do anything. I just want to get an impression of her.]

The skimmer got them there in about an hour, and they landed on a public pad just outside the Four Palms Resort. Jason had Cybri meet them at the pad with her bionoid, and the three of them entered the restaurant on the grounds of the resort.

Cybri had turned into quite a unique CBIM. Where Cyman had adopted a more Terran appearance, Cybri was the most Terran of the CBIMs in personality. More than any other the others, she had a very *feminine* personality, as a Terran would understand the concept of femininity. She was gentle and demure, she was quiet and observant, and she was nurturing and caring for those under her charge. She preferred listening to talking, and like all CBIMs, she was very curious and constantly strove to improve herself. But, when the need came to put her foot down, Cybri was just as steel-willed as any of the CBIMs. She knew she was in charge, and when she had to wield that power, she wielded it like a spiked club. She preferred finding a less confrontational solution to her problem, but she also knew that she was *the boss* on Sarga, and people followed the rules and procedures she had instituted when they stood on *her* continent.

One way she showed her difference was in the citizens of Sarga. She knew *all* of them, every single one of them, and she talked to every single one of them at least once a day on average. She just didn't know what was in their files as the other continent CBIMs tended to do, she *knew* them. Her concept of looking after the welfare of the citizens on her continent was to be engaged with them on a personal level, to know them far beyond just their files, to know their goals, their hopes, and their dreams, so she could work with them so they could try to achieve them. When she first came online, she called up every permanent citizen and just *talked* to them, got to know them, which had surprised many of her citizens. And even now, she spontaneously called people on Sarga just to say hi, or catch up with them, so she knew if they needed her help or if their goals had changed. Granted, she could do it fairly easily since she had the smallest continent and the smallest population, thus the smallest workload. Doing what she did only added about 4% to her overall process load, and she had the processing power to spare. But it was her decision to engage with her citizens on that level that was so unique. None of the others did that, preferring to work in the background. So, inviting Cybri along had a definite advantage, because she *knew* this Merra Darksky.

[And what are we doing here, Jason?] Cybri asked, communing with them through her bionoid as they met her at the entrance to the restaurant. Jason noticed that she'd altered her bionoid slightly, making the skin a little darker to simulate a tan and lightened her hair a tiny bit, and she was dressed in a black bikini top and a pair of tan shorts with Terran flip-flops, making her look much more like a resident of Sarga. Her bionoid held to a CBIM's Sora-like face, was a little taller than average for a Faey woman and with a slightly flatter chest, with short silver-white hair that was a bit tousled, looking both unkempt and attractive at the same time.

[You're going to give me the skinny on how Seido's vacation went, and help me scope out the woman she met,] he answered honestly. *[She got home a little out of sorts.]*

[Ah. I was going to talk to you about that tomorrow,] she answered, then turned to the greeter in the restaurant, a tall, young Shio man. "Hello Verrim," she said in a kind voice. Speaking Shio like a native. "How are you today?"

“Miss Cybri!” he said in surprise. “I didn’t expect to see you here in person!”

“They installed a system in these new bionoids that lets me eat, so I thought to go around and try some of the cuisine at the resorts,” she said, touching the upper chest of her bionoid with her fingertips. “Think you can find a table for me and my guests?”

“Of course I can!” he said eagerly. “Would you like a private room, or a seat in the dining area?”

“The dining area is fine,” she told him with a gentle smile.

[Now I see why you invited her,] Jenn communed with some admiration and amusement.

[This is her continent,] Jason agreed with a grin at the bionoid.

It said as much that the greeter recognized Cybri but didn’t recognize Jason.

They got a pretty nice table near the bar, by the windows with a great view of the ocean, and they received menus. Shio restaurants had traditions, and one of them was that menus were printed on paper and handed out, and they were written by hand in Shio calligraphy with photos of the dishes. Shio restaurants didn’t just tell you what they served, they showed you what they served, and that could be a help when guests couldn’t read Shio. That made the menus a little larger, the one Jason was given was eighteen pages, but tradition was tradition, and no traditions were more sacred to the Shio than traditions that revolved around food.

[They must have some good chefs here, they have a very large menu,] Jenn noted. *[And they serve Faey and Terran dishes as well. Wait, this is a Colony dish, so they serve even more than that.]*

[These resorts cater to more than just the main three, Jenn,] Cybri told him, referring to the “main three” races of Faey, Terran, and Shio. *[And Shio chefs enjoy expanding their culinary skills into other cultures.]*

[So, how good is this Merra Darksky?] Jason asked.

[She’s 27 years old, which is very young for a chef in her position,] she answered. *[She graduated from one of the upper tier culinary schools on*

Shio Prime three years ago and put in her time in the smaller diners and restaurants in the Federation. She decided to move to Karis for two reasons, to escape the social stigma homosexuals have in the Federation and to seek out the opportunity to open her own restaurant, which can be extremely hard for younger Shio in the Federation.]

[That's almost identical to Seido,] Jason mused.

[Seido and Merra aren't unique among the Shio in the house, Jason. Many of them came here for opportunity and to escape the Federation's views on their lifestyle. Merra passed the screening five months ago and moved to Sarga almost as soon as she immigrated to the house and has worked here since she arrived. She was promoted up from junior chef within two takirs of getting here, which means that she proved her culinary skills to the head chef.]

[And what's she like?] Jason asked.

[I like her,] she answered. [She has a rich sense of humor and she's dedicated to her career, but like many Shio homosexuals, she's very guarded about her private life and tends to be introverted because of it. She keeps it a secret, even here, because her boss and the resort management are all Shio and she's afraid she'll lose her job if they find out.]

[That's against the law,] Jason protested.

[Laws can be bent, Jason. I've already had to resolve several instances of Shio claiming they were fired over their sexual orientation, but their bosses found other reasons to terminate them that are technically legal. So, while my hands were tied legally, I made sure those Shio found new jobs with people much more tolerant of their private lives.]

[So there's a dark underbelly to the Shio,] Jenn noted soberly.

[All races have their dark spots, Jenn. For the Shio, it's a cultural intolerance for those who have what they consider to be unnatural sexual appetites.]

After ordering, they sat around and talked of less important things, mainly baseball. Both Jason and Jenn were baseball fans, and Cybri had become quite the baseball fan herself, following all four main baseball leagues; the Karis Planetary League, both Imperial Leagues, one league of

women players and a league of men-only players that had taken root in the Imperium, and Terra's Major League. She had fully embraced *her* baseball team, the Sarsa Waverunners, to the point where she had season tickets behind home plate and a private skybox. It was one of the first things she'd bought with her allowance once she was off her probationary period. It was the Waverunners' inaugural season in the league, and unfortunately for Cybri, the expansion team was being a typical expansion team, with a pretty terrible record and them still trying to find their own system and culture both in the dugout and in the home office. But they had a good owner that was willing to spend money to improve the team, so as soon as they found their identity and got some experience, Jason felt that they'd be just fine.

The fact that Cybri loved baseball made Jason like her that much more.

Shiziki and batchi were also huge on Sarga, thanks to the large Shio population and batchi being the de facto Faey sport, as well as a plethora of other sports played on the semi-pro and fun league level, so the continent had plenty of sports for both residents and visitors to enjoy, either playing them or watching them.

Cybri made sure that their meals were cooked by Merra—requesting a chef by name was not uncommon in a Shio restaurant—and when their meals were put on the table, Jason was impressed. He was even more impressed when he took a bite; the woman was nearly as good a cook as Seido. *[She's good,]* Jenn complemented. *[Very, very good.]*

[Somehow, I'm not surprised at all that Seido would find a girlfriend that's a good chef,] Jason mused. *[It means they have a lot in common right off the bat.]*

After a very, very good dinner and dessert, Cybri had Merra come out to meet them, another Shio tradition. Jason was a bit surprised at the sight of her, because Merra was a very petite lady. The picture of her he'd seen didn't give him an idea of her height. She was both short and slender, about Dellin's height, but her current appearance matched her bio picture almost exactly. She had a face that made it clear she wasn't a teenager, with very dark hair with greenish undertones and striking violet eyes. Despite being slender, she was blessed with ample feminine curves, both in the hips and the bust, and she was quite pretty. She blanched a little bit at seeing Jason and Cybri, clearly recognizing them, and nearly stammered out her

greeting, bowing at the waist. “I—I had no idea I was cooking for *you*, your Grace, Miss Cybri,” she blurted, speaking not quite so fluent Faey.

“I like to keep a low profile,” Jason chuckled, speaking Shio, as he stood up and shook her hand. “This is Vell, a good friend of mine,” he introduced.

“Nice to meet you, Merra,” Jenn said in fluent Shio.

“I wanted to compliment you on a wonderful meal in person,” he announced, taking her hand. It was warm and surprisingly strong. “But I won’t hold you here when others are waiting their chance to sample your cooking.”

“Thank you, your Grace. Miss Cybri,” she said, bobbing a bit to each of them. “Nice to meet you, Mister Vell.”

“It was a pleasure,” he smiled.

[So, you came all this way just for that?] Vell asked as she nearly skipped back into the kitchen.

[Not even. I’ll come back after she finishes work so we can have a talk, outside of the earshot of her bosses. When does her shift, end, Cybri?]

[In four hours.]

[Jyslin may have something to say about you being out all night, Jayce,] Vell smiled as Jason paid the check, as easy as having his gestalt pay the tab, as well as leave a healthy tip for both the server and Merra; tipping the chef was another Shio tradition. And while the restaurant adhered to Shio traditions when it came to menus and whatnot, they were quite progressive when it came to paying the check.

[Jyslin won’t mind once I tell her why I’m here,] Jason replied as they stood up, preparing to leave. The manager took that as his cue to scurry over and gush a bit over them being there, making sure to name-drop Jason to let the entire dining room know that the *Grand Duke himself* had patronized their establishment. Jason made sure to complement Merra for the quality of the meal before leaving, ensuring that if the management suspected Merra’s sexual orientation, they’d be morons if they fired her.

Jason and Vell hung out a bit in Cybri's facility while they waited, then Vell went home using Jason's skimmer as Jason returned to the resort. He had Cybri track down how she got home, and after finding out that she walked, Jason parked a hovercar from Sarsa's motor pool out by the employee's entrance of the restaurant. When she came out at the tail end of the workers, he pinged her interface with a priority message, the kind that would come through whether she had messages on or not. The priority message simply read *Wait there*, and she did so, in a bit of confusion. When the other workers filed towards the parking area or the tram station, Jason pulled the hovercar up and lowered the window. "Your Grace!" she gasped as she looked into the car.

"Let me drive you home," he told her. "There are a few things we need to talk about."

"Uh, yes, yes, your Grace," she said hesitantly, no doubt trying to process how weird the situation was to her. She went around and got into the passenger's side, and the door closed behind her. He lifted the car up and started it in the direction of her apartment, just doing it very, very slowly. The car barely moved at a walking pace. "I'm not going to be coy about why I'm here, Merra," he said. "Seido works for me."

The Shio gasped. "She does?" she exclaimed. "She never said so! She said she works as a chef for the government!"

"She does. She's one of my personal chefs," he told her. "So in a way, she *does* work for the government. But she doesn't like to brag, so she plays down how important of a job she has. She doesn't know I'm here, and I'd appreciate it if you didn't tell her. She'd probably put rocks in my *mido* stew if she found out," he said, which made her blurt out a laugh. "So, why I'm here. She came home a day early."

"I know. I thought I did something wrong," she said, her face flushing. "I mean—"

"I know about Seido," he told her calmly. "And the fact that I'm here now should tell you how much I care about that. I made her tell me why she came home a day early, and you're the reason."

"Did I make her mad? She told me she had a family emergency, but I could tell she wasn't telling the truth."

“The opposite. She felt things were going too fast between the two of you, and Seido is a traditionalist when it comes to that kind of thing,” he told her, which made her eyes light up a bit and give a sudden nod. “She came home a day early because she was almost afraid of how fast things were moving, then she felt terrible that she sent the wrong signal to you when she did. But there are a couple of things you need to know about Seido and her life if you want to date her, Merra,” he said in a calm voice. “First and foremost, you *will* have the Imperial Guard look into you,” he warned. “Seido is a member of my staff, so she technically falls under the protection of the Imperial Guard. They don’t follow her around the way they do me, but they *do* make sure she’s safe. And part and parcel of that is conducting security investigations on those that get personally involved with their charges. So, is there anything in your past that may concern them?”

“No!” she said, almost indignantly.

“Good enough for me,” he said with a nod, glancing over at her. “Seido didn’t tell you what she does because she doesn’t like that kind of attention. If you start dating her, she’ll expect you to respect that. So, can you date Seido without telling the world that you’re involved with a member of the Grand Duke’s personal staff?”

“I wouldn’t—I mean, if you know Seido, you know what it’s like for us. You know, women like...us,” she said, flushing again. “We don’t advertise who we are, your Grace. Nothing but bad things come of it.”

“Maybe in the Federation, but the House of Karinne has far more progressive sensibilities,” he said calmly. “Seido mentioned that you have an aversion to Faey because of their telepathy. But if you date Seido, you’re going to be surrounded by them. Is that a problem?”

“It’s not entirely the telepathy, it’s the Faey,” she said. “Faey women are—well, they’re *rude*. We have enough telepaths in the Federation that we’re used to having them around, and if it bothered me, I sure wouldn’t have come here. There’s more telepaths on Karis than there are in the entire Federation,” she said honestly. “The problem I have is, when a Faey woman wants to ask you out, she doesn’t even hide the fact that she’s reading your thoughts, where the Faey you meet outside of something like that don’t do that. That turns me off a little bit, it’s like they don’t respect my privacy.”

“Faey women aren’t exactly known for their subtlety,” he agreed with a chuckle. “And I know how you feel. I had some issues with my wife when we first met because she more or less did the same thing to me.”

“Really?”

“My own talent wasn’t awake yet when I met her, and at that time, Terra had just been annexed by the Imperium and was under the Trillanes, and things were very bad. We Terrans really, really didn’t like the Faey back then,” he explained. “So I know exactly how it feels to have a pushy, nosy Faey woman trying to get into your head because she’s interested in you, and you’re almost helpless to stop her.”

“So what did you do?”

“I kicked her in the face,” he replied casually, which made her gasp, then laugh. Her laugh was quite beautiful. “I’m not joking,” he added lightly.

“Seriously? You kicked her in the face?”

“Knocked her out cold,” he said proudly, which made her laugh again. “But the silly thing is, that only made her even more determined,” he said ruefully. “I shouldn’t complain, though. If she hadn’t been so damn stubborn, I may have missed out on the best part of my life. So, telepaths don’t bother you?”

“Not really,” she replied. “The ones here respect your privacy.”

“I’m glad to hear that, since *I’m* a telepath,” he said, giving her a look that made her smile a little bit. “So, that’s where it stands. In a day or two, Seido’s going to call, as soon as she calms down and realizes that she overreacted a tiny bit. I’d appreciate it if you don’t hold that against her. Seido is an interesting, complex, intelligent, caring, lovely woman, and she’s one of my dearest friends far more than she’s my chef.”

“I know what you mean. The days I spent with Seido were incredible,” she said in a fond voice. “She’s charming and witty and so beautiful, and she’s an *amazing* chef. I can believe she’s on your staff.”

“My house wouldn’t be the same without Seido. She lives in the house with us,” he told her.

“Ohhhh, that explains why she was vague about her house in Karsa.”

He nodded. “She use the roommate excuse?”

She laughed. “No, she said she rented a room with a family.”

“Room my butt. She has a pretty big apartment,” he corrected. “And I think I’m gonna whack her when I get home for making me sound like I make her live in a closet.”

Merra laughed. “She did say she really liked the family. That there were lots of kids and things were always happening and that a day there was never boring.”

“That about describes my house,” he nodded. “It’s pretty chaotic most of the time, but Seido and my house servants, Ayama and Surin, they’re about the only ones that can manage that chaos and keep all of us moving in the same direction. We’d be lost without them. That’s just one of the ways Seido is so special,” he told her in a gentle voice as the car descended, the landed on the pad outside her apartment building. “And here we are,” he declared. “It was nice to meet you, Merra,” he said as the door opened.

“I’m glad I met you, your Grace. And I think it shows how much you care about Seido that you came all this way to talk to me.”

“Seido is family to me, Merra,” he confirmed. “And like a typical meddling dad, here I am checking out her prospective girlfriend.”

She laughed. “That’s very Shio, your Grace.”

“Now you know why I get along with the Shio so well,” he answered, which made her laugh again and nod. “Just be patient, and Seido will call you. And remember, I wasn’t here,” he reminded her.

“Okay.”

“Hopefully I’ll get to *officially* meet you soon,” he said easily. She got out of the car and came around to the driver’s side, then shook Jason’s hand when he offered it through the window. “Now I’m gonna head home and get ready for tomorrow. I have a ton of work to catch up on. Paperwork... whee,” he said blandly, which made her giggle. “You have a good evening.”

“Thank you, your Grace.”

“I think you’ve earned the right to call me Jason,” he told her, letting go of her hand. “I hope Seido calls you soon.”

“Me too. I miss her.”

“Just be patient,” he assured her. She took a step back, and he picked the hovercar up and turned it back for Sarsa, which was only about 30 kathra north. *[I’m done here, Cybri,]* he communed with her core crystal. *[Can you get in touch with the command center and have them send someone to pick me up?]*

[There’s a frigate on picket duty at Joint Base Sigma, Jason. The Jeluna. I’ll order them to power up so they’re ready to go when you arrive.]

[Good deal. Take the car back to the motor pool for me?]

[Certainly. And I think you owe me a longer visit next time.]

[Sounds good to me. When’s the next Waverunner home game?]

[Vesta, they’re playing the Virsa Wanderers. It’s a day-night double header,] she communed enticingly.

[Then I’ll bring Rann, Danelle, and Aran and we’ll make a day out of it,] he promised. They were his kids who most liked baseball. *[No doubt Shya will tag along, too.]*

[I’d be happy to see them.]

Chapter 2

Kaista, 8 Kedaa, 4405, Faey Orthodox Calendar

Monday, 21 April 2019 Terran Standard Calendar

*Kaista, 8 Kedaa, year 1330 of the 97th Generation, Karinne
Historical Reference Calendar*

Foxwood East, Karsa, Karis

This was...incredible.

Standing at the top of a very small, gentle hill in the center of a meadow, Jason looked down at Serenity Woods, a wood of ancient hardwoods with little to no underbrush on the forest floor, the trees spaced far enough apart to have some visibility in the immediate area. In the distance were the Regarak Mountains, and in the other direction, at the edge of the wood, was the large city of Freeport with the Albian Sea beyond. Hanging in the sky over the city of Freeport was a distant planet, a planet of reds, browns, tans, and blacks known as Netherim, making it abundantly clear that he wasn't standing in some meadow on Karis. Jason was dressed in a simple vest and leggings of black leather, and the hilt of a sword jutted over his left shoulder...the base of the scabbard pressing almost uncomfortably on the top of his tail.

This wasn't a location anywhere in the real world. This was a virtual world, the world of Arca, and the setting for a new game being developed by the shell company attached to 3D. The company had two development studios under its umbrella, Fifth Dimension Studios, which was responsible for Vanguard, and Thunderbird Studios, which was responsible for this project. The Jason that stood on that hill wasn't Jason, it was his in-game avatar who was a feline race called a Jagaara. And Jagaara had tails.

This was a new game, a fantasy-based RPG MMO named *Citadel Online*, and a rather ambitious one. For one, it was merge *only*. Only jacked

players could play the game. For another, the game itself was literally the size of *two planets*...or it would ultimately be. In the current version, only one continent on each of the two planets of Arca and Netherim were developed, but the other continents would be developed in future expansions, as well as the Citadel for which the game was named, a small moon-like celestial body that hung in space between the two planets. The project had pulled in hundreds of game developers from Terra with experience in MMO games, hiring developers from past MMORPG games like *Everquest*, *Neverwinter Nights*, *World of Warcraft*, *Aion*, and *Dark Age of Camelot*, hiring nearly 300 developers with RPG experience to help develop the lore, gameplay, and quest system of the game, while the “art department” and programmers were actually Cyvanne and several members of 3D that were working on the project as research on the capabilities and limits of jacked simsense VR. Cyvanne was the primary programmer of the game, and the fact she was a CBIM made her scary effective at it. What would have taken a programming team months, or maybe even years to do, Cyvanne did in nine days. She wrote the entire code of the game in nine days. All she needed were the parameters and the mechanics of the game engine, which was what the devs helped design with her.

This was the initial closed alpha version of the game, where the maps, scenery, and game engine’s operations were more or less finished, but most of the gameplay content and quests had yet to be added in. The city of Freeport was all buildings and no NPCs right now, and this version of the game was basically a test world so they could make sure that the maps had no bugs or glitches in them. Right now, the only moving entities within the game were the alpha test players and background animals and insects, which had very simple AIs which they were testing to make sure they worked before they started adding in the more complex AI NPCs.

Cyvanne had created the look and feel of this world, and Jason was *impressed*. She was by far the most artistic of the CBIMs, and she had done an incredible job making this world feel like it wasn’t reality but was *close enough* to feel comfortable here. It was reality with a touch of the fantastic, where the colors were a little brighter, the air had a feeling of *magic* in it, and what didn’t exist in reality seemed entirely normal and natural here. She had designed every tree in the forest, every leaf on every tree, every contour of the hills, every blade of grass, and designed the animals and

insects and races and monsters that inhabited it. She had pulled inspiration from real places in the Confederation for many of the locations in the game. Serenity Woods were inspired by the ancient hardwood forests of western Europe on Terra, for example. The entire planet of Netherim was inspired by the planet Araban, and anyone who had seen pictures of Araban would see that similarity...and boy would the Arabok go nuts over seeing their planet represented like that.

This wasn't the first completely artificial VR environment he'd seen, since some of Yila's simsense viddys were computer generated fantasy worlds...but those simsense viddys were *nothing* like this. Simsense viddys gave the illusion of being there, but it was never so completely realistic that you didn't know you were in a simsense. This...this blurred that line. Jason had a hard time telling if he was in a real world or not—albeit a world very different from the real world because Cyvanne had created this world to be a more...*vibrant* version of reality—from the fact that he felt entirely *natural* having fur and a tail and whiskers to the way the sun warmed his face and the wind pulled gently at his whiskers. This was military-grade merge compatibility, the kind of merge he'd expect to have in a Titan or in a combat simulator, and Cyvanne had found a way to port the merge sensation of biogenics onto a moleculartronic platform. Yila was going to market Cyvanne's advances as "Third Gen Simsense," and of course make everyone upgrade their simsense decoder rigs to take advantage of it.

To be fair, Vanguard had nearly this level of detail on its maps, but the difference there was, that game moved so fast that players didn't get a chance to appreciate it. But standing on that hill, with nobody shooting at him and able to look around and see everything in peace, it made him truly marvel at Cyvanne's virtual reality masterpiece.

The game was ambitious in more than its VR simsense setting. Gameplay wise, the players in the game would be divided into ten factions, each faction holding four races, with a total of a whopping 40 available player character races. For now, five factions were on Arca, and five were on Netherim, splitting the players evenly between the two planets. While players from different factions could group together and play together, players from other factions risked being attacked if they entered another faction's home territory, could be killed without penalty by other players or NPCs for invading another faction's home territory. Serenity Woods and

Freeport were human territory, part of the Golden Lion Faction of humans, high elves, mountain dwarves, and the Jagaara, with Serenity Woods yielding to the Heartwood and the elven city of Astralar to the south, the Claw Foothills and the mountain dwarf city of Deepforge to the north, and the Dark Thicket and the Jagaara city of Twinfang to the east. It was that physical proximity that made the four races part of the same faction, and it allowed the gameplay developers to create content that low-level players of all four races could enjoy without having to go very far from home and stay within their faction borders. Each faction would have a balance like that, with a “physical” race, a “magical” race, and a “balanced” race, with each faction having a slightly different mix for the fourth race. In the Golden Lion faction, the Jagaara were the physical race, with enhanced physical stats that would make them excel in combat and crafting professions that relied on strength, like blacksmithing, and a bonus to combat skills. The high elves were the “magical” race, with bonuses to their mental and magical attributes and enhanced skills in magical arts, and the humans and dwarves were the “balanced” races, with a good mix of both traits, humans leaning a bit towards magic and the dwarves leaning a bit towards the physical. That didn’t mean that a high elf couldn’t be a badass fighter or a Jagaara couldn’t be a kickass magician, it just meant that those races had natural attributes that gave them advantages in certain skills and professions, and those advantages had the most impact when the player first started. A just-started Jagaara was going to beat a just-started high elf in a straight up physical fight, but the high elf would kick the Jagaara’s ass if it was a magical duel.

The genius of the game was that it wasn’t class and level based. There were no classes in Citadel Online and no levels, everything was based on skills. The abilities most often associated with classes were divided into skills which players could learn, allowing a player to customize her character with exactly the skills she wanted to play the game exactly the way she wanted to play. Every skill was theoretically available to every player, with the exception of some small number of skills being exclusively available to only certain races. A player could load up on physical and fighting skills to become a nasty front-line warrior, but also have several magical skills that complemented those combat skills to give the player some versatility, for example. And since there were 1,254 skills in the game, it gave players a nearly overwhelming array of skills to pursue. Not

all of them were combat based, however. Some were utility skills, like Appraise Item, Detect Secret Doors, and so on, some were crafting skills so players could make their own items and equipment, and some were purely “fun” skills that had no impact on gameplay, like musical instruments, fishing, painting, or cooking. Some skills, all players had at the start, like the basic combat skills and the language skills of the four races on their faction. Some skills players had because they were racial, such as a high elf, who started the game with a Spellcasting skill in a school of magic of the player’s choice and given three spells that the player would choose at character creation. Some skills weren’t offered for training in a certain faction area, requiring a player to seek out a trainer either in another faction’s territory or in neutral territory to learn it. And there were some skills that could only be learned by finding an item that granted it to the player, known as Ancient Skills. One of the major pursuits of the game for players was to find and learn Ancient Skills, because they were more powerful than normal skills, and many of them granted players strong combat abilities. The last way to gain skills was for the player to invent the skill herself, but that was an endgame aspect of the skill system. When a player achieved a high enough skill level in a skill, she could invent her own unique skills based on the parent skill, like special attacks using a weapon skill or a unique spell in a school of magic where the player had a very high Spellcasting skill. Skills were increased in two ways, by spending Experience Points to raise them and by using them, which caused skills to increase during the course of gameplay. It both caused skills to passively increase with use to give a sense of growth and allowed the player to invest XP into skills to raise them more quickly, representing their dedication to improving that skill.

The gameplay was revolutionary, because the player didn’t hit a button on a hotbar to execute a skill, they *performed it themselves*. Players with Spellcasting skills had to actually perform the spells, speak the words of power and use whatever material foci the spell required, like a wand or a fetish. Players with the Sword skill didn’t just hit a button and watch their avatar attack, they swung the sword themselves...though the game’s engine did assist them by “guiding” their movements based on their skill level. Part of the game’s unique enjoyment was having to learn the actual movements to, for example, perform a Combo Attack with a Sword skill, and if they didn’t do the moves right, the attack failed. And those with some real-world

skill that related to the in-game skill would receive a bonus to that skill reflecting their real experience. So, Jason would receive a bonus to his Martial Arts skill based on his real-world knowledge of Aikido. He could, in effect, use his real-world skill in Aikido in the game, as well as play a piano in-game because he could play a piano in real life...though playing with his avatar's clawed hands might be a bit problematic.

It would also introduce some civilians to the concept of controlling avatar bodies that had parts that they didn't. Jagaara had tails, and the non-tailed players that rolled them could learn how to control those tails, to learn how to use a limb they didn't have in real life. That was an aspect of jacks that most jacked people didn't encounter, but something that a rigger would understand intimately. Riggers "controlled" their machine bodies in ways that had nothing to do with a flesh and blood body, to the point where many riggers had psychosomatic issues after breaking a long merge because they were so used to having an exomech for a body. Jason already knew how to control a tail by driving bionoids of races with tails, so he had no problems with his tail. What he had to learn to control were the retracted claws in his fingers.

As a Jagaara, Jason started with skills the other races in his faction didn't have, but races in other factions might. He started with the skill Claw and Fang, giving him the ability to fight with his claws and by biting enemies, inflicting damage without weapons. He also gained the Stalk skill, a combo move silently/concealment skill which helped in combat situations by allowing him to gain a surprise bonus on enemies if he could ambush someone. For non-combat, he started with the Hunting skill, the Climbing skill, and the Tracking skill. He received a bonus to his Strength, Agility, and Speed stats reflecting the physical power and grace of the Jagaara, and he also had bonus abilities not available to any other race in his faction, the abilities of Enhanced Hearing, Enhanced Smell, and Night Vision. Enhanced Hearing gave him a bonus to the Listening skill if a player had it (and he did), but it also allowed him to hear sounds from a longer range than other players when outside. It added twenty meters to his range to hear sounds in outdoor settings, allowing him to hear something coming from further away than races that didn't have Enhanced Hearing, but did nothing in an indoor setting unless he also had the Listening skill. If he did, then it increased the range of his Listening skill by five meters in an indoor setting.

Enhanced Smell gave him a bonus to his Tracking skill (which he had by default as a racial skill) and allowed him to identify objects by scent, but it was also very useful because it allowed him to smell poison in drinks and food. Night Vision was self-explanatory, giving him the ability to see in the outdoors at night. It didn't let him see in lightless environments like deep in a cave, however, nor let him see if he was afflicted with a Blind spell.

Each race had bonus skills, modifiers to their stats, and bonus abilities, which really diversified the races and balanced the factions by giving races in each faction access to bonus skills and abilities that evened them out when comparing them to the others. It made the Jagaara feel much different from the high elves, dwarves, and humans in his faction, but he was somewhat similar to the Drakkin, a race of reptilian bipeds in the Black Fangs faction on Netherim. They too had the Claw and Fang skill and the Hunting skill and had a similar spread of bonuses to their physical abilities, because they too were a physically powerful and agile race. That made them similar to a Jagaara from a gameplay perspective, but the two races had enough of their own unique aspects to make them different from one another. There were small races like the Gnomes, who were the size of a Prakarikai, and big races like the Ogres, who were the height of a Bari-Bari but much more heavily built. There were fast, powerful races like the Jagaara, and highly intelligent and magical races like the high elves and the Azari, a Netherim race. There were four races that had truly unique abilities that Jason felt might be a tiny bit game-breaking, but they hadn't been changed. The Drakkin and the Sylphs had wings and could fly—Sylphs were based on the Imbiri—the Nazatar could breathe water, and the Pikk could walk on walls like an insect. Thus far, those were still in the game, which made him think that there would be *tons* of Drakkin and Sylphs in the game when it first launched.

He turned his head when a high elf female walked up to him, wearing a lacy, breezy dress of white gossamer silk, an elf with Cyvanne's face. "So, what do you think?" she asked, making a grand gesture at Serenity Woods. She was speaking Elvish, which he could understand because he had basic skill in the languages of his three ally races. And she was speaking *real* Elvish; Cyvanne had created 40 new player character languages for the game (Sun Elves, Wood Elves, and Dark Elves also spoke Elvish, and Mountain, Hill, and Underdark Dwarves also spoke Dwarven, but they

belonged to different factions), and those languages were complete in both spoken and written forms. She'd also created six other languages based on the Ancient Races, most prevalent in old ruins scattered across the continent, but those were language skills that players had to pick up during their gameplay. Since the game was merge-only, part of the game's operation was to have the player access the language skills possessed by player that was stored in the vidlink that ran the game code so they could understand the in-game languages, creating maximum immersion. So long as Jason was in the game, he could speak fluent Jagaaran and broken Elvish, Dwarven, and Common, but as soon as he logged out, he forgot them because they weren't in his organic memory. He could learn those languages naturally, little by little and piece by piece as he played, but the game wouldn't download the game's languages into the brain of a player.

"I think you did an incredible job, girl," he said approvingly in Jagaaran, his speech a little lispy because of the fangs. "Are all the zones as detailed as this one?"

"Yup," she replied, turning to look towards Freeport, switching to Jagaaran herself. Since she had admin privileges, she could give herself any skill in the game...and she more or less needed to. Starting Jagaaran players started with a low skill rating in Elvish, so he wouldn't be able to understand everything she said if she spoke Elvish. Races started with skill in their faction partner races' languages, but only just high enough to understand basic things. He could understand things like *go there* and *what is your name* in Elvish, but if she started reciting Hamlet in Elvish, he wouldn't understand much of it at all, just a word here and there. "The game devs gave me a general idea of what each zone needed from a gameplay perspective, how they could divide up questing areas so lower skill players didn't wander into places where they'd get killed, and I used that to generate the terrain. Then I went back and filled in the little details, like caves and whatnot, to give the game devs more options for setting up the quests and add flavor to the zones. I liked working on that much better than this," she said, pointing at the distant Netherim hanging in the sky behind Freeport. "I had a lot of fun designing the maps on Netherim, since it's so exotic compared to most terrestrial planets. How many planets have a boiling ocean or burning mountains?" she grinned. "The maps are finalized, but the game devs are still working on some of the skill systems. Given

there's over a thousand skills, it's taking them a while to balance everything.”

“Yeah. I spent over an hour in Twinfang at a target dummy trying to figure out how the Claw and Fang skill works,” he admitted with a chuckle, holding up his clawed hand. He extended the claws—something he had to learn how to do—and showed them to her. “I eventually got it. I even raised it six points practicing,” he laughed. “I hope the tutorials cover racial skills.”

“Yeah, they will,” she nodded. “We haven't put them into the game yet. How's the simsense?”

“A little weird, since this race has fur,” he said, running his clawed hand up his forearm and feeling the fur ruffle and shift under the pads on his hand. “But it's pretty damn solid. I can smell you from here thanks to the Jagaara's enhanced smell ability, feel the warmth of the sun, and so on.”

“We're using the third gen moleculartronic simsense software for the base release,” she told him. “But we'll be releasing a Karinne-only version based on biogenic simsense for House members. Right now, you're using the commercial release, so the simsense should only be better when you're using simsense designed for biogenic systems.”

“Hell, I can barely tell this isn't real as it is, I'm afraid of what *even better* will be like. We'll for sure need limiters on the biogenic simsense side of things, or players may get sensory overload.”

“I know,” she nodded. “You tried out any other races?”

“Not yet, I kinda got hung up trying to figure out Claw and Fang,” he chuckled. “How are the flying races being handled?”

“Same as the others. Flying won't be a gimme. The players will have to learn how to do it, the same way you did when you practiced in that Imbiri bionoid,” she answered. “There will be a flying skill, but it won't actively assist players until they reach a score of one hundred, and they can only skill it up by using it. And for game balancing purposes, they can't fly forever. We're kicking around putting a one-minute time limit on flight before they get tired and have to land, at least at first. That time will increase as they gain more skill in flying, one of the ways raising your flying skill will matter, up to a hard cap of seven to ten minutes, at least in

overworld applications. We'll have preset flight paths that flying characters can use to travel from zone to zone without tiring out. And there will be hard barriers in place keeping the overly clever from getting over things they're not supposed to be able to cross," she added.

That made him laugh again. "Yeah, you'd better be ready for that. Nothing's more cunning than an MMO player trying to get past a wall he can't climb," he told her. "What about the Nazatar and the Pikk?"

"We're leaving them alone for now and we'll see if they break the game in the open beta," she answered. "You gotten much further than this?"

He shook his head. "Like I said, I kinda got hung up in Twinfang, and just managed to get through the Jagaara starting zone, um, the Dark Thicket, and get here. I was going to go to Freeport and see how different it was from Twinfang."

"Very. Every race's cities and villages have unique architecture," she told him. "Jagaara architecture is more primitive, tribal, with logs and leather and thatch and ropes, where human architecture is based on European medieval masonry styles, and the dwarven architectures is all massive stone, blocky and heavy and imposing. High elf architecture is definitely the most unique. It's stone and wood, but those materials were shaped by magic, not by artisans, so their buildings grow and flow, are very organic. It's definitely worth a look."

"I'll dick around in here again after the council meeting," he told her. "So far it's been pretty interesting. I'm curious to check out Netherim."

"Just remember to reroll. There's a bit of a bug right now trying to take a race into another faction's territory," she warned. "It's proving to be a bit of a bitch to track down and squash."

"That's why this is an alpha test," Jason chuckled.

"I hate having to program in TEL code."

"Tell me about it," he agreed. "When are you guys putting in the NPCs?"

"Any minute now. We have to run a couple of tests before we can spawn them."

“Cool. I just hope you didn’t go overboard with the AI systems for them.”

“I doubt one’s going to become self-aware,” she chuckled. “But some of them are pretty damn complex, especially for the lore characters and heroes. But, if we did it right, even the innkeeper AIs should be able to hold something of a conversation with players. The devs will put in the trigger words to trigger both public and hidden NPC quests with the next pass,” she supplied. “The plan is to spawn the NPCs without quests enabled to test their stability and AI behavior, and when they pass that test, we’ll start adding the quest interactions.”

“I hope they’re adding the monsters in with the NPCs.”

“Not yet,” she answered. “We want to make sure the NPC AI is working before we start messing with hostile monster AI. Oh wait, they’re spawning in the NPCs right now,” she announced.

The effect was noticed. The entire world seemed to *stutter*, a lag spike in the datastream when a fuckton of NPCs were spawned simultaneously, and seconds later two young human girls entered the meadow, both of them carrying baskets and heading for some berry bushes further down the edge of the meadow. Both of them were naked. “Cyvanne,” he noted, and she laughed brightly.

“That is *definitely* a bug,” she told him. “Hold on, let me see if I can track that down.” Seconds went by, then peasant dresses shimmered into being around the two NPC girls. “Glitch in the human NPC attire database, it’s fixed.”

“I’m almost afraid to ask why they were made anatomically correct,” he said, giving her a sharp look.

“Because it’s not real unless what you can’t see is just as real as what you can,” she grinned in reply.

“You realize that there will be a long list of pre-teen Terran players trying to flip the skirts of the NPCs?”

“For one, there won’t be any pre-teens in this game, and for another, the human NPCs will react to it as a hostile act,” she winked. “Getting slapped may be the least that will happen to someone trying that. I decided to go for

social realism in the human NPCs, so most of them are complete prudes. But not every race will react the same way to something like that. If you go walk around Twinfang again, you'll find the males and females there don't wear much more than loincloths. The Nazatar NPCs don't wear anything, because clothes are a hindrance for an aquatic race."

"And there goes the 'Everyone' rating on Terra," he sighed, which made her laugh.

"This isn't a game for morally twisted Terrans, this is a game for more mature and socially enlightened people," she teased. "And for your information, there's a weenie filter for less progressive races planned for the final release that will clothe the nude NPCs and disable some of the more adult quests and behavioral subroutines in the NPC AI when they interact with them," she told him. "I just hope you're not one of the weenies that goes that direction, or years of living with Jyslin will have been for nothing."

"I'm almost afraid to ask...but I guess I'd better. Just how far will the NPC AIs go?" She grinned at him. "Fuuuuck," he growled, which made her laugh. "This isn't a Faey simsense, woman."

"This is a merge-only game, which means that only adults will be playing it," she retorted. "So while there's some childish comedy in it, the storylines are more mature and there's more adult pursuits included in the game for entertainment purposes. And even NPCs like to have a good time," she lilted, then laughed when he slapped the backs of her knees with his tail.

"Why do I put up with the lot of ya?" he lamented.

"Because you love us," she replied impishly. "Now come on, you should have enough time to look around Freeport before the council meeting. I'll show you some of my favorite parts of the city."

He was doubly impressed when they entered Freeport. As she intimated, Twinfang really wasn't that much to look at, since it was a collection of wood and leather thatched huts surrounding larger crude stone buildings inside a wall made of piled stones and charred logs. Freeport was a surprisingly large city roughly based on western European architecture, and the NPCs were dressed in Terran historical clothing from the middle ages.

Smocks, frocks, peasant dresses, stockings, tunics, with armor on guards varying from leather similar to what Jason's avatar wore to full plate armor. No NPC guard carried a firearm, those weren't in the game, but several carried bows or crossbows. There were, however, cannons on the defensive placements around the harbor. The game had cannons as siege weaponry and as armament on ships but had no firearms. There were *thousands* of NPCs in the city, Jason noticed as they walked the streets. This was a living, breathing city, and each and every NPC had a program that told it what to do based on parameters programmed into it when it was created. Every NPC had a home, or at least a place where they slept, and had activity cycles based on their home, their job and their hobbies. There were homeless bums in the city, working class laborers, merchants, craftsmen, rich people, and nobles in the city, and they interacted with each other based on the complex AI systems that Cyvanne had created for them.

What made it curiously fun for him was that because he had a low skill in Common, he couldn't understand everything the NPCs around him were saying. His skill in the language would increase with use, him either listening or speaking, and he could see it slowly ticking up as he walked around town with Cyvanne and enjoyed her tour. And the higher the skill got, the more words he could understand. The way Cyvanne had it coded, he'd gain full skill in Common with about 40 minutes of continuous passive exposure to it, like walking around Freeport listening to the NPCs talk to each other, 20 minutes of continuously trying to speak Common to NPCs, like him trying to haggle with a merchant over the cost of an item, or about ten minutes of dedicated "language practice" with a fully skilled Common speaker, either player or NPC—it *was* a game after all, they weren't going to time gate basic things like players being able to communicate. But, only members of a faction could do that within an allied race's cities and villages. However, in every "starting zone" outside a race's capitol city, there was an NPC language teacher in an out of the way place that outside faction players could reach without much risk of being attacked, that would teach players from outside the faction that race's language...for the rather steep price of 500 gold links, the game's currency. So, a player could master all 40 player character languages and dialects in the game, if he was willing to travel around and pay gold to learn the languages of the other races. That, or he could track down other players who had those language skills and learn from them.

And those were just the *player* races. There were six Ancient Languages, and there were also languages for some organized monster races, like the lizard men that lived in the Dark Thicket and were the primary antagonists against which starting Jagaara fought during their introductory quests. Players could learn those languages as well, but those were considered Ancient Skills. If he remembered right, Cyvanne said something about a rare drop from a boss in the Jagaara questline, that was the Ancient Skill teaching the lizard man language. And those languages would be useful, because knowing a monster NPC race's language would unlock additional quests for the player and give them the ability to negotiate with NPCs of that race, even raise the reputation with them so the monster NPC race no longer considered them to be enemies...within reason. As a Jagaara, Jason would never be able to raise his standing with the lizard men, because Jagaara and lizard men were mortal enemies, fighting one another for territory in the Dark Thicket. Since he was allied to the humans, dwarves, and elves, the races that were their mortal enemies, the orcs, hobgoblins, and ratmen, also wouldn't ever allow him to become their friend. But in the next faction over, the one holding the Savasa, Hobbits, Joradim, and Vissanu, the mortal enemy races of that faction would allow him to raise his standing with them. It would open up new questlines, like working with those races to undermine the strength of the other faction, even as he did other quests in their faction territory that might raise his standing with the NPCs of that faction. A clever player could raise their standing with both sides and gain the benefits of both sides, like being able to enter their villages and towns and buy from their merchants, effectively becoming a double agent and playing both sides against each other.

Seriously, Cyvanne had majorly done her homework when she coded the game.

By the time they finished touring Freeport, Jason had made two conclusions. One, that this game was going to be a smash hit, probably even bigger than Vanguard. Cyvanne had outdone herself creating something that was beautiful, engaging, complex enough to take some work but not so complex that people would get frustrated, and the simsense aspect of the game made it incredibly immersive. The skill system would allow players to create *exactly* what they wanted, the combat system would be almost addictively fun, and the sheer size of the world would always give players

new places to explore, always have something to do. Two, that a game like this might incite even more people to get jacked, since one had to be capable of merging to play the game. Right now, only about 14% of the Confederation's civilian population was jacked, but games like this, and Yila's next generation of simsense, were going to make people get them just so they could find out what everyone that had jacks was raving about.

This was a game that Jason was going to play, and he was a man that was usually far too busy with work to play games. If someone like him was getting hyped over a game after just a two-hour tour in an alpha test, he could only imagine how gamers were going to react to it. There was already a pretty large community of jacked gamers across the Confederation, and when the teaser trailer for Citadel Online hit CivNet tomorrow...look out. The game would be announced tomorrow, with a slated release date sometime late in the year.

They walked out of the front gates of Freeport, and he was having a hard time telling if it was him doing it, or just an avatar doing it. That was how immersive the simsense was.

"So, what's the verdict?" Cyvanne asked.

"I think you found your calling, girl," he told her. "I think Citadel Online is going to be bigger than Vanguard."

"I did have fun designing the game and the world," she smiled. "So, you gonna buy a copy?" She laughed at the flat look he gave her. "Okay, okay, I'll flag your account as permanent and make sure your merge pod's onboard always has the most recent build of the game on it. But all your skills get reset after the beta," she warned. "And no admin privileges. You're just another player, Jayce."

"Cheating isn't all that fun," he snorted. "And that's exactly how I play Vanguard. But I do have one suggestion."

"What's that?"

"An overall common language that all races know," he told her. "I can foresee a bit of a roadblock at the start of the game when people start leaving faction territory and enter neutral territory."

“We’ve got a workaround for that,” she said. “The quests you do in the starter zones as you work your way towards neutral territory introduce players to the other languages on their planet. If we did it right, by the time you enter neutral territory, you have a minimum skill of twenty in the other languages on Arca, and that’s the starting skill players have in the other two languages on their faction. That should be just enough for different factions to group together to take on content in the neutral zones. But we want the two planets to have communication issues on purpose, Jayce. The overall concept of the game is faction based, but it’s also meant to have a wide chasm between the factions on Arca and the factions on Netherim. The races on the two planets are meant to be very mistrustful of each other.”

“That makes sense,” he nodded.

[Jason, it’s almost time,] Cybi warned.

“And there’s work,” he sighed, which made Cyvanne chuckle.

“You could try to split enough to attend council and stay here,” she grinned.

“Nah, we’ll be discussing the newest treaty offer from the Consortium, so I’d better do more than pretend that I’m paying attention,” he replied, which made her laugh. “But I’m definitely gonna come back and look around some more. How long is the alpha gonna be up?”

“As long as possible,” she replied. “Part of this is testing its long-term stability.”

“Do me a favor and port me to an inn so I can log out,” he said.

“Jayce, there’s one right *there*,” she chided, pointing back inside the gates.

“Oh. Oh, in that case, never mind,” he said, which made her grin at him.

After going into the inn and logging out, he opened his eyes and yawned a bit, feeling a bit of a psychosomatic tingling where his tail should have been. He was sitting at his desk with his feet up on it, leaning back in his chair, and Chichi was curled up on his lap, dozing. The game’s software was installed in the merge pod in the other room of his office, but he didn’t have to be in it to access it and merge to it. It was just a comfortable place

to sit for him and reclining in the chair at his desk was nearly as comfortable for short periods.

Short being the defining word. His neck had a bit of a crick in it from him being merged to the game for a little over two hours, given he hadn't been splitting and thus had been all but dead to the world. "I'm awake, girl, gonna put my legs down," he warned the tabi, who just moved with him as he did so. He did split then, dividing his attention enough to merge to his Hall of Peace bionoid, practicing his ability to fully control both sides of a split by petting Chichi as his bionoid rose up into the council chamber...and as usual, he was one of the last members to join.

This was a fairly important session, because they were going to debate the treaty terms Mesaiima negotiated with the Consortium. The treaty was straightforward; in return for assisting them in evacuating Andromeda, the Consortium would *never* return to this galactic cluster. Not that they could anyway, given it would take them thousands of years to get back, but it was the principle of the matter. But the parts of it they had to discuss were the assistance terms. The Consortium was asking for help to evacuate their civilians, to get as many people out of Andromeda and away from the Syndicate as possible, and given that quite a few empires in the Confederation did not trust the Consortium *at all*, there was quite a bit to talk about. Empires like the Urumi, the Skaa, the Alliance, the Karinnes, the Imperium, those who had fought the Consortium before the Confederation was formed and immediately afterward, those who had suffered *billions* of casualties at their hands, they wouldn't trust the Consortium to keep their word, to send transports and lightly armed ships to help civilians evacuate. There was also the matter of the protection of the Stargate that would link the evacuation point to their new territory, which looked more and more like it was going to be Galaxy A5A-1. Rudy was going to give his final report to the council during this session, telling them that the KES had confirmed that the galaxy was suitable for the Consortium to use as their new home.

There was also the matter of the colonization fleet en route to the home galaxy. It was way out in flat space right now, and it would have to be brought out of hyperspace and returned to Andromeda so it could be sent to the new galaxy...and that would more or less require the Karinnes. And that was another rather sticky problem. Only a translight drive could get a ship

into position to intercept the incoming fleet, so a Karinne ship would have to make the initial contact with the fleet. Jason wouldn't trust the Consortium any further than he could throw a planet, but he would more or less have to have some of their ruling energy beings on a ship to issue orders to the fleet when it was knocked out of hyperspace. There would need to be a Stargate there to get them back to Andromeda, which would mean a sizable Karinne fleet there to protect it, and there was no telling what might happen when the Karinnes and the Consortium were squared off like that. There was a hell of a lot of bad blood towards the Consortium on Karis, given they'd attacked the planet twice and Karinnes had died fighting them off, and Jason was right there with his people. He'd lost several good friends in those battles, like Drae, and there was no forgiveness in his heart towards the Consortium over what they'd done to his house and to the Exiles. But he might have to swallow all that and work with them, something he was only willing to do because he'd never have to see them again when it was done.

Zaa's hologram appeared—she was still the only unjacked member of the council and they still hadn't designed a proper Kimdori-only bionoid for her—and the current chair of the council gaveled it to order, none other than Emperor Enva. She stood at the lectern with two Sha'i-ree aides sitting at the desks in front of and to the sides of her podium, who were also bionoids. The permanent aides to the Speaker sat to each side of them, who were Terrans who were not Karinnes. There were four permanent aides to the Speaker that worked for the council, and they worked with the Speaker's staff when it was their turn to hold the gavel, a system that worked despite how chaotic it sounded. Enva's staff was working with the Speaker's staff so she was well informed during her ten-day tenure holding the gavel.

It struck him. The Dreamers called her *the Hammer*...and she was holding the gavel, which was effectively a wooden hammer. Was that what the title meant?

The session started, and Jason remained quiet and just listened as Mesaiima gave her report, Rudy gave his report, Maraa gave a report on the sincerity of the Consortium when it came to obeying the treaty, then the council entered into rather free-wheeling debate. Debate wasn't structured despite having so many members, with rulers being considerate enough to

allow others to talk, and he rarely spoke during debate...he rarely spoke during council most of the time. He listened as the council more or less broke into two sides, those who had fought the Consortium and those who joined afterward, with those who had fought much more suspicious and reluctant to accept the terms of the treaty as they were. They wanted much more detailed language in the treaty spelling out how the Consortium would behave and wanted ironclad agreements that all Consortium military vessels would be sent to the new galaxy *before* the Confederation moved in to assist the civilians. Dahnai and Assaba and Vizzie and Grayhawk and Ethikk and Sk'Vrae had all been burned by the Consortium before, and they wanted extravagant guarantees to make sure it didn't happen again. Sk'Vrae and Assaba understandably more or less represented the part of council that was wary of the treaty, each for their own very valid reasons.

Debate lasted for nearly four hours, then it was tabled for the day so all of them could consider the points that were made and vote on the treaty tomorrow, and they moved on to the other business on the schedule. Lorna appeared via hologram and gave her report, putting up images of Atrovet. The interdictor was taken down yesterday, and the Syndicate Navy had reached the moon and had begun assessing the reality of the situation. All the Benga prisoners were there, including Gen, and all the Dreamers were gone, exactly as the Confederation had promised when Jason confronted the Board. The Navy had yet to start dealing with all the sailors and soldiers on the moon, still in the process of contacting the various camps and debriefing the officers to find out what happened, but they did know that Gen and the other 19 Benga that had participated in the cultural program were aboard the fleet flagship and were being debriefed by the Fleet Commander personally. They knew that because Gen himself had told them a few hours ago. That meant that Gen was telling them everything, may be doing it at that very moment, and no doubt they'd have one hell of a report to present to the new Board once it reformed.

It made him worry a bit about Gen. He was very concerned that they might execute him for cooperating with the enemy but Gen himself seemed unconcerned about it. He'd said that they'd see his cooperation as a cunning move to gather more intelligence about the enemy, which was more or less the Benga way. The fact that he wasn't going to hide anything, tell them everything, would reinforce that idea, he said.

Finally, the council ended after Lorna's report, because there wasn't much they could do about that. Until the Syndicate Board reformed, all they could do was watch and wait and have Kraal keep them up to date on what was going on. The vote on the Consortium treaty offer would be tomorrow...but Jason might try to stall that by asking Maraa to dig a little more. Maraa was proving herself to be one of Denmother's best, and her intel had been critical over the last few takirs.

He broke the merge with an empty belly and an empty office. Chichi must have gotten bored and went back outside, which left him in a dark office that seemed...lonely. Or maybe he was just feeling apprehensive over the peace treaty. He had the feeling that it was going to pass, and that was going to put him in the position where he'd have to interact with those who had killed people he knew, people he cared about. True, Sk'Vrae had more or less done the same thing, but she had apologized and then proved herself by committing to the Articles that became the Confederation.

Which was a bit of a situation for him, given that his plan all along was to do exactly what he was doing. He just hadn't really thought about the fact that his girls would have to be in the same room with the Consortium. He'd made the plan without thinking about the details, that they'd just magically go away once the deal was made, and now he had to consider the fact that Palla would have to stand side by side with one of the energy beings as he told the colonizing fleet what was going on.

He was going to owe her *big time* after this. Drae had been one of Palla's friends, and he was going to order her to be nice to a being that might have given the orders that got her killed.

After a quick meal down in the cafeteria, he returned to his office and studied a report Maraa sent to him, which was a very long, exhaustive, and detailed way of saying *they'll keep their word because they have no other option*. But what worried him was that they may find another option, may find some way to backstab them. That he might watch Coma and everyone on her ship die out in the void between galaxies when the Consortium betrayed them.

He sighed and leaned back in his chair...maybe that was why *Citadel Online* had his attention. It was an escape, an entirely different world where he didn't have these problems...where he didn't have to face the possibility

that he might order his friends to their deaths. Just a quiet, peaceful meadow on a hill, with a warm breeze that smelled of grass and flowers....

He scrubbed his hands over his face, then turned the chair and looked out the window. He had a lot to think about, but he didn't want to do it in his office. He needed a place to think without distractions, someplace *real*, someplace well divorced from Karis and the problems that lurked in the shadows of his homeworld. As much as the tree at home gave him peace, there were too many distractions there, especially with Jyslin and the kids within commune range.

So, in typical Jason fashion, he slipped out of the White House without telling anyone, got into his brand-new Nova fighter sitting on the pad, and left the planet. He landed nearly an hour later on the pad at his vacation house on Tir Tairngire, then walked out away from the house, up the hill, and sat down and put his back against the *oye* tree that grew there. It was night here as well, and the sky was half-filled on one side with the Magnum Dwarf formation, and on the other half, the edge of the Milky Way was starting to creep into the night sky. The air here was fresh, pristine, smelled of grass and flowers, and the smell of the bark of the *oye* tree soothed him. This wasn't his tree, it didn't have the same sense of presence to him, the same feel, but it still welcomed him as a friend, and sought to comfort the unsettled thoughts swirling through his mind.

He didn't understand why he felt this way. For days now, he'd been... disquieted. Pensive. Apprehensive. He'd been subject to bouts of melancholy reverie, which was very much unlike him. He just felt...felt like something ominous was coming. Felt like there was a storm on the horizon, a storm that he could sense, but could not see, and the uncertainty of it made him even more unsettled. He looked up into the growing canopy of the tree, which was getting wider and wider, and wondered if this was a *shaman* thing, if he was sensing something that had nothing to do with the real world...or the world as most people understood it. Since the day the *shaman* put the first *jaingi* on his shoulder, he had felt that the world had become much larger, that there were parts of it that he had never seen until that moment, but now...now it was like he was seeing the dark shadows of that world that people did not *want* to see. Did his moodiness the last takir or so have to do with the peace talks between the Confederation and the Andromedan empires, or was it rooted in something more mystical? Was he

worried over the big changes he knew would come when peace was finalized, concerned that the Confederation may disband, or was it something else? Was there a darkness out there that was hiding within the shadows cast by the light of love, waiting for its chance to spread?

Or was he just being a moron?

A shadow fell over him, and he looked up to see the alpha wolf in the pack, standing in front of the moon...or one of the other moons of the gas giant in a higher orbit, which was in a full phase. His eyes were all but glowing, twin slits of radiance with a dark, shadowed body, then he stepped forward more and sat down. The change in position made his white fur suddenly glow in the light of the other moons up in the sky. "Hello friend," he said in a quiet, friendly voice, holding his hand out. The giant wolf reached out his paw with a bit of an amused expression and let him take hold of it. "You couldn't sleep either?"

The wolf looked at him with unblinking eyes.

"I don't know. I'm just...I can't shake the feeling that something bad's going to happen," he sighed. "It's been gnawing at me for days. Actually, more like since I came back from E Chaio," he corrected, holding up his hand and looking at it. Underneath that flesh was a machine, an endolimb, a collection of metal and silicon and polymers with artificial muscles, connected to his bone and nerve endings. It was an alien thing, but something that had become a part of him. It was something he could get rid of easily enough, have Songa replace the endolimbs with cloned arms...but that too seemed *wrong*. These arms, they were a reminder of his own hubris, a penance, a punishment for losing his head. The next time he got it into his head that he could fix everything himself, that putting his life at risk was acceptable to avenge his daughter's dignity, all he had to do was look at his hand. "There's something coming, friend. Something dark. And I don't know what it is."

The wolf laid down beside him, staring him the eyes and blinking slowly.

"If I could, I'd be preparing for it," he sighed, putting a hand over the *jaingi* on his shoulder. "I don't even know if it's a feeling of foreboding based on my job or based on *this*. With everything going on right now,

everything's so jumbled together," he sighed. "Two peace treaties, the fleet expansion, the drives, just so much going on. I've been feeling burned out, and now this on top of it."

The wolf glanced to the side, then looked back at him.

"I have no idea. Takirs. Months," he said, leaning his head back against the tree. "Maybe you're right. Maybe I do just need to take a vacation...but I *can't*. Not right now. Not until things are settled with Andromeda. You think I can settle for an evening sitting under this tree without a care in the world?"

The wolf laid all the way down, then rolled over on his back and wriggled vigorously, giving him an impish look.

"Oh, rub it in more," he said accusingly. "I think when all things are considered, you got the better end of the deal when it comes to life," he said wryly. "And sometimes I think it was wrong of us to show up here and show you there's much more than the life you once knew. Sometimes, it feels like we robbed you of your innocence. I'm sorry for that."

He stopped moving, looking at Jason soberly.

"No, I wouldn't," he said. "This is where the Dreamers belong, and where this tree belongs. Have you met any of them yet?"

The wolf glanced at him.

"Wow. Maybe I should bring the elders here and have a conference. It's overdue," he mused, looking up again. "I'm sure they think I've forgotten about them. And I think I'd like to get a look at Alaria myself. I've only seen it in pictures."

The wolf blinked.

"Sure, if you want. Though I should warn you, the more you learn of the world outside, the more it's going to change you. There may come a time that you regret knowing. But for now, let's not talk about the outside. I came here to get away from it."

The wolf's mouth opened, his tongue lolling out to the side.

"You better feel lucky I'm too lazy to get up and come over there," he retorted playfully. He laughed when the wolf got up, stepped over, then

flopped down over his legs, pinning him down. “Cheater,” he accused, putting his hands on the wolf’s side and shoulder and scrubbing his fingers gently through his fur. Their fur was very thick, but it was also almost amazingly soft, far softer than it appeared to be because their outer coats were a little shaggy. “I’m gonna be in so much trouble when Aya finds out I snuck off the planet, but I don’t care,” he said with a yawn, leaning his head back against the tree again. “I just want to not worry about anything, at least for a little while.”

The wolf gave a snuffling sound.

“You won’t be much help, you’ve never seen Aya angry,” he said with a rueful chuckle, feeling distinctly sleepy and...content. Like being here, under the tree and with the wolf, was causing him to relax, to do just what he wanted, to *not* worry. He just had to get through the next couple of takirs, and maybe everything was going to work out. And he was definitely going to go on a *long* vacation when this was done, maybe a whole month, where he did nothing, worried about nothing, and gave himself a chance to rest and recharge.

There was much to do, much to worry about, and there was that feeling of foreboding, but those were worries for tomorrow. Not right now. Right now, he was among friends in a place without distractions, in the gentle, soothing embrace of Tir Tairngire and the *oye* tree. This was not Karis, this was not his home, not his tree, but this was a place where he felt very much welcome. This was a place illumined by the light of love, by the grace of harmony. This was the Promised Land, and while it was not his promised land, it was a land that sought to ease the burdens placed on his shoulders and give him the peace and quiet and support to maybe forget about them for a little while.

He wasn’t entirely sure exactly when he fell asleep.

And the moment he woke up, he knew he was *in big trouble*.

Aya was not there, but the sun peeking over the trees warned him that he’d been here all night, had been here for hours. All five members of the pack were laying around the tree, forming a protective ring around him, and all but one was asleep. The youngest female was awake, laying on her belly

with her head up, keeping watch while the others slept. He accessed Karis time on his gestalt and realized he'd been here for nearly twelve hours, that it was 07:16 back in Karsa, and that by now Aya must be thermonuclear. It wouldn't take her more than two minutes to find out where he'd gone, since his Nova's ID had been logged going through the Stargate and its telemetry was being sent back to command from the biogenic link here on Tir Tairngire. Besides, his gestalt would tell them where he was even if he stole someone else's skimmer or something.

He felt a little stiff, but he also felt...better. He didn't feel nearly as apprehensive and depressed as he had last night. He still had a lot on his mind, but he didn't feel nearly as pessimistic today. Maybe the alpha was right, maybe he just needed a relaxing vacation to get his mind back in order. He yawned and stretched, then stood up and walked around the trunk enough to get a look at the mecha hangar on the other side of the hill. If Aya was going to come here to get him, she'd come in a frigate, and the frigate would land over there.

No frigate. That was...maybe a good sign. Maybe not. He was expecting her to be here, either to wake him up by grabbing his foot and dragging him towards the frigate or to be nearby to wait for him to wake up and get some distance from his five furry protectors. But, if she wasn't here, that meant she had all night to seethe, and it was just going to make facing her even worse. A quick sweep with his talent told him that nobody else was here except the wolves; the house stood empty when not in use, though KMS units and members of Bunvar's build team did come over every day to check the house to make sure everything was alright. He almost dreaded doing it, but it had to be done. *[Cybi,]* he called.

[Finally awake, I hear,] she replied lightly. *[Feeling alright?]*

[I guess. Why isn't Aya here trying to kill me?]

[She did that last night,] Cybi replied with amusement rippling through her thought. *[She was met by a small army of animals that literally chased her back to her dropship. The local wildlife made it very clear to her you were not to be bothered,]* she finished impishly. *[She realized about then that you were safe, because the animals weren't about to let anything threaten you. So she's not nearly as mad as you think she is. She's mad, don't think she's not, but she's not absolutely furious.]*

[Well, that's good news, I guess,] he answered, stepping carefully over the wolves, then heading for the pad by the house. His Nova was still sitting there. [I should have told her I was coming here, but I didn't want anyone bothering me. I needed time by myself to think,] he told her.

[You feel better?]

[A little. So, any movement while I was hiding from the world?]

[No. The council session to vote on the treaty isn't for twelve hours. Right now, everyone's in a holding pattern, because nothing can move until that vote is made, either accepting it or rejecting it. What's new is that Kraal reported an hour ago that Gen is on his way to Syndicate military headquarters on E Chaio so he can be give them his report in person. So far, no new CEOs have been installed, so there's still no voting quorum for the Board. But there is one thing that's rather...unpleasant.]

[What?]

[The military has no plans to move the prisoners of war off Atrovet,] she replied. [It seems it's too expensive to ship that many people back to their home bases, so they're just going to leave them there. It's part economy, part punishment for them being captured. From what Kraal reported, all the enlisted soldiers have been discharged from the military, their back pay confiscated, and left to fend for themselves. The Benga soldiers that were captured in the Atrovet operation even had their corporate contracts revoked, what Kraal referred to as being nopped, as punishment for allowing us to take the Dreamers. The officers aren't being discharged, but they still have to find a way off the moon themselves as punishment for being captured. And if they don't report to their next duty assignment within thirty days, they'll be fined and reprimanded. Gen is one of only about 17,000 soldiers that the military took off the moon. They took the program participants and the high-ranking officers, and that's it. Anyone O-5 and below was left to more or less fend for themselves. That leaves close to twenty-two million soldiers on the moon whom the Syndicate is forcing to pay their own way off the moon, and nearly a million soldiers they have completely written off, every one of them a telepath.]

[They're going to leave them there to starve?] Jason asked in shocked outrage.

[Not exactly. They're going to make the soldiers that weren't nopped arrange their own transportation off the moon. So they have to hire a civilian transport ship to come get them. So, if a sailor or Marine is too broke to buy passage off the moon, he's stuck there. They left them a comm device to let them contact transport services, and that's it. The ones that were nopped, they are stuck on the moon, Jason. They can't legally hire a transport to move them because they don't have a corporate contract, and I doubt they could afford the bribes to have a transport come get them under the table. They're in effect leaving all the soldiers stationed in the Atrovet system on the moon, including all the telepaths that were stationed on the moon itself, most likely because they don't need them to control the Dreamers anymore. And what the Syndicate does not need, they throw away. Between the soldiers on the bases elsewhere in the system we captured and the telepaths on the moon, the total number of nopped soldiers is just over three million.]

[Bull shit is that going to happen,] he seethed, his thought incredulous and shocked at the pure cruelty of the Syndicate. Having one's contract with a megacorp terminated, or being "nopped" in the Benga language, was effectively a megacorp firing someone but not killing them, and it was a *very* bad thing to have happen. "Nops," the term for such people, couldn't interact with 95% of Syndicate society because they had no citizenship. Without an income, once they burned through what money they had, they had no way to eat. Without a sponsorship, they couldn't enter into legal agreements, which meant that they couldn't even rent a hotel room, which left them homeless. They were the destitute of the Syndicate, most of them resorting to crime to survive, and living in a society that considered them to be worse than vermin. There was no social safety net in the Syndicate, no charity, no kindness. Their only option was to try to sign on to another megacorp, and megacorps were very, very selective about taking on nops. That was *intentional*. They used nops to keep the rest of their wage slaves in line by using the threat of being cast out of Syndicate society as a potent threat, even more potent than killing them. If there was no threat of being "nopped," then there was no incentive to work, so megacorps intentionally left the nops to suffer and starve as motivation for those that thought that there might be something more to life than to be a slave to their corporate masters. The soldiers that had been stationed in the Atrovet system were facing the grim prospect of being stuck in the POW camps on the moon,

unable to hire a transport to remove them, and they'd face slowly starving to death once they went through the supplies left on the moon...that or spending the rest of their lives subsistence farming on the island where they were left. *[I'm...I guess I shouldn't be as surprised as I am. We know what the Benga are. I just didn't think that level of callous cruelty would extend even to their soldiers. That's biting the hand that feeds them.]*

[True,] she agreed. [But I guess the Syndicate is more interested in finding ways to write off soldiers they don't really need and punishing the ones they do by fining them for not being at their duty stations than they are in getting their soldiers home.]

[God, they are so fucking horrible,] he sent, his thought almost bubbling with disgust. [But...this is an opportunity. Cybi, patch in Kraal, if he's awake.]

[One moment.]

[What is it, Jason?] Kraal asked.

[Cybi just told me what those asses did, nopping the Atrovet POWs,] he communed, his thought seething. [I want to ask a simple but serious question, Kraal. How hard would it be to set up our own corp within the Syndicate? One not on the Board, but with the same legal powers as megacorps?]

[Hmm. It would be possible to set up an autonomous corporation, cousin. Expensive, but possible,] he replied. [There's a process for a megacorp to spin off a client company to become autonomous, and those corps are known as shadow corporations. The megacorps use them for covert operations against other megacorps, entities that the megacorps control but aren't directly connected to them, so they have plausible deniability for anything the shadow corp does.]

[Then that sounds exactly what we need here. Kraal, set one up. Set it up and offer every nopped soldier on Atrovet a contract with it. That gives us a large and immediate pool of experienced mercenaries within Andromeda, including a large number of Benga telepaths, but it also creates a large network of information gatherers that you can use throughout the Syndicate. We spread those soldiers out under the guise of

working in satellite offices of our shadow corp and have them keep their ears open, and they send all that information to you,] he declared.

[Jason, that's going to be extremely expensive,] Kraal warned, [but I see the advantage in it, as well as an intriguing opportunity. I'll set it up as a transport corporation, an independent company hauling both cargo and civilians. A large pool of ex-military workers will give me a ready reserve of workers that know how to maintain and operate the transports, and we'll have a logical reason to have offices spread across Andromeda. But even more than that, cousin, it will give us a perfectly legal and above-board means to move people and equipment through Andromeda without having to rely on CMS ships, and given Andromeda is a very big galaxy, we'll need those soldiers to staff enough offices to give us coverage across the Syndicate. Our operatives and equipment will be on transports owned by a Syndicate corp, on official business for that corp, everything will be completely legal and we don't have to risk violating a peace treaty using a CMS ship to move our assets. And if we move fast, we can get it done before Tricorp selects a new CEO, get it done while there's still chaos in the bureaucracy, which will make it much easier to slip something through. Give me three days, cousin, to get the paperwork through Tricorp to set up a shadow corporation, then cover our tracks so nobody in the corp has any knowledge of it. But I'm going to warn you now, cousin, Denmother is going to send you a gigantic bill for this. I have to buy billions of tekk worth of equipment and buy or lease facilities and offices to set this up. And that doesn't even include the salaries of three million soldiers we'll have to pay. It's going to be almost prohibitively expensive, cousin. We'll have to put most of them on minimal pay until we get things set up and can organize some kind of sustainable revenue stream into the operation. It's going to be very rough for them for a while, but I suppose they'll still jump at it. The alternative is starvation and ostracism. Barely scraping by and living in one room hovels is still better than being nopped.]

[It will be worth it. I really didn't consider the idea of being able to use it to move our own stuff through Andromeda without having to sneak it around, but that alone will make it worth it. I was thinking more along the lines of having our own military organization in Andromeda that we could use if it was necessary, one that doesn't violate our oaths, and one that

doubles as information gatherers for you. Soldiers already there and who won't attract too much attention, because they're Syndicate.]

[I'll set that up too,] Kraal affirmed. [The Syndicate's laws make it perfectly legal for a corp to have its own military forces, so I'll set up a private military operation to go paw in paw with the transport company. And we can use all those captured Syndicate assets to equip it,] he said with some amusement in his voice. [How many Marauders do we have just sitting in warehouses right now?]

[Tons. We got a shitload of gear from those military bases on Atrovet and Sha Ra's fleet when she surrendered it,] he confirmed. [Marauders, walkers, ground batteries, missile launcher stations, infantry weapons, armor, and equipment, the whole nine yards. I didn't have them destroy any of it. Hell, we can even get our hands on fully intact Syndicate military vessels. There are thousands of them still just sitting in mothballs waiting for empires to decide what to do with them. I take it I should buy some of them back?]

[Yes,] Kraal answered. [Aim for around one hundred of each ship class except super-ships, cousin, that gives us a small but effective military force that will exist on paper to protect our transports, that's not so large that it attracts unwanted attention. We just have to make absolutely sure the Syndicate Navy can't ID them as being ships from Sha Ra's fleet. And I think I know how we can do that,] he mused. [The derelicts just floating around in Andromeda, they have computers and ID beacons. We salvage those computers and beacons and swap them with the ones on the active ships. That will make it look like the company's naval assets were salvaged from ships abandoned after past battles with the Consortium, and that's legal. Syndicate salvage laws are rather liberal, no doubt to make it easy for one megacorp to steal the assets of another. Under their maritime laws, the Terran expression possession is nine tenths of the law certainly applies. Let me discuss this in detail with the Denmother, Jason. I'm sure she'll have some suggestions for us. She is far wiser than we are.]

[I'll agree with that,] he said. [But get started on the process as soon as you can, and we'll work Denmother's suggestions in once you form the shadow corporation. I'm fairly sure I can get my hands on those ships fairly cheap, several empires will sell them to me at scrap metal rates. And I don't

think we have to keep this secret from the Confederation,] he added. [If the council knows what we're doing, they won't bitch too much about me buying back even more Syndicate ships. Many of them are still very curious over why I bought back the super-ships.]

[Let's let the Denmother make that decision, cousin.]

[I'll agree with you there.]

[I'll get started on this. I'll keep your office informed.]

[Good deal, cousin,] he called, then Kraal dropped from the conversation. [Cybi, generate a plan to move all our captured Syndicate stuff to Prakka so it's available for Kraal to use as he sees fit,] he told her. [Syndicate tech only.]

[That's a fairly good idea, Jason,] Cybi communed approvingly. [I'll inform Jrz'kii of your order, so she can set up the logistics. I'll also warn Bunvar, she'll have to build more warehouse space to hold it all. That, or she'll have to tow in some orbital storage facilities, whichever she deems is most efficient.]

[As long as it works, she can do whatever she wants,] he answered, walking onto the pad. His Nova's cockpit canopy opened, and the ladder extended. [I'll be going straight to the office, Cybi, I want to avoid Aya as long as I possibly can.]

[You're only making it worse, Jason,] she warned impishly.

[I have some calls to make, and I don't want anyone seeing me on holo with a black eye,] he answered, which made her laugh. [Do me a favor and warn Jys when she wakes up. I may be too busy to call her for a couple of hours.]

[She's over at Tim and Symone's, and she's still asleep,] she told him.

[Is she mad?]

[Of course not. She said that as mopey as you've been the last takir or so, maybe going to Tir Tairngire was exactly what you needed.]

[God, I love that woman,] he professed as he climbed up into the cockpit and started strapping himself in, the canopy closing. Novas were designed so a pilot could fly it without armor, but it still had no controls. It

did have flight information panels, however, since it was designed to be flown either in full merge mode or interface mode. So, when he started the mecha, the HUD holos popped up in front of the glass panels in the cockpit facing the seat, and more data was projected onto the canopy glass. He decided not to fly by merge, to fly in interface mode, and started the engines. The young female wolf bounded down the hill towards him, so he opened the cockpit canopy again and looked down at her. "Tell the others I went home, and thank you for everything," he shouted to her. "I'll be back in a few days, as soon as I can arrange some time off. Oh, and tell your alpha that I didn't forget my promise. If he wants to come to Karis, we'll arrange it when I come back."

She gave a simple nod, backing up off the pad and sitting down.

"See you in a few days," he called, then closed the canopy again.

Zaa was in his office by the time he got back to Karis, and they sat down and discussed his idea in more detail. She revealed she was kicking around the idea of doing something what Jason suggested, using Syndicate citizens as information gatherers to expand the Kimdori network there, and the Syndicate disenfranchising well over three million soldiers in one fell swoop granted them the perfect opportunity to move on it. It would give them a very large pool of trained military veterans from which to draw that could both uphold the shadow corp's cover as a transport company and gather information for the Kimdori. It would require them to do actual business with the Syndicate megacorps, using a shell company to sell things like replicated metals to Syndicate metalworking companies to raise the Syndicate cash to pay their people. And as much as he didn't like the idea of even giving a Syndicate company profit, it was worth it to get their foot in the door so they could keep a close eye on what was going on in Andromeda.

It would also make sure that three million soldiers for which Jason felt some portion of responsibility wouldn't be trapped on Atroviet, or slowly starve to death huddling in a filthy alley or die in a Syndicate slave labor prison camp. He promised those men and women he would see to their welfare and get them home when they surrendered, and by God, he wasn't going to abandon them to *that*. If the Syndicate wasn't going to take care of them, then he would. And they'd help out the house in the bargain. They'd

gain a sizable force of skilled soldiers, and even if they knew that they were working for an enemy of the Syndicate government, they probably wouldn't care. As long as they got a paycheck and there was no intrinsic risk to themselves, they were golden.

In some respects, the Syndicate citizens were similar to the Faey in that self-interest was their primary motivation, but the heartless cruelty that had been ingrained into most Syndicate citizens made them far too dangerous to trust. Faey were selfish and self-centered, but they weren't *evil*. Jason wouldn't be stupid enough to think that the soldiers he was saving would show him any loyalty at all, but he wasn't doing what he was doing to have them fawn over him. He was doing it because it was the right thing to do, and that with the proper precautions, those soldiers would do their jobs and do them well.

He would not allow the darkness of the Syndicate to dim his own light.

Kraal and Maraa joined them via hologram after about an hour, and they worked out their plan. They would form a transport shadow corporation, moving people and supplies from system to system within Andromeda. The soldiers they'd hire would be the employees, staffing the offices, flying and maintaining the transports, operating the private military assets the company would use to protect its transports, and doing all the administrative work, but they'd also be gathering information and sending it up to corporate HQ, which would be staffed primarily by Kimdori infiltrators. Their focus when it came to their ex-military employees would be on the telepaths, putting telepaths in key positions that would let them gather as much information as they could. They were going to fund the operation with commerce, by establishing covert trade relationships with select Syndicate megacorps, those that most aligned with what they wanted the Syndicate to do, selling raw materials to the Syndicate to raise the tekk to pay for the operation. That was going to put a significant economic burden on the house until the transport company started making money, to the point where they might actually run in the red for a couple of years, but they had the cash reserves to handle it. It was going to make Kumi absolutely livid, but Jason considered this to be a justifiable expense. It would get them a solid foothold in Andromeda within the Syndicate's own system, it would put in place military assets that answered to the house if

they were ever needed, and most importantly, it would not violate their oaths.

One way to offset the cost was by increasing industrial production and dedicating it to funding the Andromeda operation, so Jason called in Trenirk and discussed that idea with him. And he heard what he wanted to hear, mainly in the form of a hologram Trenirk put up. “What is this, Tren?” he asked, looking at a long-range hologram of an asteroid.

“This is a mining survey pic of a system in galaxy A5A-1,” he replied. “The KES found it during their scans of the galaxy to make sure it was suitable for the Consortium to be moved there. Jayce, this asteroid is solid Telvestrium-407,” he said, which made Jason whistle.

“Like that one we found in the R quadrant?”

“Yeah, but this one is five times bigger,” he declared. “This asteroid is worth about one *trillion* credits, Jayce. If you need to raise some quick cash, there it is. Right there for the taking.”

“And the drives just paid for themselves,” Maraa laughed.

“No doubt,” Kraal agreed.

“Holy shit,” Jason breathed. “It’s that big?”

“It’s that big,” Trenirk nodded. “We send out a recovery team, tow it back, then sell it on the galactic market. I’d suggest keeping it for making Neutronium, but you said we need money. So here it is.”

“How long would that fund the project, Denmother?”

“It would get it off the ground,” she replied. “But it won’t make it solvent. We can use it to buy the equipment and rent the facilities we need. It can get us started, but we’ll need to inject more capital into the project to keep it going.”

“I’m almost afraid to ask what kind of operation you’re setting up that can’t be funded by *that*,” Trenirk mused, pointing at the hologram.

“A very large one, Trenirk,” she replied mildly. “A very, very large one.”

“Thanks, Tren,” he said. “Do me a favor and send down the order to recover that asteroid, but I need you to move it to Prakka,” he told the Makati. “Once they get it there, have them clean it up and chop it into standard 100 benkonn industrial cubes, make it look like it was mined and refined the traditional way.”

“No problem, Jayce. It’ll be there in two days, and they should have it packaged and ready for delivery to the buyers in about fifteen days,” he nodded, then he turned and scurried from the office.

“Kraal, find out what the going rate is for Telvestrium-407 is on the Syndicate metals market,” he told the massive black-furred male. “And line up some buyers.”

“That’s going to require me to set up another shadow corporation, cousin, but I already planned on doing that,” he answered. “We’ll need an autonomous shadow corp in their system to act as our shell company.” A Kimdori’s arm appeared in the hologram, handing Kraal a handpanel. “And so you know, cousin, the going rate for Telvestrium-407 is six hundred tekk per *badu*. That makes the asteroid worth about 1.7 trillion tekk.”

“Yeah, I think that’s going to set up our shadow corp,” Jason said dryly.

“That will fund buying the *assets*, Jason. I’ll need more tekk to pay the *salaries*,” Kraal stressed. “I don’t think you understand the scope of Denmother’s plan. We won’t have just a few hundred facilities, cousin, we’ll have *tens of thousands*. Some will only be small offices in spaceports, some will be major maintenance facilities. We’ll need 16,233 offices at strategic systems through the Syndicate to have realistic coverage of the entire galaxy. We’ll have a fleet of nearly thirty thousand ships, both cargo freighters and personnel transports, and that means we pay to maintain them. And remember, we’re going to be paying *three million* salaries, anywhere from twenty thousand tekk a year to one hundred thousand, and that is a tremendous amount of money. We’ll be paying out approximately three hundred *billion* tekk a year, just in employee salaries. We’ll need to find an asteroid like that every two to three years to pay those salaries. That’s what it’s going to take to build a viable company that spans across Andromeda, and it *has* to do that to be viable. The company will have to have pan-galactic coverage for it to do what we need it to do.”

“Okay, I get the idea,” he said.

“How long will it take, Handgroom?” Zaa asked.

“I’ll have the companies set up by the end of the cycle,” he answered. “It’s going to take us some few months to find and buy the ships and equipment we need, and while we do that, we’ll be finding and leasing out office space. We’ll also have to find strategically located industrial property to set up maintenance facilities for the ships. In the meantime, I think it’s best if we hire the Syndicate soldiers and keep them on Atrovet in the short term, send in some supplies and some modular housing and train them in their future jobs right there on the moon, then move them to their new jobs as we get things set up. That in itself will be a significant operation, given we have virtually no infrastructure in place.”

“Are we going to be able to do that?” Jason asked. “Atrovet is a closed system.”

“Not anymore,” Kraal answered. “When we took the Dreamers, the Syndicate military declassified the system. They’re going to remove all of their equipment and then sell it on the galactic market next fiscal cycle. The military owns the system, but they don’t need it anymore. The bases there existed for the sole reason of keeping the Dreamers away from the Consortium. And the Dreamers are gone.”

“Could *we* buy the system?” Jason asked. “How much would an entire star system usually go for?”

“Far more than we could raise in time,” Kraal answered. “An entire star system usually goes for around one quadrillion tekk. We’d have to find a thousand of those asteroids to raise the capital to buy the system.”

“So, that gives us about a year to get all the Benga off the moon.”

“More or less,” he nodded. “And we can use the moon to train the soldiers in their new jobs while we do it.”

After working out a few more details, the meeting broke up. Kraal and Maraa got to work on their parts of the plan, and Zaa and Jason discussed a few final details before she went back to Kimdori Prime. After they were gone, Jason sat in his chair, turned to look out the window, and petted Chichi. And he felt...*better*. He didn’t understand why he did, but he did.

No, he did understand. Up until this point, he had this feeling that the Syndicate was going to be an eternal pain in his ass, but now they were taking action to at least be in a position to keep a close eye on them. And they would bring something to Andromeda that had been lacking for thousands of years...*kindness*. Jason planned to treat his workers well, to show them that the Syndicate way was not the only way, and this would be the beginning. He would have to move slowly, carefully, treat them the way they expected to be treated at first and then slowly show them a better path through patience and kindness, which he hoped would foster loyalty from his workers that went beyond just getting a paycheck. Much as he had earned Gen's respect and friendship, he wanted more men like Gen in his organization. And if he couldn't find them, he'd *make* them.

And when Gen finished his enlistment with the military, Jason fully intended to bring him in to head the paramilitary organization that would operate with the company they were building. Gen would be an *outstanding* commander, because he was very much unlike other Benga in that he understood the value of loyalty when it came to soldiers.

The fact that they had a plan for Andromeda now had eased his troubled mind, more than he expected, and gave him hope. He now had hope that they could find a permanent peace with the Syndicate, and if they could not, then at least he would have an organization inside Andromeda to help him beat the aggression out of a future Board.

Time would tell, but he had the feeling that time was going to be on his side.

Kaira, 9 Keda, 4405, Faey Orthodox Calendar

Tuesday, 22 April 2019 Terran Standard Calendar

Kaira, 9 Keda, year 1330 of the 97th Generation, Karinne Historical Reference Calendar

Camp Sentinel, Prakka 21-C

It was done.

Jason walked with the albino Kimdori Maraa as they moved through the new Camp Sentinel, a Karinne Marine base established at Prakka that would be their primary forward military outpost in Andromeda. Camp Sentinel was one of three land bases and one orbital station that made up the military operation here, a permanent presence that would host both Kimdori and Karinne intelligence gathering operations. All the surveillance probes in Andromeda would send their data here, where Kraal and Maraa both had analysts that would carefully study the intel and bring anything important to their attention.

Maraa had started moving on the next phase of her operations, and that was Galaxy A5A-1. Just nine hours ago, the Confederation had formally accepted the peace treaty offered by the Consortium, and they were already starting to act on it. The Consortium was told where to send their ships to use the Stargate that was going to be brought in, and since they wouldn't need stasis pods, to bring every civilian they could get on a ship and bring them. Those ships would unload their passengers to be taken through and go back to get more, which would allow them to evacuate as many Consortium citizens as possible.

The Confederation had a detailed plan to do this, and the Consortium had perused it for about two hours before signing off, because it was a good plan. Their evacuation of Atrovat had given his Kizzik logistics experts the opportunity to design the most efficient means available to move huge numbers of civilians in a short time, and they would do it again for the Consortium. They were bringing in three Stargates and a Nexus bridge to evacuate civilians and move supplies and equipment, and on the other side, they'd set up an entry station to process those civilians and assign them to one of 23 different planets they'd selected for initial colonization, based on that species' environmental requirements. Far more people were coming than would fit on just 23 planets, but those planets were just way stations, giving them a place to collect their breath, organize themselves, then move on to their ultimate destination. The Consortium would select those destinations going on the stargate data that the Karinnes supplied to them and their own scouting reports. They were going to colonize about 2,400 planets across the entire galaxy, and do it all at once, so things were going to be a bit chaotic for them to start out. But once they established

themselves and started building up some infrastructure, Jason felt they'd be alright.

Much as it pained him to even think that, given everything they'd done to him and his house.

Maraa had her operatives over there already, setting up the intelligence network that would keep an eye on the Consortium. They would be in place and ready to go before the first Consortium ship even arrived, but for now, she had most of her operation here on Prakka, transitioning it over.

Jason hadn't been at the council meeting that accepted the peace treaty, because he didn't trust himself to be civil to the representative of the Consortium that attended the formal acceptance session via hologram. Cyrsi had sat in for him, had voted yes on the treaty by proxy. He selected her because she was a CBIM that hadn't been online when the Consortium war happened, so she could at least be civil.

"We should have everything ready before the first ships arrive," Maraa told him. "The pieces of the Stargate are in transit now, and the sister gate is already there and is being assembled. They're almost done preparing to move Nexus Three and Four. They should be en route within the hour."

"I don't like the idea of letting the Consortium see Gate Paragon," he grunted. "But we don't really have a choice. It's the only way to get Nexus Three over there."

"We're going to need it to move that many ships. We're only using one gate, so we need the largest gate possible, so their ships aren't bottlenecked at the gate. Jrz'kii is going to establish traffic lanes so ships can pass through in both directions without crashing into one another. They have to move as much as they can in two months. Kraal estimates that it's going to take the Syndicate two months to reform the Board and get serious about ending the war with the Consortium. So they have two months to move as much as they can when they're not doing it under fire."

"Have they realigned their naval forces to protect the planets they're evacuating along the front?"

She nodded. "Their navy is going to hold the Syndicate at the current line to give their people as much time as possible to evacuate. You can't fault them for that."

“No, I suppose not,” he grunted. “I’m glad the war with them is over, but I don’t like having to work with them now,” he added with a mutter.

“That’s why the *only* thing you’re doing is supplying the gates and the interdictors to drop their colonization fleet out of hyperspace. Mesaiima made sure to arrange it so the Consortium representative won’t be riding on the *Tianne*. It’s going to tow a Verutan ship in to do the actual negotiations. The Verutans were neutral during the Consortium War, so they’re best for it. If it was the *Tianne*, the Consortium ships might fire on it before their diplomat could talk them down.”

“Works for me, I’d have hated to order Palla to host one of them,” he said, looking over at her. “But at least we can say that at least that war is officially over,” he sighed. “One down, one to go.”

“Any word on that?”

He shook his head. “Kraal’s people say no change. It’s going to depend entirely on who wins each Board seat as to whether or not they accept the peace treaty. Kraal’s doing what he can to make sure the people we want win those seats, but you know how the Syndicate is.”

“Those candidates are probably sealed in bunkers and guarded by small armies.”

“Exactly.”

“I see that you had the doctors heal the bruise,” she said with slight amusement.

He touched his face almost unconsciously. Aya had shown her displeasure with his stunt by slapping him with her gauntlet in the face, giving him a bruised cheek...and he was surprised that was all he got. He fully understood that he was a nightmare for his guards, someone under their protection that often chafed under their rules and restrictions and wasn’t afraid to ditch them when he felt he didn’t need them, or they were being silly. He was a grown man, he could take care of himself, and besides, going to Tir Tairngire was safe, so he didn’t need guards. “You know Aya.”

“It’s your own fault, you know,” she chuckled.

“I keep her on her toes. It keeps her young and vigorous,” he drawled, which made her chuckle. “She’ll get her chance to relax. Now that the peace treaty is signed, and there’s nothing we can do about the Syndicate but wait, I’ve decided to take a vacation. I’ll be on Tir Tairngire for two takirs or so, I haven’t decided exactly how long yet. I want to meet with the Dreamers, take a tour of the moon and see what they’re up to while I’m there, so it’ll be a working vacation. I could use it. After the last few months, I really do need a break.”

“I can imagine. You’re the only one that hasn’t taken a little time off since all this started. I think you deserve to put your feet up for a while, as the Terrans say.”

“I’m not going to argue with you, cousin,” he told her, glancing over at her with a smile. “I’m going to let Cybi sit in my chair while I’m gone, give her a little experience acting as regent. Just in case.”

“Understandable. You taking the kids or making them stay home so they don’t miss school?”

“And have them hate me forever?” he asked, which made her laugh. “Jys is arranging tutors for them so they don’t fall behind. Whoa, careful,” he said in a gentle voice, stopping and leaning down to pat a juvenile tabi. They had more or less moved into the camp in large numbers, and the KMS was majorly spoiling them. Tabis were the ultimate opportunists, and many of them had figured out that all they had to do to get free food was to act cute. “Be more careful, little one, I almost kicked you. Not all of us look down when we walk.”

The tabi gave a squeaky little *rowr* and bounded off towards the mess hall, where several other tabis were gathered in anticipation. They’d figured out mealtimes for the Marines here and were gathering for the feast.

“What did it say?” she asked.

“Nothing worth repeating,” he replied, looking over at her. “Just the typical teenage rebellion.”

She laughed. “I’m surprised there are any left on the moon. I’d have thought about the entire population would have found its way onto ships by now.”

“My people keep very strict control over that to make sure the tabis aren’t depopulated,” he told her. “I’m sure half the Marines here think they own one of them by now, but they don’t take them off the moon. Tabis will attach themselves to a person they particularly like, we’ve come to learn. They’re a lot like vulpars that way.”

“And who is it in your house that Twilight is most attached to?”

“Amber,” he replied immediately and seriously. “Twilight is *Amber’s* tabi, not ours. If Amber ever leaves the house, Twilight goes with her.”

“A pet owning a pet,” Maraa mused, then she laughed.

“If you call Amber a pet where she can hear you, she’ll bite you,” Jason warned lightly. “Now let’s get down to the business of why we’re here.”

Jason’s business on the moon was mainly busy work, but he felt it was important. Bunvar had started moving the Syndicate military assets they were assigning to the company they were founding to Prakka, and she was at Camp Sentinel doing some consulting with the Marine general that commanded the camp about expanding the base. While the KMS did have a civil engineering division, they usually didn’t do the kind of work that General Maie Karinne wanted done at the camp. They were *combat* engineers, who did their work in active war theaters. When it came to projects like what Maie had in mind, it was best to have Bunvar’s department take care of it.

They met Bunvar in Maie’s office in the center of camp, the female Makati standing on Maie’s side of the desk, pointing out features to her on a flat hologram hovering over it. “Jason, what are you doing over here?” Bunvar asked as they came in.

“I decided to come talk to you in person rather than recall you to Karis, B,” he told her.

“Where are your guards?”

“Right now? Wandering around, I suppose,” he said. “They consider this a secure facility, so they’ll let me off the leash. At least a little bit,” he drawled, which made all three females in the room laugh. “You two getting things ironed out?”

“More or less, your Grace,” Maie nodded. “Bunvar likes my expansion plan, at least with a few changes. We’re going to need that space, this camp will be a major forward operations position if we ever go to war with the Syndicate again. I need enough infrastructure in place to handle a population ten times the size that’s here now.”

“I’ll take care of it,” Bunvar told her.

“Well, I’m here to add to your workload. You thought about where we’re storing those assets I’m sending?”

“Yes, and we’re going to do it the easy way,” she answered. “I’m going to bring in a series of orbital storage facilities to hold them, as well as a mothball shipyard for the ships. We’ll put them all in orbit around Moon Q. I think we should keep that equipment separate from our own, for more than one reason. The main one being I get the feeling that we’re going to be accessing that equipment a lot, so we need it in a position where it can be quickly pulled out of storage and shipped to where it needs to go. Orbital stations cut a lot of time off that. They’ll be around their own moon, so it keeps regular traffic away from it and also keeps the lanes clear to and from the moon to the Stargate in case we have to send anything out in a rush.”

“Always practical,” Jason said with an approving nod.

“I’m Makati, Jason, we define practical,” she replied with a smile. “Without us, the Imperium would have collapsed two thousand years ago. We rein in their silliness,” she said, pointing at Maie.

“Watch it, Bunvar,” Maie retorted playfully.

“You have enough stations to handle the inventory?”

“Yup,” she replied. “I talked to Jrz’kii about it, and between her and me, we have more than enough MK-170 cargo terminals and the MS-400 storage stations in reserve to handle it. She’s already started moving them here.”

“Guess you were right, B, building more than what we needed *is* going to be useful to us in the long run,” he chuckled.

“We told you, Jayce,” she smiled. “If that was all you needed, you can let us get back to planning this base expansion.”

“Don’t throw me out of my own base, woman,” he threatened, then laughed when she gave him a tart look and shooed him away with her hand.

That business done, Jason and Maraa headed back for the frigate that brought him, talking about much less important things. He’d developed a sincere friendship with Maraa since she was brought in to be Gamekeeper over the Consortium, because she was one of the most down to earth Kimdori he’d met. She was very *cosmopolitan* among her people, less constrained by their millennia of tradition, willing to try new things, and not afraid to criticize the parts of her society she felt needed improvement...and that made her an absolute firebrand. But where it mattered, she was one of the best Gamekeepers the Kimdori could field, and that was why she was entrusted to such an important post. Zaa put up with her rebellious nature because she was very good at her job.

But Maraa wasn’t alone in that regard. Zaa herself had shown quite a bit of a willingness to go against tradition, mainly in her choice of Kiaari for Gamekeeper of Terra. Tradition would have demanded that a highly experienced Gamekeeper with centuries of experience be assigned to a post that important, but she had instead went with a Kimdori that was shockingly young and basically untested, because her instinct told her that Kiaari would excel on Terra. And her instinct bore fruit, because Jason doubted that any Kimdori would be a better Gamekeeper for Terra than Kiaari. She had exactly the right kind of mental attitude to handle that rather unusual post, and just enough independence to do things in the ways that were against tradition but were necessary to operate effectively on Terra. She would have been a disaster at another Gamekeeper post, but on Terra, she was a perfect fit.

And Zaa knew it.

Dera and Ryn met him back at the frigate, each of them carrying *their* reason for coming...tabis. Aya wanted more tabis for the strip, so she’d been sending her guards here to find one of their own in a rotation of two guards every three days, to give both her girls and the tabis time to adjust before new ones were brought in. She wanted all 45 of her girls with a tabi by the end of the month, which would be trained with Jason’s help in their duties as service animals, to defend the strip from hostile incursion. Of

course, giving each of her girls a loving and adorable pet had *nothing* to do with that decision...nothing at all.

Sometimes Jason felt that unleashing tabis on the Confederation may have been the biggest mistake of his life. In fifty years, the little furballs were going to be ruling the universe, conquering it with their cuteness.

“I see each of you found one,” he noted.

More like she found me, Dera told him, scratching the rather large smoke-colored tabi between her ears. *Came right up to me and demanded I pick her up.*

“That’s not unusual,” Jason chuckled. “Tabis can sense who they can wrap around their evil little paws. She picked her slave,” he teased. He leaned down, his hands on his knees, and addressed the female. “She wants to take you home with her,” he told the animal. “Is that alright with you?”

It gave a little chirping sound.

“Well, you’ll be living in a different place, very different from this place, and you’ll have plenty of food and attention, and a lot of other tabis to hang around with and children and toys to play with. You’ll have a soft, cozy bed in a sheltered place out of the rain, a place where the air is always just as warm or as cool as you want it to be. You won’t ever have to hunt again, and you’ll be in a safe place with no predators hunting you. In return, they’ll ask you to warn them if you sense something nearby that wants to do harm. What do you say? Is that a fair trade?”

Both of the tabis gave an eager chirp. The one in Ryn’s hands was much smaller, with light tan fur with several brown spots randomly dotting its head and body. It looked to barely be more than a juvenile.

“They’re both in,” he told them. “When you get there, they’ll let you settle in for a few days to get used to the place, then they’re going to teach you things, signals you can use to communicate with each other. Not all of us can talk to you the way I can,” he warned. “And they’ll teach you how things work where we live. You’ll be protecting our territory by ferreting out those that want to do harm. You find them, they will deal with them,” he told them, pointing at Ryn. “But it’ll be an easy and boring job for you,” he told them with a smile. “The place where we’re going, it’s a very safe place.

They're asking for your help just as a precaution, to make sure it *stays* safe."

Both tabis gave another little chirp, and the younger one gave a second little growling squeak, which made Jason laugh. "Easy there, tiger, just let them handle the fighting part," he told the young tabi. "I think you found a real firebrand, Ryn."

Then he suits me, she replied with a smile, stroking the young tabi's tan fur. *Are we ready to go home, Jason?*

"I think we are," he replied. "Remind me to tell Aya that I've decided to go on vacation earlier than planned. I don't think I want to be anywhere near us helping the Consortium, so I'm going to spend two takirs or so on Tir Tairngire and let the others handle it. They'll get everything done without me looking over their shoulder."

Now if only you could understand that in everything else, Dera smiled.

"If I wasn't nosy, the Kimdori would disown me," he said simply, which made both of them give that wheezing, voiceless laughter. "Now let's go home and start planning for our vacation."

Chapter 3

Brista, 15 Kedaa, 4405, Faey Orthodox Calendar

Monday, 28 April 2019 Terran Standard Calendar

*Brista, 15 Kedaa, year 1330 of the 97th Generation, Karinne
Historical Reference Calendar*

Karinne Family Retreat, Tir Tairngire

This was *exactly* what he needed.

Laying back in a lounge by the pool, hands behind his head and ankles crossed, Jason had his eyes closed and was drifting in and out of a doze as family and friends laughed and played all around him. The vacation house on Tir Tairngire was almost completely full, so full that not everyone had a bedroom, and the compound hadn't seen this kind of activity since Meya and Jenn's wedding. All of his kids were here, including his infants, their mothers were here, everyone that lived on the strip was here, several Generations that lived just outside the fence were here, and several close friends of the family that lived on other planets were here. That made the vacation house a bit crowded and the compound a little loud and chaotic, but Jason was so used to that from home that it wouldn't feel right if it wasn't.

The last few days had been eventful for the Confederation, but he had strictly kept his nose out of it. Cybi was giving him daily reports, but she only gave him the bare essentials so he wouldn't worry. The peace treaty had been enacted on both sides, and now the Confederation and the Consortium were cooperating to enact the treaty's provisions. The Consortium had already begun ferrying their civilians over to Galaxy A5A-1, where the receiving planets already had substantial populations of transients as they prepared to move on to their permanent homes. The Consortium was handling the welfare of their population, where the

Confederation was *only* supplying the Stargates and Nexus bridges to get those people out of Andromeda. Everything going on in A5A-1 was the Consortium's responsibility, and from Cybi's reports, they were managing it fairly well. They'd established sufficient housing and food services for the people on the transition planets, keeping them in good health as they waited for a transport that would take them on to their new home. On those destination planets, they would immediately roll up their sleeves and get to work, for there were virtually nothing there. Every civilian would help rebuild their civilization, and they'd do it literally from the ground up.

The Consortium had done many evil things, but Jason could not fault them in one respect; they *cared* about their people. That was something that the Syndicate did not do.

The mission to intercept the colonization force was almost ready to launch. The *Tianne* was going to tow a Verutan heavy battleship out into flat space, where interdictors had already been carefully placed so the full interdiction field would just *barely* sweep over the colonizing force just before it reached full power. That would knock the entire fleet out of hyperspace simultaneously, would prevent ships from potentially crashing into each other, and then the Consortium energy being aboard the Verutan ship would make contact with the colonizing force. Once the colonizing force fully understood what was going on and was on board with the plan, the *Kinai* would tow in a Stargate, they would link it, and then the colonizing fleet would traverse over to A5A-1 and immediately spread out to their new planets. Since they were carrying colonization equipment, everything the people aboard ship would need to establish new cities, they could get right out there and get to work.

So, that was all going smoothly in the first few days of its execution, and since he was staying as far away from it as possible, it was a worry that had been taken off of his shoulders.

The last six days had provided no movement as far as the Syndicate went, at least mostly. Two more megacorps had selected their new CEOs, which crept them closer and closer to having the necessary quorum to reform the Board. The only news of note there was that the two new CEOs were ones that Kraal said were in favor of a permanent peace treaty, so that was good.

Kraal felt that more of them would be in favor of the treaty once they read the debriefing report from Gen. His friend had completed his debriefing and had been assigned a new squadron of riggers and was serving out the remainder of his enlistment as a squadron commander assigned to E Chaio. That kept him right there in case the Board wanted to talk to him, but also put him back where he belonged, in the cockpit of a Marauder. Much to Jason's relief, they hadn't reprimanded him or punished him for cooperating with them. In fact, he'd been given a medal for bringing them so much valuable intelligence, for tricking his opponents into divulging so much to him. But what he'd told them, Kraal reported, had made the Syndicate military feel completely justified in assassinating the Board to stop them from escalating the war against the Confederation. Gen made it clear to them that the Confederation had only sent a *fraction* of their available military resources to Andromeda, which had steamrolled the Syndicate and thrown their entire galaxy into military, political, and commercial chaos with their interdictor blockades of important systems, the taking of their most heavily fortified system, Atrovet, and the capture of the Dreamers, taking away their Oracles. And he made it abundantly clear to them, in stark, direct terms—which wasn't easy to do in the Benga language—that the Syndicate would *lose* if they escalated the war against the Confederation. He told them about the Karinne plan to wipe out the invasion fleet in flat space between the galaxies, and the plan the Confederation had to cripple the Syndicate to such a degree that they could never threaten their galaxy again. He stressed vociferously the massive technology gulf between the Consortium and the Syndicate, telling them about the amazing technology he'd seen during his stint as a consultant that made the Syndicate look like backwater rubes, and couldn't warn them enough that the Confederation was an *intergalactic power*, capable of crossing over into Andromeda at will and wreaking havoc, while their home territory, the Milky Way, was completely unreachable by the Syndicate with the Confederation able to ambush and destroy invasion fleets in flat space between the two galaxies. He stressed how their superior technology more than made up for the sheer number of ships the Syndicate could field, and that was a lesson that they'd experienced enough to take to heart. Kraal said that many Syndicate military experts were completely rethinking their entire strategy after seeing a Megatron unit take out one of their super-ships. The sheer size of those ships was their strongest protection, but

against the Karinnes and the Confederation, it had been reduced to *nothing* by their superior technology. The Syndicate's best military minds were even now considering a complete reorganization of the fleet and a drastic change in military tactics, because they had been shown in a harsh manner just how weak their military really was.

Size was not strength.

What they had was enough to beat the Consortium, at least when they had the Oracles. But now, they knew that any future wars would be against a foe that could decimate their forces with tiny devices that could easily be mass produced in overwhelming numbers, and victory would never again be guaranteed.

Kraal reported that when the Board did reform, the military was going to do everything it could to ensure that they accepted the peace treaty...and if they didn't, then they had plans to remove the Board *again*. It had been the military that killed off the last Board, so they'd have no qualms about removing this one as well.

And now that Gen had been assigned back to a warmech squadron, Jason was hopeful that he could see him soon, just as soon as things settled down. He still had his Benga bionoid on E Chai, and it wouldn't be that hard to arrange to meet somewhere on the planet and just hang out for a while. Gen was his friend, a very good friend he'd come to learn once he left, and Jason worried about him quite a bit. Seeing him in person would make Jason feel much better.

So, with those two big problems looking to get worked out in the due course of time, Jason could admit that he felt much better about things...or maybe it was just him getting the chance to kick back and relax, letting Cybi run things for a while. Either way, the last few days, Jason had felt better and better, up to the point where he almost felt back to his normal self. The feeling of foreboding was still there, but it wasn't nearly as bad as it had been just a few days ago. Now it was a nagging sensation that things *might* go wrong, not that they *would* go wrong. And he could live with a *maybe*.

But that wasn't going to stop him from milking this vacation for everything it was worth. He hadn't left the compound since arriving five

days ago, but he'd be going out tomorrow morning to tour the first city they were building here, Alaria. After the tour, he'd be bringing Dreamer Elders back here in groups and talking to them, and he was going to visit several villages over the next several days to see how they were doing. He made sure to keep his work forays to a minimum, give him plenty of free time every day to relax and have fun.

It occurred to him, Cyvanne had named the high elf capitol in Citadel Online Alaria. She'd honored the Dreamers by naming their city after the race in the game that most resembled them.

But work was intruding in a couple of ways, and the most obvious of which was opening his eyes and seeing Grand Emperor Shakizarr hovering near the grill, watching intently as Seido grilled him a steak. Shakizarr was wearing a pair of knicker-like swimming trunks and nothing else, his black hair and green and black fur wet from the pool. It said a lot that he'd come here and just go swimming like a normal person, his honor guard dispersed throughout the complex along with Aya's guards, but Dahnai often joked that Jason had that effect on the members of the Council. Even the stuffiest, most arrogant member of the Council couldn't help but let their hair down a little bit when around him...and he guessed he couldn't refute that. But then again, while Shakizarr was all for formality and haughty appearances in public, when he was in private, he *did* like to go "casual," as it were. It wasn't the first time the Verutan Emperor had sat around a table at Jason's house wearing swim trunks and eating steak.

In that way, he was like Dahnai. In public, Dahnai was the Empress, but in private, she liked to just be herself.

The difference today was, Jason got his first real look at Shakizarr's heirs. Verutans had more than one child at a time, so the first-born litter of Shakizarr was here. They were all about nine years old as Jason would reckon things, three boys and two girls that looked completely mystified about what was going on. They'd been in training to be the potential next rulers of the Verutan Empire since before they were weaned, and they were in no way prepared for being exposed to Jason's family and the complete lack of rules or discipline that surrounded him. They didn't know what to do, they didn't know how to just play like children, standing in a group and

watching everything going on around them with wide eyes and very nearly fear in their expressions.

There were five of them, but only one would be the next Emperor (there was no “Empress” in their language, so a female would be called Emperor). Shakizarr would not name an heir, either. When he died, the five of them would compete for the throne through a series of rituals and tests, and whichever of them was the smartest, the most cunning, and the most deserving would win. That ensured that only the best sat upon the throne. But it wasn’t a death sentence for the losers, much to Jason’s relief. The four losers would retain their nobility and would serve their sibling as military officers and still have a whole lot of money and power, but Verutan law disqualified them from ever taking the throne. That prevented a sibling from assassinating the Emperor to try to take the crown; in fact, if an Emperor was assassinated, then all his siblings were immediately put to death whether they had anything to do with it or not, to ensure that future siblings didn’t get any bright ideas. So, the five heirs to the throne were very competitive with one another, but they didn’t see each other as enemies to remove.

Grand Admiral Hezivarr was Shakizarr’s brother. Jason didn’t know that until just a few months ago. And it explained a whole lot about Hezivarr’s personality.

The one thing most people overlooked when it came to the Verutans was their intense loyalty to the throne. The four losers would serve the throne dutifully and to the best of their ability because the winner proved he was the best choice. That was one of the things taught to the cubs as they grew, that losing the competition for the throne was not a disgrace, was nothing to be ashamed about, and that loyalty to the Empire was more important than personal feelings.

If Jason remembered correctly, Shakizarr had two other siblings than Hezivarr, and all three of them withdrew from the challenge to allow Shakizarr to take the throne, because they knew he was the best choice. Then again, Shakizarr was a truly exceptional man, so exceptional that even his siblings could see it and knew what was best for the Empire.

Over the last few days, and over the next couple of takirs, Jason was going to have more Council members here. They’d come in small numbers,

just one or two, and carefully matched up so they were with other rulers they personally liked, and while they were here, they'd have the opportunity to relax a little bit outside of the public eye and talk about the future of the Confederation. Jason was doing everything he could to keep everyone in the Confederation, trying to get things lined up so that if the Syndicate signed the peace treaty, the Confederation stayed together. After all, at that point, the Confederation's reason for existing would be no longer. He was determined to make sure that all the empires in the Confederation saw far more benefit in staying in it than they did in leaving it, and access to other galaxies was Jason's biggest club. He was quietly making it clear to everyone that if they wanted to expand beyond the Milky Way, the *only* way to do it was to stay in. Only Confederation members would be granted access to the Stargates leading out of the galaxy.

But at least they'd have two new members. Much to his eternal relief, both the Pai and Muri had officially been accepted into the Confederation just yesterday, and Jason's first act was to extend an invitation to the King of the Pai and the Ruling Council to visit Tir Tairngire and have a conference. Because the Confederation may be losing members very soon, Jason's primary motivation was to get their system well protected just in case a former ally suddenly tried to invade them. Both races had tremendous potential and power, and Jason wanted them under the protection of the mutual defense treaties of the Confederation. They were scheduled to arrive tomorrow, where Shakizarr and Gau would be leaving tonight.

It was about time to break that ice, he could see. He got up and padded over to the five nervous kittens, looking longingly at the three nannies that had come to chaperone them, but had been told to leave them be out here so they could get some exposure to Jason's family. He knelt down behind them, which startled them a little bit, and put his hands on the shoulders of two of them. "There's no reason to be so nervous," he told them in flawless Verutan. "Your father brought you here to have fun. So go have fun," he told them.

"We don't know what we're allowed to do," one of them ventured. Jason was still learning their names.

“In this place, as long as you don’t leave the meadow, you don’t break anything, and you don’t aggravate or hurt any of the animals, you can do just about anything you want,” he told them.

“Can we do that?” one of the females asked, pointing at the yard beyond the pool deck. There, several of his kids were having a race using toy Wolf fighters, merged to them and flying them around a course of hovering buoys and rings.

“Well, that would be a little hard for you to do, since you can’t merge to the racers,” he admitted. “But if you want to try your paw at flying one of them, I have some that have manual controllers and a VR visor. You’ll see through a camera on the racer, so you can fly it around. Does that sound fun?”

“Yes! Can we try it, your Grace?”

“Jason, cub, Jason,” he chuckled. “If I’m not wearing my formal robes, don’t call me ‘your Grace.’ I’m not big on formality. And yes, you can try it.” He rose up a bit and looked to the side. *Surin, how many of the moleculartronic Wolf racers do we have with manual controllers? The ones we have for kids who aren’t Generations?*

Eight, I think.

Perfect. They in the garage?

Yes, Jason.

Can someone go to the garage and pull them out? Shakizarr’s cubs are going to play with them.

I’m stationed by the garage your Grace, I’ll take care of it, Mai called.

“In the garage over there, you’ll find five more racers, and they have controllers and visors. Why don’t you cubs go get them and take them out into the field and try them out?” he suggested. “One of the guards is in there, and she’s getting them ready for you. And once you’ve got the hang of flying them, you can challenge my kids to a race,” he added, inciting the Verutan competitive spirit.

“We don’t know how they work,” the tallest of the males said.

“Around here, that’s only an excuse for someone who’s lazy,” he said lightly. “The only thing stopping you from learning how they work is being afraid to try. Zach!” he called.

“Yeah, Dad?” he called from the pool, where he was playing with Dara and Danelle.

“You and Dara have played with the racers using the controller before. Mind showing the cubs how they work?”

“Sure, Dad,” he said.

“I don’t mind, Uncle Jason,” Dara agreed, the two of them moving towards the ladder to get out of the pool.

“There, Zach and Dara will show you how the controller works. They’ll have you flying them around like pros in no time.”

“But we might break them. You said we aren’t allowed to break things.”

“The racers are built of armor quality metal and are built to military specs. You’re *not* going to break them. And if you do somehow pull off a miracle and manage to do it, I absolve you of any punishment,” he declared. “And I’ll tell you what. If any of you manage to beat my kids in a race, I’ll let all of you keep the racers,” he said in a conspiratorial voice, leaning down and saying it right at their head level.

That got them. They all but ran towards the garage, where Mai was already getting the toys down and ready for them.

“Are you bribing my cubs, Jason?” Shakizarr accused playfully as he walked over.

“Just giving them proper motivation to go have fun,” he replied with a smile. “I know how it can feel sometimes to be strangers around so many others, to be an in an unfamiliar place around people who all know each other, not knowing what to do. Them getting involved with the racers should break the ice with the kids. Besides, I know how to motivate a Verutan. Make it a competition,” he chuckled.

“You know us well,” the Grand Emperor chuckled. “And thank you for trying to get them to socialize.”

“They don’t get chances like this very often, no way was I going to let them just stand in a cluster and do nothing all day.”

Jason decided it was time for a little boring work, so he and Shakizarr sat at a table at the edge of the deck, they were soon joined by Gau, and the three of them discussed the future once the Syndicate was defeated. And much to his delight, he heard what he wanted to hear. Both Shakizarr and Gau had no intention of leaving the Confederation, they found the arrangement far too beneficial to leave, and were making some grand plans on their own about the future that involved exploring other galaxies and establishing themselves in the galactic cluster as intergalactic powers. And that was the best-case scenario. The Verutans and the Haumda were the two largest and most powerful empires in their sector, and if both of them stayed in the Confederation, the rest of them would also stay in in order to remain competitive...and to be protected *from* the Verutans and the Haumda. The Verutans were a highly aggressive empire, their only real fault, with expansionistic tendencies. Shakizarr’s main goal as Emperor was to expand the Empire in both size and power, and now that he was armed with Confederation-level tech, it made his military exceptionally powerful. Thankfully, he was envisioning expanding the Empire through colonization, not conquest, and his actions backed that up. The Verutans had been one of the most aggressive Confederation powers when it came to exploration of the Magnum Dwarf formation, he’d sent out *thousands* of scouts to explore the formation to find systems worth claiming. Shakizarr envisioned an empire spanning galaxies, with thousands of star systems under his flag, making them one of the most formidable powers in the cluster. Even in peace, the Verutan way was to be strong, because strength dissuaded others from war.

Jason could appreciate that point of view.

That conversation lasted about three hours, then Shakizarr and Gau decided to relax for a couple more hours before they left, mainly because the cubs were now fully engaged with Jason’s kids. They were all playing in the meadow beside the pool. Shakizarr showed his parental mettle by delaying leaving just to let his kids play a while longer. They stayed over for dinner, giving Jyslin a chance to meet Shakizarr’s cubs when she arrived from her office at the Paladins office, and when that was done, both of them left. Jason didn’t read reports, he didn’t get anywhere near his office in the

vacation house, he played with the babies and the girls up until they went to bed, played a board game with his older kids until they went to bed, then he decided to mess around in Cyvanne's masterpiece a little more just for fun while Jyslin, Symone, and Tim watched a batchi match on the vidy, a D league match pitting the Sarinda Brigade against the Jerama Lightning. For Tim and Symone, it was for fun, but Jyslin was assessing some D-league talent by watching them in action. The first day of the new season was fast approaching, and while the roster for this season was set, owners and GMs of IBL batchi teams never stopped scouting talent.

Jason was on vacation, but Jyslin was not. This was the exact worst time for an owner to take a vacation, with her team in preseason training camp and the first game of the season coming up in just a couple of takirs. So Jyslin was going to work every day and coming to the vacation house when she was done, which was some odd hours given Tir Tairngire and Karis had very different day lengths. Tir Tairngire had a 25-hour day and Karis a 29-hour day, so Jyslin was showing up at the vacation house at very different times every day.

And being here was a good experience for the kids, who, because of who they were, had to get used to dealing with different day cycles. It was hardest on the toddlers, since they needed a set schedule, but so far it had been working out. They'd managed to establish a new schedule for the toddlers, where the babies didn't really care. Being on Tir Tairngire almost felt like being back on Terra...and he found it to be almost *alien*. He'd lived on Karis local time for ten years, and his circadian rhythm was now completely attuned to a 29-hour day. He almost felt like he didn't have enough time in a day to get things done here on Tir Tairngire, because it was four hours shorter.

So, while Jyslin was watching batchi after spending all day watching her team practice batchi, Jason's mind was in an entirely different world, a world invented by Cyvanne that was getting him more and more engaged by the day. He'd spent several hours so far playing in the closed alpha of Citadel Online helping Cyvanne test things out. He'd stuck with his Jagaara character, but had switched it from being a melee warrior to a warrior/magician hybrid, using his real world fighting skills in combination with the magic skills he had picked up in the game and was now focusing upon. He was helping them test quest functionality, including the quest

generation AI that could invent quests on the spot to offer to players. Cyvanne had designed two different quest systems, the scripted quests that all players could do, and also a system that created new quests spontaneously based on player activity or exceptional role-playing with the NPCs. In the game, it paid not just to talk to NPCs, to get to know them, become their friends, because an NPC could spontaneously offer a player a new quest. But activity could also trigger a spontaneous quest. If a player spent a long time in one place, exploring or searching for something, the AI that governed quests could generate new quests for the player that involved that area, to give them something additional to do other than what they were doing. That ensured that even if a player never left his faction's territory, he would *always* have something to do.

There was another kind of spontaneous quest Cyvanne called a "bonus quest," which dealt mainly with players interacting with NPCs and solving problems. If a player did an exceptional job role playing with an NPC, it triggered a bonus quest, which was really nothing but a reward for doing such a good job. The other aspect of it was that if the player found a truly creative and ingenious means to satisfy a quest objective, like finding a clever way to rescue an NPC from a monster, he would get a bonus quest as an extra reward for his ingenuity.

Quests were worth doing in the game, because they awarded the three things any RPG player wanted most: money, experience points, and gear. Not every quest offered gear as a reward, but enough did to allow the player to gear up to get him ready to take on the next, more difficult questing area, allowing the player to progress in both skill improvement and gear to move through the questing zones in his faction territory. It was all designed to get them ready for neutral territory, which was where things got much more dangerous. Once you were out there, other *players* were as much a danger as the NPC monsters. And players had an incentive to kill other players, because you could take all the money a player was carrying if you killed him. You couldn't take his gear or equipment, but you could take his money. And there were quite a few quests that involved killing players on other factions.

That did run the risk of the game becoming dominated by player killers, so the game had a balancer in it to prevent it from devolving into that kind of scenario. Jason hadn't messed with it yet, but the "revenge system"

Cyvanne coded into the game was supposed to allow someone who was killed more than once by another player to be able to fight back and kill his killer much more easily. Cyvanne designed the game to allow a certain amount of player against player drama, but not allow it to take over the game.

Seriously, Cyvanne had done such an incredible job on this game, he was astounded anew every day at how the game grew and evolved through its alpha testing.

This was the newest phase of the alpha test, the questing system. All the play testers, which included the game devs, most of 3D, MRDD, and people from about ten other research offices and departments in the Science Division, were running around doing the quests to test their functionality, making sure the quest tracking system worked properly, quest chains were working properly, and the spontaneous quest generation AI was kicking in where Cyvanne thought it was appropriate. Jason was one of the players testing the questing in Golden Lion faction territory, doing selected quests at random all across faction territory to make sure they worked, and if they were part of a quest chain, that the next quest in the chain was offered. He'd had a ton of fun doing it, finding a few bugs and notifying Cyvanne, but really just enjoying just being in Cyvanne's imaginary world. Here he had no responsibilities, he could do what he wanted when he wanted, and death only lasted as long as it took to reincarnate in the nearest graveyard, then make the "run of shame" as he ran naked back to his corpse to retrieve his gear and equipment.

And naked meant *naked* in this game. Since it was merge only, that meant only adults and Generation kids would be playing it. And Generation kids were raised with Faey moral standards, so they saw nothing wrong at all with seeing someone naked or being naked themselves.

Jason had found quite a sweet spot in the game as far as playing was concerned. The game's rules were set up so people who were primarily spellcasters, like him, couldn't wear heavy armor because the metal interfered with the flow of magical energy or whatever crap Cyvanne made up to balance magic against melee fighters. But where the game's rules restricted his ability to wear armor, his *real-world* skills made up for that when it came to protecting himself. Jason's real world abilities in Aikido

and his military hand to hand combat training made him downright nasty in a melee fight, and by the time most monsters and NPC enemies got close enough to threaten him with a weapon, he'd already hit them with two or three combat spells to soften them up. So, the poor slob got pounded by magic trying to get close enough to kill him, and when he got there, he found himself up against someone who could take him on sword to sword...or sword to claw in his case, since he preferred to keep his hands free to use magic and rely on Claw and Fang to do his damage. That mix of magic and fighting prowess made him pretty damn formidable in the questing he'd done so far, since Jagaara had enhanced physical stats and their skills and abilities were geared around being a melee fighter, which meant he could dish out some punishment in hand to hand combat. He knew that that advantage was going to get lesser and lesser as he moved into the more advanced questing areas, where the monsters were tougher and he started getting equipment that boosted his stats, but at this stage of the game, his Jagaara physical bonuses were combining well with his Spellcasting skills and his real world skills to make him nasty.

In this game, a player character could be anything they wanted, so Jason had taken his very physical Jagaara and turned it into a magician...just a magician that could kick your ass if you got close enough to threaten him with a sword, thanks to his real world skills learned through his military combat training.

Cyvanne highly approved of his approach. She saw him as doing exactly what she wanted players to do, *be clever*.

It wasn't long before the server got much more noisy. There were about 120 people on right now alpha testing the questing system, all of them in a special comm channel created so they could talk to each other about any bugs they may find, and that number steadily increased by fifteen as the kids started logging on to play. Jason had allowed the older strip kids to join the alpha testing, so after the match was over, the kids started jumping on to have fun in Cyvanne's masterpiece. The kids were all playing on other factions, Rann and Shya on the Silver Blade, faction which was all the way across the continent, but he could talk to them in game through the friend system. Shya had opted for a wood elf, a very Faey-like race, but Rann had followed in his father's footsteps and decided to play something completely different from himself and had chosen an Ursok. Ursoks were inspired by

the Haumda, being very large and bear-like, and an excellent choice for someone who wanted to play a melee warrior type. Each of his kids were on a different faction to help test gameplay in those faction territories, each of them picking a race they thought was cool, but they were all friended with each other in the game's social system so they could talk to each other while they played. That kept them off the debug channel, where they'd be nothing but a distraction to the alpha testers. If they found a bug, they said so in their friend channel, because Cyvanne was sitting in on the channel as well. And to be fair to the kids, they were taking their job seriously. Sure, they were having fun, but they were reporting any bugs they encountered like they were supposed to.

They weren't just alpha testing the game. Sami, Yuri, Jari, Latoiya, and Mike Junior were testing a special VR adaptor they were developing for non-jacked players that would *only* be available to players on Karis, because it utilized their old interface technology...really just finding a use for the interface sensors that were taking up space in warehouses. The VR unit would allow them to see and hear through their avatar, and if they wore a special sensor suit, it would let them feel through it as well, the sensation of touch transmitted to the player from the suit and into the skin. That was *Kimdori* technology, the suit would sync with the wearer's nervous system and transmit sensory data through the skin, but it only worked for the sense of touch. The unit did nothing for the senses of taste and smell, so it meant that a VR player playing a Jagaara couldn't utilize Enhanced Smell, and players eating food in the game wouldn't taste anything. The interface unit would allow the player to control their avatar as if it were their body, just like the old interface system they used in exomechs and the one they installed in Gen's Marauder. And since it was biogenic tech, it would only be sold on Karis, to people who didn't have jacks, including kids. Though the game was meant for adults, kids on Karis had the right cultural exposure to handle the game's mature themes.

Using the VR unit would put a player at a disadvantage, but if they really wanted to play and wouldn't get a jack for whatever reason (a jack was cheaper than the VR unit), the option was there.

It was kinda weird and made him feel a trifle self-conscious playing the game as a magician. He had to chant the words of power to use the spells like magicians in movies or other games, but he had to memorize those

spells himself in order to use them. The game's magic system had its own language and held 1,731 "words of power" that could be combined to create every spell in the game. The spells starters used only had one or two words to use, so they weren't hard to learn. But the stronger the spell, the more words it had, and thus the longer it took to cast and the greater chance that the player messed the spell up or had the spell interrupted by an enemy he was fighting. And you couldn't whisper or mumble them either, you had to speak them in a strong, clear voice. And the pronunciation had to be perfect, or the spell would fizzle, or even worse, misfire. So, Jason sometimes felt a little silly calling out words in a made-up language, but the effect made the embarrassment worth it.

That was because there was more to it than just the words. Cyvanne had somehow managed to program into the game the requirement that the caster *concentrate* on the spell in order to make it go off. Just saying the words wasn't enough, you had to *mean it* in order to make the magic happen. It had taken him a while to figure that out, which was something every player that bought a magic skill would have to do. And it went beyond that. Spells that had variable parameters relied on the caster's imagination and intent to set those parameters. That meant to cast a spell with an area of effect, Jason had to decide where the center of that effect would be and how big the effect was, out to the limits of the spell. He could make the effect smaller if he wished, to avoid hitting an ally for example, which would matter if he was in a group. Members of his own group could be hurt by his magic, so he had to be very careful how he used his spells, or he might end up killing his own group members. Luckily, though, Cyvanne had designed the magic system to allow casters to have a great deal of control over the spells to allow them to avoid hurting their own companions, but also retained an element of risk that made magic inherently dangerous to *both* sides in a fight. She wanted magic to be powerful, but also *dangerous*, to force the players to respect that power and use it wisely.

He sometimes felt that only Cyvanne could have pulled something like *that* off, designing a magic system in a game that relied on the player's ability to concentrate on the magic he was casting in order to make it work correctly. It was almost as if she brought *real* magic into the game.

However, he almost felt it might be too difficult for many players to master, but Cyvanne had a lot more faith in the future players of her game

than he did. And if he turned out to be right, well, she could fix it in just a day or two.

Still, it was a lot of fun. For a Grand Duke on vacation, distracting himself with alpha testing the game had been very relaxing. And he wasn't alone for very long. After about an hour of playing solo, a lithe, beautiful high elf wearing a mixture of leather and chain mail armor and carrying a bow reached him. That was Jyslin, who must have finished with her paperwork for the team and had logged on to play. She liked the game too, and it was no surprise she chose a high elf. There were four different elf races in the game, primarily to appeal to Faey players that wanted something *pretty* to play, so naturally she went with the elf race on the faction Jason had chosen for his alpha test character. Jason and Jyslin were the primary players testing the quests in the Golden Lion faction, so it was like they had an area the size of New Jersey back on Terra to themselves.

That was how big the Golden Lion faction territory was, but it was a territory the size of New Jersey on a continent the size of South America. The five player factions of Arca only accounted for about 12% of the area of the continent, making the rest of it neutral territory. Cyvanne was anticipating that there may be tens of thousands of players on a single server, so she made the game world absolutely *huge*, so they weren't stepping on each other's toes. A server could comfortably support a population of up to 50,000 before things got too crowded, since players had so many options as to where they wanted to go and what they wanted to do. Some places would become very popular and crowded, but that was a design feature, not a potential problem. Certain cities and locations in neutral territory were explicitly designed to be attractive to players to give them a chance to gather in one place and socialize, meet new friends (and perhaps new enemies), and support a player-driven economy by giving players who focused on the financial side of the game someplace to sell their goods to a large number of players.

But that would be much later in the game's progression. For the start of the game and to make it easier for new players, all four player capitol cities, where new players would start, were within 60 kilometers of one another. The rest of the faction's territory was filled with smaller towns, villages, farmsteads, and lots and lots of NPC monsters for them to fight.

Each faction would have one really big city that would serve as the hub for the faction's players, which would give ample opportunities for players to meet, greet, and trade. In the Golden Lion faction, that city was meant to be Freeport. It was the largest of the four faction capitols and centrally located, making it easy for the other three races to reach.

"Finish the forms?" Jason asked in Elvish as she jogged up to him. She'd selected an avatar that didn't look like her but was still beautiful, with silver-gold hair so long it reached her knees, which she kept in a single long braid. Her chain mail hauberk managed to show off her cleavage, which was no surprise. Jyslin was a Faey, and Faey loved to show off their goods.

"Yup, and that's the last of them until next season," she answered, nocking her bow. "And how much did you get done without me?"

"Not much, mainly just dicking around," he answered. "I avoided finishing the quests we both have so we could do them together. I was mainly just killing stuff for fun and profit, seeing if I could raise my skills higher without spending experience."

"Nothing wrong with that," she winked with a smile. "Get anything good?"

"Nah. I did get one gear piece to drop, but it's a pair of plate gloves. Neither of us can use them."

"Yeah, I can't wear anything heavier than leather on my hands, and they can't cover my fingers," she nodded. "And you can't do magic with metal gloves."

"You can," he teased.

"Only elven chain mail," she countered. "And you seen how expensive that stuff is? I don't really get that rule in the game. Why do I get to wear metal armor and still use magic?"

"Because you're the magic race in the faction," he replied. "And you can only wear enchanted elven chain, which like you said, is expensive. It keeps magicians from getting too much armor. They're meant to be glass cannons, love, they hit hard but they die fast. A high elf magician decked out in magical elven chain mail would be a whole lot harder to kill, so

Cyvanne made sure that that wouldn't happen until much later in the game, when players have very high skills and raid quality gear."

"That's the point, being able to kill stuff without any danger."

"You have a lot to learn about games like this," he told her with a chuckle.

They spent nearly three hours questing in an area called the Twilight Glade, which was east of Twinfang in what was considered Jagaara territory. Jason and Jyslin were doing the questing out here, while the other testers on the faction were testing out the questing for the other three races. It was nearly two hours' walk from Twinfang and a good half hour from the closest faction village, and out here, some of the drawbacks of the game became glaring, because they'd have to walk back to that village to log out. Jason didn't like how Cyvanne had done the log out system, but she wasn't going to be moved, she considered it one of the challenges of adventuring far from a city or town. You couldn't just log out in the game and expect everything to be just as you left it when you logged back in, because while you weren't in the game anymore, your avatar *was*. It would be exactly where the player left it, and if some monster wandered by, they could easily kill the player while he wasn't there. The only way to completely log out of the game was to do it in an inn or in a player-owned house, be it the player's own or a friend's. Only if you logged out in an inn did your body "disappear" from the game world, meaning you were completely safe. Players who ventured far from an inn had to plan for how they were going to log out, from strategies like hiding their bodies to using magical spells that would create a safe zone that would allow them to log out. Luckily, Jason had picked up a spell that did that, called Create Shelter, but it required a Transmutation skill of 150 to learn and cast, and his skill was only 123. He'd mainly been working on Transmutation before Jyslin logged on to get it high enough for him to be able to log out anywhere.

Jason was certain that that spell was going to be one of the most sought-after spells in the early stages of the game, because it would allow players to log out from anywhere in the world. Cyvanne had planned for that as well, making sure that every faction had easy access to a Transmutation trainer and putting in enough beginner spells to allow a player to raise it to 150 relatively quickly.

Jason felt that the log out issue was going to be a major issue, but Cyvanne wasn't budging. She'd change it only after the game went live and the players proved Jason's point by complaining about it.

They spent a very fun three hours testing quests and killing monsters, getting some quality time together despite doing it in a game where he was a two meter tall muscular cat-man, like a much taller version of a male Jirunji (Jagaara were based mostly on the Jirunji), and Jyslin was...well, mostly just like herself but with pale skin. They didn't find any bugs during their play session, and they were even rewarded for their game time in the form of a new piece of gear. They got a bow off a random monster; part of the random bonus loot drop system Cyvanne implemented. Players could strip dead monsters of their gear and equipment, but most of it was usually damaged by the battle and was thus really only worth selling to an NPC merchant for money or using as raw materials for their own tradeskills. But some monsters had extra pieces of equipment that wasn't damaged, and it was usually magical in some way. So, if they came across a lizard man wielding an iron sword, they could take that sword if they killed the lizard man. And if it wasn't too damaged in the fight, they could use it. Those pieces of bonus loot were easy to discern from the monster's equipped gear because it was awarded to the player through a loot window rather than stripping the corpse. To prevent things from getting too, well, ghoulish, Cyvanne had created the loot window system to give players the money and bonus loot on the monster, that way they didn't have to search the body. But if they wanted the monster's worn equipment and weapons, they could manually strip the corpse of them.

The bow Jyslin got was pretty solid...so solid, in fact, that she didn't have a high enough Bow skill to use it, nor did she have sufficient Strength to draw the bow. She had to hold onto it, and when she raised her Bow skill to 125 and her Strength to 25, she could use the bow. Raising Strength wouldn't be that hard for her, since most gear past the gear acquired in the starting areas increased a player's stats. She only needed two more points in Strength, and that was like one piece of gear quest reward.

After calling it a night, they sat on the balcony off the master bedroom and watched the planet rise, Jyslin snuggled against him on the lounge. *[I can tell you're feeling much better,]* she intimated, communing through contact so no other Generation in the house could hear her.

[Yes I am,] he agreed. [I think if I wouldn't have taken this vacation, I might have had a nervous breakdown or something. Thank you for nagging me into it.]

[It's my job to keep my man healthy and happy,] she replied lightly, sliding her hand across his chest. [I'm just glad that at least half of the war with Andromeda is over. With luck, in a couple of months, the Consortium will be so far away from us that they'll never bother us again.]

[And if we're really, really lucky, we'll have a peace treaty with the Syndicate not long afterward. Then we find out what happens to the Confederation.]

[I don't think much will happen. It's far too profitable and advantageous to stay in it than it is to leave it,] she predicted. [The largest empires are staying in for access to other galaxies, and the smaller ones will stay in because the larger ones stayed in.]

[That's what I'm hoping,] he agreed, pulling her a little closer. [And I'm seriously relieved the Pai and Muri decided to join. Most of the other members don't truly understand how special and how powerful both of them really are. The Pai may be much more flashy, but the Muri are the ones with the far more useful ability.]

[How many Muri are in navigation training in the KMS?]

[About fifteen hundred,] he answered with an audible chuckle. [I want a Muri on every ship either in the navigator's chair on the bridge or down in Astrocartography. Their psionic ability makes them perfect for either job.]

[Is that gonna be enough?]

[No. We'll need about five times that to staff every ship we're planning to build. When we're done with the fleet expansion, the Karinne Navy is going to be nearly five times bigger than it is now. That should be large enough for the KMS to hold its own against the entire CCM, at least so long as every empire doesn't send every ship they have against us.]

She was quiet a long moment. [I hate that we have to plan to fight our allies.]

[So do I, but I learned a hard lesson over the last five years, love. Our allies will turn against us the moment they believe they have more to gain

from attacking us than they do from working with us. Zaa told me there's no less than twenty different plans or plots from various Confederate empires to acquire translight drive technology. The only thing stopping them from executing them is my threat to blast them back into the stone age if they try it. The only true allies we have in the Confederation are Dahnai, Sk'Vrae, Kreel, Krirara, and Enva. None of them are plotting to steal or capture translight drive tech. Just about everyone else is, including Shakizarr and Holikk. I'm not going to move against them for plotting, but I will if they try to carry that plot out. Zaa's Kimdori will keep us informed, so none of those plots will come at us by surprise.]

[Thank Trelle for the Kimdori,] Jyslin chuckled.

[You're a cousin now, love, so I can honestly say thank God for you,] he smiled.

[You better, buster. I'm the best thing that ever happened to you,] she grinned, her boundless love for him radiating through her thought. [And you're the best thing that ever happened to me. I think Trelle made both of us for the sole purpose of loving each other.]

[Not gonna argue with that,] he demurred, leaning his head down against hers.

Raira, 29 Kiraa, 4405, Faey Orthodox Calendar

Tuesday, 13 August 2019 Terran Standard Calendar

*Raira, 29 Kiraa, year 1330 of the 97th Generation, Karinne
Historical Reference Calendar*

The White House, Karsa, Karis

Things had been going *too* well. He was starting to get that nagging feeling that everything was about to go to hell again.

Leaning back in his chair, he worked through the last items in his inbox, preparing to leave the office for a rather important appointment, trying to shake off that feeling. He knew where it was coming from; after nearly three months, the Syndicate was very nearly ready to reform the Board, and

that meant that the possibility of another war with them was starting to rear its ugly head. The last three months or so had been quite peaceful, even pleasant, because the Consortium had behaved, had adhered to every provision of the treaty, and the operation to move as many of their citizens to Galaxy A5A-1 was almost complete. The only systems left to evacuate were the ones furthest away from the border with the Syndicate, the ones that had been under the least threat of invasion, and those operations were slated to be complete in about 14 days. The Kizzik had managed to evacuate nearly three *trillion* civilians from Consortium space over the last three months, and absolute marvel of efficiency and organization. It was mostly the Consortium moving those civilians, but they were doing it by the schedules that Jrz'kii and her logistics team had drawn up, and they were doing it because they realized quickly that the Kizzik knew her business. They were moving *four billion* civilians a day from Consortium territory to A5A-1. That was nearly the population of a planet being moved, every single day.

They were doing it with *millions* of ships. The Consortium was using absolutely anything that was spaceworthy to move people, from garbage scows to military warships, because Jrz'kii had convinced Jason to install bridges at Consortium systems so any ship with a jump engine, no matter how old, could move civilians. But on top of those ships, they were moving civilians in hastily constructed “flying boxcars” that were nothing but annealed metal plates to form an airtight container and a crude life support unit inside to keep people from freezing to death during transit. It was those crude transport units that were moving the majority of the people, for they were putting upwards of 10,000 of them in at a time and then bringing it to Nexus Three, on a very tightly controlled schedule that ensured that the line to pass through the nexus gate was always full. As the processing bay emptied out of people, a new group arrived to refill the queue. They were moving 220 people a minute through the nexus bridges, 29 hours a day and ten days a takir. And on the other side, there was a continuous parade of ships without jump engines moving them from Nexus Four down to the planet that was acting as the starport to get them down to the planet.

The Karinnes and the Confederation were involved in the evacuation, but only in A5A-1. CCM personnel transports were assisting the Consortium in moving their civilians once they arrived, under the very strict

provision that no Consortium military warship would enter A5A-1 while CCM transports were moving their civilians. Their warships were staying in Andromeda, pulling the double duty of holding the line against the Syndicate and moving civilians to the evacuation point.

For this entire operation, the Consortium had been nothing but polite and obedient. They obeyed every provision in the treaty, obeyed every additional rule set by Jrz'kii and the CCM command staff overseeing the evacuation, and Jason could understand why. Their only hope to continue as a civilization hinged on being evacuated out of the galaxy, so they were doing everything the Confederation told them to do because they didn't want to mess this up. Jason said it before, but it held true that the only way he could give them some respect was that they sincerely cared about their citizens. They were trying to evacuate as many as they possibly could, because they knew what would happen to those left behind. They wouldn't be exterminated—they were worth more alive than dead to the Syndicate—but they'd become slaves to the Syndicate megacorps.

Literal slaves. That was what the Syndicate did to Consortium civilians they captured. They had to serve as indentured servants for ten years to “buy a sponsorship” and join Syndicate society as a sponsored citizen. They had to endure ten years of the most grueling, humiliating labor in the most horrid conditions in order to get a contract with a megacorp, a process many didn't survive. Even though Jason saw the Consortium as an enemy, he didn't see their *civilians* as his foes, so he had authorized the KMS to support the evacuation effort.

The Consortium civilians had nothing to do with what they did in their galaxy, and an innocent life was worth trying to save.

So, that operation was moving smoothly, and Jrz'kii projected they'd be finished in about 14 more days. The civilians were leaving with only what they could carry in a single suitcase, forced to abandon virtually everything they owned, but they were doing it willingly and gratefully. They'd have their lives and their freedom, and that was worth losing mere things.

The nervous part was the Syndicate. They'd been advancing into Consortium territory as their naval forces abandoned each system, and after realizing what they were doing, they'd not been pressing deeper in. They saw that the Consortium was giving up those systems, and all they had to do

was wait for them to clear out and “conquer” them without firing a shot. But now that the Consortium was down to having operational control of only five star systems on the very edge of Andromeda, Jason was worried that they might launch an offensive before the last of the civilians could be evacuated. They had no idea of what the Consortium was doing, they believed that they were stuffing those people on colonization ships and sending them out of the galaxy. They believed that because Gate Paragon and Nexus Three were outside the galaxy, at a location about five minutes’ jump beyond the galactic rim. They had to keep it close because they couldn’t put all those civilians in stasis for an extended jump, so the gate location was concealed by an armada of Kimdori SCM units. They were in a line with the Milky Way galaxy, so any Syndicate ship that saw them jump out would assume that they were being sent over to this galaxy, following the colonization fleet that launched a couple of years ago.

That was the military. The political side of it was coming to a head, because they only needed one more CEO to be named to have a quorum to reform the Board. And when they did so, the first order of business would be deciding whether or not to accept the Confederation’s peace treaty. That treaty was very simple and very straightforward: military hostilities would cease, and Confederation military assets would not enter Syndicate territory. That was it. No conditions, no provisions, no pages and pages of legalese filled with loopholes. Well, there were *two* loopholes, but it was one that the Syndicate wouldn’t easily see. The first was that since Prakka was not Syndicate territory, it was exempt from that clause of the treaty. The Syndicate couldn’t claim it was their territory because they couldn’t reach it. The other was that while there would certainly be military assets in their territory, they would not be *Confederation* assets. They would be a private paramilitary force run by the Kimdori and the Karinnes whose mission in the public eye was to defend the transports and freighters of their corporation. The Syndicate would have no idea that that company was controlled by the Kimdori and bankrolled by the Karinnes.

Yeah, Kumi was *not happy* when she found out how much money Jason had committed to the project. It actually put them into the red for the fiscal quarter, something that had never happened before. And if there was one thing that absolutely infuriated Kumi, it was *losing money*.

Kraal's latest report said that they would reform the Board sometime within the next one or two days, and then they'd debate the peace treaty as their first order of business. And the peace that they'd enjoyed the last few months would hinge on their decision. Kraal was optimistic about it, since many of the CEOs selected to the Board were in favor of the peace treaty, for various reasons. Some wanted nothing to do with the Confederation, taking Jason's warning to heart. Some saw war with them as unprofitable, and thus not worth pursuing. Some wanted to focus on the Consortium, achieving ultimate victory over them and dividing up the spoils of their newly captured territory. But, there were some that wanted war, mainly those whose arrogance wouldn't allow them to accept the fact that they'd lost against the Confederation, and it was how many of those that managed to get into the CEO seats of their respective megacorps that would determine if Jason would be back in his Titan running combat missions.

He'd be doing some training today, but not in a Titan. He'd be doing it in a Wolf. It was time for him to renew his combat certification for a Wolf, so he'd be going up to the carrier *Brian Fox* after he finished here and doing the PIM segments of the certification exam. He chose for two reasons, one because the squadron with which he was going to do his certification was stationed on the carrier, and two because he was going to drop in on one of the newest Wolf pilots in the Karinne Navy, one Lieutenant Aura Karinne. She'd finished her initial flight training just five days ago and was now on her first real training assignment aboard the *Brian Fox*, assigned to the 1023rd Combat Training Squadron aboard the carrier. She'd spend three months in that squadron learning basic tactical maneuvers and group tactics, doing so in a real-world environment of being on a carrier. She'd be training using both the Wolf fighter and the Nova fighter, and once she passed the very same rating exams Jason had been taking over the last few days, she'd earn her fighter pilot's insignia and be assigned to a fighter squadron.

Jason already knew which one, Juma had told him. If she passed her training (and her scores indicated she was going to pass easily), she'd be assigned to the 303rd Carrier Squadron aboard the *Aldu Nor*, which was commanded by Ravai. Aura didn't know Ravai, so Juma felt it was best to station her aboard a ship where she didn't know her captain personally. And

for Aura, who lived on the strip and had so much contact with the upper echelons of the KMS, it wasn't easy to find a captain she didn't know.

The 303rd used both Wolf and Nova fighters and was one of only about 10% of Navy fighter squadrons that had both fighters assigned to them. Each pilot had two fighters, a Wolf and a Nova, and they used whichever one best fit the mission...though that was going to change when they got more fighter pilots trained. Right now, they had something of a shortage of pilots, so they had something of a luxury of having multiple mecha assigned to them. But when the fighter corps' numbers got up to where Juma wanted, pilots would only have one mecha, and their secondary mecha would become another pilot's assigned fighter.

The Navy's numbers of Nova fighters grew by the day. After seeing what those little fighters could do, Juma had ordered a few thousand more of them. They were a perfect complement to Wolf fighters and having both of them in a combat theater was a major advantage. They were even faster than Wolves, much more maneuverable, and since they'd managed to miniaturize a disruptor to mount into the fighter, it was just *deadly*. It didn't have the raw firepower of a Wolf, but it exceeded its big brother in dogfighting scores because of its insane speed and maneuverability. Juma had assigned Novas primarily as fighter interceptors, their job was to engage enemy fighters and bombers while Wolves either did the same or were assigned to attack line vessels. Both Wolf and Nova fighters were now being assigned to most routine missions, such as recon, gunboat escort, CAP (fighter defense), and bomber interception. The only missions Novas didn't do that Wolves did was line vessel assault and ground assault, though they were capable of attacking line vessels thanks to their disruptor gatling cannons. Wolves had much more firepower and thus were much more effective attacking line vessels. When it came to ground assault, Wolves were far superior, which was why Sioa hadn't ordered nearly as many Novas for the Army as Juma did for the Navy and Marines. The Novas that Sioa ordered had the mission of air superiority, taking out enemy air assets and giving the Wolves, corvettes, and gunboats the opportunity to make ground strikes unimpeded. Army Novas were strictly dogfighters, who went in and cleared out the enemy's aerial assets and established control of the airspace over a battlefield. And in that job, they excelled.

Jason had done his rating exams on a Nova just two months ago, so he didn't have to do those again. His passing scores would be carried over into the rating scores for that side of his rating exam. He'd be doing today's tests in his Wolf, which had been picked up from the pad behind his house and taken to the carrier for him to use. That was his personal fighter, and while he'd never used it in combat before, it was kept at combat readiness at all times...just in case. The tests weren't that hard, he just had to prove he remembered how to fly his fighter and that he remembered all the basic commands when operating in a squadron. He'd be flying with the 182nd Carrier Squadron, the Rebels, and doing a training mission with them was part of his rating exam.

The Rebels were something of a rarity in the Navy, it was an all-male squadron, made up mostly of Faey and Terrans. Most of the Faey men were like Jenn, they were damn proud of being fighter pilots and they flew with a massive chip on their shoulders, much the way Jenn chafed at how his sister Jezzi always tried to put him in a box and keep him safe. The Terrans had inherited the same attitude from their Faey compatriots, since they'd also tasted the sexism Faey women displayed when it came to men fighting. They just had the added indignity of being treated like that when they weren't raised in a female-dominated society. They were one of the elite Naval squadrons, with some of the best pilots in the Navy, and they had an expectation of excellence that drove them far more than other squadrons because they always felt like they had something to prove.

In reality, they did. Even Juma had major issues with *men* being in combat roles in her Navy, but she had no choice but to accept it with gritted teeth. The Rebels were out to prove to the women that men could be just as good at fighting as they were, so their squadron commander demanded that the Rebels have the highest scores in the Navy. They fell short of that because of the Ghost Squadron, but they continuously tried to prove they were *better* than the best fighter squadron in the KMS. That rivalry was good-natured, however, mainly because Captain Justin Taggart was a *man*. The pilots of the Rebels highly respected Justin both for his skills and for the fighter squadron he built...even if it was predominately women.

How good were they? If the Ghost Squadron wasn't available for an extremely important mission, they sent in the Rebels. They were like the Red Warriors and the Banshees from the rigger corps, who were just one

step below the KBB in their respective services (the KBB wasn't assigned to either the Army or the Marines, they were an independent entity that answered directly to the command staff in the chain of command). In the Navy, they were just one step below the Ghost Squadron.

Jason had flown with the Rebels last year for his rating exam by random luck, and he'd been so impressed that he specifically requested them for this year's exam.

Tickling Chichi under the chin a little bit, making her close her eyes and tilt her head up to encourage him to keep going, he finished the last couple of reports and the last bit of paperwork that required his attention, and checked the clock. He had about half an hour before he had to go, which wasn't really enough time to do much of anything but too much time to want to just sit around and wait. So, he spent that time playing with Chichi, giving her more than enough attention to hold her over until tomorrow.

Miaari walked in while they were engaged in a mock battle, Chichi cradled in one arm, on her back, making a game out of trying to catch Jason's hand when he darted it in to rub her belly. Catching his hand meant he *kept* rubbing her belly, at least until he saw an opening and managed to escape from her little clawed paws. Chichi wasn't exactly gentle in their mock battle, as the light scratches on the back of Jason's hand attested.

He didn't mind. If playing with Chichi didn't result in a few scratches, well, he didn't play with her anywhere near the way she liked. She was a rough and tumble little tabi.

"Stop tormenting that poor tabi, Jason," Miaari ordered with a smile.

"Hey, I'm the one bleeding here, you should tell Chichi not to be so mean," he chuckled in reply, scrubbing his fingertips against her belly. She gave a little *rowr* of protest and gnawed at one of his fingers. "Dropping off something routine, or are you here for a reason?"

"Here for a reason," she replied. "Can you ask Chichi to let you go?"

"Alright. Afraid play time is over, little girl, Miaari needs to talk to me," he told her, slowly pulling his hand away. He tapped her on the nose playfully and then shifted her around and settled her on his lap, stroking her black fur gently. "Alright, drop it on me."

“Fortunately, it’s not bad news,” she told him with a bit of a chuckle. “The Board has a quorum. They’ll be reforming tomorrow. What makes it not bad news is that the CEO we wanted has taken control of Dynamax Technologies. Kraal is confident that the Board will accept the offered peace treaty, at least after a debate over its merits. Those in favor of peace have a voting majority with the current quorum.”

“The end is in sight,” Jason breathed.

“It is,” she nodded. “If we’re lucky, by this time next takir, the war will be over.”

“God, I hope so. What do you have on this new CEO?”

Jason had to reschedule his recertification exam, because this was more important. He and Miaari discussed what was going to happen over the next few days for nearly three hours, first getting a detailed briefing on the newest member of the Board, a surprisingly young Benga woman named Dai Su Jam Ber. She favored a peace treaty with the Confederation, mainly because Dynamax was one of the megacorps in a position to profit the most off a peace treaty. They discussed a few other new CEOs, and then discussed what tomorrow might bring. The Syndicate’s rules demanded that the Board hold its first meeting within 51 hours of gaining a quorum if a quorum was lost, and they’d scheduled their first for about 33 hours from now. It would have about two hours of ceremony as the new Board members were formally seated—in a recently rebuilt Boardroom in their capitol building that had a ton of additional security features—the Chairman that would lead the Board was chosen by a public disclosure of net worth, with the largest and most valuable megacorp taking the Chairmanship, and then they’d get down to business. Kraal had managed to find out that the peace treaty was at the top of their agenda once they were back in session, because the threat of the Confederation restarting the war was something they could not ignore.

What made Dai Su Jam Ber an interesting choice was that she was one of the more visionary Benga. She chafed at the Syndicate’s technological anachronism, mainly because Dynamax was a tech company that used far more advanced tech in their internal workings than the Syndicate did as a whole, and she wanted to bring the Syndicate up to Dynamax’s level. With her supplying the tech, of course, making Dynamax ridiculous sums of

tekk, but she had a point, and now the Board would probably be amenable to a sweeping infrastructure upgrade project. The Confederation had kicked their asses with a fleet a fraction the size of theirs—physically and numerically—because they employed far superior technology. They couldn't afford another disastrous war like the Confederation War, where an exo-galactic entity with far superior war capability invaded Andromeda and crushed the Syndicate. The war with the Milky Way had opened Dai Su's eyes to their vulnerability, and her main goal as a member of the Board was to upgrade the Syndicate's infrastructure and military capability to meet these new threats. And if she was smart and savvy, it would be Dynamax products the Syndicate would be buying to do those upgrades.

[You coming home for dinner, love?] Jyslin called over the biogenic network.

[Not sure yet, but I hope so. Something important came up,] he answered.

Cybi cut in. *[Not to ruin your dinner, Jason, but Sioa wants to see you. It's not high priority, however. If you have time today, fine, if not, tomorrow is also fine.]*

[Tell Sioa I'll see her first thing tomorrow,] he replied.

[Alright.]

"Pay attention, you silly man," Miaari teased.

"Sorry, Jys and Cybi asking questions. How likely is it that the voting majority for peace changes before the vote can be taken?"

"Slim. The remaining megacorps are still days, maybe takirs away from selecting a new CEO. There are outright wars being waged over the CEO position in twelve of the megacorps. The casualties have been high, to the point where entire boards have been killed off. Add that to the fact that the Board wants to get the peace treaty quickly to prevent further economic upheaval, and the outlook is quite favorable for us."

"Finally, some good news," he sighed.

"We deserve some after the last two years," she agreed. "I'll have everything put into a report and have it delivered to you."

“Done already?”

“There’s little else we can discuss until the Board makes a move,” she told him. “You may have time to get your certification mission done if you want.”

“Nah, I’ve already rescheduled it for tomorrow,” he said. “I guess I can go down and see what Sioa wanted before I go home instead.”

“I’ll have the handpanel delivered to the house this evening.”

“Sounds good.”

He tracked down Sioa in the command center before going home, and she took him over to the main console. “I thought you’d like to know that we finished the feasibility tests for the quadrupedal mecha concept,” she told him. She touched her interface, and the hologram of a mecha built around the concept of a large cat appeared over the console. He had to dredge his memory a little to recall all the details. It was called a Warpanther if he remembered right, and he’d asked Sioa to reopen the project to see if it would be feasible with the artificial muscle strand technology they invented for Titans.

“And what’s the prognosis?”

“I’ve ordered two prototypes built,” she answered immediately. “The sims and data we got from a redesign of the mecha were *impressive*, Jason. It’s four times faster than a Titan on the ground, has impressive firepower, its low profile makes it surprisingly hard to hit, and with the tech upgrades, it’s highly durable and cost-effective. To build it, though, it’s going to need a little more research. With your permission, I’d like to send this to MRDD and have them assign a research team to it, see if they can improve the design even more with the prototypes.”

“I thought MRDD was doing it already?”

“They are, but it needs you or Myleena to make it project-level,” she told him.

“Ohhh, okay,” he said. “So it’s going to take a little more tweaking to make it viable?”

“Not much, but if we promote it to a full project, it will get the love it needs fast enough to give us a viable prototype by the end of the year,” she nodded. “There are two design concepts that need to be tested for the legs. One is muscle strand tech, but the other is a bit of a radical concept someone in MRDD thought up. Her idea is to use gravometric engine pods in the legs in place of muscle strand tech or standard mechanical drive tech.”

“You mean have them move by pods? But how will the legs hold up the main body of the mecha if there’s no mechanical system in them?”

“That was my question. There’s *some* systems in the legs to make them functional, but the main mode of movement for them would be grav pods. The system that would manage the joints would be very simplistic, easy to maintain and hard to break, while the grav pods would serve as the actual ‘muscles’ of the leg, providing the movement force. It’s a bit hard to explain. I can have them send you the research on the idea, it explains it much better. That kind of tech is beyond my understanding,” she chuckled ruefully.

“Bottom line it, Sioa. Is it worth spending the credits on a full-blown project?”

“Yes,” she said immediately. “If the prototype can match the simulation data, it will be a formidable mecha in combat, and an excellent complement to all four of our current combat mecha. Our sims show that its combination of speed, agility, and a very low profile will make it very hard to shoot down.”

“That’s good enough for me. I’ll notify MRDD to promote it to a full development project,” he nodded.

“Then I think it’s about time for both of us to go home,” she said.

“So, how’s married life treating you?” he asked. “Still in honeymoon phase?”

She chuckled. “It’s been interesting,” she replied. “All these years I thought I’d never get married. In some ways, I still think I’m too much of an old warhorse, but he talked me into it.”

“You may not be the only one. Rumor has it that Ilia’s on the verge of proposing to Melliken.”

“He’s such a nice boy. I think he’d be a good match for Ilia,” she said with a smile.

“She’ll be in for a bit of a surprise,” Jason laughed. “Mell’s a little bit of an impish scamp. He’d shake her highly regimented life to its foundations. I’d be happy to see it, though. For years I’ve been trying to get the girls to marry. It took how long for it to happen? Eight years? And *Meya* of all girls?”

Sioa laughed. “The others have to get married now. Jyslin, Maya, Songa, Temika, and Meya have the high ground.”

“Exactly,” he chuckled. “I’m hoping a little petty vindictive competitiveness will drive a few more of them to the altar. And now that you’ve broken the marriage barrier on the command staff, I’d better see a few more wedding invitations.”

“I rather doubt that,” she grinned. “Myri and Juma are married to their careers.”

“So were you,” he pointed out.

“But I was *dating*. I don’t think either of them so much as look at men.”

“Well, I’m gonna fix that,” he said with determination.

“It’s entirely possible that they’re *happy* being single, Jason,” she smiled at him. “Just because you enjoy the married life, it doesn’t mean that everyone else will.”

“Everyone is legally mandated to enjoy what I enjoy,” he replied with insincere gravity, which made her laugh suddenly.

“Go home and stop causing trouble, you impossible man you,” she grinned.

“I should, I have some reading to do tonight, and I always get it done fastest at my office at home. More than enough motivation to make me finish,” he smiled.

He took care of Sioa's request when he got home, making the mecha a full research project and sending it to Myleena's office for her to assign researchers. She wouldn't be doing it herself, her staff would handle it, because Myleena was elbows deep in the new Project H, which was the Nexus Bridge project. The objective was to build a bridge that could be placed on a planet, or at least in a gravity well, and to just do general research into the theory and the technology to see what improvements could be made. She and Emia were anchoring the project, which involved 15 3D scientists and a good smattering of hyperspace physics experts from both the Research Division and MRDD. The project had just started, so they hadn't really started getting going yet, just settling into their research labs at MRDD headquarters on Joint Base Alpha and ramping up for their work. Despite that, Myleena and Emia had already done some work on the project and had reduced the overall power consumption of the bridge system by 12%.

The mecha project wouldn't be Project I, those kinds of projects were 3D projects. MRDD would assign it as Project 05-11, the Warpanther project.

It was just one of about 117 separate research projects going on by the many different research offices and departments that made up Myleena's Science Department. That was what the House of Karinne did, and they were *always* starting new research projects. And it wasn't just the government doing it. Many corporations and satellite campuses of the Academy also conducted research, which was completely or partially funded by the House government.

There wasn't much more for him to do work wise but worry about the upcoming Board vote, so he distracted himself by going hoverboarding over the ocean off the beach with Aria. His adopted daughter had gotten stronger and stronger over the months since she finished her biotine treatments, but much more importantly, she got more and more graceful. The treatments could restore her muscle tone, but since she spent years laying on that slab, she'd had to all but learn how to walk, eat, and do basic movements again. She was proving more and more every day that she would eventually make a full recovery, because she didn't *ever* like to sit down. She wanted to do, do, do, all day every day, to catch up on all the life she'd lost as an Oracle. All that activity was good for her, because she got more and more

coordinated every day from her constant activity. As it was, she had regained enough control over her body to play organized sports in school. She wasn't all that good at them, but she loved to play sports. She was currently on both the school's baseball team and the track team, because she loved baseball and she loved to run.

And it was exactly what she needed. She still needed more therapy, needed to be active to catch up to peers her own age when it came to physical coordination, and playing organized sports was *perfect* for that. Her coaches were teaching her how to control her own body, and that was all she needed to make a complete recovery.

She certainly had enough toys to keep her entertained in her outdoor endeavors. Jason and Jyslin maybe spoiled her a little bit with the equipment they bought her, letting her try out everything from ice hockey to sailboarding. If she wanted to try a sport or activity, they geared her up for it. Every activity she tried got her that much closer to full recovery, and besides, Jason felt that she *earned* the right to do just about anything she wanted...at least within reason.

There were some sticking points, though. Aria was at that age in a Faey girl's life where she *really* started to notice boys, and the fact that he was living in a Faey society was warring with his very Terran morals when it came to his girls. She was well into puberty, having developed breasts and hips since being put on the growth acceleration program that Songa prescribed for her, which was about two thirds of the way to getting her to what Songa felt was her natural height for her age. She was still shorter than most other girls her age, but she was still growing so fast that she outgrew any clothes not made of memory fabric in about two takirs.

It was a complete diametric opposite. In Faey society, girls were the aggressors, girls acted almost exactly the way boys did in Terran society when it came to the opposite sex. They chased boys, and when they caught boys, they *followed through*. But Jason had been raised with the very Terran morals of a girl doing the exact opposite of that. It was about the only thing that he and Jyslin fought about anymore, just how far to let Aria go when it came to exploring her budding sexuality...but that was a war Jason knew he was going to lose. Like it or not, the society of the House of Karinne, at least here on the strip, was more or less based on *Faey* society. Other races'

societies had tremendous influence in places where they lived, like the values of the Shio holding much greater influence on Sarga, but the rules and laws of society for the House of Karinne were more or less based on Faey societal norms. And in Faey society, a 15-year-old girl was *expected* to do everything in her power to lose her virginity as quickly as possible.

The problem there was that while Aria was 15 physically, *emotionally*, she was more like 10. She'd had no development at all while she was an Oracle, so she was like a child stuck in a pubescent teen's body. But, much to her credit, she'd handled the whole thing with a great deal of maturity, thanks to many long talks with Jyslin and Jason, whom she trusted enough to discuss such private things, or at least most of those things. Aria was aware of Jason's discomfort about discussing sex with her, given his diametrically different viewpoint from just about everyone else on the strip but Temika, Luke, and Mike, so she didn't talk about it to him. She saved those discussions for Jyslin...maybe because Jason would tell her to resist her impulses, where Jyslin would cheer her on. But she also did it because she didn't want him to feel uncomfortable, and for that much, he could appreciate her thoughtfulness. So, their conversation steered away from the fact that Aria had something of a boyfriend in school, or that she was immensely proud of the pink fuzz that was starting to grow south of her belly button—Jyslin had utterly corrupted her in that regard, she wasn't afraid to go around naked anymore—or that her breasts were more than just bee stings now. She was maturing, becoming a woman, and probably on an accelerated schedule because of the growth treatment Songa had her doing to get her to her natural height after having her growth stunted for several years.

Careful, he warned as a small pod of Terran dolphins decided to swim past them. They'd only recently been introduced into Karis' ecosystem, and thus far, they'd done very well for themselves. Like the whales, they were disoriented for a couple of years and had to be carefully watched, but once they learned their way around, adjusted to the 29 hour day, and started to understand how the food cycle worked in the oceans here, they'd settled in quite famously.

I love those things. What kind of fish are they?

They're not fish, they're air breathing mammals. They're called dolphins, they're from Terra.

Oh, neat. I've always thought they were very pretty, she sent as they adjusted course a little to run more parallel to the coast after turning around and going back the other way. Aya didn't like them to board outside the boundary of the strip fence, so they usually just ran back and forth out where the reef was growing. That kept them inside the area of the hard shield if Aya had to raise it for some reason. *I wonder if they like it here.*

We can always ask them, he told her, slowing his board to a stop, and kneeling down. "Hey, hold on a second!" he called, and the dolphins submerged, then surfaced in front of him, their heads out of the water. Even Terran mammals seemed to understand him when he spoke, as long as he spoke sincerely and from the heart. That was the trick of it, he'd come to learn after discovering this strange ability of his, what the *shaman* said was his strength. "My daughter wants to know how you like living here in this new place," he addressed them as Aria circled around and slowed to a stop, sitting on the edge of her board, her legs dangling into the water.

They all started chittering at once, making it a little hard for him to pick out what they were saying. "At first, it was very scary," he told Aria, listening. "Nothing was where it was supposed to be, and we couldn't find anything. The places where we used to go to find food were gone. We didn't know what to do, and there were times when we went days without enough fish to eat, because we didn't know where they were. But we started to learn our way around. We watched, we studied, learned where the fish go and when they go there. It was scary at first, but now we're starting to understand this strange place. We like it here. The water is clean, the air fresh, very different from where we were." Jason looked down at the pod of about ten dolphins. "We had no idea it was so hard on you guys at first," he told them. "We're very sorry."

One of the dolphins gave a short chatter sound, which made him chuckle. "Well, I'm the only around here that can understand you," he answered. "And it's hard for me to be everywhere." His eyes widened when he heard another one. "Seriously? Huh."

"What, Pam?"

“They said that they employed a telepath capable of communicating with them when they brought them here. That was pretty smart,” he mused. There were telepaths that could communicate with animals, but they were very rare. Obviously, the department that handled repopulating Karis with animals had tracked some of them down to help the animals acclimate to Karis.

One of them asked why they were moving them here in the first place.

“Two reasons,” he replied. “First, to help this place recover from a terrible disaster that wiped out almost all life, a very, very long time ago. We needed to bring new life from other places to return this place to a natural state. Secondly, to move you from the place you were so it has a chance to recover after the Terrans living there polluted the environment and give you a better chance to survive. Here, you’re not going to be hunted by the men in boats, you’re not going to get tangled in the nets they put out to catch fish, and you won’t have to worry about unnatural objects floating in the water you might mistake as food. So, I have to ask...do you like it here?”

The answer was complex. They didn’t at first, but as they learned more and more about this place, they grew to feel very much at home here. The pod was now thriving, and they didn’t want to go back.

“I’m glad to hear that,” Jason chuckled. “I’m sorry it was hard on you at first. We did what we could to help as much as possible, but I’m happy that you’re happy here. I’m a lot like you. I came from the same place you did, and it took me a while to adjust to this place. To the days that were too long, the sun being the wrong color, feeling a little heavier, the moon that was too large and didn’t move the way it was supposed to. To the stars all being in the wrong places. But now, this is my home, and I wouldn’t want to live anywhere else. I’m now a child of this world, not our old one.”

They understood *exactly* what he meant. They felt they were now children of this new place as well.

“We’ll let you get back to your hunting. Good luck,” Jason told them.

The pod turned and swam towards the north, heading for the reef that was growing on that side of the strip’s beach.

Jason repeated what they told him to Aria as they watched the pod swim away, and she gave a knowing nod. “That’s how I feel. This wasn’t where I was born, but this is my home now,” she said simply. “I don’t want to be anywhere else, not even Tir Tairngire. I like it there, and my people are always very nice to me, but it’s not my home. This is.”

He drifted over on his board, leaned down, and kissed her on the cheek. “Aww, I love you too, Pam,” she said with a radiant smile up at him.

They stayed out for a while longer, at least until business intruded. The report from Miaari arrived, and he went up to his office to read it. It was a more detailed analysis of what they already talked about, including some background bio and profile information of the new members of the Board. Kraal sent quite a long profile of each of them, from the basic info all the way down to their preferred foods, and he worked through it to get a better understanding of these two. But what he read did give him a little hope for the future, because both were against escalating the war with the Confederation. One was against it because she felt it was suicide for the Syndicate, that they were no match for the Confederation with their current technology, and the other because he felt that escalating the war was not profitable for the Syndicate in the long run. He was interested in *permanent* peace, where the other one would be amenable to restarting the war once the technological gap was removed.

He would take it, either way. Once the Syndicate tasted a few decades of peace, and could only wage war through the tremendous effort of crossing over to another galaxy and taking on a galaxy they *knew* was armed to the teeth with technology much more advanced than their own, it was his hope that they’d find peace more profitable than war.

That made him check the fleet realignment schedule. The four new fleets had been formed on paper, and they were starting to reorganize the entire Navy... not into four fleets, but into two. Since they only had two fleet flagships built, they were going to divide the KMS into two major fleets, and when the other two were built, divide them again into four, but those four fleets would be organized and ready long before they came into being. So for now, ships were being assigned either the Alpha or Beta fleets, but ships that would move to the Gamma and Delta fleets had already been selected and were just waiting on their fleet flagship to be built

to move over. Ships were being assigned to the four fleets one by one, based not only on ship type, but on the strengths and capabilities of their captains. Juma wanted a perfect balance of ship captains with expertise in all four phases of operation necessary for command staff; tactical skill, strategic skill, diplomatic skill, and leadership ability. The perfect example of a top tier tactical captain was Sevi, she was an absolute nightmare in battle because she could see the openings and react to them much faster than most other captains. Because of her exceptional tactical brilliance, she would be the ranking tactical battleship captain in the fleet to which she was assigned, which would be the Alpha Fleet. The best example of a strategic captain was Edra, captain of the battleship *Zempali*. She was adept at seeing the “big picture,” seeing beyond the short-term tactical situation and understanding how actions effected things over time. Edra would be assigned to the Gamma Fleet, at least eventually. The best example of a diplomatic captain was Haika Medorre, captain of the tactical cruiser *Jomaki’s Blade*. Haika could talk the scales off an Urumi, and she was calm, steady, and unflappable. She would ultimately be assigned to the Delta fleet. Leadership was a quality that all captains had to possess, but some were much more gifted in it than others, mainly through their personalities. The captains of the most famous ships in the fleet all shared exceptional leadership qualities, able to inspire their crews to excellence, but Jason felt that no captain personified that ability more than Mikano Strongblade. The crew of the *Javelin* had absolute and utter faith in her, and they would follow her into hell if she asked it of them. A captain like Mikano turned a standard ship of the line into a force to be reckoned with. They could put Mikano on any ship in the fleet, and within three months, it would be one of the best of its ship class because of how Mikano inspired her crew. Mikano would be assigned to the Beta fleet.

There were several captains like that, and all of them shared Mikano’s leadership qualities. Palla, Haema, Jeya, Salira, Kiya, Marayi, Koye, all of them inspired fierce loyalty from their crews, and it wasn’t just because they were good at being captain. They all possessed that intangible quality that made soldiers and sailors want to follow them, want to excel because their captain expected it of them. Mikano was just one of them that wasn’t captain of a flag-level ship. But she would be, there was no doubt about that. Mikano was the Shio version of Jeya, a highly gifted officer and woman born to command a ship and would probably be sitting in the big

chair on a battleship the instant she met the time in service requirements commanding smaller vessels. She very well may go straight from a frigate to a heavy cruiser.

Jason had felt that putting Jeya on a command ship that early had been a mistake, but he was man enough to admit that he was wrong and Juma was right.

Jeya's exceptional abilities were going to serve the KMS well, for Jeya was one of the two command ship captains chosen to command one of the fleet flagships being built. She didn't know it yet, but she and Kiya would be promoted to command the two new flagships, Jeya being taken off the *Pegasus* and Kiya off the *Aegis*. Koye Karinne was being promoted to take over the *Pegasus*, and Marayi was being promoted to take command of the *Aegis*. Jeya was already youngest admiral in the KMS—the captain of a command ship was a Fleet Admiral by rank—but she'd soon become the youngest Flag Admiral in the KMS.

Jason had full confidence in her. Her performance on the *Pegasus* had been nothing but exemplary, and he knew she'd be just as exceptional on the bridge of a fleet flagship. The KMS valued ability over just about everything, and Jeya and Koye had proved that they were the best choices for promotion up to a fleet flagship, despite both of them being young as admirals went.

He missed dinner to finish reading the report, nibbling at what Seido brought up to him while he was working, and when he finally finished, he spent the evening playing with the girls and the babies before it was bedtime for them. He went back to the kitchen for a late snack before bed to find Seido chopping vegetables for something she was going to cook tomorrow, and he couldn't help but be a little nosy. *So, have you seen Merra lately?* he asked.

I talked to her just a little bit ago, she replied, a bit curtly.

Talking to her isn't seeing her, silly, he chided.

If you must know, we're going to go on a date tomorrow, she replied. *She's coming over to Karsa so she can try one of my favorite restaurants in town.*

So, when are you going to bring her home and introduce her to the family?

You've already met her, Jason, she sent firmly.

He had to laugh. Yes, I went over and had a talk with her, because I didn't want her to get discouraged, he replied honestly. I didn't want her to get away from you.

I can handle my personal life, Jason, she accused.

I know you can. But you also know I'm a nosy dad, and I think she's such a wonderful woman that I'm not going to let get away from you. With chains if necessary.

She gave him a bit of a surprised look, then smiled a little. I think that might give her the wrong idea, she noted lightly.

Oh, I dunno, she might find them a bit exciting, he winked.

Don't be like them.

Oh? And just exactly who is he not supposed to be like, Seido? Jyslin challenged from upstairs.

Did you have to augment her talent? Seido asked him acidly, which made him laugh.

If I knew then what I know now, I might have told her no, he grinned at her, which made her laugh.

Oh, is that so? Jyslin challenged. I think you just don't like being put into your proper place of under me, buster.

I outrank you where it counts, bitch, he teased in reply. Now shut up and let me talk Seido into bringing Merra home to meet us.

Pfft. Seido, bring Merra over after you go out so we can meet her. There, was that so hard?

Seido gave him one other adorable annoyed looks, rolling her eyes.

"She's Faey, she just doesn't get it," he said aloud with a grin.

"Truth," she agreed.

“So, think Merra won’t think you’re going too fast if you bring her over to meet us? Just a few minutes, you can swing by as you take her back to the starport.”

“I’m going to go get her in my skimmer, then take her home,” she said, looking a trifle embarrassed. “It’s cheaper than her taking a transport.”

“Nothing wrong with that,” he told her. “But that’s an hour over and an hour back.”

“Well, it gives us time to talk, I enjoy her company,” she told him. “And tomorrow’s my day off, so I’ll have the time.”

“True. And I’m sure you’ll be glad to know that Merra meets my approval,” he said with a growing smile. “Her boobs are just big enough. They meet with my stamp of approval.”

Seido gave him a startled look, then burst into helpless, delighted laughter.

Chapter 4

Daira, 29 Kiraa, 4405, Faey Orthodox Calendar

Wednesday, 14 August 2019 Terran Standard Calendar

*Daira, 29 Kiraa, year 1330 of the 97th Generation, Karinne
Historical Reference Calendar*

*KMS Brian Fox, orbiting X2139-Y2388-Z8399-à0003, Galaxy A1C
(Ilviros)*

Jason felt that coming all the way out here just to do some fighter training missions was a bit silly, but he wasn't complaining *too* much.

He didn't get to do things like this anywhere near as much as he wanted. He was in full armor, standing in front of a missile rack looking out of the open doors of the launch bay along with Aura and Commander Dedre Karinne, commander of the Rebels. He'd just completed the last of his certification flights with the Rebels, doing a recon mission of a terrestrial planet in this system. It was the third mission he'd run that day, with the first two being a combat simulation and a deep space navigation mission, testing his ability to navigate without beacons. The recon mission was surprisingly fun, since they went down into the atmosphere of a terrestrial—but not life-sustaining—planet and scanned using external sensor pods. The planet was like a less hellish version of Venus, with ambient air temperatures averaging around 300 shuki (around 140 degrees Celsius), with a pressure of 41.7 (enough to instantly kill most life) and a barren surface pockmarked and scarred by lava flows. The planet was young, barely half a billion years old, and was still extremely volcanic. The rampant volcanic activity had raised the atmosphere's temperature above water's boiling point, an atmosphere laden with carbon dioxide. The planet was much like how Terra was at that age before life began, a burning rock that was slowly cooling. The heavy percentage of water in the atmosphere would convert to liquid when it cooled enough, and then it would rain on

that planet for *millions* of years, cooling it down and forming oceans. The scans they ran was for the geology department, getting them some great data about the composition of a young planet's crust and atmosphere.

He ran that mission PIM, which was decidedly odd to him.

It looks almost beautiful from this distance, Aura noted as they regarded the young planet, red lines marking kathra-wide lava flows on the surface, which were visible from orbit. She had her helmet held against her side with the crook of her arm, and her other hand was on her hip. She'd cut her hair very short, probably to make it easier to get her helmet off and on. For a fighter pilot, that could be an issue if they were scrambled. She didn't want to waste precious time stuffing her hair up into her helmet so she could put it on.

Not so much fun from up close, Dedre chuckled audibly. *The particulates in the clouds are worse than tar. I don't think I want to be anywhere near my ship when the ground crew cleans off the hull.*

Truth, my fighter looks like it has paint primer on it, Jason agreed, glancing back at his fighter. Its usual smooth, glossy black hull was dull from the glue-like particles mixed with volcanic ash that stuck to it while they were in the atmosphere. It had the chance to do so because they weren't running with their IP armor systems on, so the energy charge on the hull didn't repel the particulates or burn them off when they stuck to the hull. It was a simple matter to clean the hull, there was a way to do it using the IP emitters, but he'd bet that the smell would be *awful* when they did it. *Still, I enjoyed the mission. I don't get the chance to come out here very often.*

I still have to remind myself that they're being serious when they say we're deploying to another galaxy, Dedre mused. *And I must say, your Grace, you're still a very good fighter pilot. When are you going to give over on those silly exomechs and join a fighter squadron?*

Sorry, Dedre, I'm a rigger at heart, he smiled over at him. *I keep my combat status active on fighters so I know what it's like for the people I'm ordering into combat, and so I can be ready to defend Karis in any way needed of me. Besides, I'm a much better rigger than I am a fighter pilot. We all must follow our calling. I'm nowhere near good enough to be Rebel,*

but I am good enough to be a Storm Rider, he sent proudly. I'll leave being a fighter jockey to those best suited for it, he added, putting a fond hand on Aura's shoulder.

I've seen your scores, Lieutenant, and I think you'll be a great fighter pilot, Dedre told her.

I hope so, Commander. I'm surely going to try my best.

[Secure all fighters,] came an order of the ship's local biogenic network...which was now encrypted. Jason couldn't understand it without a gestalt, the program to decrypt it was installed in it. It caused him a few issues where he had to ignore the commune from the ship and listen only to his gestalt, which wasn't easy. [Jump operations commencing in twenty minutes.]

*Going home already? Jason sent back to the bridge, where Lelara Karinne was commanding. Much like Ravai and Kirai, Lelara was one of a set of twins, but her twin didn't command another carrier. Enara Karinne commanded the battleship *Podaki*.*

Actually, no, we're jumping to Sigma Proxima Ascending, she replied. We're going to do one more survey mission before heading back. Feel like one more run, Jason?

You know it, it keeps me from pacing the office and worrying, he replied. At that very moment, the Board was meeting over on E Chaio, and he was being serious that running missions with the Rebels was keeping him from going crazy worrying about what was happening. There was nothing he could do about it, Kraal would give him a detailed report when he got back, so he was staying out of the office today.

Orders in, we're doing one more survey mission, Dedre sent to his squadron, including Jason. We're going to treat it like a combat launch immediately on drop back to normal space. So I want everyone in their fighter and ready to bounce! Ground crews, get those fighters in combat condition before we drop into normal space!

And just like that, Jason was put on "combat" alert. He joined the other Rebels in getting into the armored box cockpit of his fighter, and as the ground crews got the hulls cleaned off by charging the IP emitters, he called up the orders sent down to his fighter by the TCC, Tactical Command

Center. It was a command and control center just off the bridge that managed fighter operations, and it was from them that his squadron's orders were sent. Survey mission of a terrestrial system in Sigma Proxima Ascending, atmospheric insertion, running the external sensor pods already installed on the wings of his Wolf. This run was a bio-scan for the biology department, not a mineral and composition scan for the geology department. The mission itself was routine, maybe even a bit boring, but Dedre was going to make them launch for the mission like it was a hot jump-in, where they'd launch as soon as they were back in normal space, and that made it a combat training exercise.

There was a reason Dedre had them all mounted up and merged before they even jumped out of Ilviros, and it was a good reason. Just like exomechs, fighter pilots performed best when they were fully "settled in" to the merge with their fighter, so what Dedre was doing was making sure that all his pilots had a 100% merge before they started the mission. It was one hour, 37 minutes to their destination, and Jason would spend that entire time merged to his fighter and waiting to begin the mission. Hurry up and wait, a mainstay of military service no matter what branch it was. Jason, however, had more options than to just sit in his fighter and wait. He spent that time discussing what was going on over on E Chaio with Kraal and Maraa, which was mainly just speculation. Kraal couldn't get a listening device into the Boardroom, not with the new wave of security features installed since the assassination of the prior Board, so all they could do was wait for the meeting to end and have Kraal's operative within the building report in. Kraal had two infiltrators and four paid Benga informants in the building, and one of them was in the office that handled the paperwork of the Board. He would find out what happened in the meeting as soon as it was over, when the main executive in charge of communications and records came into the office and told them what to do. When the Board made a decision, it was that office that sent down the official orders to have that decision carried out, so it was the perfect place for a Kimdori to gather information.

But still, there was nothing he could do but talk, though he could do it with those who know what was going on. They kept him distracted enough that he had to get back to reality, when they were ten minutes from their destination, as the ship began to slow in mode three in preparation for returning to normal space. That was much safer now that it had been just a

month ago, thanks to Cybi and the other CBIMs creating a new navigation algorithm that was able to calculate the ship's exit vector much more precisely while operating in mode three. The margin of error for the ship had been reduced to just .15 light years, which meant that ships could now jump in at the edge of a star system and then enter it in either mode one or mode two, whichever would get them to their destination planet faster. However, since this was an uncharted system, they would be coming in using mode one because they had insufficient navigation data to plot a jump into the interior of the system. Under mode one, getting to the destination would take about 16 minutes.

The ships could go much faster than that, but it wasn't safe to go that fast inside a star system. All it would take was one very large uncharted asteroid being in their path to destroy the ship, kill the crew, and probably do drastic damage to any celestial body within 2 billion katra from the shockwave of the explosion. Within an uncharted system, there was a hard speed limit of 5 light years per hour, which gave their long range sensors sufficient time to scan their vector for hidden dangers, and gave them enough time to navigate around them if any were found. Granted, a ship as big as a carrier had sufficient phantom mass to push about anything but a planetoid out of its way, but that was no reason to be reckless. There were no doubt quite a few uncharted planetoids in their destination system. So, after dropping out of mode three, the ship almost immediately turned towards the system's star and entered mode one, cruising in at FTL speed. Jason accessed the long-range sensors and observed the incoming telemetry, just for something to do. The system had ten planets, two terrestrial planets and eight gas giants, but none of them were particularly interesting. One of the terrestrial planets was a barren rock with no atmosphere, like Mercury, but the second was in the "goldilocks" zone for life-sustaining planets for this star, an orange star about half the size of Terra's sun. KES probes had detected oxygen in the atmosphere, and that was usually a strong indicator that there was life on the planet. They were the first Karinne ship in the system, so they would be conducting the initial system mapping and initial scans of the system. That was what the *Brian Fox's* sensors were doing right now, taking scans of the planets in the system and searching for anything unusual.

[Hold on launch,] Dedre ordered over squadron tactical. [Ship sensors are detecting coherent energy emissions at destination system.] That was an indication of possible intelligent life. [Everyone remain on standby, be ready for a combat scramble if we come under attack.]

[Do we jettison our sensor pods, skipper?] someone asked.

[No, keep them unless it's a combat scramble. It takes the ground crews a while to reattach them if we dump them.]

[I'll delink and stand down,] Jason called.

[You will not, K1,] Dedre ordered. [You will stand by for orders.]

[You want me to PIM a combat sortie? Aya will murder you, Dedre.]

[I'm not taking you out there if it's a combat sortie. But you're not standing down until I'm sure it's not. That way you're in position and ready to launch if we continue on with the survey mission.]

[Roger,] Jason said, mildly amused. Aya was on the ship along with Dera and Suri, and no doubt she was charging down here at that very moment to drag Dedre out of his fighter and beat him to death with his own liver.

He was certain that it was an advanced civilization as they got closer, because the energy patterns they were picking up were roughly identical to the kind of ion power that the Keelo used before upgrading to Confederation plasma. That meant that it was a fairly advanced civilization, definitely with space travel capability, and might have some advanced weaponry to boot. That meant that the parameters of the mission would change, and Lelara followed the procedures for approaching an unknown spacefaring civilization. They dropped out of mode one nearly 8,000,000 kathra from the planet, then they turned all their sensor arrays towards it so they could get more detailed information. The ship also turned to orient itself outbound and the jump engines were put on standby, so Lelara could jump out of the system in literally two seconds if an unknown ship or vessel approached. Jason looked over the sensor data, the same data the sensor officers were studying at the same time and saw that the energy patterns were very complex. They were also registering several large metallic masses in orbit around the planet, which were either ships or orbital

stations. The ship launched a hyperspace probe towards the planet, which would get them a much more detailed scan of the area.

They weren't going to stay. There were three ships moving towards them at FTL speed, two from the planet in front of them and one from the gas giant in an orbital track close to their location but currently about a quarter of the way around the star from them. The *Brian Fox* had been detected, and the alien race was sending ships out to intercept.

[We're not risking the Grand Duke in a first contact situation,] Lelara called over the ship's biogenic network. [All hands secure for hyperspace jump.]

He almost told her to belay that, but the thought of Aya murdering *him* crept into his mind.

The ship jumped out of the system in mode two, but it didn't go far. They jumped for only about half a second, which was enough to propel them outside the system, into interstellar space one system beyond their target system, in interstellar space nearly equally distant between three stars. That too was standard procedure. The ship didn't enter mode three in scanning range of unknown civilizations unless it was an emergency, to conceal the fact that the ship had intergalactic capability. *[Mission complete, all hands prepare for mode three jump back to base.]*

[That's that. All Rebels, stand down and return to normal duty rotation. K1, you passed, so your flight logs will be uploaded to command so they can renew your certification.]

[Thanks, but I'm not done here yet. I'm curious now.]

[What do you mean?]

[I mean, I'm not going anywhere, and neither is this ship.]

Dedre found out what he meant quickly. The *Brian Fox* was ordered to hold inside the galaxy—actually, just off the galactic rim—and a response force of KMS vessels was sent out to rendezvous with the carrier, as well as a KES scout ship. The scout ship had a first contact specialist aboard, along with one of Jason's bionoids, and the KMS ships would hold at the carrier's location to be nearby in case the scout ship ran into trouble. This was their

first contact with a spacefaring civilization in this galaxy, so they were going to be exceedingly careful.

About three hours later, Jason was merged to his bionoid, standing beside Kaimo Stormblossom, a Shio first contact specialist from Yeri's diplomat corps that was attached to the KES. She was tall, willowy, and just as beautiful as any Faey woman, with dark hair with greenish undertones and vibrant light aqua colored eyes that were quite striking compared to her dark hair and green skin. Much like Lyra's and Palla's eyes just jumped out the onlooker, Kaimo's eyes did the same. They were studying the hyperspace probe data as they cruised back into the galaxy in mode two, and it painted a picture Jason expected. The civilization had extremely efficient FTL engines, with their sensors picking up some ships moving to or from the system at a very respectable 4.128 light years per hour. That would allow one of their ships to travel from Terra to its closest stellar neighbor, Proxima Centauri, in a little over an hour. That was a very, very advanced application of FTL technology, even better than the Hrathrari's translight tech. With FTL engines that fast, it looked like they'd never bothered to develop hyperspace jump technology...or they did and simply never employed it. They used saturated ion flux technology for power, which was about as powerful as ion tech could get, which gave them enough energy to power some pretty strong weapons and shields. They were using tachyon burst for system to system communication, but within the system, they were using both EM modulation and a rather innovative form of tunneling photon carrier modulation, which allowed a photon to "tunnel" through the fabric of space/time using a trick of relativity and arrive at a destination at nearly three times the speed of light...EM for planet-only comm, photon for communicating with off-planet locations within the system.

The probe had done a sweep of the surrounding systems, and it had found four more systems within 30 light years that also held advanced life using the same type of technology, hinting that they were all part of the same civilization.

So, it was a fairly advanced multi-system civilization, but not up to Confederation technology.

“Done any of these outside the galaxy?” Jason asked Kaimo as she tied back her dark hair into a tail.

“Two,” she replied. “One was a civilization in galaxy A2B-3, a single system civilization about equal in tech to the Pai and Muri, and one in galaxy A2C-6 that was nearly as advanced as the Confederation. We did the standard contact protocols with both. Told them we were conducting exploration and scientific research very far from our home territory and asked them which direction we could go that wouldn’t cause us to trespass into their claimed space.”

“You’re just a veteran now,” he chuckled.

“You keep us busy, your Grace,” she smiled. That was the truth. The KES had made contact with 114 spacefaring civilizations so far during their exploration of the galaxies in the cluster, but those contacts were about the equivalent of “hi, how you doing, don’t mind us we’re just passing through.” They’d made no agreements with any of them, basically just making contact, ensuring them they weren’t hostile, and asking which direction they could go that wouldn’t bring them into another empire’s claimed space. The need to conceal the fact that they were from another galaxy prevented an exchange of information, so they had to be a little more careful than they would if they were contacting a new civilization within their own galaxy. Despite that, they were still making contact, because it was a good thing to be on good speaking terms with one’s neighbors.

Kaimo, like Seido, reminded him that it wasn’t just the Faey that had some top tier telepaths. Kaimo was easily as powerful as any Imperium mindbender, maybe as powerful as an Imperial Guard. She preferred to use her talent as a diplomat and first contact specialist, when she had the power to do virtually anything she wanted when it came to occupations that relied on telepathy. She was in the diplomatic corps of the State Department, but when the translight drives went public within the house, the allure of going out on missions in the KES caused her to join the new office in the State department that permanently attached first contact specialists to the KES. Kaimo was in both the State Department and the KES, she had military rank within the KES, and she was fully trained like any KES officer, but she was still considered a member of Yeri’s diplomatic corps. She’d gone on two exo-galactic first contact missions since she finished her training and

earned her Lieutenant KES rank about two months ago. Kaimo was uniquely suited for first contact missions because she was a listener on top of being a powerful telepath, and she was very, very well trained. Dera had trained her to unlock her full potential as a listener, an honor that was saved only for the most promising telepaths that joined the house. The Imperial Guard trained Jason's family out of duty, but when they found a rare jewel like Kaimo, they trained them as a favor to Jason and the House. The Imperial Guard were not only some of the most powerful telepaths alive, they were beyond any doubt the most *skilled* telepaths alive.

Kaimo earned *two* paychecks. She got her State salary *and* her salary as a KES Lieutenant, which Jason felt was only fair. She was in both the KES and the State department, she deserved to be paid for both roles.

She was what Jason wanted to see in his House of Karinne, and that was Faey *not* dominating every job, role, and position. He wanted diversity both in his government and in his population, and he was privately thrilled that non-Faey were starting to really compete against Faey for positions up and down the chain of command in the KMS and the government. He didn't want his people to see nothing but Faey in positions of power, he wanted them to see as many different races as possible, so they would know that the House of Karinne was dedicated to the inclusivity that drew them to the house in the first place. The House had mostly Faey and Terrans in the highest positions of government, but that was because when the house reformed, about all there was in the house were Faey and Terrans. But now, as more and more races joined and they started to work their way up the ladder, new faces were appearing.

Not all the Faey in the house were happy about that, but that was just the smug Faey superiority mindset being sulky.

Jason was present on the bridge when the scout ship jumped back to the target system, following the standard procedure for a first contact situation. The ship jumped in at standard jump distance and held its position, broadcasting a rhythmic tone over EM modulation that their probe told them that they used, and they simply waited for them to advance. About twenty minutes after they arrived, a squadron of ships approached, coming to a stop about 100 kathra from the scout ship. And as soon as the ten ships

came to a full stop, Kaimo's eyes widened. "They're contacting us!" she told him. "They have some powerful telepaths to reach that far!"

"Then do your job, woman," he said with a smile.

She winked at him and put a finger to her temple. She was quiet for several long moments, her eyes closed and her expression neutral, then she opened her eyes and looked at the captain. The captain of this ship was a Subrian, one of the first Subrians to join the house when they made contact with the Coalition. He was a typical Subrian in that he was very tall, very burly, very handsome, very bald, and had very impressive fangs of which he was quite proud. "Captain Marikk, they're going to advance up to about five kathra, then launch a shuttle to board with us."

"Very well," he nodded. "Tell them we're going to launch a zip ship to guide them to our landing bay but do it nice and slow. Open the forward port landing bay doors. Helm, turn the ship so they can see the docking bay, so they know where to go. Launch a zip ship."

It took just a moment. As the ships approached, the scout ship slowly turned so its port side was to the advancing squadron, its main landing bay doors opened, and a tiny zip ship flitted out and held position about a kathra from the ship. "Any sense of them, Kaimo?" Jason asked.

"I'm getting a lot of chatter," she replied. "They must have a high number of telepaths in their population, given how many I hear sending. They're sending both within the ships and between the ships."

"Okay, that's good to know. Hearing anything that might be a threat?"

"Not really. They're fully aware that our ship is far beyond them technologically, but they're not being aggressive. A few of them have suggested capturing our ship to learn its technology, but they're a small minority. They're fully aware that it was a *warship* that initially entered the system, and they think that the carrier is nearby. They don't want to risk a fight with a technologically superior and unknown foe."

"That's only wise," Marikk said calmly as the ships came to a stop on the viewscreen. A single small craft launched from the lead ship, and it began its approach to the scout ship. "I think it's about time to move to the landing bay, Lieutenant, your Grace."

“Yes, Captain.”

They moved down to the bay, just in time to see the zip ship and alien shuttle enter. The shuttle was small, sleek and tapered, almost ovoid, with no wings and a flat bottom. It had two small windows in the front, like the windscreens on an old-fashioned jet plane, and a small, tapered tail on the stern with a single vertical fin. It didn't extend landing skids, it landed directly on the deck, which explained to him why the bottom of it was flat. The zip ship returned to its parking space and landed as Marikk, Kaimo, and Jason approached the shuttle, whose hatch was opening.

Jason was a bit surprised when a lone figure stepped out of it. He looked so much like a Rathii that Jason nearly did a double-take. He had the same graceful bone structure and the same very long, slender ears that ended in points over the top of his head and was just as attractive as any Rathii Jason had met.

Gora's Law strikes again.

He was wearing a military uniform, gray in color and with silver-colored metal insignia on his collar, the uniform surprisingly plain. It had no buttons, no decorations, it was just a plain gray jacket and pants with a white shirt underneath it. Kaimo stepped forward and offered her bare hand to the handsome fellow, and he took it with a calm expression. The two of them were silent for long moments, no doubt teaching each other their languages, until the ship's mainframe downloaded a new language into his bionoid. It was called Ika, as was the race, and the man was identified as Queen's Captain Salviano Jorsanimiata. “Now that my companions can understand us,” Kaimo said aloud in Ika, “might I introduce Captain Marikk, commander of this vessel, and Jason Karinne, a dignitary from my government?” she said in a melodious voice.

“Have you no family name, sir?” Salviano asked curiously.

“My people don't use family names,” Marikk replied as he saluted the captain. “In the most formal of situations, I would be called Marikk, son of Jelin, of Clan Hakru.”

“Quite interesting,” he said. “I had never conceived of a society where there are no family names.” He looked at Jason. “And I must ask. Do robots have official standing in your society?”

Jason had to chuckle. “This isn’t exactly a robot, Captain,” he replied. “It is, but there’s a living being operating it in a way that’s difficult to explain. I can see and hear through the machine, and can control its movements from where I am.”

“No doubt through the telepathic interface I’m sensing,” he said, looking carefully at the bionoid. “I can hear it, but I can’t understand what it says.”

“Precisely so, Captain,” Jason told him.

“Ah. Quite ingenious,” he said. “But we digress. The Ika would ask why you come to our system.”

“The first ship you encountered was on an exploration mission,” Kaimo said smoothly. “This is completely unexplored and uncharted territory for us. Our long-range sensors told us there were terrestrial planets within the system, and it is our standard procedure to explore such systems. It is also our standard procedure to immediately retreat from the system if we detect spacefaring races within the system. The ship you saw called in this ship, a diplomatic vessel, so we might make peaceful contact with your people, and so you can tell us which way we can go to continue our exploration that does not cross your territorial borders. We will honor your claimed territory and avoid it.”

He was quiet a moment, and in that time, Kaimo told him what was going on. [*He’s receiving instructions from someone aboard his ship,*] she communed from her interface.

“From where do you come?” he asked. “We’ve explored most of this side of the galaxy and have never encountered your people before.”

“You wouldn’t believe us if we told you,” Jason said before Kaimo could respond.

“We’ve only just begun exploring this part of the galaxy,” Kaimo added. “And you’re the first spacefaring civilization we’ve encountered.”

“You explore using giant warships?”

“Our exploration vessels need to be large because they’re designed to operate far from a base of resupply for very long periods of time,” Kaimo answered. “We understand that our ships don’t look like peaceful vessels of

exploration, and they give the wrong impression when we come across other races. We apologize if our ship caused your people any anxiety.”

“Ah. That’s understandable,” he said. “But I must ask. How do you enter hyperspace safely? My people have studied hyperspace, but its effect on the mind makes it too dangerous to use as a mode of travel. Only our automated ships use hyperspace. Are your ships all manned by those robots?”

“My people, the Shio, are much more resistant to the effects of hyperspace, we can endure the effects of it for short periods of time,” Kaimo explained smoothly. “As are my companions, who are known as Terrans and Subrians. But there are some races among us that are intolerant of hyperspace, as you seem to be. Only those tolerant of hyperspace man our exploration ships.”

“Ah. I hadn’t considered that. No race we’ve encountered can tolerate hyperspace for more than a moment or two.”

“Our resistance isn’t much more than that,” Kaimo admitted. “Which is why the ship you saw is equipped with an FTL drive in addition to a hyperspace jump engine. The jump engine is used to catapult us to a new section of the galaxy to explore, which we then explore using our FTL drive.”

“Clever,” he said with an approving nod. “And explains why your ships are so large. Jump engines are massive.”

“Precisely so, Captain,” she nodded. “With your indulgence, can you show us which way we can go so we don’t enter your claimed territory, or the claimed territory of your neighbors?” she asked as a hoverpod floated over, to the side of them, and projected out a hologram of a stargate with the system they were in at the center. “Our intent is the exploration of this sector *without* causing any incidents.”

“I find it surprising you don’t wish an exchange of information,” he said.

“Our past experience teaches us to minimize contact with civilizations far removed from our own,” Jason cut in. “I know that makes us seem quite suspicious, but it’s for our protection. More than once, our diplomatic ships have been attacked by other civilizations seeking to capture them to study

the technology they hold, or we have been pulled into a conflict between two civilizations we have just met, so it is now our policy to completely avoid space claimed by other spacefaring races. That's why we only want to know which way we can go to avoid entering claimed space. You don't have to reveal the locations of your systems, you only need to point us in the direction we can go without crossing someone's border."

He was quiet a long moment, during which he was communicating with his ship. *[He's told them what we said, now he's waiting for them to answer,]* Kaimo said, her thought amused. *[Turns out he's not actually the captain. He's a mid-grade officer.]*

[Whatever they want to do is fine with me,] Jason replied. *[Do they seem hostile or overly suspicious?]*

[A little suspicious, but the officer here believes that we're not aggressive. He told his commander as much.]

[Then that's all we really need.]

After another moment, the Ika looked over at the hologram. "To answer that question, the only direction you can go is back the way you came," he said, stepping up to it. "The Ika claim the territory along this line, at least in a two-dimensional sense," he said, tracing his finger in a curve with their location at the valley. "The space through which you traveled to get here is devoid of habitable systems, so it is claimed by no empire in the sector. Beyond us, here, are the Briei," he said, pointing at the top of the map. "We have peaceful relations with them. Here are the Uro Nok, an aggressive empire that threatens all who shares a border with them, including us," he finished, motioning along the bottom of the hologram.

"Thus why there were warships stationed in the system," Jason said absently, to which the captain nodded.

"Then it seems we'll be turning around and going back," Kaimo said. "Thank you, Captain. If you would, please return to your ship and inform your government of this conference, and we shall turn around and go back several dozen light years, then choose another direction to travel to continue our exploration. We apologize once more for entering your territory, and we assure you that we will not do so again. Your territorial borders shall be honored, as will be the borders of your neighbors."

“Thank you, madam diplomat.”

Barely five minutes later, the Ika officer was on his way back to his ship, and the scout ship was turning around to jump back out of the system. The Ika had tried to get them to establish permanent diplomatic relations, but Kaimo danced around that rather masterfully. That was their current standard procedure. Since it would be virtually impossible to hide the fact that they were from another galaxy, they were avoiding establishing permanent diplomatic relations with any of the exo-galactic empires they encountered. Jason didn't want his ships to be hunted by every spacefaring empire in the universe when they found out that Karinne ships had intergalactic capability, and just about everyone in the upper echelon of both his government and his military agreed with his policy.

For Jason, it was quite an enjoyable little diversion, getting the chance to see how the first contact team was doing their work in this new intergalactic age, and he was quite impressed by Kaimo. Ryn had spoken very highly of her when she trained her, and she'd become a personal friend to Dera during their training sessions.

It was odd to him that Faey women and Shio women seemed to get along so well, when they were so different culturally. But then again, Shio were very charismatic people, so maybe it wasn't quite so much a surprise as he believed.

So, that bit of fun completed, Jason stowed his bionoid, delinked, and hung out with Dedre and the Rebels during the trip back to Karis. Once he got home, he headed over to his office in the White House and stood by as he waited for Kraal to contact him about what the Board was doing, catching up on two days' worth of backlogged paperwork as he did so...at least when Chichi let him. The little tabi was being quite naughty, baiting him into playing with her instead of doing boring paperwork.

Eventually, though, he both got the paperwork done and got word from Andromeda. Kraal's face appeared on a flat hologram across from his desk without warning—Kraal had authority to do that—as he was going over Myleena's latest report from Project H, which had been hand-delivered by courier not long ago. “Cousin,” Kraal called, getting his attention.

“About time. Any news, cousin?” he asked, setting the handpanel on the desk.

“Very little, but what little news I have is good news,” he said. “There’s been no official decision about accepting the peace treaty, but they’re currently debating the issue. The good news is, it looks quite favorable that they’ll accept the treaty as is.”

Jason breathed a sigh of relief, leaning back in his chair. “Any idea exactly when they may vote on it?”

“Perhaps late tomorrow their time, or the day after,” he answered. “My contacts told me that they spent most of their first day going over financial matters before taking up the peace treaty.”

“Well, that’s very Benga,” he drawled, which made the massive Kimdori nod knowingly. “So I came back to the office for basically no reason.”

“I dare say you caught up on your paperwork, cousin. Sometimes I think Chirk must follow you around to make you do your job.”

He had to laugh. “She’s not that bad, but I know when I’m starting to irritate her,” he grinned. “All the fun things I can do instead of sitting in this office is a temptation I can’t resist sometimes.”

“I’ll send you a more detailed report, but it won’t say much more than what I’ve told you.”

“Alright. Since I have everything done and there won’t be any movement in Andromeda for another thirty-five hours minimum, I may as well go home.”

“Then I’ll talk to you tomorrow, cousin. As soon as I have news.”

“Just remember, I have an appointment in the morning my time.”

“I remember.”

Raista, 30 Kiraa, 4405, Faey Orthodox Calendar

Thursday, 15 August 2019 Terran Standard Calendar

*Raista, 30 Kiraa, year 1330 of the 97th Generation, Karinne
Historical Reference Calendar*

The Last Chance Tavern, Trejaki City, E Chaio

He was getting used to the idea of this by now.

He sat at a small table on the second-floor balcony of a large tavern frequented by Syndicate military personnel. It was called the Last Chance Tavern, since it was the last bar many enlistees got to enjoy before heading out for deployment. It was just outside the largest military installation on E Chaio, an area known as Trejaki City, which was about 500 kathra from the capitol building. Jason sat at the table with Gen using his new Benga bionoid, which used his facial features and body type, just upsized to Benga height and with his skin and hair color altered to make him look Benga. Blond was a very rare hair color for Benga, so his bionoid's hair was an amber-brown color, the closest it could get to blond and still be somewhat normal for a Benga. His bionoid's eyes were green like his real body, and his skin was Benga green. He did not in any way stand out in the tavern by his appearance, but he did stand out in that he wasn't in a uniform. He was wearing the maintenance coveralls of a mechanic, which wasn't *too* unusual in a place like this.

This was a top of the line infiltration bionoid, just off the factory line two days ago and filled with both Rook's and the Kimdori's newest innovations. It had complete SCM to fool any sensor into thinking he was a Benga, it had the capability to eat and drink, it could even bleed if it was cut. That was a true marvel of engineering on Rook's behalf, finding a way to circulate synthesized Benga blood through an artificial capillary system in the bionoid's skin. The blood wouldn't pass muster if it was analyzed by a medical sensor, but it had the same look and consistency as Benga blood to casual observation. The bionoid had full biorhythmics for a Benga, and even had authentic, non-synthetic hair. It was hair from a large bovine from Algrath IV, but it had the closest consistency to Benga hair they could find. The sensor mesh in it was the newest iteration of sensory encoding/decoding technology, which Rook was calling Third Generation, giving moleculartronic systems very nearly biogenic throughput and sensitivity. It was the same simsense Cyvanne was using for her game and

would be the next upgrade to simsense released by Yila's simsense company. Nobody in the tavern suspected he wasn't a Benga, but there was one person in the place that knew what he was.

Gen sat across from him at the table, a mug of Benga ale in his hand but still resting on the table. Jason had resumed his visits with his friend since he settled into his new assignment, which was leading a warmech squadron until his enlistment was up and he retired with his pension in about three months. They'd been there for a good two hours, knocking back ales, eating *jik* pods (which tasted like squash and were a rather tasty Benga "snack food"), and chatting about Gen's new assignment and Jason's fictitious adventures as the civilian foreman of a military equipment repair bay on the base. Gen was here to more or less train a squadron of future squadron commanders, all of his squadron members were going to be put in command of their own squadrons when Gen retired. Gen...wasn't very happy about that. They didn't feel they had to listen to him, that they knew better, and they'd been driving him a bit nuts the last month or so. Gen was now counting the days until he earned his pension, and the nimrods he had in his squadron now had poisoned him against the idea of staying on as a civilian contractor to train squadron commanders. Gen's squadron was the best because he hand-picked his people and he trained them himself from the ground up, and his commanders were starting to learn that just throwing a bunch of squadron commanders together into the same squadron and expecting them to become like Gen because Gen was training them wasn't going to work.

"Seriously? Right in the landing bay?" Jason asked, speaking fluent Benga, even with an E Chaio accent, making him sound like he was born and raised on the planet.

"I couldn't believe it," Gen said in disgust, which made Jason laugh despite himself. "I tell you, Jay, I'll be *so* glad when I'm out of here. But at least they sending us some new toys before I'm done."

"New Marauder models?"

He nodded. "Twenty prototypes, they want us to put them through their paces and see how they do. I gotta admit, they're well-built mecha. New power plant that gives it more power, which means more powerful weapons, and upgraded armor plating so it's much tougher. New HUD

system that's much more intuitive, movement prediction systems that learn from the pilots, and they're stronger and faster than the old model. Nothing like my *last* mecha," he said with a slight smile, referring to the custom Marauder MRDD built for him, "but still fairly solid. So far, I've been impressed."

"We've always known that they've had the technical skill to design next-gen mecha, they just didn't want to spend the money," Jason said, to which Gen nodded sagely. "I guess they want to spend the money now."

"It's about damn time," Gen grunted, then he took a long drink of his ale. "I guess it took getting our asses kicked by the Confederation to make them see the light. Speaking of that, I know that you know a lot more about what's going on than just about anyone in Trejaki, Jay. Any word on the war?"

"The rumor mill's still pretty quiet," he answered. "The only thing I've heard is about what everyone else has. The Board reformed, and they're supposed to take up the treaty offer. As to when they do it or what they decide," he said, making a Benga gesture which meant *who knows*. "All of us can't do much but wait and see." He took a drink of his own ale, his fifth one since coming in, and he was glad it couldn't make him drunk. That was because, he had to admit, the ale in this place was *awesome*. Kreel would go absolutely nuts if he could taste this stuff. "If you're asking my personal opinion, they'll accept the treaty. They *need* to, we need time to get our house in order before we take another shot at them."

That was exactly what a Benga would be expected to say in a public forum, where he could be overheard by other Benga.

He nodded knowingly. "I'm just glad I'll be retired by the time that happens," he said. "The last thing I want is to face those Confederation mecha again in a Marauder. They flew circles around us," he said sourly.

"I had to fix some of them after that battle out by Andrallon. I've never seen so much damage from a single battle," Jason said with a frown. "Hundreds of Marauders parked on the tarmac outside the maintenance hangar, all of them shot to hell. By the first coin, it took us nearly ten rotations just to clean up all the blood, let alone get them back in service."

“What do you plan to do after you retire, Jay? I know your date is up in just a few divisions.”

“I got an offer from a new transport company,” he answered. “They need mechanics that can work on just about anything, and well,” he trailed off lightly.

Gen chuckled. “Sometimes I don’t see why you’re not in research.”

“Cause I don’t have time for all that politics bullshit,” he retorted. “Just give me something broken to fix and I’m happy. I don’t want to have to look over my shoulder all the time while I’m waist deep in a mecha. That’s why I’m going with this new place. They said I’d be running the shop, and I’d be working on everything from Marauders to IBCC-121 personnel transports, to I-12 battle cruisers. My kind of job.”

“I haven’t heard about anything new.”

“I’m surprised they didn’t approach you. They told me they were building a private security force to protect their transports, and you’re about to retire. They couldn’t find anyone else better for it. I mean, if you still wanna do military work after you retire.”

“I’m not sure,” he replied, his eyes both puzzled and curious. “What’s the name of this company?”

“Galaxy Express Transport,” he said, which never failed to put a slight smile on his face. If only Zaa knew exactly where *Galaxy Express* came from, she’d brain him. Then again, it was her fault for letting him name it, she knew he had a love of old Terran toy and cartoon references. “They approached me ten rotations ago about it. Said I’d be based on the Wheel. They bought four entire bays of hangar space in it.” *The Wheel* was a huge deep space station on the edge of the E Chaio system, that served as a major hub for both civilian and cargo traffic. “I have their contact address if you wanna talk to them about a job,” he said enticingly, giving him a direct look. “The chance to hire Gen Lun Ba Ru? They’d jump all over it.”

“I’ll think about it, but I’ll want to take a look at this operation first. I don’t want to get burned by an underfinanced operation that goes under in an orbit,” Gen said, giving him a slight, knowing nod. He was fully aware that Jason was offering him work when he got out of the Marines, and that it was Jason behind this new company. Gen was smart enough to know that

the Confederation wasn't just going to *leave*. This was how Jason was telling him that the Karinnes were establishing a presence in Andromeda and doing it by setting up their own corporation within the Syndicate's system.

"I liked what I saw, but then again, I'll be in a nice, safe hangar," Jason chuckled. "They've got some toys, Gen. Top of the line Marauders, EC-20 walkers, exoframe battle armor, and the IBCC-121 they had in the hangar getting repainted when I visited looked brand new. They said they were closing a deal on some old I-7 and I-12 battle cruisers to escort their transports and cargo ships, but those would take a while to get, and I'd have a hell of a lot of work to do when they got them. They said they were getting surplus mothballed ships and were going to refit them for service."

"That works, if they have a good maintenance crew," he said musingly. "I'll have to go take a look at this place when I have my next pass."

"Level four of the Wheel, bay 4-112 is where they're establishing their office space. I'll send them a message saying you're interested in a position and that you want to come up and inspect things."

"We'll see. Who knows, maybe I'll take my pension and start my own company. Lots of retired pilots do it."

"That's a dangerous way to live, doing the corps' dirty work for them off the books," Jason noted. "But if you do go that route, you can always swing by the Wheel and I'll fix your mecha and your ship when it gets shot up by pirates or corp security. At cost," he offered.

"Such a grand gesture," Gen smiled.

"We go too far back to be anything but wholesale with each other, Gen," Jason told him, another Benga expression. "I fix it, you break it. That's been our deal for quite a while."

Gen laughed. "It works well for both of us," he admitted.

"You know I'm never truly happy unless I'm elbows deep in a mecha, yelling and cursing at it like it swindled me," Jason grinned, which made Gen laugh again.

[*Jason, you need to return,*] Kraal called, making sure to *not* use the link. He sent it by commune to Jason's organic mind.

[News?]

[By the time you get the bionoid back here, yes, there will be news,] he answered.

“Speaking of work, I’d better get back to the shop. No telling what those fungus-brains have messed up while I’ve been out,” Jason said, hitting the button on the table’s ordering console to finalize the bill. Given these were Benga, they had to pay for everything in advance, but finalizing the bill would let him get a receipt. Receipts were *big* in the Syndicate system, and no Benga would ever so much as buy a single piece of candy without getting the receipt. The console on the table blinked, and he slotted his ID, which uploaded the receipt to his account. “Next time you buy,” he reminded Gen as he stood up.

“It’s a contract,” Gen said as he stood up as well. “Next scheduled time?”

“Unless something changes. I’ll send you a message if it does.”

“Alright. Don’t kill any of your mechanics.”

“Sometimes I want to,” he growled, which made Gen chuckle.

Kraal wasn’t joking about it taking time to stow his bionoid. It took him nearly two hours to travel back to the glass factory Kraal was using for his base, but instead of stowing it, he came to Kraal’s office. Kraal had set up sections of the underground sections of his operation with Benga-sized rooms, meaning the ceiling was more than high enough for Jason to function down here in his bionoid. Kraal and his Kimdori workers stayed in their normal shapes down here, but they were all at *Benga* size, which meant that the complex was built to accommodate Benga. They had already absorbed the mass they needed to take Benga form, that way it would be a very fast process to take Benga shape. Kraal waved him into his upstairs office—he had a much more secure one in a section of the complex built for normal size, which would be very hard for Benga to get into it—and he sat down in the chair opposite his desk, his eyes on a monitor in front of him. “What did you find out?” Jason asked him without much preamble.

“The Board should be just finished voting on the peace treaty as we speak, if the information I just got a few minutes ago is good,” he replied, which made Jason lean forward in his seat a little. “The last update I got

was that the vote was scheduled for 1740 universal time, which was about twenty minutes ago. Right now, I'm just waiting for the result from my operative in the administrative office. They'll send the vote to that office so it can be officially notarized and added to the Syndicate legal database."

"Any indication what the vote will be?"

"I'm fairly confident it will be to accept the peace treaty," he replied, then his monitor beeped. And that made him smile. "And I was right. They've accepted the treaty as proposed," he declared. "That means that the war is officially over, cousin."

The relief that flooded through him was so palpable it nearly broke his merge. "Thank God," Jason breathed. "That means I need to activate our peace plan while you tell Denmother, and she informs the rest of the Confederation. I want everything in motion before the emergency meeting is called."

Kraal nodded. "And the work is just beginning for me," he smiled.

"The only other Kimdori that could excel at this post is Miaari, Kraal, and I rather like her right where she is," he smiled.

He had to chuckle. "This is a challenging post," he said modestly.

"Let me stow my bionoid and get moving. Commune to my interface if you need to pass anything."

"I will."

Five minutes later, he was climbing out of the merge pod in the spare room off the master bedroom. It was dark in the room, just a night light on, because it was 02:10 on Karis right now. *[Cybi, did you eavesdrop on my merge?]*

[Do you have to ask?]

[Snoop. But that does mean that you should have started waking people up,] he teased.

[Of course I have. Everyone should be in the White House by the time you get dressed and get over there. I'll have a hologram over there, my bionoid is over on Sarga right now.]

[Checking out Merra?]

[Me and Cybri are playing Bingo.]

[Playing what? Like Bingo Bingo?]

[Yup. Terrans opened a Bingo hall here last takir, and we're playing.]

[God, you two must be cheating so much,] he accused as he stepped into the bedroom, where Jyslin was sleeping, and opened a dresser drawer.

[I'll have you know that we're only playing two game sheets each,] she retorted primly. *[Each sheet has nine Bingo boards on it. And before you call that cheating, there's an elderly Terran woman sitting three seats down from us playing four sheets. You should watch her, Jason, she's a marvel of efficiency.]*

[What's the verdict?] he asked as he put on his jeans.

[It's a weirdly fun game,] she replied. *[Very simple, but I'm enjoying myself. It's more fun because they don't allow technological assistance. Everyone has to take off their interfaces so they can't snap a pic of their game sheets and run a number marking program. So me and Cybri are marking the called numbers manually, just like everyone else.]*

[But you don't miss any numbers.]

[Neither is that Terran woman,] she replied. *[What did Gen have to say?]*

[Not much. I offered him a job with Galaxy Express, and he said he'd think about it.]

[I expect him to take it. He likes you, and he likes how the Karinnes do things. Prove to him that you're going to run the company the way you run Karis, and he'll sign on.]

[Gen likes loyalty, and if I can prove I've got his back for the long haul, yeah, I think he'll take the job. I hope he does. Having Gen running the paramilitary force will make them damn formidable.]

[Are you sending his custom Marauder?]

[Most likely. Gen can just refuse to allow anyone but a shapeshifted Kimdori mechanic to work on it, which isn't unusual for riggers. We don't

want anyone that's not our own ground crew messing with our rigs. He'll just have to learn to never put on the interface until the cockpit doors are closed.]

[I think we can come up with a system for that, integrating the interface unit directly into the mecha so he can't take it out, and disguising it as an optical overlay or something,] Cybi mused. [I'll talk to Myleena about it. As long as it's close enough to his brain to receive command thought, it'll work no matter what shape it's in.]

[You're gonna disturb Myli with that? She's gonna rip out your sensor mesh one node at a time.]

Cybi returned pure amusement in her commune. *[That's a fair point. Maybe I'll just take it to MRDD. They built Gen's Marauder in the first place, I'm sure they can come up with something.]*

[Now you're engaging your basic survival instincts,] he replied cheekily.

The command staff was waiting when he arrived in the command center, some of them bionoids and some of them there in person. "The Syndicate signed the treaty," he declared even as he walked in, which caused some sighs of relief and a few muted cheers. "So we're a go with the peace plan. Are we ready to execute it?"

"We are," Myri told him as she and Juma stepped up to the central console. "Trieste is already ninety percent evacuated, so we only have a little left to do. The Kimdori nearly have their sensor post ready to go, and the hyperspace probes are ready to deploy for long range surveillance, and the Benga military equipment is almost halfway stocked within the system. I think Bunvar's last report said that she'd have that done in about twelve days."

"What about the warships? Are they moved and ready?"

"Moved yes, ready no," Juma answered. "It's proving a little more difficult than we anticipated to completely scour the identities of the ships out of them. The refit teams are having to all but rebuild the entire computer core of each ship. But we should have the first ships ready to transfer to the transport company in about two takirs."

“I think we can live with that phase of the plan being behind schedule by five or six days,” he said as he reached the console. “How are we on the soldiers on Atrovot?”

“As we expected, Jayce, every single one of them signed on,” Sioa told him. “None of them want to be nopped. They’re a little annoyed that we’re holding them on the moon for now, but they’re staying busy with the training regimens the Kimdori set up to prepare them for their new jobs. I think they’ll be ready when the ships start being delivered.”

“Make sure they have time to find apartments once we pull them off Atrovot,” Jason warned. “I want each of them to have at least eight days to settle in where we station them before they start on-site training. After all, some of them have families they have to bring in.”

“At least what passes for a family among Benga,” Myri grunted.

“Have the personnel rosters been finalized for all of them?”

“It has,” Navii told him. She was present in a bionoid, which had become her normal. Age was *really* catching up to her, to the point where Jason was really worried about her. He’d tried to get her to retire three times in the last month alone, but she wouldn’t hear of it. But he did get a victory in that he sicced Songa on her, so now she was doing some supervised physical therapy to keep her strength up.

Songa was a total bulldog, and that worked in Jason’s favor when she wasn’t chasing *him*.

“We should have every worker where they need to be when they need to be there,” Navii continued.

“Are the plans ready for pulling interdictors and Stargates?”

“It’s ready,” Juma answered. “Jrz’kii sent us a schedule for pulling every interdictor in the home galaxy and delinking and towing out the Stargates if necessary. The catapults will be left in place for now, pending how the council session tomorrow comes out. But we have a plan for pulling those as well, just in case.”

“Then it sounds like we’re good to go,” Jason said.

“Or course we are. Now get out of here and let us do our jobs.”

His next stop was at the newest building in the White House complex, the State building. Yeri's office had gotten too big for her floor in the main building, given she was dealing with both the Confederation and potentially thousands of civilizations not in it, so two months ago, Bunvar had built a new building on the grounds for Yeri and her department. Beyond her elegant white marble building was another new building only about halfway built, which would be the new Military Operations Center, and would house all Karinne military services, as well as have office space for both the Medical Service and the KES. The KES would still have their own building in the complex, the smallest one, but they needed a liaison office in the MOC for those times when the KES got drafted into the KMS during war time.

It was all part of the plan. In about a year and a half, Jason's executive office would be the only department left in the main building. So far, State, Power, Communications, Infrastructure, Finance, Production, Intelligence, Logistics, and Member Services had been moved out of the main building and into their own buildings, each one more than large enough to accommodate a department that might have upwards of 20,000 employees. Defense would be next, and then they would move Interior, and finally they would move Science, whose building would be the largest and most difficult to build, and they would be done. The main building, the original White House, would be the *smallest* building in the complex—well, outside of Cybi's facility anyway—and would be surrounded by the much larger buildings holding the house's departments, all clustered around the massive trunk of Cybi's *oye* tree.

That tree was now the center of the White House complex. The fence and grounds had been adjusted to put it squarely in the center. And Cybi's tree was the tallest structure in the Hill District, which was by design. It was the size of a 140 story building, it was now growing over the buildings in the Hill District, and Jason had made the order that no building would interfere with the tree in any way, limiting all buildings in the Hill District to about 100 stories. All buildings had to be built under its canopy in a way so that the tree had a minimum of 100 shakra of clearance, which gave hovercars and zip ships room to fly between the rooftops and the lowest branches of the tree's canopy.

It wasn't much of a strain on the city. The Hill District was filled mostly with government offices, business offices that supported or were supported by government offices, and the headquarters buildings of all the main corporations that operated on Karis, both domestic and foreign. Jason allowed certain corps to have HQs on the planet, those that did extensive business with Karis, and most prominent among them were the Ruu and the Moridon. The Moridon had 46 different HQ buildings in the Hill District for their banks, financial services organizations, and various commercial and industrial corporations that did business with the house, and the Ruu had about 87 different major corporations that did extensive business with the house, since the Ruu would do no business with any civilization they felt was a threat to their security. Since the Karinnes were about the *only* empire the Ruu would trade with, they had hundreds of corporate HQs scattered across Karis. Most of the employees in those HQs were Karinne citizens, with the upper executives being outsiders who were allowed to live and work on Karis by special arrangement, much as the Paladins batchi players, trainers, and staff were.

There were non-Karinnes living on Karis, but they were extremely rare, and they had to go through an exhaustive background check to win the right to live here as permanent resident aliens. And it was no surprise that the most numerous of those resident aliens were Ruu and Moridon.

One of them was Scientist RDX...except she was Scientist QBD now, having gained some notable rank over the last few months due to her success in the interphasic powered armor project. She was still on Karis, and still working on IP armor to further advance it. She was now working for MRDD as a consultant, in a special project that was a joint venture with the Ruu. It was something of a test to see how well Karinnes and Ruu worked together on a major project, and thus far, it had been a success.

And when she finished that project, Jason would find another one for her, something that she and her Ruu team could work on jointly with the Karinnes. QBD was too good to let get away, and she was trusted by both Jason and Myleena.

Yeri's office was just off the main pool office for all her department heads and undersecretaries, which gave her quick and easy access to any of her main aides and underlings, an office layout used by the KMS in the

command center that Yeri had found entirely practical to use in her own building. She and her entire staff were in the main office when Jason came in, sitting around a round table in the center of the large room with the secretaries of the Undersecretaries, department heads, and Yeri's main office along the walls on the sides, banks of desks flanking the door leading to the private office of the Undersecretary or department chief for which they worked. Airskin sound dampening units were installed between the office desk clusters, which made the very large room surprisingly quiet, isolating conversations to just that department, but put everyone within eyesight of one another.

"I see Cybi told you," Jason said as Cybi and the other CBIMs all manifested holograms in the room, opting for the very small, one shakra tall variants that were on the main table.

"We're implementing our action plan right now, Jason," she told him with a nod. "I've already sent down the orders to our emissaries and diplomats stationed on Terra."

"And what word so far?"

"You'll have to speak with Miaari about the most current decisions, but it's more or less as we expected. The majority of the small empires will stay in the Confederation for the protection it provides and the economic opportunities it offers. Among the largest empires, the Imperium, both Skaa empires, Verutans, Haumda, and Alliance have all confirmed they will stay in the Confederation. Thus far, the only confirmed empires that intend to leave the Confederation are the Jun, the Haiva, and the Prakarikai."

"I'm not surprised at all that the Jun are leaving, given their culture. And I'm not sure if I should be sad about the Prakarikai leaving or not," Jason noted, which made Yeri chuckle.

"I'm personally not surprised at their decision. Anavan absolutely hates you, and Anivor sees the Confederation as a shackle around the ankle of his people. He finds the Confederation's rules too restrictive, though he doesn't object to the Confederation itself. So expect Anivor to try to keep an amicable relationship with the Confederation...most likely so Anavan has the time and opportunity to send in her spies. As far as the Jun go, Quord made it clear to me just a few minutes ago that the Jun will keep diplomatic

channels open with the Confederation and retain the trade agreements they made with us, so they aren't going to isolate themselves again. And that he still considers the Karinnes a friend of the Jun."

"Good, I don't want to see them retreat behind their walls again. But what reason do the Haiva have to leave? I thought they were quite happy being in the Confederation," Jason asked.

"As you know, the Haiva are completely dominated by their Emperor, Jason. And I hate to tell you this, but he doesn't like you. That's all the reason he needs."

"He's going to hamstringing his entire empire over a personal dislike of me?" Jason asked in surprise.

"Yes, exactly that," she said with a nod. "Baklid correctly believes that *you* are the real power within the Confederation, because you can shut down the entire Confederation with one order to turn off the Stargates," she elaborated. "And he doesn't want to be in an organization where he is at the mercy of someone he doesn't like or trust. And I wouldn't be surprised if more empires give that reason, Jason," she warned. "Quite a few rulers simply don't *trust* you, not after the translight drive incident, when you basically threatened the entire Confederation with ruin if they didn't do what you say. The fact that you control the Stargates and the interdictors makes some of them very wary about continuing to give you that much control over their empires."

"But that's not what I said," he protested. "I made it very clear that so long as you don't try to steal drive tech—"

"But that's what they *heard*, Jason," she told him firmly. "What they *heard* was you threatening to annihilate anyone that challenged you, sounding very much like an overlord commanding sovereign rulers as if they were your minions. You had the right to say what you said, Jason, but the *way* you said it was...not very diplomatic," she said delicately.

He gave her a long look, honestly shocked. He'd never considered, not in a million years, that his speech to the council would have *that* kind of an effect. But, now that she'd said it, and seeing that it *did*, he could at least understand her point of view. And it filled with him both chagrin and regret.

If he'd have known now what effect that speech would have, he would have *definitely* found a more diplomatic way to say it.

He'd been Grand Duke for nearly ten years, but even he would admit that he was by no means a master of this job.

"Well...hell," he sighed, putting his hands on the table. "How many empires do you suspect may leave the Confederation purely over me, Yeri?"

"I'd say twenty to thirty," she replied. "But that's just a rough estimate."

"And every one that leaves is at risk from their former allies in the Confederation," he said darkly. "Granted, they'll have Confederation-level tech, so it'll be a complete bloodbath if a war breaks out, but someone like Dahnai might just try it despite the casualties and cost."

"It was inevitable that not everyone was going to stay in," Goma Karinne, one of Yeri's undersecretaries, injected. "What matters most is that the most important empires are staying in."

"I can't argue with that, but I'm still worried," Jason said. "I'll have to think about it. Is our own statement ready to go?" he asked Yeri.

"Yes, as is our diplomatic strategy for the council meeting tomorrow morning," she answered. "I'll have the file sent to you as soon as my staff finishes the last few edits."

"I'll go over it after I get home after talking to Miaari," he answered. "I don't think I'm getting any sleep tonight."

It was a short walk in a steady rain from Yeri's building to Miaari's building—they put them side by side for obvious reasons—and he settled himself down in Miaari's relatively new office, which followed Kimdori tradition in that it was a good three stories underground. "Thus far, Denmother hasn't shared very much of what our people have learned from the others," she told him in Kimdori as soon as he sat down. The entire underground complex under the building used Kimdori protocols that required then to speak Kimdori. "But what I can say is that the Confederation is going to lose members after tomorrow. The only question will be how many."

"Yeri said the same thing, and I was a bit surprised that *I'm* the reason for some of it," he said ruefully.

“For some. For others, they want the freedom that not being subject to the Confederation provides, and others, like the Jun, want to return to their original ways. What matters most, though, is that the empires that can most threaten us are staying in,” she declared. “That keeps them firmly allied to us.”

“But it also keeps them in a position where they can do damage to us,” Jason said. “You know I’ve been kicking around the idea of scaling back Karinne participation in the Confederation after the wars were over. After what Yeri just told me, I’m going to give that a lot more thought. If I pull back, then maybe some of them will stay in. I don’t want them being attacked by the very people they fought alongside just a few months ago.”

“There’s not going to be a perfect solution to that problem, Jason. To have that protection, they have to accept the limitations that comes with having it. And that includes being subject to your rules when it comes to using the Stargates.”

“So, some want to conquer rather than colonize,” Jason frowned.

“Yes,” she said directly. “But the saving grace for us is, they won’t have access to Stargates in order to do it. That will restrict them mainly to this galaxy.”

They were interrupted by a hologram of Zaa appearing to the side of her desk, and she didn’t look happy. “Denmother,” he said. “Any news?”

“Yes, and I am still contemplating the ramifications,” she replied. “The Coalition just voted as a block to leave the Confederation.”

“The *entire* Coalition?” Jason gasped.

She nodded. “The decision is binding on the Subrians, since the Coalition entered the Confederation as a single entity. They have no choice but to withdraw as well. Holikk is *most* displeased and is seeking legal maneuvers to have the Subrians rejoin the Confederation alone. But that might not be possible, it could cause the dissolution of the Coalition, and Holikk will not risk that.”

“Well...*fuck*,” he said in a growl. “What possible reason do they have for that?”

“They believe that they can develop equivalent technology to the Karinnes without being shackled to the restrictions you place on them,” she answered. “The Coalition is highly advanced, and while they don’t know how most of Karinne technology works, they’ve seen what it can do. A clever scientist can figure out the process in order to achieve a result he knows is possible. The Coalition has decided to pool all its scientific resources to develop their own technology to stand equal to the Karinnes and the Ruu.”

That was *bad news*. The Coalition was extremely large, even larger by volume than the rest of the Confederation, and now they had Confederation-level technology and tons of warships. The Coalition became an instant competitor with the Confederation from a military standpoint, as well as an economic standpoint. The Coalition had a powerful, robust economy—the Coalition was primarily a *business* arrangement—and it was more than rich enough to pursue that objective.

“Any more bad news before I start crying right in front of Miaari?” Jason asked. Miaari did not laugh.

“Not as of yet, cousin. But I think you should keep your comm open and stay close to it.”

That was what he did. After discussing the situation more with Miaari, he returned home and went straight to his office on the third floor—it would be on the fourth floor soon, they were going to expand the house again in a couple of months—he read the report that Yeri sent to him and kept in touch with Miaari and Zaa.

By daybreak, the outlook for the Confederation was much dimmer than it had been when the sun set the night before. By Zaa’s estimation, 71 of the 161 members of the Confederation were going to withdraw. The entire Coalition was withdrawing, which forced the Subrians to do the same, as were a smattering of mid-sized empires scattered through the galaxy. The largest and most notable of them were the Prakarikai, the Crai, and the Nakkli. But further, 12 of the smaller empires were going to shift from being active members to neutral observers, withdrawing from the military alliance but keeping their diplomatic and economic contacts open with the Confederation.

He should have seen this coming. With the entire Confederation gaining access to real-time jump engines, and the development of technology that made extended jumps safe for crews, it freed up the empires to explore the entire galaxy...and the galaxy was more than big enough for many of them to feel content. After all, the galaxy was only 23% explored by the Confederation by the Karinne's own estimation. They would lose access to other galaxies, but the real-time jump engines would allow them to expand their empires within the galaxy, by conquest if they so desired, without having the Karinnes and the Confederation standing in their way. And if they were patient and determined, they could reach the Magnum Dwarf formation in about four months, and Ilviros in six. For them, building galaxy-spanning empires of thousands of star systems within the Milky Way was more than enough. They would leave the other galaxies to the Confederation and expand their power and influence within this one.

And which empire was the one gearing up for major military action to start that conquering? Who else, the Prakarikai. As Jason feared, they were going to take the technology they got from the Confederation and the navy they built to fight the Andromedans and turn around and use it to expand their empire. But they wouldn't be doing it in their home sector, because all the other empires in their sector wisely were remaining in the Confederation, which gave them protection against the Prakarikai.

To be fair, the Verutans had the same plan, but they wanted to expand into other galaxies through colonization, not through war and conquest. Shakizarr had a grand plan of becoming an intergalactic power just like the Karinnes, with thousands and thousands of systems under his control spanning across the entire galactic cluster, and do it peacefully...because it was faster to colonize than it was to conquer. That, Jason could respect.

The plan to pull the interdictors was already in motion. That was agreed to long ago, that the Karinnes would pull the interdictors when peace was achieved to allow the free movement of traffic in and out of systems once again. Jrz'kii's KMM had already pulled 329 interdictors and would have most of them pulled by the end of today, at least from every system except the capitol system of each planet. Those interdictors had the biogenic comm nodes in them that were required for the upcoming meeting. But, when those empires withdrew from the Confederation, their interdictors would be pulled within minutes of them officially leaving the Confederation, and

they'd lose access to the biogenic comm network that gave them real-time communication capability with the rest of the galaxy. Jrz'kii would have tugs standing by and ready to jump in the *instant* an empire was no longer part of the Confederation. And Juma would have a task force on the board and ready to respond if any empire refused to allow the Karinnes to take their interdictor.

And if they still resisted, well, there were systems in place inside an interdictor to ensure anyone who captured one got *nothing*, not even its carapace hull.

The biogenic comm system was one of the little things that Jason guessed a lot of them overlooked but would *really* regret once it was taken away.

Ayama brought up a plate of Aklian eggs, Terran bacon, and Shio *bai* toast as he pored over more reports, as the rest of the house woke up to start their day, sendings and commune starting to get thick in the air as the kids started chatting with each other across the strip. He didn't remember eating, he barely remembered Jyslin coming up to kiss him goodbye before she went to work, getting ready for one of the most important council meetings ever held by the Confederation.

Not all of his preparations were going to be on Karis. After finishing breakfast, he merged to the bionoid he kept on Terra, moving from the council chamber up to Secretary General Kim's office. The slim Korean shook his hand as he came in and motioned for him to sit down, and Jason noticed that Kim's desk was cluttered with datasticks and papers; the U.N. still used paper for some things. "I expected to see you yesterday, Jason," he said, speaking Korean.

Jason responded in kind, since he'd had Korean inserted into his memory more or less just for Kim. "I had a lot going on, probably as much as you," he answered. "We're going to need to make some plans, Duk. Denmother brought back intel that a significant chunk of the Confederation is going to withdraw."

"She warned me, and I've had people working on it," he replied, rummaging over his desk and picking up a datastick, then slotting it in the panel on the side. A hologram appeared over the desk. "This is the rough

draft of a separation plan, what we need to do if an empire leaves the Confederation. What they take with them, what we have to recover, and new rules about how that empire can operate on Terra. We're not kicking them out, Terra is a neutral planet, but they will have some of their privileges revoked. Ayuma told me that you're not changing the Academy?"

He shook his head. "It has nothing to do with the Confederation. If an empire withdraws, it won't change how they interact with the Academy in any way, except they'll be locked out of the secure areas of the mainframe meant only for Confederation members. Their students, their teachers, their scientists, that won't change."

"It's good to hear that," Kim nodded. "It answers several questions some of my people had. Are any of the core members going to withdraw?"

"In the home sector cluster? Only the Jun and the Prakarikai," he replied. "And the Jun is no surprise, everyone knew they'd leave once the threat of the Syndicate was ended. Everyone else is staying in, including the Skaa, Alliance, Verutans, and the Haumda."

"Thank God," Kim breathed. "So long as the sector cluster remains united, our former allies won't dare challenge us. The core members can field a navy more than large enough to challenge any individual empire, even one the size of the Crai. Maybe even big enough to challenge the Coalition."

"Which is exactly why all of us are staying in," Jason said with a nod. "Those of us who have been in longest know that we are stronger together than we are alone."

"Those of us who fought the Consortium," Kim said, to which Jason nodded. "They picked us apart when we were separate empires, but we took them down when we united and fought back. That was a powerful lesson for all of us. I doubt that the members of the Confederation that fought in the Consortium War will ever withdraw from the Articles. We've grown too close over the years. It's almost as if we're a single empire anymore. The Skaa, the Alliance, the Imperium and the Urumi, the Karinnes, the Shio and the Colonies, we've been joined by bonds forged in fire and tempered in the blood of the people we lost, and those will be almost impossible to break."

“Well said, Duk,” Jason said strongly.

They discussed the separation plan that Kim’s office had worked up, and Jason could admit, it looked good. It completely removed an empire from the Confederation, but it did it *nicely*, an amicable separation. But it didn’t miss anything. It dealt with that empire’s involvement in the CCM, the infrastructure within the empire that was Confederation property, and the treaties and agreements that existed in the Articles that applied to all members. It created a twelve day process that removed the empire, everything from pulling catapults and the Stargate to giving military officers attached to the CCM time to clean out their offices and put their affairs in order, and it didn’t miss anything.

What it *also* did was more or less put the entire Confederation on hold until its members sorted themselves out. It included a comprehensive security plan made by Kiaari that protected sensitive Confederation information from those that planned to leave, who might try to take as much intel and information as possible before they walked out the door. It also released all CCM assets back to their home empires, more or less forcing them back into home space, whether they were going to leave or not, to clear out space around Terra so they could figure things out.

That order had already been sent out. Jason and Kim watched as warships from every empire in the Confederation headed for their Stargates, returning to their home territory.

Kim’s people were good, and this plan proved it.

Jason and Kim discussed things right up until the council session, the two of them walking in together as most of the council rose up from the storage pods under the floor. He took his normal place between Brayrak and Zaa as Kim took his on the Speaker’s podium, sitting to the left of the podium as Jason looked at it. That position represented Terra’s unique position within the Confederation, the host of its offices and organization, but not a part of it. Technically Kim was a neutral observer, but his seat was on the dais at the front of the room, which held the aides and staff of the Speaker’s office. The current holder of the gavel was Chidari Chann, High Minister of the Jhri, and he didn’t waste any time once the last member was present.

There were no aides or lackeys, every ruler was here for this meeting.

Chidari gaveled them into session, and he got straight to the point. “As most of you know, the Syndicate has accepted the peace treaty, which means that the war with Andromeda is over,” he declared. “That means that the core mission of the Confederation has been completed. Now comes the time, friends, that we must decide what steps we will take from this point. I know that some of you plan to leave the Confederation, some plan to remain, and that some of you have not yet decided. This council session will be split into two parts. A briefing on the peace treaty and its ramifications for our galaxy, and for me, as the current Speaker, to explain what comes next. The Speaker’s Office and the Confederation Planning Bureau has drawn up a comprehensive plan for us to move forward, and each empire will learn how that process will work. This process will *not* be subject to a vote, for one simple reason. The Speaker’s Office has determined that it is unfair to the Confederation for empires that intend to leave to have the opportunity to vote on the plan that will allow them to depart. The plan falls under Paragraph Four, Section Two of the Articles, and as such falls under the auspices of the Speaker’s Office.”

And that began a marathon nine-hour session of the council. First, they were fully informed about the peace treaty, what it meant, and that it effectively ended any threat that the Syndicate might pose to the Milky Way. With them unable to cross over without being spotted and dealt with *years* before they arrived, it made the people of the Milky Way safe from them. And with the Consortium a few *billion* light years away, they posed no threat either. It would take them 13,393 years to get back to the Milky Way from where they were.

After that was done, Chidari got into the new business. The rulers listened as he laid out the process for an empire to withdraw from the Confederation, and more importantly, what it would mean for the empire. He warned them that they’d no longer have the mutual protection pact, that the free trade agreement would be withdrawn, and most importantly to many of them, that the Stargate leading to Terra would be removed. He went over how the trade treaties would change, which ones would be canceled, and which would remain, and went over how the empire’s relationship with Terra and the Academy would work after they were out.

He did a surprisingly thorough job given he only read the plan himself a few hours ago, but then again, he was a Jhri. Jhri had *exceptional* memories.

After that, the rulers started making their speeches. Some of them came right out and declared their intent to leave, either giving little reason or going into an exhaustive one-hour presentation on why they felt it was necessary for them to leave. Voss was the one that did that, making it clear that she was proud to have been in the Confederation and approving of it, and having a personal wish to stay in, but that her personal desires could not come before the needs of her empire. She felt that the interests of the Crai Empire were best served by no longer being in the Confederation, and she had to do what was best for the empire, not what was best for her.

Surprisingly, Voss' speech was longer than Anavan's, who also declared her intent to withdraw, but she made it abundantly clear that it was *Jason Karinne* that was the primary reason the Prakarikai were leaving. She accused of him of being the shadow behind the Speaker's podium, the true power and decision maker within the Confederation, and the Prakarikai were not about to be ruled by anyone other than themselves. She found the rules Jason had concerning the use of Karinne technology to be an insult to her throne and a direct challenge to the sovereignty of the Prakarikai, and now that the Syndicate was no longer a threat, the Prakarikai were *done* with the Karinnes and the Confederation. She then called everyone planning to stay in the Confederation Karinne lapdogs too afraid of the big bad universe to step out from behind Jason's legs.

She didn't just burn her bridge with the rest of the council, she *nuked* it. But then again, it was all part of the Prakarikai plan to expand their power, mainly by being an eternal thorn in Jason's side. Zaa said they intended to push, and push, and push, to see how far they could go before Jason responded, to take as much as possible without inciting him to take action.

She was going to be bitterly disappointed in that plan in very short order. Jason had a plan of his own.

Jason spent that time split between listening to speeches and coordinating things with a variety of people, getting the Karinnes ready for what was coming in both senses. When Chidari was about to end the session, asking if anyone else had something to say, he ended his splits and stood up.

“I have only one thing to say. It was an honor to serve with all of you, both those who are leaving and those who are staying, and I wish all of us peace and prosperity from this day forward.”

And then he sat back down.

The end of the session wasn't even the halfway point of his day. An hour later, he was sitting at a table out on the patio of Dahnai's summer palace along with the other seven original members of the Confederation, and they spent nearly ten hours discussing the situation and making plans for moving forward. Their number steadily increased over those hours as they contacted other rulers from the home sector cluster to discuss matters, then those rulers came over to join the discussion, until every ruler in the home sector cluster was sitting around a very large round table that Dahnai's staff had brought out from storage. Everyone was there except for Anavan, and Jason suspected that everyone was glad of that. *Everyone* hated Anavan. Even Quord was in attendance despite the Jun's intention to leave the Confederation, which Jason saw as a promising sign. The Jun were going to return to their custom of isolation, but Quord being there told him that they weren't going to completely close the door. Quord had made friends and allies during his time in the Confederation, and some of the strongest of those allies were sitting at the table with him.

It was just past sunset when they got through the majority of their discussions and started ranging into less serious topics. While Sk'Vrae was taking a twenty minute “power nap,” they held off on serious discussions so she wasn't excluded. “I think I'm going to lay down a wager on how long it takes Anavan to get her navy blown up,” Kreel said cheekily, leaning back in his chair with a tankard of Makati ale in his hand. “She sure made it clear in that council session that she's spoiling for a fight.”

“Zaa's operatives said that's just about exactly what they have in mind,” Jason said in disgust. “They started it before the session even started. They tried to deny my tugs permission to come in and retrieve the interdictors once the peace treaty was finalized.”

“Isn't there one left at Prakarika?” Dahnai asked.

“No, it's gone. It was pulled about two hours ago.”

“It wasn’t an easy task,” Cybi said from a hovering camera pod. None of the CBIMs were present in hologram form, but they were all listening. *“The Prakarikai threatened the KMM tugs that jumped in to retrieve the interdicator. We were forced to execute Plan B.”*

“That sounds ominous,” Enva said with a slight smile.

“Oh, just a little something extra we added to the interdicators to make sure that the host empire would *beg* us to take them,” Jason said without much humor. “The one at Prakarika was rigged with a gravimetric harmonic subduction field.”

“And that means what in non-science?” Kreel asked.

“Oh, just a little gadget that reproduces the effect of my subsonic vibration units on a planetary scale, utilizing gravimetric oscillation on specific harmonics instead of subsonic vibration,” he said pleasantly. “The effect would be like the entire planet being dunked in a giant vat of itching powder.”

“You *didn’t!*” Enva gasped, then she burst into nearly hysterical laughter.

“Of course I did, I can’t stand those little pricks,” he said with a snort. “When their scientists figured it was the interdicator doing it, they dropped all resistance to us taking it out of orbit. I guess they were tired of scratching themselves bloody. Anavan did the usual yelling and screaming, calling it an act of war, but Yeri simply referred her to the written agreement that put the interdicators there in the first place. You know, that little clause that stated that the House of Karinne had the legal right to exert whatever force is necessary to recover an interdicator in the case that the host empire would refuse to allow us to take it back. She was doing her ranting while trying her best not to squirm and scratch at herself, so she didn’t look like a complete spaz in front of Yeri. She failed miserably.”

“I hope Yeri recorded that?” Kreel grinned impishly.

“I’ll send all of you a copy,” Jason said, which caused some laughter around the table. “Anavan seems to have forgotten that I cheat outrageously.”

“I’ve heard all kinds of stories from Jys and the girls,” Dahnai grinned at him. “Some of the pranks you guys have pulled are legendary.”

“We play rough on Karis,” he said mildly, which caused more laughter.

“Any other trouble outside of that?”

“Nope,” Jason replied. “Juma reported in a bit ago and told me they’re removed the primary interdictors from several empires that are withdrawing, and that it was all orderly and polite. That reminds me, we need to talk about the one at Jun-ara, Quord,” he said, looking over at him. “We’ll pull the interdictor, but I wanted to know if you wanted me to leave the biogenic comm node there. I trust the Jun not to bother it.”

“I’ll have to discuss the matter with the Senate, Jason,” he replied. “But in the short term, you can simply have the interdictor turned off until a decision is made.”

“Cybi,” he prompted.

“I’m having it turned off as we speak, Prime Senator,” she confirmed.

“Thank you, Jason. The Karinnes have proven to be true friends of the Jun. As have everyone else at this table,” he said with an honest smile. “It’s our hope that you allow us to return to our ways but indulge us the occasional diplomatic call or missive.”

“You’ll always be welcome on Draconis, Quord,” Dahnai said with an earnest smile.

“And on Veruta,” Shakizarr nodded.

“I’d say you’re welcome anywhere in the sector cluster, Quord,” Kreel told him. “And I’m glad you were with us. I have no doubt that the Union and the Jun will move forward from today with an enduring friendship.”

“We will, Kreel,” Quord assured him. “The Grimja and our other neighbors have earned our respect.”

“We will need to talk about the Prakarikai, Prime Senator,” Verdunn of the Farguut cautioned. “You’re the only other empire in the cluster that has withdrawn. That makes you a target.”

“You won’t have to worry about that, Quord,” Kreel said with a predatory smile. “If they attack you, they’ll get a whole lot of *us* in their face. You may not be a member of the Confederation anymore, but you *are* a loyal friend of the Grimja, and we will be a loyal friend to you. And we won’t tolerate those little asses invading the Fatherland.”

“Neither will we,” Verdunn declared. “Anavan will find out quickly that as far as the Farguut are concerned, the Jun are still our military allies and we will come to their defense if they are attacked.”

“I think you can take it on general acclimation that everyone at this table will stand with the Fatherland,” Dahnai said, which caused everyone to nod or rumble in assent. “And dear Trelle, Sk’Vrae would have a complete nuclear meltdown if Anavan dared attack you. The Brood Queen holds you in the highest respect, Prime Senator, and she would be *beyond* furious if the Jun were invaded. She’s send the entire Urumi navy against Anavan, and they’d have the entire Imperium and Karinne navies right behind them.”

“Damn right we would,” Jason agreed. “In fact, the Urumi would be chasing after us to get there first.”

“That respect is mutual,” Quord said, his expression almost embarrassed. “And from the depth of my heart, thank you, my friends. Your support of the Fatherland is most appreciated.”

“The Fatherland will remain in the hands of the Jun for so long as the stars do shine,” Shakizarr said. Jason recognized it from a Jun opera. “Those are words of truth, and even those who are not Jun believe them. If the Prakarikai move against you, Quord, the Verutan military is only a call away. The Fatherland shall endure, because people on *both* sides of the border will protect it.”

After Sk’Vrae returned from her nap, they got back to business, and that business lasted nearly another eight hours. Jason had more and more trouble paying attention, concentrating as each hour passed, since he hadn’t slept in days, to the point where Dahnai more or less called it off close to sunrise because Jason was nodding off. She offered him a guest bedroom in the palace, and he was quite grateful to all but crawl up the stairs and drag

himself into the bed. By that point, he'd been awake for 71 hours, and he simply had nothing left.

But he didn't have time to sleep. The next few takirs were going to be insanely busy, and the house needed him awake and alert. But for now, he had no choice. It was sleep or collapse.

Raista, 14 Romaa, 4405, Faey Orthodox Calendar

Thursday, 4 September 2019 Terran Standard Calendar

*Raista, 14 Romaa, year 1330 of the 97th Generation, Karinne
Historical Reference Calendar*

Foxwood East, Karsa, Karis

It was done.

Jason read the final separation report that finalized the withdrawal of the last empire leaving the Confederation, the Wadiri, as rain pelted the window behind him. The hologram was illuminated by a flash of light from a bolt of lightning, then the following thunder startled Amber out of her nap, laying in his lap. He put a calming hand over her back, and she settled back down. The last steps of the separation process had been completed, and the Wadiri were no longer part of the Confederation's network. The Wadiri had been removed from the Confederation's computer networks, Wadiri workers in Confederations bureaus had been dismissed and replaced, the Wadiri officers in the CCM installations had been transferred out, and what annoyed the Wadiri the most, the biogenic comm node that had connected Wadiri II to the galactic biogenic network had been removed. The Wadiri's addresses had been removed from the comm system by Siyhaa, so even if the node was still there, the Wadiri were locked out of the galactic biogenic network.

They *really* thought they were going to get to keep that. They thought wrong.

As Jason suspected, that one little thing was making quite a few of them feel quite a bit of buyer's remorse over their decision to leave the

Confederation. Their citizens had just gotten used to having access to the galactic biogenic network, and to lose it now felt to them like they'd taken a major step backwards. It was more than just the entertainment, it was losing access to sending their bionoids to remote locations, it was losing substantial business opportunities for their financial sectors, and it was losing real-time access to the Academy mainframe. Each empire had to revert back to extreme distance gravband systems, which were not in real time and had bandwidth restrictions the further away they had to transmit. Empires on the far side of the galaxy were the most affected, with data requests from the Academy mainframe taking up to nine hours to process... and if it was a lot of data, it could take *days* to transfer.

The Confederation that would see the sun rise in the morning would be very different from the one that had fought against the Syndicate. They now had 90 members, having lost 71 after the peace treaty, and while those members were still spread across the entire galaxy, the vast majority of them were in the home quadrant, the S quadrant, and nearly half were in the home sector cluster. Yesterday, they had voted in new Articles that defined the Confederation's role in this new time of peace, which made it look much more like the Coalition. It was now an alliance of trade, finance, and shared scientific advancement, much what Jason had envisioned for it, but it did still maintain the CCM and continued to work together militarily. The CCM would be much smaller, still commanded by Lorna, but their mission now was to train to be ready in case there was another war. It would ensure the member militaries of the Confederation would be ready and able to work under CCM rules if needed.

The rules holding them together were still minimal and relaxed. The Confederation still had no control over its member empires outside of how they treated each other. Each empire was still sovereign, could make its own deals and agreements outside the Confederation, and still had full control of its military assets. It was still a loose alliance of various empires to ensure peace was maintained between them and that they would be ready to work together if the Confederation was threatened by an outside force, but each empire would work more or less independently of one another during peace. There were free trade agreements to allow the free flow of trade goods throughout the Confederation, which would keep the economies of all members strong, and there were right of passage treaties

for civilian craft within member nations so citizens could visit other Confederation members, which would foster peace and cooperation.

The new Articles codified Terra's status as the host of the Confederation but *not* a member, holding a unique status that allowed Kim to sit on the council as a neutral observer...really just continuing the way things already worked, just making it much more official. It recognized Terra as a true neutral planet that had military protection from the CCM, and refined the rules that allowed the Confederation to have its bureaus and offices on Terra, but what was new was that the Confederation would *pay* Terra for the privilege.

That was the other new part, and one that Jason was surprised had no resistance from the council. Every member of the Confederation would contribute .01% of their gross domestic product to the Confederation so it would *finally* pay for itself, rather than relying on Terra, and by proxy the Karinnes and the Imperium, to pay for everything. Terra had paid for every office building the Confederation used and was paying the salaries of the people who worked in those buildings. Now, the Confederation would be paying for it using funds donated by its members...and in reality, the Confederation's operations didn't cost all that much to operate, so nobody really got into a twist over the minor amount of money they'd have to contribute. The Confederation's agencies and bureaus were very small, they operated using a minimalist approach to ensure they didn't infringe on the sovereignty of their members, which translated to their operating expenses being surprisingly small for an organization its size. Kim had built a very effective system that always kept its eyes on its finances, since Terra was paying for it, and it was such a model of efficiency and cost-effectiveness that many member empires had sent their people to study it, to see if they could reproduce Kim's model of efficiency within their own empires.

It wasn't Kim that built it, though, it was his Kizzik organizational experts. When someone wanted something built that was a marvel of efficiency, one called in the Kizzik. They were *gods* when it came to efficiency.

Most member rulers saw the yearly amount they had to contribute as an investment, not an expense, because they got a whole lot back for that

money in the form of services and access to formidable infrastructure that was exclusive to Confederation members.

That was what kept many of them in. Jason had removed the Stargates, the Karinnes were going to need them for exo-galactic exploration operations, but the *catapults* remained within member territory, and those catapults allowed member empires to move ships and freighters around Confederation territory without having to spend the money to upgrade their engines to real-time capability. It made them competitive traders and strengthened their economies without having to spend massive credits upgrading their fleets...like some former members were going to have to do.

But not all of the former members were *completely* out of the picture when it came to the Confederation. Only the Prakarikai left on bad terms with the others, so many former members made quite a few trade deals with their former allies, and the most prominent player in that game was the Coalition. The Coalition's long-term game plan became apparent over the last twenty days, building solid trade relationships with the Confederation members in the P and Q quadrants, as well as the Crai, to maintain their economic success while they geared up to do a lot of scientific research. Zaa told him that their game plan was to stay as close to the Confederation as possible as they developed their own versions of Karinne technology, and when they managed it, they'd have Confederation-level infrastructure without having to follow the rules that came with access to it. The Coalition might be able to pull that off, at least with some things like catapults, since they were so advanced already, but it would take them years to get to where the Imperium was.

It was no surprise that their primary focus of research would be Stargates. The Coalition wanted to develop their own version of a Stargate, and their time in the Confederation had given them access to sufficient data and theory to try to build their own version. And while Jason wouldn't help them, he would cheer them on. If they could do it, bully for them, much as he rooted for the Ruu in their attempts to develop their own translight drive. His oaths didn't restrict him from allowing others to develop similar technology to the Karinnes *on their own*. If they pulled it off, he'd be the first to congratulate them.

But there was a tiny bit of conflict within the Coalition, and it was because of Holikk. Holikk was still *pissed* that the Coalition forced the Subrians to leave the Confederation, but it didn't look good for them to get back in by themselves legally. Their commitments to the Coalition would prevent them from rejoining the Confederation on their own. So, Holikk being Holikk, he did his best to establish as many ties with his former allies as possible from the outside, building a large network of trade deals and research agreements with members of the Confederation, the Karinnes and the Imperium being the most prominent among them. Those deals were exclusive to the Subrians, which ensured that they would remain the most powerful and advanced empire within the Coalition.

In all, Jason was quite satisfied with what had emerged from the dust of the Confederation downsizing. It was still focused on keeping the peace and keeping its members financially prosperous, and it still did its best to not step on its members' toes, allowed them to do as they willed as much as possible. And that, Jason suspected, was why so many stayed in even beyond the protection the military alliance provided them. Not a single small empire had left the Confederation because the advantages they got from it far, far outstripped the obligations it placed on them. An empire like the Kirri got desperately needed access to infrastructure, jobs for its people, opportunities to expand, and military protection from vastly superior rivals.

And what was best? He no longer had to deal with *fucking* Anavan in council.

The Prakarikai were already regretting leaving, and how they left even more. As Jason expected, the first thing they did was start pestering the Jun, trying to provoke them into an incident that they could use to declare war, confident they had the military might to prevent the Jun from exterminating the Prakarikai to the last man, woman, and child. But that idea got axed in a *fucking hurry* when they found out that the Jun had signed mutual protection pacts with the Grimja, the Morbods, the Ujjo, and the Farguut, who were all empires in the Grimja sector that completely surrounded the Prakarikai, and had more than enough combined firepower to blow them into an alternate universe. They found out the next day that *every empire in the sector cluster* had signed that same agreement except for them, meaning they'd be up against 43 different empires if they attacked the Jun, including military powerhouses like the Imperium, the two Skaa empires, the

Haumda, and the Verutans. After that shocking revelation, the Prakarikai decided to go find someone else to annoy by sending out scouts to explore the rest of the S quadrant.

It was a dark day in the Royal Palace on Prakarika when they found out about that mutual protection pact, Jason had learned, and that just tickled him pink.

And the Jun couldn't have been happier. Quord told him that they'd never felt so safe and secure, and what was more, so *included*. The rest of the sector cluster would honor their desire to be left alone, but would also not tolerate *anyone* harassing them. The Jun would be free to simply *live*, without fear and without worry, which was all they wanted.

It got no better for the Prakarikai after finding out about the pact. They found their tentative overtures for trade agreements rebuffed, almost at every turn, and what was worse for them, their existing trade agreements dried up in a matter of days because their former trade partners could get better deals through their allies in the Confederation. In just twenty days, the Prakarikai economy was in marked decline, mainly because their primary trade staple, food, was no longer in demand.

It was almost as if Anavan and Anivor had not even remotely thought their decision through to make such simple, basic mistakes, as if they were so blinded by the might of their new military that it made them forget that a military did very little for them if its soldiers had nowhere to spend their pay and their citizens were rioting in the streets because they lost their jobs.

That, Jason *did not* want to see. An empire with a strong military but a bad economy was just a powder keg waiting to explode, because it incited its rulers to go to war just to stimulate their economies and give their angry citizens something else to occupy their time. He had to step in at that point, convincing Brayrak, Holikk, and a few others outside the Confederation to bolster the Prakarikai economy to keep them from imploding. And by that time, the Prakarikai were willing to make a fair deal, because they needed the trade.

Further from home, everyone was settling in to the new normal very well. The members of the Confederation were keeping in touch with former members, there was a lot of trade going back and forth between current and

former members, and for the most part, everything was amicable...of course, everyone having the same military technology had a lot to do with that. Jason had once said that if the defenders had overwhelming advantage in war that it would dissuade anyone from attacking them, and his theory seemed to be panning out. Nobody wanted to declare war on a former Confederation member—except the Prakarikai, because they didn't care how many people died so long as they won—because of the prospect of losing vast numbers of ships and soldiers in the attempt. Everyone may have the same weapons and armor, but the kicker was, powerful Confederation weaponry could be easily mounted on orbital platforms in massive numbers to create a wall of pure firepower that would make landing on that planet a nasty, nasty proposition. They'd seen just how devastating that tactic could be with the Karinnes and the Skaa, the Karinnes with their orbital platforms and drones and the Skaa with their picket ships, a tactic so effective that virtually every empire in the Confederation had copied it. That act turned every planet, moon, and station into a fortress bristling with insane amounts of firepower that would dissuade just about anyone from attacking them.

In all, Jason felt that things were going to be just fine as he read the final separation report. He felt like a great weight had been lifted from his shoulders, and for the first time in a long time, he had some sincere hope in seeing a long, long stretch of *peace*. He doubted things would stay quiet for centuries, but he could see one or two decades of peace and quiet on the horizon, and he couldn't be happier about it. All they had to do was keeping the *fucking* Prakarikai in check, and he'd have a nice stretch of boring old peace on his calendar for the foreseeable future.

But that didn't mean that he didn't have a ton of work ahead of him. That calendar full of peace was going to be filled with tons of other stuff, from exploring other galaxies to keeping an eye on the Syndicate and the Prakarikai. The Confederation was too powerful for anyone in the galaxy to mess with them, but there was always going to be the problem of other wars starting, particularly as former Confederation members started exploring the galaxy without the constraints Jason had placed on them and started messing with the civilizations they found out there.

And in that respect, Jason felt a tremendous amount of responsibility. He'd armed them with the technology they were going to use to make war

on others, and there was very little he could do about it. Giving them that tech had been absolutely necessary for the basic survival of the galaxy as a whole, but now, with the Syndicate dealt with, those empires could use that technology as *they* saw fit...and not every empire in the galaxy was as devoted to peace as the Karinnes. Even within the Confederation, there would be little he could do if, say, the Verutans stumbled across an undiscovered civilization in the R quadrant and decided to annex them. There wasn't anything in the Articles that could stop them, because they weren't using Stargates or catapults to do it, they were using their own real-time jump engines to get out there. The Articles gave the Confederation no power over its members outside of the agreements that Jason forced out of them in return for getting access to the technology the Karinnes provided. And if they did use that technology to do what Jason didn't want them to do, then Jason's hands were tied.

The first time it happened—and it *would* happen—Jason would feel no small measure of guilt over the suffering of that civilization. All he could do was his best to make sure that things didn't get out of control.

As far as the home front went, Karis was shifting into the next phase of Jason's plan. Kosigi was now completely clear of foreign dock workers, the last ships and crews having been shipped out this morning, and that meant that Kosigi could now focus on expanding the Karinne Navy. Jason was holding to his plan to build a navy that could hold its own against the entire Confederation, just in case things came to a head, and they needed Kosigi to build those ships, as well as keep the size of the fleet a secret from the others. And that would be very easy inside Kosigi. They were going to start as soon as Miaari finished her extensive security sweep to clear out all the bugs and espionage devices that other empires had managed to leave inside the moon, and once she certified the moon's security, they would begin. The fleet was going to more than quintuple in size, with the main focus being on frigates and destroyers, and once those ships were built and manned and the crews trained, they'd head out to explore the galaxies in the cluster while the KES focused on galaxies beyond the cluster. But there would always be more than enough ships in the home galaxy to respond if Karis was attacked.

He could definitely feel it. He could feel that this day was the end of a major portion of his life, and the dawn of a new one. After nearly a decade

of hardship, strife, conflict, and struggle, the House of Karinne had achieved a meaningful, lasting peace. It was almost like he could see his own Golden Age on the horizon, to coin the Dreamers, and he almost couldn't wait to see it.

He wondered what discoveries they would make out in the universe as they explored it. He wondered how his children would grow, he wondered how the house would fare when they no longer felt that they were being threatened by a superior force. He wondered how the other empires would react to an era of peace and economic prosperity, how it might affect them, change the attitudes of their peoples. He wondered how long the peace could last.

He wondered.

And he hoped.

He closed the hologram holding the report, gave a cleansing sigh, and stroked Amber's fur as she tried to settle back down after being startled awake by another peal of thunder, an act of finality that closed the book on the Syndicate War and the partial reorganization of the Confederation. From here out, he knew, they would be walking down a much different path, and he had no idea where that path would take them. But he felt that with hard work and vigilance, it would lead somewhere good.

"That's, that, little girl," he murmured to a slightly annoyed Amber, who stood up, turned a couple of circles, then laid back down on his lap. "The last of the empires leaving the Confederation is out. We're on our own now, so to speak."

She gave an indifferent yawn, looking up at him.

"Of course you wouldn't," he chuckled. "I know one thing. I think I'm going to sleep for about three days after this," he said with a bit of a yawn of his own. "Actually, I think it's time for another visit to Tir Tairngire. After the last couple of months, I could use a couple of days just to unwind and decompress before we start our naval expansion project." He had to give a soft laugh. "I should have a little free time from now on, maybe I'll spend more of it over at 3D, driving the guys crazy."

Amber gave a malevolent little yip.

“You are such a meanie,” he teased, scratching her behind her ear, making her lean into his hand. “I won’t know what to do with myself. Three years, little girl, three years we’ve been engaged in war, or under the threat of war, or preparing for a war. Sometimes it feels like it’s been ten years, a hundred years, since I woke up and didn’t have to worry about someone dying, to dread turning on my panel at what message might be there waiting for me. When I wake up in the morning, I won’t feel like the galaxy might fall apart if I make the wrong decision. I could use a good twenty years of nothing happening whatsoever.”

She looked up at him, blinking slowly.

“Well thank you, little miss sunshine,” he said darkly, which made her give an amused little squeaking growl. “I really don’t see what might happen...but I’d better watch what I say, or karma will make sure I find out. I’ll take my nice boring expansion project and the exploration missions, and I’ll be happy with them, thank you very much.”

She put her chin on his leg, her two tails swishing in a hypnotic spiral pattern.

“Me too. And I hate to disturb you, sweetie, but I’m done here. And I’m going to bed. I’m going to be very busy tomorrow.”

She gave a yip as he picked her up and stood up, then turned off the panel deliberately.

“I guess so, though Rann’s gonna wonder what happened to you. I do not see what you get out of sleeping under the covers. And I don’t think I’d understand if you told me. It’s gotta be a vulgar thing.”

Chapter 5

Kaira, 1 Shiaa, 4408, Faey Orthodox Calendar

Wednesday, 6 July 2022 Terran Standard Calendar

Kaira, 1 Shiaa, year 1333 of the 97th Generation, Karinne Historical Reference Calendar

Foxwood East, Karsa, Karis

You're going to be late for school! Jason's sending snapped through the house, encompassing the entire house because he wasn't entirely sure where his dawdling son and adopted daughter were at. He glanced up at the ceiling, then continued the serious task of getting Bethany's shirt properly buttoned up. His daughter was just the cutest thing ever, giving him a darling smile as she patiently let him fuss with her school uniform, which was a white button-down shirt and a pleated skirt. It was a very Terran outfit, and one of which Jason entirely approved. It was his turn to drop the girls off at school, and thankfully they'd finally gotten settled into the routine of it. They both loved school, not because of what they were learning, but because they'd made a ton of friends in the two months since they began. Siyae came out of the bathroom with her shirt already buttoned up, fussing with her hair, which was much more Faey. Her bangs nearly reached her chin, but the back of her head was nearly shaved, with her hair getting shorter and shorter from front to back. She was putting in the barrettes that held her bangs away from her face, and since she hadn't been doing it on her own for long, she was still more than a little clumsy. Bethany's hair was shoulder length in a very Terran hairstyle.

It was sometimes amazing how quickly his children grew up. It seemed only yesterday that Bethany and Siyae were toddlers, but now they were a precocious 7-year-olds, and it was Jon and Julia that were the energetic toddlers that often ran the adults in the house ragged. Rann was surprisingly tall at 14—13, whatever, damn the Faey and their adding a year to

someone's age—and at 13, Jason could tell from the way she'd been acting lately that Shya was going to be one of those girls that started puberty early...and when she did, oh boy. Things were going to get weird in the house when a little girl he saw as his daughter was starting to look *sexually* at the boy that was Jason's son. The fact that they were married wouldn't really hit home until the first time Jason caught them in a compromising position, and he wasn't sure how he was going to handle that, but he knew that time was coming, and it was coming soon. But they didn't come close to his oldest, Aria, who was just starting prep school this year. Aria was shockingly tall at 19, just a few tikra shorter than her parents, and Jason often joked that Songa had overdid it with the growth acceleration program she'd put his daughter on when she first came to Karis. Aria's love of sports and activity had not changed over the years since she'd lived with him, and it seemed like just yesterday she was the gangly, awkward girl he'd brought home. Now she had the body of an athlete, sleek and toned and defined and powerful, and three years of constant activity and hard work had made her strong, agile, and graceful. She'd been at her new school for only two months, and she'd already won a spot on the batchi team playing midfielder, which was almost unheard of for a freshman. Aria played about six different sports, and she was fantastic at all of them.

Aria had definitely filled out in the *other* way, turning into a gorgeous young lady that drove Jason crazy because she was raised as a Faey and Jason had Terran morals when it came to his daughter. Aria was very popular with the boys because of her exotic skin and her accomplishments both in a classroom and on a batchi pitch, and Jason had had to basically just grit his teeth and bear it when she went out on dates that he *knew* were going to end up with her conquering her newest boytoy. She knew he had major issues with what she was doing, but in this case, she was having too much fun to stop. She never talked about her sex life to him, and she did honor his views by at least *pretending* to not do what she was doing where he could see it.

Jyslin, on the other hand, encouraged her every chance she got, and was always the first one to hear all the juicy details of her latest hot date.

Aria made her appearance in the room, wearing nothing at all and with a towel thrown over her shoulder—she didn't have school today—which showed off her impressive assets. Jason was too conditioned to Faey ways

to bat an eye over his daughter running around the house naked, which was her preferred condition...a full reversal from the shy, modest little girl that had come to live with him years ago. Aria was both stacked and supermodel-hot, and she liked to show off the body that her constant exercise had sculpted into something any artist would love to capture on a canvas. Dahnai was Aria's role model when it came to her appearance, wanting the same muscular definition and how it enhanced her feminine curves. And the washboard stomach and defined arms and legs showed how close she was to achieving her goal of being as ripped as Dahnai. "Mom told me to remind you that you have to turn in that panel when you drop off the girls," she said.

"It's already in the car," he answered.

"You're not in your school clothes, Ari," Bethany accused.

"No school for me today, squirt, it's a teacher workday. So I'm hitting the beach," she smiled down at her. "Don't forget about tonight, either, Dad."

"I'm not going to forget," he retorted as he patted Bethany's shoulders. Aria was 18, and on Karis, that meant she was eligible for her Class 3 license...*mostly*. She was technically eligible for it at 18, but it required a special exemption...and what do you know, Jason had the authority to grant the exemption. Since he was the one teaching her, he would make damn sure she knew what she was doing before he granted the exemption and allowed her to get her license. Jason had been training her for it over the last couple of months, and tonight he was taking her out for her first vector-based lesson, taking her to Kosigi and back in the skimmer. No child of Jason Karinne was *not* going to have a Class 3 as soon as possible...and it was going to make her even more popular at school, since she'd be able to fly her friends about anywhere on the planet they wanted to go. She'd be one of the rare few that would have a Class 3 at 19 instead of 22.

She didn't know it yet, but she'd have her own skimmer when she got her license. Jason had bought a used Thrynne 21-B, a compact but well-built four seat skimmer capable of operating in space, and he'd been fixing it up over at 3D in his spare time, where she couldn't see it. It was about the size of a Terran SUV, with seats for four but not much additional cargo capacity, but it would be capable of operating in space, even able to traverse

a Stargate. Thrynne incorporated a Stargate passage mode into any ship they built that was capable of space operation. He wanted to surprise her with it, so he hadn't even told Jyslin about it. Thrynne built some quality ships, and the one he bought only needed some cosmetic work done to the hull and a few upgrades to Karinne technology under the hood to make it good enough for his daughter.

She'd have her own skimmer, but it would be a *used* skimmer. He wasn't about to let *that* go to her head. If she wanted a new skimmer, or a bigger one, she could save her money and buy her own.

He was of a mind to install an electrical shock system in the back seat that would go off if someone laid down on it.

After getting the girls sorted out, he came down into the kitchen to see Rann and Shya at the table, eating breakfast. The Shio walking back to the counter was one of the biggest changes in the house over the last year. Merra had moved in about four months ago, just after her and Seido's honeymoon, and she'd quickly settled in and found her place in the controlled chaos that was Jason's household. Merra didn't work in the household, but she did cook for them when Ayama, Surin, and Seido were busy. They lived in an apartment Jason had renovated out of the second floor, part of a major renovation that added another story to the house, added two new bedrooms for kids, and most importantly, converted the second floor into a pair of apartments for Ayama, Surin, Seido, Merra, and their current and future families. The second floor was divided into two very large, spacious apartments, each one with three bedrooms, giving them plenty of space for their children, both current and future.

His house was now four stories, and it was starting to look a little...odd. Colonials weren't designed to have so many floors, and it was stretching the design aesthetic of the house to be so tall. Jason and Jyslin had talked about it, and they'd decided that if they had to expand the house again, they were going to effectively demolish it and have it rebuilt in another style. The main problem was, they had no way to expand the house except to go up or down with it. The entire strip was claimed, and between Tim and Symone's house, Myleena's house, and the guard barracks behind the house, on the other side of the *oye* tree, there really wasn't much of anywhere to go except to add more stories or excavate more sublevels..

Merra and Seido had opened their own small restaurant last year about six blocks from the strip, and it was wildly popular. Seido did still work in the house, but she now worked part time so she could devote proper time and attention to the restaurant. Merra was the one that worked at the restaurant full time, and they'd found three young and talented Shio chefs that could cook just about anything and make it delicious to staff their kitchen. The restaurant they started was small and intimate, meant to be more of a corner café more than a traditional large restaurant, but given it was a Shio establishment, it meant that the food they served was as good as what could be found at any luxury restaurant in Karis. The café only had eight tables in it, which meant that the chefs that worked there weren't overworked, but were quite busy when they were there because all eight of those tables were usually occupied from the moment they opened to the moment they closed. For both Seido and Merra, it was a dream come true to have that café. It was the dream of any Shio chef to have their own restaurant, and it was one of the reasons both Seido and Merra had come to Karis, because opening their own restaurant at their young ages was extremely difficult back in the Federation. They owned their own restaurant, it was popular, and it was large enough to keep them busy but not so large that it frazzled them. It made both of them truly happy, and now that they were married, it made their lives complete.

Just about everyone on the strip adored Merra, and it hadn't taken her long at all to feel welcome here. What shocked her most was how accepting everyone on the strip was to the fact that she was married to another woman—well, everyone but Temika, but Temika never let her disapproval show. Merra had made quite a few fast friends among the strip girls, and since she loved children, she didn't mind at all being surrounded by Jason's boisterous, naughty brood.

And *naughty* was no exaggeration. Faey kids were sneaky and devious, and Jason had found that the older his kids got, the more their cunning natures were starting to dominate their personalities. Rann and Shya had a nearly perverse joy in getting in trouble, and they dragged all their brothers and sisters into their shenanigans. They were never openly rebellious, but they did push the boundaries of the rules under which they lived.

"Morning, Merra," Jason said as he came up to the table. Rann laughed when he lightly slapped the back of his son's head. "And you are about to

get on my bad side, boy,” he threatened.

“What, we were dressed and ready, Dad,” he protested.

“Then why is your hair still wet?”

“Because Shy hogged the dryer,” he replied.

“I did *not*,” she retorted as Bethany and Siyae ambled into the kitchen. Jason scooped them up one by one and put them in chairs, then picked up Amber and put her on the table, in front of her bowl...which was not filled. She gave Merra an imperious look as the Shio brought another platter over to the table, then gave a squeaky little growl of command. Merra gave her a light look and scraped some scrambled eggs mixed with chopped *diru* pods, cheese, and Terran bacon into the bowl, one of Amber’s favorite breakfasts, and that assuaged the tiny vulpar’s impending wrath.

“You working today?” he asked Merra.

“I’ll go in after lunch. Fomyk is opening today,” she replied. “We’re going to the clinic on Faroll after breakfast. They want even *more* paperwork,” she sighed.

“I’m still trying to talk Seido out of that,” Jason said, pointing at Rann. “*That* should tell you why you should never have kids.”

“Hey!” Rann protested as Shya giggled, elbowing her husband.

What Merra and Seido were doing was trying to have a baby, but *how* they were doing it would cause a row on Karis if it got out. The Alliance medical system had a procedure that allowed two women to have a baby that was genetically theirs, where they took the egg of one woman and used it to fertilize the egg of the other. Seido and Merra were in the last stages of going through the process, and if they held to schedule, one of them would be pregnant with their daughter in about two months. They hadn’t decided yet who was going to carry the baby. Faey religion was heavily against any sort of unnatural conception, to the point where they didn’t even have fertility treatments for women who had trouble conceiving, and it was those religious views that were forcing Seido and Merra to go outside the house to get what they wanted. Despite the Karinne Medical Service treating every species in the house, Songa would *not* approve the ova fusion procedure used by the Alliance, and Songa’s word was law when it came to

the Karinne Medical Service. Jason was a little disappointed in his friend that she was letting her religious views interfere with the lives of her patients, but she would not be moved. And since the Medical Service was sovereign, there was nothing that Jason could do about it except pull a few strings with Ethikk to get Seido and Merra in with the best fertility doctor in the Alliance.

“I doubt our daughter will turn out half as badly as Rann did,” Merra winked at his son.

“And I thought you were nice, Merra,” Rann accused.

“Usually. When I feel like it,” she said lightly, which made Jason laugh.

Seido hurried down, wearing what Jason would call nice clothes, a Shio tunic and leggings. “Thanks, love, go get dressed and I’ll handle the rest,” she said, speaking Shio.

“Any time, dear,” she replied, then she hurried upstairs as Seido took over at the grill. Jason probably was the only one on the strip with a wood-burning indoor combination grill/oven installed in his kitchen. It utilized ventilation and airskin technology to keep the smoke contained and easy to vent outside. They’d installed it last year to placate Seido, who *hated* cooking on the stove and was getting tired of cooking all her meals out on the deck. To a Shio, cooking on anything but a wood-fueled fire was something akin to blasphemy. About the only exception they ever made to that was to use charcoal instead of wood for certain recipes, but the charcoal had to be specially prepared to make it acceptable. The deck outside had a rack just beside the kitchen door holding a variety of different wood types Seido used for cooking, both natural logs and prepared “wood bricks,” which was sawdust and small pieces of the specified wood pressed into a block with certain aromatic compounds and spices to add flavor to the food cooked on the fire that wood produced. A service came every day and replenished the rack, that way Seido had the type of wood or wood brick she wanted for whatever dish she was cooking, and they didn’t have to keep large quantities of wood stored up.

The Shio on Karis were the sole reason why the timber farm business was booming. Several companies on Karis grew specific trees that were used in Shio restaurants, each with a type of wood that Shio swore up and

down enhanced the flavor of the food cooked over it. It was part of a Shio recipe book what wood was used in the grill when it came time to cook it.

After herding the kids through breakfast, Jason got them in a skimmer and got his day started by getting them to school. It was two stops to drop them off at their respective schools, including a brief layover when he ran in the panel holding forms that the elementary school wanted for the girls, then headed to work...or what passed for work anymore. It had been almost dull for the last year or so, but Jason was more than happy to be bored at work because that meant that nothing major was going on. The House was moving along smoothly, the planetary terraforming operation was progressing without any hitches, no major wars out there to worry about, the Confederation was holding together, exo-galactic exploration was moving right along with few problems, it was almost as if they didn't need him around. And that told him that he was doing his job.

In all, the last three years could be summed up in one word: uneventful. Since the end of the Syndicate war, life in the Milky Way had been quite placid, despite empires like the Prakarikai out there trying to cause trouble. There had been a few rough edges, like the Belvarian Incursion, but all in all, things had been quite predictably boring...just the way he liked it. The biggest change, he supposed, was that the Confederation was up to exactly 100 members now, with said Belvarians and eight other empires joining over the years, empires contacted by the Confederation as they explored the Milky Way, and with one former member returning to the fold. Two months ago, the Crai rejoined the Confederation, and Jason felt they wouldn't be the only one. They'd seen how member empires had advanced and prospered over the last three years, and it convinced Voss that it truly was in her empire's best interest to be in the Confederation. Jason was quite happy about that, because he rather liked Voss.

Jason felt it was the Ruu that spurred that. Three months ago, they successfully tested their own version of a translight drive, jumping a ship from Ruu Prime to Sevalax in the Magnum Dwarf Supercluster in nine hours. Their version wasn't nearly as fast or efficient as the Karinne version—they didn't have the same power generation tech as the Karinnes, so they couldn't power the engines to reach the speeds of a Karinne drive—but the fact that they built a working drive was what mattered most. It worked, it was stable, and it was safe, and the Ruu were about to build a second

prototype engine and expand their testing. And Jason was happy to see it. He had no problems with the Ruu developing their own versions of Karinne technology, because he knew the Ruu wouldn't use it to make war on others. They'd also developed their own version of the GRAF cannon, but that was purely out of scientific curiosity more than a desire for a weapon. The Ruu actually had developed quite a few devastating weapons, but outside of building defensive weapon platforms around their planets, they didn't use them. The Ruu did not have a standing navy, they relied solely on their planetary defenses...and the fact that if anyone attacked the Ruu, the entire Confederation would attack the invaders in return.

Unfortunately, he doubted that the Coalition would ever rejoin. Relations between the Confederation and the Coalition had deteriorated over the last couple of years, because the Confederation was eating into what the Coalition felt was their private playground in the P quadrant. Several systems in the P quadrant had been claimed and colonized by Confederation members, and that had sparked something of a war of words between the two organizations. Holikk and the Subrians were the only reason that things weren't even worse, but those attempts had put the Subrians on the outs in the Coalition. Many saw him as a Confederation lapdog, and they wanted him to step down as leader of the Coalition Congress before his term ended next year. But Jason felt that antagonizing the Subrians was the *last* thing the Coalition should be doing, because they were the largest, most advanced, and most economically powerful member. The Coalition could very well crash and burn without the Subrians, and most of the Coalition members knew it.

On the home front, things had gone boringly well. The terraforming project had made major progress over the last couple of years, with Sarga now at 63% complete, Kirga 50% complete, Virga 41% complete, and Hirga 38% complete. The Parri that had come to the planet had had three years to establish their villages and grow their trees, so there were now groves and stands of towering *oye* trees on every continent. Every continent was now populated, and the house stood at an overall population of just over 3 billion citizens. What surprised him most was that there were far more people moving to Hirga than most anyone expected. It seemed that Hirga's rugged topography and colder climate was quite attractive to more than a few Terrans and Faey, on top of the usual races that would find Hirga

quite comfortable. Cyman wasn't the CBIM of a desolate continent, he had four very large cities on his continent to manage, on top of keeping an eye on the terraforming effort and reclamation efforts.

But, unfortunately for him, and the other CBIMs, Cybri was the queen of popularity. Sarga wasn't just the playground of the Shio, it was the most popular place to live among the Faey and Terrans in the house as well, in addition to the usual races that preferred a tropical climate like the Urumi and Skaa. The terraforming process had turned Sarga into an Eden, a tropical paradise, and it was so beautiful there that everyone either wanted to live there or took their vacations there. It was starting to rival Menos and Jilaxis as a vacation destination. And as expected, Sarga was dominated by the Shio. The Shio represented 58% of Sarga's permanent population, making them the majority race on the continent. But, while they had the edge in numbers, Jason wasn't allowing them to institute Shio customs and moral values on Sarga. The Shio that joined the house did so fully understanding that they would have to embrace a new culture, one that wasn't nearly as straight-laced as their own, nor one that tolerated discrimination against those who had customs and practices proper Federation society didn't like.

They learned that lesson the hard way. After Jason found out how Shio business owners and managers were subtly discriminating against women like Merrra on Sarga, he had Cybri go in there and put her foot down. And like any of her sisters and brothers, Cybri could stomp *hard* when she was of a mind to do so.

The naval expansion project was completed about a month ago, and the fourth and final fleet flagship had just finished its shakedown period and was ready for active service. Admiral Jeya Karinne had been promoted from her command ship to take command, a decision Jason didn't at all think was hasty given how well she'd commanded her command ship. Much to everyone's surprise, she had kept the name of her ship and transferred it to the fleet flagship, so it was known as the *Pegasus*. Koye had been awarded the other flagship, which she had named the *Saiva*, which had been completed about seven months ago.

They still had the same problem as during the war, however. They had the ships built for the new naval organization, but they didn't have the

sailors to man them. Nearly a quarter of the ships built for the expansion were sitting in Kosigi uncommissioned because they didn't have enough people.

The addition of two new flagships and the refit of the *Aegis* had brought them three new members of the CB family, and one of them was a bit of a surprise. The CBMOM of the *Pegasus*, Coran, identified as male, and had selected for himself a Dreamer-appearing hologram and bionoid rather than a Faey one. His reasoning was simple: he found the Dreamer's brown skin more aesthetically pleasing. Outside of that, he was really no different than the other CBMOMs. Jason rather liked the appearance he'd set for himself, which, like Cyman, was burlier and taller than most Faey men, looking much more like a soldier than "regular" Faey men. The other two, Codi on the *Saiva* and Coja on the *Aegis*, were much more akin to Coma and Cori.

He was nearly halfway through the day's paperwork when someone came into his office without being announced. He looked up to see Krirara looking at him over the desk, several handpanels held against her furry chest in one arm. *Are you responsible for this mess, Jason?* she demanded, dumping the panels on his desk and picking one up, then thrusting it at him accusingly. *Everything is behind schedule! Bunvar's looking for someone to blame so she can chop them off at the knees.*

Don't look at me, he retorted. Rund had to put a hold on the construction because the facility was in the boundary field of two broadcast power nodes. Bunvar knew that, but she started construction anyway, even after Rund told her she couldn't install the power collection system until he fixed the power problem. It's going to pull too much power to be in the phase boundary, it'll burn out the receiver arrays. She can get back on it when he finishes the upgrades to the Setai City node. She'll be on hold for five days tops.

She put her hands on her hips. *Why did I ever agree to work for you?* she asked tartly.

Because I paid you five times what you'd get anywhere else, and you're a masochist, he replied cheekily. He'd rallied hard to get Krirara to come to Karis after she finished her term in the Kirri Council, and Krirara being a typical Kirri, she played coy with him for *months*, fishing for the best deal possible, showing off that Kirri penchant for negotiation, almost to the point

of madness. But he'd been completely justified. She worked for him as a project manager, organizing and executing large-scale projects for the house, and she was the best one he had. She wasn't a member of the house, so she couldn't work on any top-secret projects, but he didn't need her for that. Her current project was what he'd told her wanted her to do a while ago, she was overseeing a major project to introduce Kirri symbiotes into the Karis ecosystem, to make the planet appealing to attract Kirri to join the house. The project was more than halfway done, with them building "seeding" installations that cultivated the symbiotes and released them into the atmosphere. Since it was technically a terraforming operation, it fell under the jurisdiction of Grik'zzk, but Krirara had been working with Bunvar more than anyone else, since she was the one building the seeding facilities.

Jason wasn't the only one highly interested in the operation. Songa had been studying Kirri symbiotes for the last few years, and she firmly believed she could get the symbiotes to work for *Faey* the way they worked for Kirri. She was treading very carefully, however, because a single tiny mistake could turn the symbiotes into a virulent plague that would wipe out all life on Karis.

Krirara was in the unique position of being the only member of the Ducal government that wasn't a member of the House. Krirara held the rank of Executive Manager of the Special Projects Office, which answered directly to Jason. It was an office he more or less just made up to give Krirara clout in the government and the ability to do her job, but that office had turned out to be quite effective. Krirara had staffed it with Kirri that had worked for her when she was Moderator, Makati, Beryans, and Kizzik, and that made it almost insanely efficient and effective.

All in all, Krirara did not mind taking Jason's job offer. Krirara was one of those kinds of people that needed to work, would go nuts if she didn't have something meaningful to do, and the strict laws against ex-government officials being in positions where they might be able to lobby the government would lock her out of the kinds of jobs she would enjoy if she stayed at home. Krirara commuted to Karis every day from her home on Kirri'arr, and under her skillful eye, the seeding project was ahead of schedule and under budget.

Now, wanna tell me why you're uncharacteristically snippy today?

She gave him a wry look. Teenager issues, she replied. My son and I nearly got into a fight this morning before I came to work.

Hopefully not over anything important.

I suppose that's what made me angry, that he's dug in his heels over something so trivial, she replied ruefully. I think he'll be glad when he's back in school. He's been a pawful since he came home for semester break.

And what trivial matter got him riled up?

Seems I work too much to suit him, she replied. Which is a silly thing to think. I work less here than I did when I was Moderator, but the difference is, I'm on a twenty-nine-hour day here. So I'm gone at odd hours and constantly wake him up when I leave or come home.

Ah, so he wants to spend time with you, but he's never sure when you'll be home. Or awake.

Mostly.

Simple solution to that is to bring your son and husband here for the rest of semester break and let them have a bit of a vacation while your son's home from boarding school. If he's on the same day cycle as you, you two can spend your off hours together. You can put him up in the house I've set aside for you when you finally join the House.

She gave him a slightly accusing look.

I'll wear you down yet, woman, he grinned at her. Now take all these panels back to your office and let me get back to slacking off. I have very unimportant things to do, like clearing your husband and son to travel to Karis and stay for a while.

This does not in any way affect my decision, she challenged. But thank you, Jason.

That was the most excitement he'd had in days.

But fortunately for him, he had something quite exciting scheduled for after lunch. He was going to continue his training to rate on the Karinne Army's newest mecha, the Cheetah. MRDD had finished its testing of the

mecha, and it had been certified for combat operations just two months ago. They only had a few in service, however, because the training program to pilot a Cheetah was significantly different from any other mecha.

He knew that from personal experience. It was *radically* different from piloting a Titan. The quadrupedal frame required Jason to undergo nearly two months of special training to acclimate to having a body radically different from his own before he could even begin the training program for the mecha. Everything about *everything* was different when a bipedal, upright man was put into the body of a quadrupedal, horizontally oriented mecha. He'd had to learn almost everything from scratch, even walking, and it had taken him that long just to get where he was even allowed to merge to a Cheetah.

It was a pain in the ass to rate riggers for the mecha, but the results were more than worth it. Cheetahs were the perfect complement to the other heavy mecha on a battlefield, having the sheer speed and agility that bipedal mecha did not, and their low profile and quickness made them very hard to hit. They were not meant to be a hand to hand mecha, though they had formidable melee weaponry if they had to fight in close quarters. Much like Syndicate walkers, they were most effective at range, where they could use their blazing speed and agility to maximum effect. A Cheetah was nearly as long as a Titan was tall, stood about 24 shakra at the shoulder, which was a good six shakra taller a Juggernaut, but God were those things *fast*. They could hit 620 kathra an hour in a dead sprint—that was 570 kilometers an hour, or about 310 miles an hour—without any kind of grav engine assistance, and could approach the sound barrier when using their grav pods to boost their velocity. They were also exceptionally agile, having grace to back up their insane speed, which made them a nightmare to try to shoot down in a firefight. They had nasty weaponry on top of sheer speed, including retractable monomolecular blades that extended from the sides of the mecha, monomolecular reinforced claws, and IP armor reinforced compressed Neutronium teeth that would let them bite through armor. All of their other weapons, and there were a lot of them, were incorporated into the superstructure of the mecha, so it had no exposed barrels or units, making it look exceptionally sleek and streamlined. The only visible indication that the mecha was armed was the flared unit at the end of the

tail, which served as the focusing array of a Tetryon wave weapon that used the tail as its ionic staging tube.

That was by no means the most powerful ranged weapon equipped on the mecha. It was equipped with both pulse weapons and rail weapons, but its most powerful weapon was built specifically for the mecha, a brand-new weapon developed by MRDD called a particle cannon. It was a much weaker version of a particle beam projector, firing a narrow beam of subatomic particles in a short burst rather than a sustained stream, but it still had the same devastating penetrating power of a ship-mounted particle beam weapon. There were two of the weapons in the mecha, and they ran down nearly the entire length of the main body with the muzzles in the shoulders to each side of the head, hidden behind gunport doors. The reason they designed the new particle cannon was because, unlike a disruptor or pulse weapon, the beam's trajectory could be changed at the focusing lens, meaning that the barrel didn't have to move to allow the particle cannon to change the vector of its shot. Because of how it was built, the particle cannon was fixed within the mecha, including the "barrel" array, which was where the particles were gathered and charged before firing through the lens. That meant that if the weapon couldn't be aimed by moving the lens, then the entire mecha would have to move to manually align the barrel with the target. That may work for a GRAF cannon, but no way could that work for a mecha, who was moving at high speed and would be shooting at a moving target. The weapons each had a 40-degree field of fire horizontally and a 70 degree field of fire vertically, and had a ten katha range in an atmosphere before the beam was diffused by the air, which was more than enough in ground combat. For a mecha that didn't have arms and could easily move the weapon it was firing, having a weapon with adjustable targeting was essential. The mecha was armed with two pulse cannons to back up the particle cannons, a rail autocannon that rose up from a door behind the head, carried two of the new Hawk drones and four spinners for additional support (it was simply too fast for ground drones to keep up with it, so aerial drones were designed for it to carry), and had mountpoints where they could mount external weaponry, which made the Cheetah unit very versatile. It could carry about half of the weapon pods designed for Titans, including heavy pulse cannons, and had 16 different pod mount systems designed exclusively for the mecha.

The chassis of the mecha had been redesigned from its original concept to make it much sleeker, leaner, look much more like the cheetah for which it was named. It was lean, long-legged, almost looked delicate, but it was equipped with a carapace, additional armor plating in key locations, and had IP armor systems backing that up, so it was extraordinarily tough. The redesigned legs were exactly what it needed, much more durable and less prone to breakdown, making it dependable and rugged, capable of executing maneuvers that put tremendous stress on the leg units without them breaking down. Jason's suggestion had been implemented in the design of the mecha so that it could rise up on its hind legs like a Parri and manipulate objects with its front paws, which had a digit that could rotate on the paw and become an opposable thumb. The mecha certainly couldn't fight when standing upright, but it was never meant to. It simply gave the mecha some use in non-combat situations.

It wasn't the only new mecha that had hit the Army and Marine units over the last year. The Imperium had designed and built the Valkyrie, which was the Imperium's answer to Titan mecha, and Jason had to admit, they did a *damn* good job. The mecha was fast, agile, powerful, and surprisingly rugged for a Faey mecha, following Faey design concepts to a tee; the mecha was elegant, beautiful, graceful, fast, and heavily armed. As they'd done with the Knights, Jason had bought Valkyries and had MRDD reverse engineer them so they could build their own version using biogenic technology, and their version wasn't much better than the original Valkyrie. There really wasn't much need to upgrade the original design, they'd done that well with them. All Titan companies now had Valkyrie mecha mixed in with them, for Titans were a little more rugged and had the capability to carry heavy pulse cannons where the Valkyrie did not, but Valkyries were a little faster and a tiny bit more agile due to their sleeker design. Titans still held the title as the mecha able to bring the most boom to a battlefield, but Valkyries were more than viable mecha that were quite impressive.

The Imperium wasn't the only one to build Titan-sized mecha. The Subrians had developed an exceptional large mecha about two years ago, and it had been in service long enough to be updated with a Mark II model. The Verutans and the Jirunji had also managed to build comparable mecha to Titans, with varying degrees of success. Verutan BM-1 (Battle Mecha 1) mecha were good, but they couldn't match Titans or Valkyries in speed or

agility but could match them in firepower. Jirunji Warclaw mecha, on the other hand, gave their giant-sized siblings one hell of a run for their money. The Jirunji were probably the most underestimated empire in the Confederation when it came to scientific knowhow, and their best mecha engineers had really scored a goal when they designed the Warclaw. It was fast, nimble, heavily armed, and significantly more durable than a Valkyrie. MRDD was currently studying the design and working on building a Karinne variant using biogenic technology.

How they got it was simple. They bought it.

Sovial had done what Jason had expected...she had her R&D people design and build the Warclaws with the primary objective of selling them to empires that lacked the engineering ability to design their own heavy mecha. The Jirunji were raking in the profit as well, selling Warclaws to many other empires in the Confederation, and they were rolling in credits with their consulting fees and sales of both mecha and spare parts.

Sioa was interested in Warclaws for the Army, to diversify the inventory to make it harder for potential enemies to counter ground forces by exploiting the weaknesses of a mecha. Cheetahs were primarily Army mecha because they were specifically designed for ground operations, but some Marine Titan companies would be issued Cheetahs to add to their inventories.

The reason was simple. Somewhat surprisingly, in vector-based combat, Cheetahs performed very well when mounted with flight pods. They were specifically built to handle the stresses of high-G maneuvers, and that translated to vector-based combat. And on top of that, their particle cannons were highly effective in space, with no atmosphere to diffuse the beam. They were very fast and nimble in vector-based combat because their combined engine output far exceeded their mass, which made them effective dogfighters when matched up against fighters or mecha.

Jason got a major *Voltron* vibe out of seeing a Cheetah in space, but there was nothing wrong with that. If 46-foot-tall robots could fly and fight in space, so could 43-foot-long robotic cats.

So, as of now, the Karinnes had three different heavy mecha in their inventory, the Titans, the Valkyries, and the Cheetahs, and were in the

development stage of a fourth, the Warclaw. For the smaller mecha, they had four models in service. The Gladiators, Juggernauts, and Knights had been joined by the Centurions.

The Centurion wasn't an exomech. It was a different class of mecha called an *exoframe*, because the pilot wasn't completely enclosed inside the mecha. It was only 13 shakra tall, which made it smaller than a Gladiator, and the pilot rode in the torso of the exoframe and was completely visible, with just a window of transparent titanium in the front that served as a HUD. The pilot locked in using his pod mounts and controlled the exoframe like any rigger would control an exomech. The difference was, exoframes didn't require special training to use, making them much more versatile and useful to ground troops. Any Karinne Army soldier or Marine could operate an exoframe, and their smaller size made them easier to carry around with an army unit. A Centurion could fold up into a carry configuration about the size of a MC-3 cargo crate, making them easy to ship with ground units in good-sized numbers.

Jason had thought the concept behind the Centurion was silly, until he saw the prototype in action. He changed his mind in a *hurry*. They turned an infantry soldier into a *complete fucking beast*. Not that Crusader armor didn't do that already, but the exoframe significantly increased an infantry soldier's mobility and firepower using the frame's onboard weaponry, plus the ability to carry external weapons. Centurions could carry external weapons and mount weapon and utility pods built for Gladiators, and that made them *absolutely brutal*.

That was one of the most overlooked aspect of the Karinne Army, Jason thought. Sioa designed everything with an eye on maximum versatility and usefulness. Gladiator and Centurion mecha shared the same pod mount system, as did Juggernaut and Knight exomechs. They'd built their versions of the Valkyrie mecha using the same methodology, using Titan parts in them whenever possible to maximize efficiency in part production and repair, and ensuring that they could mount the same pods built for Titans. The only outlier in the system was the Cheetah, and that was because it was designed with an entirely different operational concept, but even it used about 23% of the same parts used in other large mecha and could mount about half of the pods used by Titans on pod mounts on its shoulders, hips, and back. Both general classes of mecha used as many of the same parts as

possible to make it very easy to build and repair them. That made it much easier to outfit and equip ground forces, and also made it easier on repair techs when they needed parts for them.

Titan companies weren't called Titan companies anymore because of the Valkyries and Cheetahs that were now integrated into them. Companies comprised purely of Titan-sized mecha were now called macro companies, or *heavy* companies as the riggers called them.

Despite the House not firing a shot in anger for three years, Jason kept in top fighting trim in case he was needed. He was still rated on every mecha the House used, he'd taken training in most of the operations systems on a ship so he could man nearly any station on a bridge, and he still belonged to the Storm Riders and ran training missions with them. He still worked out religiously to keep in shape, and had even taken training in swords, polearms, and other martial arts like judo and karate so he would be a better fighter when in a rig. Jason could very nearly hold his own against Shakizarr now, and Shakizarr had trained for nearly his entire life in multiple forms of armed and unarmed close quarters combat, because it was a traditional requirement for a Verutan Emperor. By tradition, the Grand Emperor was the most skilled warrior in his army, though it was mostly ceremonial now since the Grand Emperor would never be allowed to fight in a real battle. Shakizarr was about the best hand to hand fighter in the entire Confederation, and it was Jason's goal to beat him in a spar at least *once*.

Like Cylan, he kept himself prepared in case Karis was ever attacked again. If another war broke out, he would be ready.

He found himself with about two hours to kill before his training session over at Joint Base Sigma, so he decided to indulge in one of his little guilty pleasures...games. He still played Vanguard quite a bit, it was actually good for him because it kept his combat skills sharp, but he'd been spending more time in Cyvanne's game, Citadel Online, than anything else. It had been out for a little over two years now, and the game had absolutely *exploded*. It was, by far, the most popular game in the Confederation, and had just over *three billion* active players. Clearly, that many people couldn't play in the same world, so the game had 166,388 servers scattered across the Confederation, with each empire's capitol planet holding a cluster of

about 200 servers or so. Cyvanne aimed to have about 50,000 people playing on each server, an average of 5,000 per player faction, which she felt was the optimal population to provide more than enough players for other players to encounter but spread them across the game world sufficiently so people weren't stepping on each other's toes. The servers were divided up among Confederation members so players with similar real-life cultures were playing together, which alleviated a lot of drama and infighting between players within the game. Karis had 183 servers in its server cluster, with only Karisians able to connect to them, and Jason played on the very first server to come up, appropriately named Primus. He had stuck with a Jagaara magician like he'd used in the beta, and over the last two years, he'd built his character into a well-rounded joy to play within the game.

Jason really enjoyed the game. He'd seen the potential of it during the alpha, and Cyvanne had made all the right decisions when they ironed out the final wrinkles. It was just the right mixture of requiring dedicated play time raising skills and getting gear—a practice players called “grinding”—and allowing players to feel like they were getting somewhere. Cyvanne had made the game super-realistic in many ways, and that was Jason's only real complaint about it. Given the game worlds were a continent the size of South America on Terra and a planet the size of Mars (though only an area about the size of Europe was accessible to players), it could take *weeks* to go from one side of the continent to the other if one did it by walking or using a mount. When a player decided to move to a new area to explore and quest, it was literally a move. They had to pack up their stuff, load it up, then travel for days in real time to get to their destination. There were magical shortcuts to reduce travel time, like transportation spells, ground mounts and flying mounts, wagons, boats, and magical constructs in the game called *scions* that allowed a player to teleport between two scions. Sure, there were like 4,000 scions scattered across the game worlds, but those scions were hard-wired to connect to just one other scion, and the vast majority of scions in the game were hidden. Very few of them were in plain sight, or in easy to access locations. A player had to explore to find scions, then go through the scion to find out where it went. It created a needlessly complex network of scions that players often had to resort to CivNet resource sites like *CO Today* and *The Armory* outside the game to figure out how to get where one wanted to go using scions.

It was the one thing Jason wanted Cyvanne to change, but she wouldn't do it, no matter how much he threatened her with torment, damnation, and even getting her ass unplugged. At this point, he felt she was refusing to change it *because* it annoyed him.

Jason had been faithful to his beta server character. He was a magician archetype, and a pretty damn strong one given how little time he had to play, but his real-world combat skills applied to the game to make him more than a match for a monster or other player once they got close to him. He was one of the few magician archetypes in the game that had a sword sheathed over his shoulder, who knew how to use that sword. He still played with Jyslin, several of the girls on the strip and their husbands, and the kids, who had all formed their own guild in the game. Jason didn't lead the guild, Yuri did, and she did a really good job. That was because the kids played way more than their parents, so it was best if one of the strip kids was the one leading the guild.

Yuri all but lived in the game. She was so obsessed with it that Maya had been forced to use the parental controls to restrict her play time.

Sadly, the others had outpaced him in the game. Since he had little time to play the game, he had less time to raise his skills and gear up his character, so he was more or less a lead weight on the others when they played together. The others had skills far higher than his and were equipped with far superior gear. Because of that, he more or less did his own thing in the game, and that was good enough for him.

The good thing about the game was that, like Vanguard, he could jump on for only an hour or so when he had time and always had something to do, and always felt like he accomplished something when he logged off to go back to work. Currently he was working on his Scribing skill so he could scribe spell scrolls to sell to other players, which would allow them to add those spells to their spellbooks. To do that, he had to spend time in his research library practicing his calligraphy, because a spell scroll had to be absolutely *perfect* in order for a player to be able to copy it into his spellbook and learn the spell. In the game, a player could raise his skills by either spending experience points on it or practicing it. Jason had been dumping all his XP into scribing for over a month on top of practicing it

whenever he had time to kill at work, and as a result, his Scribing skill had just cracked 1,000 last takir. It was currently at 1,012.

The only problem was, it had to be 1,250 to be able to scribe the spell he wanted to sell, so he had 238 points to go.

It would be worth it. Last month, Jason got insanely lucky and got his hands on one of the most coveted spells in the game, a spell called Teleport. What it did was allow the caster to travel instantly to a scion that he had previously marked, which drastically cut down on travel times. A magician could mark more than one scion, how many he could mark was dependent on his skill in Translocation magic, but even just being able to mark two or three strategically located scions would allow him to travel all over the continent of Arcavia in hours instead of weeks (the game used weeks rather than takirs, but a week was eight days in the game, not seven). Teleport was so much in demand that a Teleport scroll could go for upwards of 100,000 gold in the most popular player marketplaces, like Alder's Bluff or Serrethal, and Jason saw scribing Teleport spells as his ultimate cash cow. The spell was an exceptionally rare drop from boss monsters in dungeons and raids, so very few players had it. And since it required such a high Scribing skill to create scrolls of it, there were very few people capable of making the scrolls. That scarcity was what made it worth so much in the player markets. Once Jason raised his Scribing skill high enough to make the scroll, he could sell one or two a week at 50,000 gold a pop and rake in insane amounts of gold.

Finally. Being a magician was *expensive* in the game, between the materials he had to buy to use magic and the fact that a player had to have access to a research library to practice Research or Scribing. And if a player wanted a research library of his own, he had to own a house, shop, or some kind of building in which to place it. Houses were *dreadfully* expensive in this game, so that meant that most players had to rent access time at a research library owned by an NPC or NPC organization...and that was *not* cheap. The better the library, the more it cost to work there. Jason didn't have his own house, but what he did have was the guild's headquarters. All of them had pooled their money to buy a building in Serrethar to serve as their guild headquarters, and they'd set up a research library where he could practice his skills.

That was how he contributed to the guild. Since his skills and gear were so much lower than everyone else's, he focused his skills on creating items the others could use. His highest skills were Enchanting, Research, and Scribing, and he made the magical consumables the others used, the enchantments they could apply to their gear to enhance it, and also tried to research and scribe new spells for the spellcasters to use.

But he wanted more out of the game than to just be stuck in the guild headquarters all the time. His plan was to take the money from selling Teleport scrolls and buy his own house in Twinfang, where he could get the best deal. Getting back to Serrethar would be easy, because the city had a scion right in the central square, and he could mark that scion and the scion in Shadeweaver's Forest, not far from Twinfang, to get back and forth. Actually, he would buy land inside the walls of Twinfang and raise his own tower there using magical spells he'd been researching and collecting over the months. Jason decided that if he was going to play a mage, he'd go full-out role-playing with it and make his home a wizard's tower. He already had the spells he needed to build his own tower; he just needed the land on which to build it. And land was the most expensive commodity in the game, particularly in capitol cities like Twinfang. He could get a much better deal on land out in the wilderness on the edges of Jagaara territory, or in a neutral territory city like Serrethar, but that reduced price came with the risk that NPC monsters or thieves of both the NPC and PC varieties would raid his tower and steal everything in it. It was safest to build a house inside an established city or town inside faction territory, and that was the land that cost the most money to buy. Protection and security were not free in this game. In fact, it was damn expensive.

He didn't *have* to build it in Golden Lion territory. He could raise his tower out in neutral territory without paying for the land, out in the unclaimed wildlands that dominated the center of the continent, but a house built outside the protection of faction territory could be attacked by both NPC monsters and players, which was even more dangerous because players were a hell of a lot smarter than most NPC monsters. Jason could theoretically build a tower out in Jagaara territory and make it almost impossible for NPC monsters to get into it by filling it with magical spells and traps that would repel the invaders, but he doubted anyone could build anything that could keep an exceptionally clever player out of it.

People did do it. They built houses and bases out in neutral territory. But those who did followed one of two methods; they either hid their home so it was nearly impossible to find, or they made it so big and so imposing that it would take an *army* of players to get into it. Players could hire NPCs to serve as guards and henchmen, and those few people that did build out in neutral territory and didn't hide their homes instead built elaborate, heavily fortified castles filled with magical traps and NPC guards and soldiers to repel invaders.

Needless to say, only the richest players did that. There was this one guy on the Azjar server over on Terra who had built a good-sized private town filled with NPCs that surrounded his castle, which was filled with NPC guards. He ruled the town and surrounding territory, had his own army of 1,000 NPC soldiers, and from what Jason had read, he did a damn good job managing the town and its resources, as well as repelling multiple attempts by other players to either raid his town or take it over for themselves. His little town was flourishing, and it was slowly getting larger and larger as more NPCs moved in. In a few more months, the guy would have a bona fide kingdom, and he'd have an army large enough to expand his claimed territory far beyond its current borders.

And Cyvanne loved it. Players doing stuff like that was exactly what she wanted to see them doing in the game. She wanted players to take the world she had given them and surprise her with how they made it their own. She wanted them to be bold, be clever, and above all, *have fun*. There were players like Jason who spent most of their time in a research library, studying and raising crafting skills. Other players preferred to focus on other tradeskills, like carpentry, blacksmithing, enchanting, tailoring, or leatherworking, but they were like him, they spent more of their game time making things than killing things. There were those who spent all their time buying and selling goods in the merchant cities, what players called *merchant barons*. There were players that spent all their time exploring the most remote areas in the game world. There were players who raided, players who challenged the many dungeons, and players that did neither. There were players that banded together into guilds, and players that played the game by themselves. There were even players who rarely did anything but role-play in faction cities and towns, would spend hours in a tavern pretending to be their character.

Then again, everyone had to do that to some degree. While players knew it was a game, NPCs did *not*, and most NPCs had AIs complex enough to require you to interact with them in order to get information out of them or buy things from them. So everyone had to role play when interacting with the NPCs, because if you spouted game terms at them, they looked at you like you were crazy...and most NPC merchants didn't want crazy people in their shops. It took a while for Jason to get the hang of role playing with NPCs he interacted with on a daily basis, to the point where he got to know them, came to learn their quirks and idiosyncrasies, and they almost started to feel *alive* after a while. Cyvanne had done an outstanding job with the AI systems in the NPCs, making them as lifelike as possible. Every NPC in Twinfang, some 7,000 of them, had a unique personality. They had jobs, they had homes (or were homeless), they had friends and enemies, they had plans and goals, they had established routines based on their occupation and their personality. After a player stayed in a city or town for a while, he got to know his neighbors, came to learn how the NPCs acted, and could tell when something unusual was going on just by how the NPCs were acting.

Cyvanne had done such an incredible job on this game, it was no surprise it was the most popular game in the Confederation.

He went from one form of play to another after lunch, spending the afternoon doing PIM training in a Cheetah, and it was almost addictive. To run that fast, with the ground flying under his mechanical feet, it was a feeling of freedom he usually only felt when flying his Nova. His afternoon of training was split between time trials, learning how to run fast, and agility trials, navigating obstacle courses and parkour areas, having to do it all without grav pods assisting his jumps. And that was what was the hardest about piloting the mecha, learning how to judge his jumps and land where he wanted. He still had another month or so of training before he could even start the training program for combat operations, but he was in no particular hurry. He had to master moving in the Cheetah before he could start shooting at things.

He felt at home in a Titan, but he had to admit, piloting a Cheetah was *damn fun*. It was almost like it wasn't a war machine, that he was in an exotic giant bionoid just running around the deserts outside Joint Base Sigma.

In four days, he'd be at Joint Base Theta up on Hirga to do mountain training in a Cheetah, and he was both looking forward to that and a little terrified of it. He'd be learning how to navigate extreme vertical terrain...in other words, cliffs, which was the ultimate expression of parkour in a Cheetah. To pass that training phase, he'd have to literally both run his mecha up a cliff and bring it back down, choosing his footholds and jumping from ledge to ledge to get both up and down.

He wasn't alone in his training. As he pulled his mecha into a bay to power down and go through post-op, another Cheetah pulled into the bay beside him. He rose up out of the mecha from the cockpit, which was just behind the neck and between the front legs, the most protected part of the mecha, and Sirri rose up on the elevator platform from the mecha beside him. Sirri, like Aria, had grown like a weed over the last three years, growing into a ravishingly beautiful, tall, athletic woman that was still utterly obsessed with piloting mecha. She was a rigger to the marrow of her bones and was the youngest rigger on Karis that had fully rated on a Titan. In fact, the only mecha in both the KAS and IAS inventories she *wasn't* rated on was a Cheetah. The two of them were doing their Cheetah training together. When the time came for her to do her ceremonial conscription, she'd be serving her five years in a rigger company piloting a Valkyrie in the Imperial Marines rather than spend that time in the palace as a military liaison to her mother. She'd already made that deal with Dahnai.

Not bad, Sirri, Jason complemented her as he took off his helmet. You're getting better every day.

You too, Uncle Jason. These things are so fun to pilot.

Amen. Sometimes I forget that this is serious business when I'm out there.

She laughed as she took off her helmet, giving him a dazzling smile. Again, he had to just admire how gorgeous Sirri had become, especially with her hair in an adorable tousled pixie style that made her look mischievous. She was one of the most beautiful young ladies in the entire Imperium, and Dahnai was only a *little* jealous of her. *You have time for more runs tomorrow? Mom's letting me stay over at the summer palace until next month to finish this segment of the training. And I'll be honest, I*

need more practice. Mastering this having four legs thing is trickier than I thought it was going to be.

I'm not sure, but I'll see if I can carve out some time in the afternoon, he answered. *I have a cabinet meeting tomorrow. I try not to blow those off, my secretaries know where I live. Most of them live just down the block from me.*

Mind if I catch a ride with you back to the strip? Me and Aria are gonna go clubbing tonight.

It wasn't much of a surprise to Jason, but Dahnai was quite surprised that Sirri's best friend in the whole universe turned out to be *Aria*. Jason couldn't understand why she thought that. They were about the same age, and they were both massively into outdoor activities and sports. Jason found it entirely natural that the two would gravitate towards each other, especially since they had so many opportunities to bond whenever Dahnai and Sirri came to Karis.

Clubbing? Aria has a lesson this afternoon, Jason countered.

We know, we're gonna go after she's done, she elaborated. *If I tried to muscle in on her class 3 training time, she'd rip off my ears.*

He had to laugh. *I wouldn't be surprised; she's been driving me nuts for the last three months over teaching her how to pilot a skimmer.*

When do you think she'll be ready?

Honestly? Probably in two takirs or so. She just has to learn the rules when in vector-based flight and practice a little and she'll be ready. She already has atmospheric operations down. Until then, she'll have to bum rides off you. Sirri already had her class 3 license. She'd had it since she was 15.

I don't mind, it's no fun to fly a skimmer by yourself, she smiled as she used the grav pods in her armor to lift off the back of her mecha and drift towards the ground. *So, can I ride with you or are you gonna make me fly in my skimmer by myself?*

She clearly wanted to talk to him about something in a secure location, and inside his skimmer was secure. Else she'd just take her own skimmer.

Sure, he replied. But let's get through debriefing first and see how bad we did.

About half an hour later, Jason and Sirri were in his skimmer on the way to the strip, with Sirri's skimmer following them on autopilot. She'd changed out of her armor and was wearing a bikini top and a pair of shorts—she'd found that going topless wasn't nearly as much fun once her breasts fully developed and they wagged and bounced all over the place when she was doing stuff—reclining in the passenger seat as he flew them home. *[So, any particular reason you wanted to ride with me?]*

[Yeah. You need to talk to Ari,] she replied. [She's been having dreams. I think she's seeing omens again, Uncle Jason. But she won't tell you about them.]

[Why not?]

[Because she doesn't understand what they mean,] she answered. [They're not good dreams.]

[Well, that explains why she's been using the sleep inducer in her bed again,] he communed soberly. [Did she tell you about them?]

[Yeah, but it's like those other omen dreams she had last year. They're almost nonsensical. She keeps dreaming about a village being burned to the ground by a dragon. You and Mom are in the dream, you try to fight the dragon, but the dream always ends before she learns what happens to you. She said the last thing she sees in the dream before it ends is you and Dahnai jumping from the back of winged animals with swords in your hands, hurling yourself at the dragon's face as if you're going to try to kill it. But she doesn't know what happens, or what it even means. She's not sure if she should tell you or not, because she doesn't know if the outcome is good or bad. Since she doesn't understand what the dream means, she's afraid to say anything, that if she makes the wrong decision, you and Mom will get hurt because of it.]

[No, that doesn't sound very good,] Jason replied. [Have the dreams changed any?]

[No, so I'm going to assume that means that whatever she's seeing is still going to happen.]

That was something they'd learned about the Dreamers and their ability to see the future over the last three years...it wasn't *fate*. The future was not set in stone, and their visions of it were what would happen *if nothing changed*. Being aware of the prophecies they gave could change those predictions if people actively worked to avoid having it happen, and that could make it tricky to make sense of their prophecies. Not all of them were going to happen, because people took actions that altered the progression of future events. Many of their prophecies were warnings more than predictions, warnings of what might be if action was not taken to prevent it. The messy part was trying to figure out which prophecies would come true if someone took no action, and which would come true if someone *did*. Not even the Dreamers knew which were which...or more to the point, they wouldn't tell anyone, not even Jason. That was because, he suspected, they were trying to guide events in the way their omens showed them would be best for the Dreamers, and now the House of Karinne and the Confederation, whom they saw as liberators and allies. So, because of that, they were often deliberately vague about which predictions were warnings and which were true prophecies, because they didn't want Jason or someone else messing up what they were trying to accomplish.

Aria was the wild card in the Dreamer's design, because she lived with Jason, and her interests were solidly aligned with her home, the House of Karinne. She'd been having omen dreams for the last two years, not long after she stopped using the sleep inducer in the bed, but most of her predictions were about little things, things that mattered to a teenage girl, not to the welfare of the House of Karinne. But last year, she'd had a significant omen dream that predicted that Jyslin and the batchi team would be in danger, and that proved to be true. In her dream, Jyslin was the commander of an old-fashioned sailing ship, and she and her crew all drowned when the ship sank in a storm. That was typical for omen dreams, they were couched in metaphor and were rarely direct in what they were predicting. Aria's warning saved Jyslin, prevented anyone from getting hurt, because they decided to err on the side of caution and give every car, skimmer, ship, and transport Jyslin used with any regularity a detailed, in-depth inspection. That inspection had discovered a microscopic crack in the casing of the gravometric engine in the transport the Paladins used to travel to their away matches that would have blown up the ship if it would have breached while the engines were in operation. Jyslin was Aria's mother in

all ways but blood, and she was so emotionally connected to her that it caused her to predict her mother's death.

That had rattled Aria, because she saw Jyslin die in her dreams over and over again, and sent her back to therapy and her sleep inducer for a good two or three takirs, but at least she had the wherewithal to warn Jason about her dream before she went back to using the sleep inducer. The dream didn't end until the crack was found and her prediction was thwarted, and in a way, that told them to keep looking until they found it.

Jason was going to take this deadly seriously until he found out more about what was going on. Aria's predictions had already saved Jyslin's life, and this was clearly an omen dream. Almost all of Aria's omen dreams were couched in a medieval, mythical setting, which Jason had learned was normal for Oracles. Each Oracle had a particular *flavor* in which the omens they foresaw were interpreted by their brains while they were sleeping, and for Aria, it put those omens in a fantasy medieval setting. Any time her dreams were couched in a setting like Middle Earth in *Lord of the Rings*, it was an omen dream.

[I'll talk to the Dreamers on Tir Tairngire about it before I talk to Aria, see if they've had any omen dreams about it themselves. Thank you for warning me, pips.]

[Aria told me not to, but I think she's wrong,] she replied. [Whether the outcome is good or bad, the one thing she doesn't understand is that you just knowing that she's had an omen dream about you and Aunt Jyslin is important. It means something is going to happen, something important enough to trigger Aria's precognition.]

[Well-reasoned, Sirri,] he agreed with an approving nod. [I see your mother's training is starting to show in you.]

[Thanks, Uncle Jason,] she smiled.

He pondered the warning the rest of the way home, but Sirri was right, there just wasn't much to go on. What it sounded like, and it was just a wild guess based on the imagery of the dream, was that the House and the Imperium was going to get into a war with someone, but the outcome of that war was uncertain. And that was the *last* thing he wanted to hear. Things were calm now, peaceful, and the last thing he wanted or needed

was another damn war. But there were steps he could take despite the vagueness of the omen, have some long chats with Yeri and Miaari, with Myri and Kraal, and urge the girls to get as many Navy ships commissioned as possible...just in case. If there was going to be a war, he wanted his military ready for it.

It meant that he'd be rearranging his schedule to get fully combat rated on a Cheetah within two takirs. The Storm Riders had been issued Cheetahs, one of the Marine exomech companies that got them, and he had to complete his certification, or he might lose his combat ready status, or what riggers called their *active status*. A rigger had to be rated on *any* mecha in a company's assigned inventory to retain his active status.

He had time before Aria was ready for her lesson to get some of that done, warning the CBIMs, Myri and the command staff, and Miaari. *[That reminds me, Jason, we need to talk about something,]* Cyvanne said after he issued his orders. *[But it's not related to this. I've been meaning to show you for a couple of days now.]*

[Is it going to make me worry even more?]

[No, but it is rather interesting. Mind if I swing by in my bionoid? I have it on a datastick.]

[Sure, we have about an hour before I take Aria out.]

She arrived about twenty minutes later, coming into his office. She'd changed her facial features and hair yet again, going for the teenage goth look...seriously, he'd never know it was her if not for the identity chip in her bionoid telling him it was Cyvanne. "What's up?" Jason asked as he turned on his panel and reached out his hand for the datastick she said she was bringing.

She handed it over, and he slotted. "This was taken from a security camera on Terra five days ago," she said as Jason accessed the crystal. A hologram winked on showing a picnic area beside a beach. Three people were sitting at a table, but a man wearing a black leather jacket and a man wearing a tee and jeans were on the wooden walkway to the beach, and they were clearly fighting. The jacket guy had a knife, and the other guy was using a pair of wikli sticks, which were sticks used in a Jirunji game called wikli. The man with the knife lunged at the stick wielder, but he parried the

knife with professional ease and riposted by slamming his other stick into the man's face.

“Okay, it's a fight of some kind. And why did this catch your attention?”

“Watch.”

He did so. It was clear in seconds that the man with the sticks was a trained fighter, where the man with the knife was not, because the stick wielder just flat-out kicked the man's ass. He moved with elegant grace, using perfect footwork and wielding his two sticks in perfect harmony with one another. He put several welts on the knife-wielder's body and face using his sticks, then disarmed him with a deft maneuver, pinching his knife with both sticks and wresting it out of his hand. He then laid the man out with several sharp blows to the face and head, then backed carefully away from the people at the table, who had made no moves towards him. “Alright, again. Why did this get your attention?”

“The man wielding the sticks is named Kevin Ball. He's a database manager for MM on Terra. Jacksonville, to be specific. The man's never had a formal lesson in any sort of martial art in his life.”

Jason gave her a look. “Bullshit. The way he moved—”

“I looked him up. Why this caught my attention, Jason, is that Kevin Ball plays CO.”

He got the connection she was trying to make instantly. “He learned how to do that from the *game*?”

She nodded. “It only stands to reason that if you can use your real life skills in the game, that you can use the skills you pick up in the game in real life, at least those that are compatible with real world physics,” she told him. “When I programmed the game, I didn't isolate learning physical skills to only that segment of the player's memory that's within the vidlink. I couldn't, because if I did, then players wouldn't be able to practice their real-life skills inside the game and improve them. But that's not what surprised me about this, Jason. I knew about this when I coded the game, in effect I *had* to do it that way if people were going to be allowed to use their real skills in the game. After seeing this, I ran a few passive tests on him while he was logged into the game last night. Look.”

She put up a graph, what was called a Reaction To Stimulus, or RTS, curve, which was a representation of the time it took for a person to react to stimulus and respond. It was a baseline test any rigger would have taken hundreds of times, because a rigger's RTS score was the singularly most important score he could have. It was a measure of how fast a rigger could recognize and respond to a threat, and he who reacted first usually won. The graph showed this Kevin Ball's improvement over time, from when he first started playing Citadel Online to the present. And at present, his score looked more like a Faey athlete than a Terran...hell, he was crossing over into "desk job Jhri" territory. His reflexes and response time to stimulus was far, far faster than what would be normal for a man with a desk job, even faster than a professional Terran athlete. His reaction speed was *superhuman*. No normal human had an RTS time that fast. Telepaths did, but telepaths were not normal humans. A telepath's brain was wired differently than a normal Terran's, which gave them the RTS time to operate in the accelerated time frame of the mindscape. Things went so fast in telepathic combat that a non-talented brain simply couldn't keep up with it.

Simply put, telepathic brains were *faster* than non-telepathic brains. They responded to stimulus faster and they were capable of operating at the speed of pure thought, without the physical aspect of their organic brain slowing them down. There was a physical component to that as well, for a telepath's neural synaptic map was far more complex than a non-telepaths, when the brain created new neural pathways after the telepath's talent became active, pathways that were created specifically with telepathic abilities and applications. But other information could move along those pathways as well, and the rich, complex web of neural connections in a telepath's brain made their brains operate faster and more efficiently than a non-telepath's brain, even in the realm of the physical.

It didn't show nearly as much in the real world as it did in the mindscape, because a Faey's brain was limited by the speed of the body and the ability of that Faey to control her body. But in merge applications, where it was nothing but the brain operating a machine body, with that machine body operating at the speed of its control computer, Faey had a much lower RTS score than most non-telepaths. It was why his Faey riggers and pilots were so nasty in combat, because they were operating from a

merge, where the limitations of the body were removed and the Faey was allowed to operate at the speed of the mindscape. Kyva Karinne's RTS times were just as fast as any Shurai's...in fact, she was *faster* than some Shurai. And Shurai had the lowest RTS times among any race in the Confederation, on the average. And she achieved those stunning RTS times because she was jacked into her mecha rather than operating it manually.

“He must have talent.”

“He doesn't. I checked.”

He gave her a surprised look. Most Terrans had an average reaction speed of about 160 milliseconds, but people who trained their reaction speed could bring that down to as low as 70 milliseconds, like martial artists, hardcore gamers, and professional athletes. That was the time it took for the brain to recognize a stimulus and then respond to it. Kevin Ball's average RTS time was 17.6 milliseconds. That was a reaction speed more in line with a Faey soldier or athlete or a Jhri desk jockey than a Terran. If this guy had an RTS speed that low, it was no wonder he whipped that knife-wielder's ass. To him, it would be like the guy with the knife was moving in slow motion.

“That's...wow. No human should have an RTS that low.”

“Well, he's not the only one,” she replied. “After I saw this, I started running some tests on random Terrans who play CO, and I've noticed a substantial increase in RTS time over Terran baseline scores. At first, I thought it was something in the game code doing it, but after I dug a little bit, I found out it's the simsense. It's the third generation simsense, Jayce. Third gen rigs are training Terran brains in ways that decrease their RTS times beyond racial norms. But it's not happening to everyone. It seems that Terrans who have the most sensitivity to simsense, you know, the ones that have to set their limiters at the highest setting, they're the ones that are being affected by the third gen rigs the most. The rigs are increasing their reflexes and hand eye coordination, almost as if the third gen simsense is training Terran brains in ways that cause them to lower their RTS time.”

He looked at her, then looked at the graph again. “I...guess that would be possible,” he said hesitantly. “But I haven't seen any evidence of simsense lowering RTS times.”

“Moleculartronic no, but we’ve known for a while that biogenic simsense can decrease RTS time. That’s why the KMS instituted simsense training into the training regimen, to help soldiers develop their reflexes in realistic simulations.”

“Oh. And this is only happening to certain people?”

“Yes, those most compatible with simsense, at least for third gen moleculartronic rigs,” she nodded.

“Have you done any sims to see if it’s dangerous or harmful?”

“I’ve done some preliminary tests, but nothing conclusive yet. Jason, this isn’t necessarily a bad thing.”

“I know. There’s nothing *bad* about allowing people to achieve their full potential, even if it’s something like an unexpected side effect of a simsense rig. It sure helped this Kevin Ball guy when he was accosted by that man with the knife. Dig a little more, Cyvanne. Find out who’s been affected the most, how much they’ve been affected, and try to track down exactly why some people are more susceptible than others.” He looked at her. “Does it show any effect in the game?”

“With this guy, yes. Kevin Ball is one of my most unique players, Jason. I have a personal interest in him.”

“Why is that?”

“He plays the game completely solo, and he’s the only player in all of CO that plays solo at the level that he does. That makes him unique,” she answered. “He just recently revealed that he plays the way he does as part of a challenge to himself to see how far a player can get in CO completely solo, and this guy has accomplished more than I thought any solo player ever would. He can kill overworld boss monsters solo. He’s even cleared twelve *dungeons* completely solo. And despite him playing solo, he’s one of the most powerful characters on his server. He’s so strong that he qualified as the Champion on his server, beating out the *raiders*. His gear lags well behind the other Champions because he doesn’t raid or do current content dungeons, but his skills are so high that it more than makes up for it. He has a sword skill of almost *three thousand*,” she told him.

“Seriously?” he asked. The Champions were added into the game with the last content patch. There was one of each race on a server, and it was the most powerful player of that race on that server. The Champions had access to exclusive quests and gear and were currently doing an epic questline called the Grand Crusade, which Cyvanne told him was going to affect the game world in a very direct way when it was completed. The end result of the Grand Crusade was going to cause some major changes in the game world, but she wouldn’t tell him what they were going to be. When it came to the game, Jason was a player, not the Grand Duke Karinne, and she never spoiled anything.

He could see why this Kevin Ball could handle the Grand Crusade. He’d never heard of *anyone* having a skill at or over three thousand, in any skill. Anywhere in the game. If it was that high, good God, this guy had to be an absolute wrecking ball, because of how skills worked in the game. A weapon wasn’t the main source of a player’s damage, it was the player’s skill. The weapon did modify that damage, the better the weapon the greater the modifier, but the base damage was calculated using the player’s weapon skill or spellcasting skill and his physical or mental stats, depending on the attack used. But a high skill in a melee weapon or unarmed combat mattered not just for the damage, but also because it gave the player many more opportunities to deal damage in a fight. Just as a master fencer could score points at will against a neophyte, someone with a sword skill that high could all but toy with anyone with a much lower skill. With a skill that high, this guy would be a viable threat to nearly any other player with nothing but a butter knife. And if this guy had a sword with even a moderately decent damage rating to pair with that skill...*holy shit*. He’d be like that character in that South Park episode about *World of Warcraft*, the bad guy running around in nothing but his underwear and using a crappy little dagger that could one-shot anyone in the game. Only a raider would have the gear and skills to hold his own against this guy.

In Citadel Online, skills were *much* more important than gear.

If his skill was that high in the game, no wonder he could use that skill so well in the real world.

“Look into this, Cyvanne, and look into this Kevin Ball. Try to find out just how much of the skills he learned in the game he can use in real life. If

his sword skill inside the game is three thousand, damn, he could take on Zorro in the real world. Just be discreet.”

“I already am,” she nodded. “I’m keeping an eye on him, but it’s not easy. He’s a recluse and an introvert.”

“I just wonder how the hell he got it so high,” Jason mused. “I’ve seen the hardcore players, the ones who play the game for a living by streaming their gameplay, and most of them don’t have skills much over two thousand.”

“Lone Wolf,” she replied. “He has Lone Wolf. And he’s had it for nearly eighteen months.”

“Holy shit, seriously?” Jason asked, giving her a surprised look. “If he has that, no wonder he plays completely solo. Lone Wolf doesn’t work if he’s in a group.” Lone Wolf was an Ancient Skill that one acquired as loot from beating a boss monster, and it was almost mythical in the game. It was, by far, the *hardest* skill to acquire in the game, even more difficult to get than a Legendary skill, because of what you had to do to make the skill drop. It only dropped from overworld boss monsters, and the only way you could get it was to kill that overworld boss monster *by yourself*. And boss monsters were designed to require a large, well-balanced group to take down. You had to kill the boss completely solo, no other player could help in any way. If they did, it removed Lone Wolf from the possible loot the boss would drop. And even if you did kill the boss solo, the drop rate for Lone Wolf was estimated by most resource sites at .05%. So it was an ultra-rare Ancient Skill that would only drop if a player pulled off one of the hardest things to do in the game, kill an overworld boss monster solo.

If this guy had Lone Wolf...*wow*. Just...*wow*. He was the only player Jason had ever heard of that had it.

Lone Wolf, as its name implied, only worked when someone was solo, and what it did was increase the chance the player had of his skills increasing when he was using them...the higher the Lone Wolf skill, the higher the bonus to getting a skill-up while using a skill while solo. If you were grouped, Lone Wolf went inactive until you were solo again. It was, by far, the most overpowered skill in the game, for a simple reason; at the very high end of the skill curve, the bonus from Lone Wolf to getting skill-

ups really, really mattered. Once you got a skill over 1,000, the chance of it increasing through use dropped almost exponentially, forcing you to spend experience points on it to raise it at a steady pace. And if this guy had never grouped with anyone, ever, and he'd had Lone Wolf for a year and a half, then he'd had all that time to increase his skills with the boost from Lone Wolf...no wonder his sword skill was so insanely high. Hell, all his skills must be insanely high. Unlike virtually every other player in the game, he didn't have to spend XP to raise his skills once he got them over 1,000, Lone Wolf was granting him skillups during the course of gameplay, which caused his skills to go up much faster than anyone else.

Since Jason played by himself so much, he really, *really* wanted to get Lone Wolf. It would let him skill up much faster in the limited time he had to play. That was why he knew so much about it; he'd looked into how to get the skill after hearing about it from another player.

"Well, that explains it," he mused, looking at her. "I didn't think anyone had Lone Wolf."

"It's not *that* rare," she said defensively. "Nearly thirty thousand players have it."

"Out of what, a *billion*? You're a computer Cyvanne, why don't you tell me what the percentage is of players that have that skill?" he asked caustically.

"If this is you trying to guilt trip me into making me increase the drop rate, keep trying, Jayce," she replied smugly.

"Now I'm going to get it just to spite you," he retorted, which made her laugh. "If this guy can kill overworld boss monsters solo, so can I. I'll just keep trying until I get it."

"Oh really," she drawled, giving him a wicked little smile.

"Yes, really. And I'll do some of your work by getting some advice from the source, which should tell us more about this guy," he replied. "So you're going to bend the rules a little bit and do me a favor."

"And what is that?"

"Copy Blackfang onto the server this guy plays on so I can talk to him in game, that way he doesn't know who I am."

“I’ve already tried that with in-game characters. He’s a paranoid introvert, Jayce, he doesn’t talk to anyone except like three people, he sees all other players as potential enemies. But we can use one of them to get in with him. He’s friends in game with Captain Mikano Strongblade’s sister.”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah, her name is Sano, and she works for the Federation News Network on Terra, so she plays on a Terran server. If we approach Mikano about it, maybe she can get Sano to introduce us to him inside the game. That’ll be about the only way we’re going to get anywhere with him. I’ve looked up his records in the Terran database, and he’s got some serious issues. He’s a farm survivor, Jayce, and he served on a farm longer than any other Terran that’s still alive. Three years and six months,” she said grimly. “He’s got several PTSD symptoms, the biggest of which is a phobia of Faey. Something happened on that farm that psychologically scarred him for life. And that’s on top of the physical scars.”

She put up a hologram over the desk, showing the ID photo of one Kevin Bartholomew Ball. He was an average looking man, looked to be in his thirties, but what dominated the picture was the deep, angry scar that went across the left side of his face, starting just under his middle of his left eye and running at an angle across his cheek, ending under and behind his left ear, down on his neck. Jason almost shuddered to think what could have caused it, and how much pain it would have caused; for it to be that long and at that angle, whatever cut his face must have hit his cheekbone. Most people had scars like that removed by the Medical Service, but he had not.

It wasn’t the only scar. Jason nearly gasped when she put up Medical Service archive photos of him, and his body was *covered* in scars. They were all over him, from the tops of his feet to his hairline, and the worst of them were on his torso, both his front and his back. He had an absolutely savage scar on his back that went all the way across at the middle of his shoulder blades, that looked to have been so deep that it must have cut through both his scapula’s and his spine...an injury he probably only survived because of the skill of the Medical Service. His body was a brutal testament to the abject cruelty that he and the other farm workers had faced when the Trillanes were in control of Terra and seeing him made him furious at the Trillanes all over again.

“Why is he suffering from PTSD symptoms? He should have free access to psychiatric care!”

“He won’t go to them, because the doctors they send him to are *Faey*,” she replied. “Faey have all but supplanted Terrans in just about every medical field on Terra, Jayce. When the Medical Service took over, they more or less yanked the license of every Terran doctor. Since he has to go to a Faey to get help, he won’t go. He hasn’t even shown up for his annual check-up for six years.”

“They weren’t supposed to do that. They were supposed to absorb the Terran medical workers into the Medical Service.”

“They did on paper, but when it came time for the Terran doctors to get their Medical Service credentials, the vast majority of them were rejected. The Medical Service made them go to Faey medical school to get them back, and most Terrans wouldn’t do it. You know Faey, Jayce. They don’t like other races encroaching into territory they believe to be theirs. Even after nearly twelve years since the order to absorb Terran doctors, Faey still dominate the Medical Service on Terra. Very few Terrans go into the medical profession anymore.”

An old memory of Doc Northwood flitted through his mind, how he was sent to a farm because of a disagreement with a Faey doctor. But that was supplanted by a more sober thought...what Kevin Ball must have gone through. Nearly four years on a farm, the longest-serving surviving farm worker from the subjugation. No wonder he had psychological issues, even after fourteen years.

It struck him. If he looked that young now, he must have just been a *kid* when they threw him onto that farm.

Dear God.

“Alright, the most obvious question. If the Medical Service knows he has problems with Faey, why do they keep trying to assign him Faey doctors?”

“That’s a good question, and one I can’t answer,” she replied. “The files I have access to do make note of his phobia of Faey, but his medical history is filled with doctors with Faey names. It’s like they don’t care that he’s terrified of his doctor. And that’s very much unlike the Medical Service.”

“Yes it is,” he agreed soberly. “Talk to Songa. She has access to parts of the Medical Service mainframe you don’t. Ask her to make a few inquiries.”

“I will,” she nodded. “And I’ll copy Blackfang over to his server. It’s Methrian on the Terran server cluster. I won’t even have to change your race, because you’ll be on the same faction as him. He plays a human in game. I’ll add the ability to connect to Terran servers to your main vidlink, so you need to connect through it to get there.”

“Alright. But I get to keep anything I get on Methrian,” he said quickly. “You mirror that over to my real character.”

“Fine,” she said, almost against her will, giving him a sulky look.

“You’re going to be *so* depressed when I finally beat you at this little game you play, girl,” he threatened, which made her laugh.

“I don’t torment you in game because I’m mad at you. I do it because it’s fun,” she winked. That was the truth. Since Cyvanne had admin access, she could do little things like spawn boss monsters on top of him or alter the game’s topography to create giant pits under his feet, or alter his gear, skills, and stats. She seemed to take perverse pleasure in messing with him, from the childishly obvious to the subtly obscure, and he put up with it mainly because there wasn’t much else he could do outside of pull her plug. But he could admit, she was fair about it. She always fixed everything after she was done pranking him, and she did apologize from time to time in the form of special pieces of loot or neat little toys. She never gave him anything that would affect gameplay or give him an unfair advantage, so her gifts were more whimsical than practical. But he did appreciate them, she’d given him some very nifty little toys and trinkets over the last couple of years that were a whole lot of fun to use.

This...disturbed him. He looked at the pictures of Kevin Ball and felt like he’d failed the man. There were laws, rules, very specific policies about how those farm worker survivors were supposed to be treated, and it sounded like they weren’t being followed. He used his access to Terra’s computer system and brought up the government file on him, and that made him frown even more. He worked for a Faey company, which was a little odd given he had a phobia of Faey, but he lived a lower middle-class

lifestyle...and that was *wrong*. The monetary settlement that he received from the Trillanes should have allowed him to retire and live off the interest for the rest of his life, yet he worked something of a dead end job and lived in an efficiency apartment in one of the poorer sections of Jacksonville, Florida. He had no access to his financial situation, because he banked at a Moridon bank and there was no way he was getting information like that from the Moridon, not without all but declaring war on them and physically forcing them at gunpoint to hand it over. The Moridon took the privacy of their customers *deadly* seriously.

No former farm worker should be living like that. Jason instituted very strict rules when he had control of Terra that ensured that all farm workers would be cared for for the rest of their lives.

“I think I’m going to do some digging of my own,” he said in a quiet tone, rippling with undertones of anger. “Kim should be taking care of men like Kevin Ball, and it’s clear that he’s not. I doubt it’s his fault, but there’s a failure somewhere in the U.N. system that allowed Ball to slip through the cracks, and I’m *not* going to let that continue,” he declared strongly. “After what those men and women went through, no. They deserve more than to be cast aside and forgotten. Excuse me a second.” *Aya*.

Yes, Jason?

I need to go to Terra tomorrow afternoon. Get everything ready.

I’ll arrange it. Where are you going?

I’ll start in New York, but I’m not sure where I’m going from there, it’ll depend on what I find out. So be ready for me to go just about anywhere.

Alright.

[Chirk.]

[Yes, revered Hive-leader?]

[I’m taking an unscheduled trip to Terra tomorrow to deal with something that just came to my attention. I’ll be leaving after the cabinet meeting. Reschedule my appointments for the day after tomorrow and leave my schedule open for a day or two after that. I’m not sure when I’ll be back.]

[I will have a new schedule ready for you in the morning.]

[Thank you, Chirk. Sirri.]

[Yeah, Uncle Jason?]

[Afraid I have to cancel the runs tomorrow. Something came up, I have to go to Terra tomorrow afternoon.]

[Aww, okay. But when you get back, we're going.]

[That's a promise.] “Send me anything you dig up over the night and I’ll look it over in the morning,” he told Cyvanne.

“Will do,” she nodded. “I’ll run some more tests on other players so I can get a broader view of who’s being affected by third gen, so we can isolate what qualities it is about those people that allows the simsense to affect them. I’ll bring Songa in on it, we’ll have something to show you in a couple of days.”

“Sounds good,” he nodded.

He did some more research for the rest of the afternoon on Kevin Ball, the effect of third gen simsense on people, and the overall policies and practices of the Terran government concerning farm survivors, then he went home and got a head start on his final commitment of the day. He was sitting in the passenger seat of his smallest skimmer, a four-seat model not much unlike the Thrynne he’d bought, supervising as Aria started up the skimmer and got it ready for leaving the atmosphere. He’d taught her the procedures for space flight already, and this was her first chance to put that training into practice.

“Alright, what else do you have to do, Aria?” he asked her.

“Umm...I have to call control, since space above Karis is restricted,” she replied as she sealed the skimmer’s hatches and pressurized the cabin.

“Right. You have your flight plan locked into your nav?”

“Yup. That means I can call control, right?”

“Right. So go ahead.”

“Karsa control, this is skimmer KR-31, requesting flight plan approval.”

“*Skimmer KR-31, Karsa control. Accessing flight plan.*” She didn’t have to wait long, as Karsa air traffic control accessed the skimmer’s nav computer and checked its flight plan. “*Flight plan approved,*” came the response. “*No restrictions over Karsa airspace at this time. Traffic along planned vector is moderate to heavy, so expect traffic.*”

“Understood. KR-31 out. Like that, Dad?”

“Very good, pips. You ready to take off?”

“I think so.”

“There’s no *think so* when it comes to piloting a skimmer, Aria,” he warned seriously. “You either know you’re ready, or you’re *not* ready. Guessing can get you killed. Don’t ever forget that.”

She glanced at him. “Then I’d better make sure I’m ready.”

“Smart girl.”

They were in the air about a minute later, and Jason watched as Aria flew them on a shallow ascent angle out over the ocean, then ultimately out into space. She then switched her grav engine from atmosphere mode to vector mode, where the engine only engaged to make course corrections, allowing the skimmer to drift on its own momentum whenever applicable. The funny thing was, she didn’t *have* to learn how to fly vector-based using a translation engine, it operated exactly the same either in an atmosphere or in space. However, a pilot had to be able to fly using vector mode to pass a Class 3, since not *every* skimmer on Karis had a translation engine in it. There were still differential grav engines on Karis, mostly skimmers and dropships that new citizens brought with them when they moved here. And since they were available on planet, a pilot had to be able to use them to get a Class 3.

“Okay, this is harder than flying around the city,” she said, watching a Stick carrying four cargo pods carefully, that was about three kathra in front of them. It was also headed for Kosigi, no doubt carrying parts and materials for the scout ships they were building. Now that the Naval expansion was complete, Kosigi had shifted its production to KES scout ships, both standard research models and Vanguard models. They’d also started construction on a third class of ship that was much smaller, about twice the size of a corvette, that was strictly meant for star charting and

initial evaluation missions. The ship would chart the interior of a star system and conduct initial sensor sweeps of its interior to look for anything promising to investigate further. The procedure would be for a mapping ship to go in first and chart the area, conduct long-range sensor scans, then send those data to the research ships to allow them to choose systems to explore. The mapping ships would only have a crew of six, which would allow them to field a ton of them and would naturally be equipped with some fearsome defensive systems to protect them out there. However, they would *not* be equipped with translight drives. Mapping ships would be towed in by other ships, carried in a Vanguard, which had sufficient landing bay space to carry 16 mapping ships in addition to their usual complement of Nova fighters, or carried in KES exploration super-ships, the first of which would be ready in about seven months.

“What’s the rule out here?” he asked.

“The bigger ship has right of way,” she replied. “And since I’m just a little skimmer, I yield to just about everybody.”

“Very good,” he nodded. “When do you start decelerating?”

“Before I enter Kosigi’s gravity well.”

“Good. Do you have to call Kosigi control?”

“Of course I do, they have to give me permission to land,” she replied, a bit tartly.

“Just making sure you remember,” he said lightly.

She made a face at him.

Jason explained things and gave her some pointers as they spent a leisurely hour cruising to Kosigi, then he had her land in one of the corvette landing bays...and *that* made her nervous. Much like the landing bays on super-ships, those landing bays were below the surface, so she had to descend through the outer door and down a short tunnel of sorts to reach the main bay beneath. She landed them a bit harder than normal—she *was* new at this—but did just fine otherwise. He then had her take off and return home, but this time they took a much longer circular route around the planet, teaching her orbital dynamics and how to orbit a planet to reach a specific landing point.

It was while they were in a low orbital track, circling the planet to reach their entry vector to get them back home, that Jason decided to broach the subject with her. “Sirri told me that you’ve been having an omen dream, my little treasure,” he said.

“She did? That rat! I told her not to say anything!” she blurted angrily.

“She did the right thing, so don’t be mad at her,” he told her. “Aria, whether you’re seeing something good or something bad, it helps to let us know about it,” he told her gently. “That way we can either prepare for it or we can try to change the outcome.”

“But that’s just it, Dad, I don’t *know* what it means. The dream ends before I see what happens!” she said, looking at him. “I can’t tell if it’s good or bad or what! That’s why I didn’t want to tell you, because it would just make you worry about something that may not mean anything. It’s not the first time one of my omen dreams has been over nothing.”

“They’re over what’s important to you, Aria,” he said, putting his hand on her wrist. “And who won your school science competition *mattered* to you.”

“It almost felt like I was cheating,” she said, her cheeks flushing a bit.

“Your dream told you that what you had wasn’t good enough to win, so you put in way more effort,” he replied with a smile. “And guess what? It paid off.”

“I only got third place,” she said in a low growl.

“That’s better than fourth, and we were proud of you for it, you were up against some serious competition,” he told her. “But what matters here, pips, is that you should never feel like you *shouldn’t* tell us about a dream. I’d much rather find about it early than find out about it late, even if it doesn’t mean anything.”

“But this one *means something*,” she told him, the words tumbling out of her, exposing her prior statement as the evasion it was. “The way it feels, the way I feel when I wake up, Dad, it means something important. But I don’t know what. I wake up before the dream ends, every time, and I always feel a cold dread inside me. But I don’t know *why*. I don’t know if you’re supposed to fight, or if fighting is the wrong choice. I don’t

understand what the dream is saying, but I know that if I tell you the wrong thing, that something bad will happen. So I didn't want to say anything at all."

"You say the dream scares you?"

"Every time," she said, looking at him with earnest eyes. "I wake up wanting to scream, and I'm so upset I have to use the sleep inducer to get back to sleep. But I've been leaving it off at first to have the dream, hoping that I can see how it ends so I can try to understand what it means, so I know what to tell you."

"Alright. That helps," he said, leaning back in his seat and crossing his arms, his brow furrowed in thought. "I think you and me need to take a trip to Tir Tairngire, my little treasure. We should talk to the Elders there, maybe they can give us some advice on how you can see the rest of the dream, so you can try to interpret its meaning."

"I...I wasn't sure if I should. But if you think so, Dad, then we can."

"The world is a heavy burden, Aria, it's easiest to carry when you have help," he told her. "You think I run the House by myself? Think again. I have *tons* of people helping me, and I couldn't do this job without them. You should never feel ashamed over asking for help, Aria, not when it *matters*."

"Alright. Then can we go to Tir Tairngire tomorrow?"

"I can't go tomorrow, I have something going on over on Terra. But we'll go as soon as I get back, okay? That'll give you a couple more days to try to discover the meaning of the dream by yourself. I want to give you that chance."

She gave him a look of relief and gratitude, understanding that he was telling her that he trusted her enough to try on her own. Unfortunately, one thing she'd learned from Jyslin and the strip girls was Faey pride. "I've been trying my best to see the end of the dream, but I've had no luck so far."

"It's entirely possible that what you've seen *is* the end of the dream, pips," he said absently. "Maybe events haven't developed enough yet for you to see the outcome. But that's something the elders can help us with

when we go see them,” he added, looking over at her. “But either way, pippy, it’s going to be okay. We’ll find out what the dream means, and if it’s a warning, then we’ll do what we need to do to make sure it doesn’t happen.”

“Okay. Thanks, Dad,” she said, leaning over and patting him on the leg. “That makes me feel better.”

“You’re welcome. And don’t be mean to Sirri.”

“I guess I won’t. But I’m still gonna get her for breaking her promise to keep it secret.”

“Just don’t get too exotic. I don’t want Dahnai over here looking to beat you up.”

“I think I can take Aunt Dahnai,” she said with a sly grin.

“I’ll let you set off that bear trap on your own. When I’m nowhere near you,” he said dryly, which made her laugh.

Chapter 6

Chiira, 2 Shiaa, 4408, Faey Orthodox Calendar

Thursday, 7 July 2022 Terran Standard Calendar

Chiira, 2 Shiaa, year 1333 of the 97th Generation, Karinne Historical Reference Calendar

Sao Paolo, Brazil, Terra

There was something dirty going on here on Terra, and he was going to get to the bottom of it.

Right now, the state of the offices of the U.N. up in New York could be best described as in a raw panic. He hadn't announced his arrival, not even to Kim, and instead of just going to his office and leaving like he usually did, he instead started poking around the offices that dealt with the surviving farm workers. He demanded access to their computers, he dug through their files and records, and the more he discovered, the angrier he got. By the time he left the office, virtually everyone that could run had done so, fleeing for imaginary appointments or sudden summons to other offices, and those poor souls that were forced to remain got to see a side of Jason that very few people got to see

And those few that had seen that side of him never wanted to see it again.

Simply put, the rules and policies concerning the farm workers had *not* been followed. And on top of that, Jason heavily suspected that someone in the U.N. was diverting the money meant for the programs to help those workers and pocketing it, because he sure as hell couldn't find it. Even after fourteen years, there were still 21 different programs meant to help farm worker survivors, from ongoing psychological care to job training assistance to an entire office devoted to helping those people with any problem they might have, no matter how minor. The budgets for those

offices were on the ledgers in the accounting files as going to the Department of Farm Management, which had jurisdiction over current and former farm workers, but it mysteriously vanished in a complex tangled web of deposits, transfers, and expenditures before it got to the people that needed it most.

Someone was stealing that money, and it had to be someone high up in the department, someone that could dictate policy to his underlings to make them stop running programs for which money was being allotted in the budget, then conceal the fact that those programs weren't active from the auditors..

And it wasn't just in the U.N. Something decidedly *sinister* was hiding within the records of the Terra Medical Service. This morning, Songa had tried to access files on Kevin Ball from the time he worked on the farm, and she found them locked behind a top secret "eyes only" flag, which earned her a personal and very heated call from the Director of the Medical Service herself, Banlia Sodarre. She was *the boss* of the Medical Service. Eyes Only was the highest security clearance that the Medical Service employed, and for them to lock the medical file of a Terran behind it...that was *suspicious*. It was the *only* security clearance that Songa did not have, because only people who worked on Terra who had authorization and those in the main Medical Service HQ on Draconis could access those files. Songa couldn't see those files, but she *could* find out how many other patients had that flag on their files...and what do you know, all of them were farm worker survivors from the subjugation. The Medical Service was hiding what happened to those people during the subjugation, and that was almost unheard of. The Medical Service had such a pristine reputation that the idea that they did *anything* that would necessitate them covering it up afterward was nearly unthinkable.

But there was something there, and it was something that the Medical Service was trying to bury. But they weren't going to keep it hidden when someone with Jason's resources wanted it. Just two hours ago, he sicced Miaari on them, and he figured she'd completely own the Medical Service's computer system within the hour. While she was working on that, he had Siyhaa combing through the U.N.'s computer system and database trying to track down just exactly where and how that money was disappearing, and where it was going once it left the U.N. system. Siyhaa was the better

choice for that because she might need to track money through a Moridon bank, and Brayrak Kruu would do Siyhaa a favor that he'd never do for Miaari.

The Moridon were many things, but they were *not* criminals. They had hardcore client protection and privacy policies, but they did not *ever* touch money they knew was dirty. If Brayrak found out that someone in the Moridon financial system was laundering money, he'd have an apoplectic meltdown, and the dreaded Standards and Practices Oversight Commission would be all over the offending bank. On Moridon, money laundering was a crime that potentially carried the *death penalty*.

There was little more he could do in that area for now, so he was here in Brazil to work on the problem from another angle. He'd called Mikano and had her arrange a meeting with her sister Sano, and Jason was over the city in the heavy cruiser *Ovellar* along with two frigate escorts, heading for a café near her apartment where they were going to meet; Shio custom prohibited him from visiting her apartment, because one never visited the house of a young, single Shio of either gender that one didn't know unless it was a matter of grave importance, and Jason didn't feel that this met that threshold. And while she may not follow that old tradition, Jason was sensitive to the cultural norms of others. It would have been entirely improper to even *ask* to meet at her apartment. Sano Strongblade worked for the Federation News Network as a video content editor, she was one of the people that created video clips and graphics that news channels used for their pieces. She'd lived on Terra since the Shio evacuated to the planet during the Consortium War, one of the Shio that never went back to the Federation. Jason had brought up a picture of her, and he could definitely see the resemblance to Mikano. Her features were a little sharper than her older sister and her hair a different color, but the general facial structure was the same...and that made her just as pretty as Mikano.

Mikano...she was fully settled into her new command. Two months ago, she'd been transferred off the *Javelin* and had taken command of the *Defiant*. Much as she excelled as the captain of the most prestigious frigate in the fleet, both Jason and Juma felt it was time for her to start working her way up the chain by taking command of a larger ship. She'd jumped completely over destroyers and was instead assigned to the most prestigious cruiser in the fleet, and as soon as she fulfilled her mandatory minimum

time commanding the cruiser, she'd move up to one of the larger ships. Given her skillset, Jason felt she'd do quite well on a battleship. And lucky for him, Juma felt the same. So, in about eight months or so, she'd jump over heavy cruisers and take command of a flag-level vessel.

It was not unusual in the slightest for the captain of the *Defiant* to jump straight to a flag-level command. If someone commanded the *Defiant*, that meant that they were on the fast track in the first place.

He caused a bit of a row in the crowded streets on the outskirts of downtown Sao Paolo when the three warships slowed to a hover about ten thousand shakra above the city, and Jason exited the port forward landing bay in a U.N. hovercar. His usual complement of four guards was with him along with Aya, Aya and Dera in the hovercar and the others flying escort in Centurion exoframes, which was probably the first time that Terran civilians had seen them. Jason would have preferred not to have the military escort, but Aya was being Aya, and he didn't feel like fighting her over it, especially with her *right there* to countermand any orders he made to leave the hardware behind. They landed in a parking lot beside the café, and the three Centurions took up a protective triangle around Jason's hovercar, protecting it until he returned.

Besides, he had to admit...the Centurions were *so fucking cool*. Where most exomechs looked cool despite being designed along purely practical lines as a requirement to perform their mission, Centurions just looked awesome for the sake of looking awesome. They could have looked much less aesthetic and more practical, but whoever did the final exterior design thankfully added some flair to the unit to make it look both intimidating and *cool*.

A crowd formed around the three exoframes, which suited Jason just fine, because it kept them from following him into the café. It had several Shio sitting at tables, along with a Shio greeter, and he smiled and greeted him, speaking fluent Shio. That made him smile and escort him and Aya to a table, where they waited for Mikano's sister to arrive. She did so about five minutes later, and Jason would have recognized her even without seeing her picture...she was a shorter, younger version of Mikano, just with different colored hair. She recognized him as well, giving him a surprised

look as she was directed to his table. “Y-Your Grace,” she said in Faey, not sure if she should bow. “Mikki didn’t say I’d be meeting *you!*”

“I told her not to,” Jason replied in Shio, motioning for her to sit. “Sorry to intrude so suddenly, Sano, but I need your help with something.”

“Mine? Why me, your Grace?”

“Just Jason will do,” he told her with a smile. “And it has to do with someone you know in the game you play. Xen.”

She gave him a long look, then she gasped. “You’re going to help him!”

“I’m here to find out what the hell is going on,” he answered. “There’s something wrong with the system I put in place to assist the surviving farm workers. They’re not getting the help they’re supposed to. And since you have a connection to one of them, I decided it would be best to start with you and your friend. But I’m surprised you’d make that connection so quickly.”

“I can tell he’s...he’s still in pain, over what happened to him. So is Rita,” she replied. “We’ve talked face to face before, and those scars on him —” she shuddered. “I don’t see how anyone could be right after that. But he told me that the government doesn’t care about him, or others like him. I hope you’re here to fix that.”

“You bet I am,” he declared strongly, which made her smile. “Who is Rita?”

“She’s another farm worker that plays the game. She goes by Emelda in the game,” she replied. “The three of us have been doing some quests together.”

“The Grand Crusade quests?”

She flushed a bit. “Yes,” she replied. “I’m the Savasa champion. I’m surprised you know about those.”

[Cyvanne, you hear that?]

[Sure did.]

{Track down who Emelda is. She’s also a surviving farm worker,} he communed back to Karis.

[Rita Estobar, lives in El Paso, Texas,] she answered. [I've already got her file.]

[Send it to my gestalt. If I have time, I'll swing by there and talk to her.]

[On its way.]

“I helped test the game in the alpha and closed beta stage,” he admitted. “It’s a product of a Karinne software company, and I pulled a few strings to get into the testing. I thought the game looked very fun.”

“Oh, I didn’t know that.”

“I’d be surprised if you did. Anyway, to get to the point of the matter, Sano, I need your help.”

“How so, your—Jason?”

“I’m trying to get an idea of how much help Xen has gotten since he left the farms, but he shuts down as soon as anyone he doesn’t know tries to talk to him,” he replied. “So, we decided to try talking to him in his own territory, as it were. So, what I want you to do is to set up a meeting, introduce him to me inside the game. We think that if it comes from someone he knows and trusts, he’ll be more willing to talk.”

“I can do that, but we’ll have to be careful,” she answered. “I know him very well, Jason, and he’s very...skittish. If he thinks I’m intruding into the parts of his life he keeps secret, he’ll never talk to me again.”

“I fully understand that, that’s why we’re doing it this way,” he replied. “I’m not going to hide who I am, and we have another reason we want to talk to him. That way he doesn’t think we’re meddling.”

“What is that?”

“Third Gen simsense is having an interesting effect on some people,” he told her. “The skills they’re learning in the game, they’re able to use them in real life, at least skills that don’t rely on the game’s physics engine. About a week ago, someone tried to mug Xen, and a security camera caught it. He laid the guy out using the fighting skills he learned inside the game. He looked like a professional martial artist,” he explained.

“Really? He never told me he got attacked!”

“He’s not the kind of person that would say anything,” Jason told her.

“True. True,” she nodded after thinking a brief moment.

“So, we also want to talk to him about that, see if he’s been able to use any of the other game skills in the real world,” Jason continued. “Hopefully, after I get to know him better, he’ll talk to me about the other things I want to know.”

“You?”

“I have a personal interest in making sure the people who survived the farms are properly cared for,” he replied strongly. “If you don’t remember, I led the rebellion against the Trillanes over what they were doing to my people. If he’s been mistreated by the people I put in place to help the survivors, then heads are going to roll,” he growled vehemently. “I promised those men and women they’d be cared for the rest of their lives. They’re not going to be forgotten just because it’s been fourteen years since the farms were liberated.”

She gave him a highly approving look. “You might want to talk to his real-life friend, too. Mrima, I think her name is. They work in the same company. She was just transferred to Norfolk, but they still talk every day.”

“I already have an appointment with her,” he answered. “I have a meeting at the Academy later today, and I’ll stop by and talk to her before I attend it.”

“Good. Your Grace...thank you. Thank you so much for helping Xen,” she said earnestly. “He’s a very dear friend, and it hurts me to see him hurting.”

He took her hands, which was somewhat forward in Shio culture. “I promise you, Sano, I’m going to do everything I can for him. And I’m in a position to do an awful lot,” he said with a gentle smile. “I’ve had the game devs create a character for me on Methrian, one with some trained skills and equipment so I don’t look like a complete newbie. The character’s name is Blackfang, and he’s a Jagaara.”

“On Xen’s faction.”

He nodded. “That should make it much easier for me to arrange a meeting with him, since I can enter Golden Lion territory without being

attacked. I'm going to send your interface a contact number that you can use to let me know when and where to meet him. The next time you talk to Xen, arrange a meeting with me, then let me know."

"I will. We're supposed to meet at his house in-game tonight after we get off work, us and Rita. We're preparing for the big final battle of the Grand Crusade. I can talk to him about it then."

"You're already at the end of it?" he asked in surprise.

"Well, we're a small server, and not long after it started, all of us champions decided to suspend raiding and other activities and focus on the Grand Crusade," she answered. "With all of us working on it together, we managed to get through all the other quests."

"Well, I'm glad to see that there's a big epic battle at the end," he said with sincere eagerness. "The orc invasion last year was all kinds of fun."

Her eyes brightened. "You play the game?"

"When I have time, which isn't very often," he said with a rueful chuckle. "I helped test the game, and even then, I could see its potential. It was so much fun that I just moved over to live when the game was released. Couldn't keep my test character, though. That sucked."

"Well, give your devs a big raise, Jason. It's the most fun game ever."

"Shh, I don't want them getting egos even bigger than they have now," he said in a voice that made her burst out laughing. "I'm afraid I'm out of time, I need to be in Norfolk in an hour. The contact number should be messaged to your interface any second."

"I have it," she said, touching her interface.

"Alright, just contact that number when you arrange things with Xen. If I can't make it, I'll make sure to get a message to you."

"Alright. Thank you, Jason. I'm so glad someone's going to help Xen and Rita."

"It should never have come to this point," he said with a stony face. "And I'm going to make sure it never does again."

"Good."

After saying goodbye to Sano, he, Dera, and Aya returned to the hovercar, and Aya lifted them off. *That sounds like someone much more worried about someone than a friend would be*, Dera noted lightly.

Nothing wrong with that. Mikano said her sister is a total sweetheart, and she wasn't joking. This Xen guy better feel lucky a girl like her likes him that much. You pick up anything worth noting? I was closed off so I didn't make her uncomfortable.

Just that her concern for Xen goes beyond him being a friend, Aya answered. *Just don't mention it to her, she hasn't figured that out for herself yet. And she's outraged over what happened to him on the farm.*

Good, she has every right to be. Anyone with a conscience would be, he nodded. *And what is it about women that they can never understand their own feelings?* he asked, giving Aya a sly sidelong look.

Not Faey women, Dera retorted.

Well, yeah, but you guys are more like men than women anyway, he replied with deliberate flippantness.

Or perhaps it's Terran men that are more like Faey women? Aya replied with subtle snark in her thought.

Can't disagree with that. I've always wondered if that makes me a closet homosexual, he replied casually, which made both of them give him a double-take.

[Found out more on Emelda,] Cyvanne told him. *[And get this, her file is also flagged eyes only by the Medical Service.]*

[I'm not surprised,] he answered. *[Any word from Miaari on that?]*

[Not yet, she's still working on it.]

[Keep me informed.]

[You bet.]

Mrima Mrauriu was a typical Pai. She was tiny, she was adorable, and she was *damn smart*. She'd transferred to Norfolk to take over as supervisor of the accounting department in MM's Norfolk office, which put her right there by the Academy, where both of her kids were attending. That both of

her kids had won a spot to come to the Academy in person said how smart they were, and how well she raised them. Jason was intentionally vague about his visit to her because he didn't want Kevin Ball to get too worried that Jason was snooping into every aspect of his life, meeting with her during her lunch and asking her a few questions about him that she'd feel comfortable answering. But since she was Pai, she managed to unravel the real reason he was there pretty quick.

"Something went wrong, didn't it?" she asked after telling him a little about Kevin as a person.

"Something did. He should have never gotten to this point," he nodded. "There's a problem with the system I put in place to help the farm workers, and I'm going to fix it. But I'm also trying to determine how badly people like Kevin were hurt because of my mistake."

"Mistakes happen. It's how you fix them that truly counts," she said sagely.

"We'll see what it's going to take when I get an idea of the full extent of it," he grunted.

"I just hope he's okay down there," she sighed. "I was his only real friend, at least in the company. He's almost afraid of other people. I guess he saw me as non-threatening, since I'm Pai," she smiled up at him. "But he's a great kid. He has no business working that dead-end job, as smart as he is, he should be a manager, not a wage slave."

"He shouldn't need to work at all."

"That's one of the few things I got from him. He said that the settlement they got from the Trillanes only lasted about nine years," she told him. "After the money was gone, him and the others like him had to find work."

"That's not how it was supposed to work," he said firmly. "Farm survivors are supposed to get a check every month."

"I looked into it after Kevin told me how it works from his side," she said. "The survivor's fund is there, but from what I managed to dig up, only about a quarter of the people eligible for it actually get money from it. I tried to get more information, but the U.N. shut me out of their public archives."

Jason gave her a sharp look. “Do you have that data?”

“On my vidlink at home.”

“Can you send it to someone for me? I think it may help her with her investigation.”

“I’d be happy to.”

Instead of going to see Rita, he returned home and dug into some of the information Mrima pulled from the archives, and after cross-referencing it with what he took from the Department of Farm Management, he could see what was going on. The fund was still there, but what they were doing was kicking everyone off of the program they could, for the most flimsy and petty of reasons. The department had instituted a labyrinthine and convoluted bureaucracy that the farm survivors had to navigate to get their money and keep their payments coming, and that bureaucracy was designed to make them fail. It was specifically set up to keep as many people as possible from getting money from the department. They kicked people off for the tiniest mistake in their paperwork or a failure to file a form or answer a query, and once they were out of the system, it was virtually impossible to get back in.

But yet, from what Jason could dig up, the fund that paid those benefits steadily depleted at a rate that exceeded the number of beneficiaries... which meant that their payments were being stolen and redirected.

Good God, the corruption in that office was as audacious as it was intolerable. They were stealing that money right out from under the noses of the auditors. It was basic math, anyone that took even the most fleeting of looks at the books could see that they didn’t add up.

Unless the auditors were looking the other way on purpose.

He was nearly in meltdown territory by the time he finished digging through the U.N. budget, almost line by line, with Kumi. Kumi was a woman not afraid to do a little grifting herself, and she was especially adept at nosing it out...to make sure nobody in her department was pulling off scams except *her*. *Trelle’s nipples, these guys are so clumsy it’s ridiculous*, she sent, her thought tinged with dark amusement as they pored through files. *If they worked for me, I’d fire them for sheer incompetence. It’s like they’re not even trying to hide what they’re doing.*

They may not. There's a chance that the Department of Fiscal Oversight is part of this, Jason answered. The easiest way to hide something is to bribe the person who's supposed to find it to not look.

True enough, she nodded. But it can't be this blatant.

Keep in mind that we're looking at data the auditors won't have, he reminded her. It's the department that audits the survivors on its own rolls, and that's one of the fatal flaws in this system. The auditors are getting cooked books.

Yeah, but the flaw in the scam is that the payments have to go somewhere, and that's how we're gonna track this down.

I have Siyhaa running down that lead.

Yeah, good choice. She can call in a favor with the Moridon.

Exactly. He checked the time, then grunted. Hate to bail on you, but I have another appointment.

Aria?

Yeah, almost time to go. Sorry, babe.

No sweat, she needs you, she sent, giving him a smile and shooing him with a hand. Just let me know what the Elders say, okay?

You got it.

He met with Aria out on the landing pad, and she almost squealed with glee when he put her in the driver's seat of the skimmer and told her to get them up to the *Pegasus*. The fleet flagship was going to take them to Tir Tairngire, mainly just to give the ship something to do. It had just finished its shakedown cruise about a takir ago, and it had gone straight to picket duty at Karis, which meant they just sat around and did daily duty rotations and drills.

Jeya met them in the landing bay, kissing Jason on the cheek, then taking Aria's hands. "It's good to see you again. Dear Trelle, you're even taller than the last time I saw you!" she said, looking up at her with a smile and a laugh.

“I can’t help it, but I like it,” she replied. “It’s way more fun to be tall than short.”

“Tell me about it,” Jason agreed. “We ready to roll, Jeya?”

“In about five minutes,” she replied as a hologram winked into view beside her. The hologram was male, a tall, burly Dreamer in the pseudo-nude style with the legs fading to nothingness below the thighs. “I was wondering where you were off to, Coran.”

“*Apologies for the delay, Captain,*” he replied. Coran was only about four months old, having been installed in the *Pegasus* during its construction to give him some operational uptime before the ship was completed, so he’d had some time to develop some personality despite his ship only just being certified for active service. His personality indicated that he would be just fine as a CBMOM, because he was curious, astute, disciplined, and most importantly, he was very creative and tended to think outside the box. That kind of creativity was almost mandatory for a CBMOM, because they were the only CB-level biogenic units that saw combat, at least unless Karis itself was threatened. “*I was doing some trans-dimensional quantum equations that Cybi sent me. They are quite intriguing.*”

“Oh hell no, you don’t mention the words *trans-dimensional quantum equations* around me, Coran,” Jason warned in a voice that made Jeya laugh. “I tried those stage one equations Cyra sent to 3D, and I think my brain is still trying to recover from the shock.”

“*That you could do them at all is truly a testament to your mathematical skills, Jason,*” Coran replied in a voice that was equal parts complement and takedown. That was the other thing about Coran’s personality that Jason enjoyed...he was a bit of a scamp. Not Cyvanne levels of scamp, but he had a decided mischievous streak in him, a fact the crew had learned the hard way. He saw pranking the crew as a means to keep them on their toes, but thankfully he never did anything outrageous. His pranks were subtle, very subtle, the kind which make a person doubt reality for a moment before they figured it out. And that made him a perfect match with Jeya, because she needed a little chaos in her otherwise perfect life. Coran would keep her on her toes and grounded, while Jeya would put the discipline on him he needed.

“Oh hush and get us ready to go,” Jason told him, which made him smile a little.

“We do need to get going,” Jeya agreed. “Coran, if you would, get the ship ready while I escort Jason and Aria to the stateroom?”

“*Of course, Captain. The ship will be ready by the time you reach the bridge.*” [All active personnel report to duty stations,] his communique rippled across the ship.

About an hour later, Jason and Aria were easing down into the atmosphere, Aria flying the skimmer, as they headed for the city of Alaria. It was truly an engineering marvel, a multi-layered city where buildings were the foundations of platforms holding other buildings, and some of the buildings were almost fantastic in their design. Many of them looked outright impossible, relying on armor-quality materials to keep from falling over, and every building, platform, support, and spar was covered in colors. Flowers were planted everywhere, the platforms had dirt installed on them to form grassy parks and gardens, using artificial sunlight on the underside to keep those parts covered over well illuminated and the plants healthy. It created a very nearly surreal cityscape that was teeming with Dreamers. Alaria was a testament to the power of imagination, and it was built in a style that existed nowhere else Jason had ever seen.

There was a deeper meaning to all of it. The Dreamers’ power worked on metaphor, imagery, and the first city they built in the Promised Land was a symbolic representation of everything that the Dreamers were. The cityscape blended together to create images that provoked some part of Jason’s mind, making him see patterns within the shapes, images, that hinted to him of the future.

Coming here always evoked some feelings from him, because of the planet itself. He always felt welcome here, and he could hear the planet singing to him.

Over the last three years, Jason had not ignored the mystical side of himself. He’d spent many evenings in conversation with the *shaman*, learning from her, but he had yet to do anything but what he already knew that he could do. His ability to communicate using his heart was his strength, and in that regard, he had improved himself. He sometimes almost

felt he could hear Karis, in moments of deep peace and contemplation, but a planet like Tir Tairngire, who was healthy and strong, that was a voice he could comprehend with more and more clarity over the years.

The one thing he'd learned from that growth was that planets had very different minds than people. It was very hard to make out the meaning of the song that the planet sung to him, even after years of practice, and often he could only comprehend maybe an emotion, or a feeling. But what he did not deny was that Tir Tairngire wasn't just a ball of dirt and rock. There was something *conscious* about it, a consciousness that had very different motivations and goals than the tiny specks of life that lived upon it...but it wasn't the planet itself that was alive. The consciousness within Tir Tairngire wasn't the *planet*, it was a representation of all the life that lived upon it, unified into a single entity that had awareness, intelligence, and purpose. It was a mass consciousness that encompassed everything from bacteria to the Dreamers, but that awareness was anchored to the planet. It wasn't the planet, but it couldn't leave the planet. And all who were within the sphere of the collective consciousness of Tir Tairngire became a part of it, even visitors like Jason.

The *shaman* had a suitable metaphor for his concept of it. Her description was that when enough small lights were brought together, they shined as a single illumination where each point of light was lost in the glow of the others. That was how she described a living planet to him, as a single light formed from the lights of the souls of those who lived upon it. It sounded suspiciously like the Force to him, but he couldn't deny that her description and her beliefs matched up with his own experiences.

Though Jason hadn't really developed his abilities very far, he did feel that he would not be complete without them. His ability to communicate with most sentient life was one of his most cherished abilities, even over his Generation powers, because he considered it far, far more important to be able to *understand* others than it was to be able to melt their faces.

Aria landed them at the Hall of Reflection, which was the seat of power for the Dreamers. Their government was very loose and a little chaotic, where the Elders of the villages decided the direction of their people, and they did it from the Hall. There were thousands of Elders, so the place was usually very crowded, eternally noisy, and never boring...especially since

some Elders were a bit more forceful than others. But what unified all of them was the sense of peace and contentment that had washed over the Dreamers since they came to their Promised Land. Even though they may contend with each other, they were all very happy.

Jason had made an appointment to speak to the most experienced Elders when it came to omen dreams, and he and Aria met them in one of the many libraries in the compound. The Dreamers had brought all of their most important writings and books to this place, which represented every prediction and omen ever recorded, a place where Elders endlessly searched through thousands of shelves, seeking to understand the predictions and omens made in the past. And right along with them were several thousand Haumda priests and researchers, who had brought their own prophecies to Tir Tairngire for study. Nearly half of the libraries were filled with Haumda books, representing tens of thousands of years of predictions made by the Haumda priests of the past. The Dreamers and the Haumda had forged quite a unique and powerful bond over the years, based on their shared cultural connection to prophecy.

There were nearly twenty million Haumda living on Tir Tairngire, and they were welcome here by both the Dreamers and the Karinnes. Jason had told the Dreamers that this planet was theirs to do with as they will, and when they invited the Haumda to come live with them, Jason made sure it happened.

Though the Dreamers and the Haumda represented the largest numbers of people here, they weren't the only ones. The Dreamers allowed just about anyone to come to the Hall of Reflection and study, so just about every race in the Confederation was moving through the halls beyond the study where Jason and Aria were meeting the Elders.

The Dreamers had not shut themselves away from the rest of the universe, and it made Jason very happy to see it. So long as the Karinnes afforded Tir Tairngire military protection from those that would use the Dreamers the way the Syndicate had, they were quite happy to have visitors from other worlds to come to their Promised Land and learn about their prophecies and the Dreamers as a people.

“What you're asking isn't an easy thing, your Grace,” Elder Marat told him in the Dreamer's language. Five Elders sat across from them at a

massive table, many ancient tomes scattered across it. “The fact that the dream ends before Aria sees the conclusion is itself part of what she is predicting.”

“I don’t understand, Elder Marat,” Jason replied.

“Not every prediction follows a set path, your Grace,” Elder Kalu told him, her dark hair bouncing a bit as she bobbed her head. “What Aria describes is a choice that must be made, and without that choice, then there is no path for her to follow to see what happens next. This kind of prediction is not unheard of, but it is fairly rare. We call it a Crossroads Prophecy, a prophecy that warns of something momentous in the future, but whose ultimate conclusion is in doubt because no decision has been made to influence its direction.”

“What it means is that the future Aria sees cannot be predicted because there are two or more equally prescient paths that the future can take,” Elder Rovak said, the large man nearly a head over the other four Elders as they sat at the table. He was the oldest of the five, but also the largest and most spry. “As we near the events of her dream, its content may change if one of those choices becomes more likely than the others. But until that happens, your Grace, I regret to say that there is little that can be done. No other Dreamer has reported an omen dream similar to hers, so we don’t have a second opinion in the matter.”

“It is both a prophecy and an omen, your Grace,” Elder Vado said. “But until she sees more, or her dream changes, it’s an equal possibility of which it becomes.”

“Damn, I was hoping that you might have some way to help her see more of the dream,” he said, rubbing his jaw as he looked over at his adopted daughter. “So, she just has to keep an eye on the dream and see if it changes?”

“Exactly so, your Grace,” Marat nodded. “Aria, child, does this dream disturb you?”

“Very much so, Elder,” she replied. “It’s as if there’s a feeling of dread permeating it.”

“And you feel nothing else?”

“Not that I can remember, but to be honest, the dream upsets me enough to use the sleep inducer for the rest of the night,” she replied, a bit sheepishly. “When I wake up, I can’t get back to sleep again.”

“I know that the dream can be frightening, dear child, but if you want to protect your family, you must face it,” Rovak told her. “Each night, try to remember one more detail about the dream. How parts of it make you feel. Colors you see. Things in the background. Any one of them might offer you a clue as to its meaning and help you interpret it. Keep a journal of the dream, write down every detail you pick up, and if you would, share that journal with us so we might study it. And if the dream changes, then inform us immediately, so we might see if another Dreamer is sharing the dream. When we start sharing the dream, then it means that it’s coming closer to fruition. Can you do that for us?”

“I...yes, Elder. If it means I can help my family, I’ll do my best,” she declared.

Jason put his hand over hers and gave her a gentle smile. “If only Aria is having this dream, does that mean it’s only something important to her?”

“Not at all,” Rovak shook his head. “Often, the most important predictions are given by a single Dreamer, the Oracle most in tune with the future that prediction represents. As the dream nears the time of fulfillment, other Dreamers may start sharing the dream, and each will see it in a different way, because their minds are not the same as Aria’s. What we can learn from this is that since Aria is the one having the dream, it concerns her in some way, or possibly the House Karinne, since it is her home.”

“Well then, I guess we’ll do what we can to help her figure out what it means,” Jason told them. “I’ll make sure to keep all of you up to speed on anything Aria learns.”

“I’ll do what I can, Elder,” Aria said strongly. “For my family, and for my house.”

They went over a few details with the elders, then boarded the skimmer and started back for the ship. Aria was a little quiet as they flew back, but he could see the look of determination on his daughter’s face. *It’s going to be alright, my little treasure*, he assured her.

I'm just a little worried, Dad, she replied, glancing at him from the pilot's seat. That she called him that told him how she felt. He wasn't entirely sure exactly when she stopped calling him *pam* and started calling him *Dad*, but it sounded entirely right to him. She had stormed into his life like a conquering general, and she was as much his daughter as his other girls were. *If only I could see the end of the dream. I just hate not knowing if what I'm seeing is good or bad, even though the dream itself fills me with dread.*

Not all good things come from good events, he told her. *The last ten years shows that, at least as far as the house is concerned. We had to fight to get to where we are, and there were quite a few rough patches along the way. Since the day the Consortium showed itself, we've been embroiled in wars, intrigue, and even episodes of despair. But look where that road led us,* he said with dignity. *We can only hope that the dread you feel in the dream represents the fact that we have to work for that happy ending, and it won't be easy. Nothing worthwhile ever is.*

You've been hanging out with the Parri too much, Dad, she accused with a slight smile.

Oh, hush and get us aboard the Pegasus, you impertinent little whelp, he retorted with a shooing motion. That made her laugh.

That wasn't the end of his day. He had one more fairly important appointment on his calendar, but it was scheduled for 03:20 early the next morning, when everyone else would be asleep. But that was the life of a ruler, where everyone had different daily cycles and every planet was at a different time. It was one reason why scheduling meetings for the Confederate Council could be so tricky, and also why the Confederation ran on a standard time when it came to internal dealings. Because the Confederation was based on Terra, the Confederation Council had formally adopted Terra's 24-hour day cycle to govern its meeting times. The operation of the bureaus that operated on the planet also used the 24-hour cycle so the workers had a set schedule based on the day/night cycle of the planet. However, the CCM ran on a 30-hour day, because it was more efficient from a military standpoint. He spent the afternoon and evening pondering Aria's dream and what it could possibly mean, at least when he wasn't distracted from his musings by his kids and wife. He spent the late

evening doing some paperwork as the dream was still in the back of his mind, and then put it aside to get to his scheduled appointment.

He opened his eyes and stepped out of a small alcove in another galaxy, flexing his fingers and looking down at a green-skinned hand that was far higher up from the floor than his own. This was his Benga bionoid, and today's appointment was going to be on E Chaio. In this body, he was known as Jayce Un Ka Rin, a name that did not in any way hide who he was...because that was a moot point now. About two years ago, the Syndicate finally figured out that Galaxy Express was owned and operated by the House of Karinne. However, instead of shutting the operation down, they let the company continue to operate, keeping an eye on it the same way the spies attached to the company kept their eyes on the Syndicate.

It may seem odd that the Syndicate would tolerate an enemy intelligence operation within their territory, but the Benga were anything if not complex people. The Board saw advantage in letting the Karinnes and Kimdori sneak around, because they knew who they were and what they were doing, and it gave the Board a direct line of communication back to the Confederation. If they shut down Galaxy Express, then the Karinnes and Kimdori would simply start up another operation somewhere else, one they *didn't* know about. It was an example of the old saying *keep your friends close and your enemies closer*. There were any number of Syndicate spies working within Galaxy Express, and Kraal kept his eyes on them as much as they were keeping an eye on him. It was a complex and convoluted relationship that Kraal seemed to relish for some bizarre reason, and it made Galaxy Express *the place* to go if someone wanted to buy, sell, or acquire information.

In that regard, Galaxy Express had succeeded even beyond Zaa's expectations. The company was a clearing house of information gathered by its many agents, who were in every corner of the Syndicate. *Nothing* went on in the Syndicate that the company did not know about, and that had brought the Syndicate's intelligence operation into the company to tap into that information itself.

Another reason they didn't move against Galaxy Express was because, in a way, they admired how the Karinnes had done it. They had built the company up from *within* the Syndicate, operating by the Syndicate's own

rules and obeying all their laws. The company didn't try to change or operate against their system, so they tolerated its existence because it did things the Syndicate way. The company obeyed all the rules, it paid its taxes (which were substantial, since it was a shadow corporation rather than an extension of a megacorp), and the Syndicate itself had contracted the company to move personnel and supplies from place to place. And to be technical, there was no real law in the Syndicate against an outside agency setting up an operation within the Syndicate's system.

But most importantly, the Syndicate had learned that Galaxy Express, and the House of Karinne that was behind it, did not see the Syndicate as an enemy. Yes, they were there to keep an eye on Andromeda, but the contacts between them and the Board had not been hostile. When Galaxy Express learned something that it felt was a threat to the Syndicate's commerce system in a certain part of Andromeda, they informed the Black Sashes, who were the Board's intelligence department. They shared certain bits of the intelligence they gathered with them and helped keep the peace within Andromeda as the tensions between the megacorps had started to rise. The House of Karinne was very much invested in the Syndicate remaining stable, because they had their *own* business interest within their system that would be at risk if the Syndicate destabilized.

Since the Karinnes had demonstrated a willingness to play the game by the Syndicate's rules, they allowed the company to operate. And from that, a very tenuous and wary relationship had been formed between the Board and the House of Karinne.

And the biggest reason they let the company run was because it was a model of profitability within the Syndicate, and several of the megacorps surreptitiously studied the business model Galaxy Express employed to see if they could increase their own profits by adopting some of them. In just three years, Kraal had turned the company into a financial success, a feat Jason felt for which he should be just as proud of as his intelligence operation. Galaxy Express had a sterling reputation within the Syndicate business world as a solid, dependable cargo and personnel transport company that got its cargo to its destination on time, every time, no matter how dangerous that delivery might be, and their rates were very reasonable for the service they provided. Andromeda was a dangerous place for ships to travel since the war ended with the Syndicate, not from Consortium

guerillas, but from the large numbers of nopped soldiers that had stolen or salvaged ships and had resorted to piracy to survive...and that was on top of the officially sanctioned privateers and freebooters that megacorps employed to attack the ships of rival megacorps. Syndicate space was like the wild west, and it was why Galaxy Express had to employ a formidable security force to protect their transports. The company managed not only to compete in that chaotic environment, they thrived, and had built a reputation for excellence in the years they'd been in operation.

The main reason the company was so dependable was the men and women that worked for it. The employees of Galaxy Express were *fanatically* loyal to the company, the core of them the soldiers that had been saved from being nopped, and their loyalty to the company had filtered down into the new employees the company hired as it expanded. Jason had suspected that even the Benga would show loyalty to a company that showed loyalty to them, at least up to a point, and he had been proven right. Galaxy Express paid its workers well, it cared for them, protected them, and looked out for them and their families, and the workers had learned over those three years that they would never find a better job than Galaxy Express. To keep their jobs, they put their heart and soul into the company, and that made it the best place to work in the Syndicate. But over time, that devotion to the company for selfish reasons had evolved to where the people that worked for Galaxy Express had sincere loyalty to the company. And no segment of the company had more loyalty than the Galaxy Marines, the soldiers and sailors that made up the military force that protected Galaxy Express ships. Those were the men and women that the House had saved from being nopped, had given them back their citizenship and their chance to make a comfortable life for themselves, and they had never forgotten it. The Marines protected the company, because the company protected them.

None of the other shadow corporations or sponsored privateers in the Syndicate would mess with them because of their Marines, and that was thanks to the Karinnes' engineering skill and Gen Lun Ba Ru. Gen had trained the company's military forces, and they were outfitted with cutting edge mecha, ships, and equipment. GE Marauders were custom built using the best Syndicate technology, so much so that the Board had sent spies to steal their design specs. Their warships were refitted to be top of the line,

using Syndicate tech but innovated beyond Syndicate norms. Their armor was tougher, their shields were stronger, their diffusers more powerful, and their weapons were far nastier, so much so that, again, the Board had sent in spies to steal the plans for the reflex cannons that company warships employed to defend their transports.

Jason was proud of his reflex cannons, because *he* “invented” them. He had taken the Subrian concept of the weapon and devised a means to build them using only existing Syndicate technology, producing a formidable weapon particularly effective against Syndicate ships. Reflex cannons couldn’t be diffused, and since they were a multiphased weapon that didn’t require the significant amounts of power that most phased weaponry needed to be used, they allowed ships using Syndicate power plants to employ them in either large numbers or extremely powerful “megacannon” variants, and they could be scaled so they could be used on anything from a Marauder war mech to a super-ship. The main reflex cannons on Subrian command ships could destroy Syndicate super-ships, so they were more than powerful enough to threaten even the largest enemy warship when the megacannon variant was mounted on a GE battleship or command ship, to take on enemy super-ships. On top of that, reflex weaponry was multiphased, so they bypassed the single-phase shield technology the Syndicate employed, rendering the vast majority of Syndicate vessels weak to them. The reflex weaponry he developed was so good that Myleena had taken his design concepts and set MRDD to developing a variant of it that ran off Karinne double metaphased power. They’d never adopted reflex weaponry for the KMS because they had other weapons that hit harder and consumed less power, but Jason’s work adopting reflex weaponry to Syndicate power had made them energy efficient enough for the KMS take a long, long look at them.

That was the mother of all complements.

It was worth it. To someone not well versed in military theory, having so many different weapons would look counterproductive, or a waste of time, but the Syndicate itself had demonstrated the need for a varied arsenal in this modern age of warfare. The Syndicate relied almost completely on just four types of weapons—Torsion weapons, dark matter weapons, hot plasma weapons, and missiles—and when they came up against the Confederation, who could counter all of their weapons, it effectively

neutered them. The KMS employed multiple weapon types on their ships despite their own pulse and particle beam weapons being superior, solely because it would give them options if they came up against a foe that could counter pulse weaponry and particle beam technology. Having rail weapons, MPACs, disruptors, plasma torpedoes, even more archaic weapons like Jhri striated multiphased ion cannons and Colonial iso-neutron weaponry, they made it very hard for an enemy to counter *all* of it.

“Executive Jayce,” a Benga secretary said as he stepped out of the small office that held his bionoid in the Wheel. The company now owned nearly an entire arc section of the deep space station, and it was their official corporate headquarters. “General Gen is waiting for you in landing bay six.”

“Very good, Mez,” he said. Mez Su Dak Vit knew that he was a bionoid, and part of her job was keeping that secret from those outside the company. Everyone inside the company knew that the Karinnes were involved in it and had bionoids, as did the Board, but the general populace of the Syndicate did not. And despite knowing they were working for a former enemy, the employees *did not care*. The Karinnes had earned their loyalty by saving them from being nopped and providing them with stable, good paying jobs. It was a racial trait; most Benga would work for Satan if the pay was good and the benefits package was appealing. The average Benga had no loyalty to anyone but himself, much like many Faey. “How’s your daughter doing?”

“She takes her test next segment, Executive, and we have high hopes she’ll earn her third stripe,” she said, giving him a slight smile. Jason had started a private academy for the children of all employees, and his workers learned really fast that their kids weren’t going to get that kind of an education unless they were rich. The Academy used a curriculum nearly suitable for a Karinne school, teaching advanced mathematics, science, politics, and business as part of its main focus as a combination technological and business academy to train the next generation of engineers, scientists, and business leaders...just with a Karinne flavor on them, part of Jason’s attempt to slowly influence Benga society to make them...less of the assholes they currently were. They’d had to adapt to the peculiarities of Benga society to make it work, like turning the school into a highly competitive arena where the students had to contend against one

another to advance, but it worked. Students earned rank by taking and passing tests in their chosen field of study, and the more rank a student had, the more power and privileges they enjoyed.

A school's curriculum had to tailor itself to the students to be truly effective, and Benga children were highly competitive and just as cunning as Faey children. The easiest way to teach them was to make it a competition to learn, where their scholastic accomplishments gave them rank over others and extra privileges.

“Well, tell her good luck for me.”

“I will.”

Jason entered the landing bay, which was very busy. They had quite a few ships in today, with the smaller ships running cargo and passengers within the system as the larger ships were in for maintenance between runs to other system. Half the bay was devoted to rows of Marauder warmechs, each of them gleaming with their black lacquered finish and the golden crest of Galaxy Express emblazoned on their armored breastplate. Beyond the airskin shield preventing the bay from decompressing, six ships hung at docks along the rim of the Wheel, two T-170 cargo freighters, one P-29 passenger ship, and three I-3 warships, which were about the size of a Karinne heavy cruiser.

Every one of those ships was Syndicate only in its outward appearance. They'd all been refitted with the next-gen tech that MRDD and other Karinne research arms had devised for Syndicate technology, improving their base technology to the next level. That edge made Galaxy Express warships far more nasty than the ships they faced out in the wild stretches of empty space of Andromeda, with superior armor, more powerful shields, stronger diffusers, and their biggest advantage, their reflex cannons. Jason had also brought in other KMS standard practices to the Galaxy Marines, such as their own version of Crusader armor systems, the use of drones and spinners, and what shocked most outside the Syndicate the most, Galaxy Express allowed other races to pilot warmechs, not just Benga.

But there was one unit in the bay that had *forbidden* technology in it, and that was Gen's personal Marauder. It was equipped with an interface system that allowed him to control the mecha directly through mental

command, a system integrated into the mecha and his helmet, so he didn't have to wear an external interface. Kimdori in Benga shape were the only ones allowed to work on his mecha, which kept its secrets safe, the "hand-selected" ground crew Gen had assembled to maintain his warmech.

"Ready to go, Jayce?" Gen asked.

"Sure am," he replied. "I just wish I could use a Marauder."

"That would look completely out of place," Gen told him. "You're going to a meeting with a member of the *Board*, Jayce. You don't show up for something like that piloting a warmech."

"It would sure make me feel less vulnerable," he grunted, which made Gen chuckle.

He boarded a civilian personnel transport, a sleek, handsome TP-36 Starliner Executive model, then seated himself in the cockpit with one of Gen's Reavers in the co-pilot's chair. Her name was Bei Ji Man Ver, and she was both Gen's protégé and his second in command in the Reavers. She was a gifted rigger despite being extremely young, the equivalent Terran age of around 25, and she exemplified the very un-Benga-like loyalty to commander and company that employees of Galaxy Express demonstrated. But unfortunately for Gen, Bei's loyalty was far more than just professional. Kraal had confided that Bei was *smitten* with Gen, which wasn't absolutely unheard of in Benga society. Love was seen as a youthful frivolity, was referred to as the "young crush," and most Benga grew out of it as they matured in a society that had no place for love within it. Bei's loyalty to Gen was a combination of both his skill as a commander and as an object of affection. But either way, Bei was not a Reaver because she wasn't worthy. She was one of the best riggers the Galaxy Marines had, and nearly three years of training under Gen had turned her into an absolute *beast* in a warmech. Much like Dellin, she did not look in any way anywhere near as dangerous as she really was...at least to a Benga, and that was half the reason Gen had assigned her as Jason's assistant for this meeting. She was short, she was slender, and she looked more like an office worker than a Marine, but that woman was all muscle and she was particularly adept at hand to hand combat when outside of a warmech. If this meeting turned violent, Bei could protect him without needing a weapon.

Bei was also *adorable*...at least for a 4.5-meter-tall giant with green skin. She was considered quite petite among Benga, very short and slender, but well gifted with a generous bosom and sensual hips that made it clear that she was a fully grown woman. She had a face that just radiated cuteness, with eggshell colored hair and luminous violet eyes that Jason felt were her best feature.

“Engine start complete, Executive Jayce,” she reported. “We’re ready to depart.”

“Alright, Bei, let’s go get this over with.”

It took them about three hours of sublight travel to reach E Chaio from the Wheel (hyperspace jumps from inside the E Chaio system by anyone but Board members and Syndicate military warships was prohibited), and they landed on the roof of Dynamax Technologies right on time. Jason had changed into proper business attire on the trip in, so when Bei opened the hatch, he looked like any other Benga business executive with his gray tunic, leggings, and soft black boots, attire that almost looked military...and in a way, it *was*. It was a tradition that went back over 10,000 years in Benga society. The insignia of Galaxy Express was emblazoned on a badge on his shoulder. Four aides met them on the landing pad and conducted them inside the building. After three separate security sweeps, they were led into a gigantic office that took up nearly a quarter of the building’s penthouse floor. This was the personal office of Dai Su Jam Ber, CEO of Dynamax Technology and the current biggest mover on the Syndicate Board. Dai Su’s plan to modernize the Syndicate had been adopted by the Board, and as a result, Dynamax was seeing record profits from their contracts with the Board and other megacorps to supply them with cutting edge tech. “Executive Jayce,” she said in a silky voice, standing up from behind her desk.

“Chief Executive Dai Su,” he replied respectfully, he and Bei stopping and bowing when she addressed them. As his superior, she had the right to address him by only one name, where custom demanded he address her by her first two. “I do hope we are not late?”

“You are right on time,” she replied, motioning towards the seats in front of her desk. Two guards stood behind her chair, and two more at the entrance to the office, which was standard procedure for Board members.

Dai Su was fairly young for a CEO and quite attractive, tall (for a Benga) and shapely, her CEO attire cut to flatter her figure and provide a peek of cleavage. But like Bei, her youth was just a smokescreen that concealed her true potential. Jason considered her by far the most intelligent of the members of the Board and possessed of a vision and foresight that gave her drive and purpose. But she was also just like the other Board members in that she was absolutely ruthless and had no morals whatsoever. Greed was the only drive in her life, and *any* action was justified in her mind if it increased her wealth or advanced her company.

In that order.

It was greed that had brought this meeting to pass, and Dai Su wasted no time in exposing it. “We’ve considered your proposal, and we are interested. We would be amenable to entering into certain agreements with Galaxy Express concerning the next-gen technology your research division develops for use by the company. But the question is, why are you selling them?”

“We have decided it brings more profit to sell the specs of at least some of our more desired inventions and advances rather than have them stolen, given we don’t have the resources of a Board corporation. Bei,” he prompted. She opened the small case she was carrying and removed five Syndicate data storage cards from it. “These data cards hold the specs for our SB-317 shield modulation system, which turns standard shields into a multiphased system that makes them approximately 141% stronger than standard shields. The modification also allows the shield to resist multiphased weaponry.”

“And you would sell us this, and other advancements?”

“For you to turn around and sell to the Syndicate military, yes,” he replied. “For thirty percent of your profit from that contract. The military won’t buy from us, but they *will* buy from Dynamax. I believe that places our two companies in a position to earn profit by working together. We will supply you with our advances, and in turn, you will pay us a percentage of the profits you earn marketing those advancements to the rest of the Syndicate.”

She gave Jason a long, assessing look. “I assume this one knows who you really are?”

“Of course she does,” he replied. “We haven’t hidden who owns Galaxy Express from our employees.”

“Then I’ll be direct. Why are you outfitting your enemies with advanced technology?”

“You mistakenly assume that the Confederation sees the Syndicate as an enemy,” he replied. “So long as you don’t try to invade our galaxy and start a war with us, we are more than amenable to engaging in trade with you. But, with current sentiment towards the Confederation in the Syndicate being what it is, we decided that a more...subtle approach would be necessary to establish those trade relationships. We established ourselves in your system using your rules, and now we’re seeking to open a trade relationship. We can start small, such as with the advances that we’ve made studying your technology, and in time, we can expand that relationship into other areas, such as commodities and manufactured products. And to be honest, Chief Executive Dai Su, right now, the Syndicate Navy *needs* to refit itself to deal with the modern world,” he said bluntly. “It’s our opinion that a healthy, prosperous Syndicate is critical for peace between our galaxies. And the first step is to ensure that the Syndicate Navy has the decided edge against the sudden large numbers of pirates and freebooters that have sprung up across Andromeda.”

“That was our own fault,” she growled, surprising Jason with her candor. “I told them it was a mistake to nop so many trained soldiers as they drew down the Syndicate military after the Consortium was defeated, but they were more interested in the profit margin. They showed some serious lack of foresight.”

“I’m glad to hear that at least one member of the Board can see the bigger picture,” Jason told her with an approving nod. “The attacks on our own transports and convoys has proven that our systems are effective in repelling the pirates. We’re willing to sell those advances to the Syndicate Navy through Dynamax to get their ships up to where they can easily trounce pirate fleets.”

“And how much of this technology are you willing to sell?” she asked, leaning a little on her desk.

“Most of it,” he replied. “Our armor, our shields, and a modification to ship power plants that increase their power output and reduce power decay through conduits.”

“And the reflex cannons?”

“We have no real need to sell what has already been stolen,” he replied calmly.

“Dynamax wasn’t the ones who stole it. And I’d be willing to pay for those specs.”

“You can get the specs from the Black Sashes.”

“I can get the *blueprints* from the Black Sashes. I want the *specs*. I want the journal reports of the scientific theory behind how they work and the lab records documenting the development of the weapon for my scientists to study. They can learn much more studying the written theory and lab work of the research team that invented the weapon than they can looking at an engineering schematic.”

“You almost sound like a scientist, Chief Executive.”

“I started at Dynamax in a research lab as an assistant,” she told him proudly. “I *am* a scientist. Dynamax has a long history of its CEO and board members rising to those ranks through the research division. After all, we are a *technology* company. The executives must have a technical background to better serve the company’s core mission.”

“That’s an approach I can respect, Chief Executive,” Jason told her with an approving nod. “I myself am something of a dabbler in science.”

Bei nearly rolled her eyes. She was fully aware just how good Jason was at technology, given he was one of the few people allowed to work on Gen’s Marauder.

“Then you fully understand why I want the specs for reflex weaponry.”

“We can’t give you *everything*, because it involves some active research projects our science division is undertaking,” he said thoughtfully, tapping

his chin with a finger. “But there’s quite a bit of research data we can turn over to you. I think we can do business in that regard, Chief Executive.”

Though they had an agreement in theory, nothing was ever that simple when it came to the Benga. Bei and Dai Su’s guards were forced to wait and listen as Jason and Dai Su engaged in some fierce negotiations over just how much Galaxy Express would hand over and how much they’d be paid for what they gave. Jason was a skilled negotiator, but Dai Su proved she deserved to sit in the CEO chair by bargaining with the cunning of a Kirri, the intelligence of a Moridon, and the tenacity of a Zyagya. Though Jason wasn’t entirely worried about how much they made out of the deal, Dai Su would not take him seriously in the future if he rolled over in the negotiations, so he fought like a starving hyena over every percentage point and tekk.

After nearly three hours (or about two and a half divisions) of negotiation, Dai Su offered an official contract to him that would have Galaxy Express sell six different technological advancements to Dynamax in return for 19.5% of the profits they earned by selling that technology to other corporations. The information would include the theory behind the science on top of the engineering specs to build it. The etiquette at play here would give Jason three days to review the language of the contract, and then they’d meet again to officially notarize the contract, which sealed it. He’d need those three days to have his legal experts go over the contract to ensure it said exactly what Jason wanted it to say, since Benga contracts were convoluted and intentionally vague to allow loopholes to slip through.

“I believe that once this contract is notarized, we’ll have a very profitable future in this joint venture, Executive Jayce,” she said with a predatory smile as he gave the data card holding the contract to Bei, who slipped it into her case. “Inform my secretary when your review team completes their task, and we’ll schedule the official notarization.”

“I will. Thank you, Chief Executive Dai Su,” he said as the two of them stood, then bowed to her. “With your permission, we shall return to our headquarters.”

“Travel safely, Executive.”

Jason didn't say a word until they were back on the Starliner and nearly halfway back into space. He called back to HQ to inform them they were on the way back, and it was Gen of all people that answered him. "*Was it a profitable meeting, Jayce?*" Gen asked.

"On its face, but we'll see how good the contract is once I have it reviewed," he answered. "But she did jump all over the offer."

"*That's to be expected. So, when are the refits to GE ships going to be done to keep us one step ahead of the Syndicate Navy?*"

"They start next segment," he replied. "The specs should have been sent down to the maintenance crews already, and the parts and equipment are on the way from the factories at Site Thirty."

"Any Marauder upgrades?" Bei asked.

"Several. I think the Reavers are going to like the Mark IV Marauder," he said with a smile over at her. "The biggest upgrade is going to be something that all of our people are going to have to consider before they accept it."

"*How do you mean?*"

"My people have invented a jack compatible with Syndicate mesotronic computer architecture."

"*Jacks? You're going to offer us jacks?*" Gen asked in sudden interest.

"Yes," he replied. "But these are going to be rather special jacks, Gen. They won't have an external port. They'll be internal and will link to a dedicated exo unit that serves as the interface. If my people built them right, Syndicate scanners won't see the synaptic connectors as artificial, since they'll be built of *organic* components. Syndicate scanners should mistake them for nerves and ganglia. The only part of it that'll register as artificial will be the comm node that will be just behind your left ear, anchored to the bone back there. And that won't look too much out of place, since we disguised it to look like the panic unit that most executives have implanted."

Panic units were technology that Benga executives had implanted in their heads. It was a computer that monitored vital signs and bodily functions, and if it detected anything anomalous, it notified the user and

appropriate medical and/or military personnel. That hastened response to the executive if he was under attack, having a medical issue, or was poisoned. And being poisoned was the most common hazard that an executive may face in his day to day life.

“I could pilot a bionoid with this jack?” Bei asked.

Jason nodded. “And connect your mind directly to your Marauder the way the Karinne riggers do. Even pilot it remotely,” he added. “That’s the main reason we researched this, we want to get our riggers over here merge capability. It *vastly* increases your combat survivability, and allows you to pilot your rigs by remote,” he told her. “When it comes to our soldiers, their survival is always the highest priority in anything we design for them.”

“It reduces training costs,” Bei said reflexively.

“It keeps you alive, and that’s what concerns me most,” he told her, glancing over at her. “Gen, I’m going to have some people over to train you in how the jacks work. Since you know what jacks are and what they do, I’ll let you come up with how we explain them to our employees. And should I put you down for getting one?”

“That’s a stupid question, Jayce. I want one as soon as they’re available.”

“You’ll be the first in line,” Jason assured him.

“They’ll have all the same abilities as the jacks you use?”

“Virtually. Since Syndicate mesotronic computers aren’t exactly designed to work with an interface, merging to external Syndicate computer assets will require an emulation program that’ll be integrated into your exo unit, but everything else should work the same. GE computer systems are going to be upgraded to add merge functionality, so you’ll have a much easier time of it using company systems.”

“Are they worth getting, Commander?” Bei asked.

“Yes,” Gen replied immediately. “I’ve used a mind to machine interface before, when the Karinnes hired me to consult for them, so I know just how useful they are. But the one I used was not nearly as good as the system the Executive is offering us now, because the jack system will allow us to become our machines. It will move like our own bodies, and we can control

all of its systems directly with our minds. They will turn the Reavers into the most feared warmech squadron in the Syndicate,” he said fiercely.

“It’ll get even nastier than that, Gen. Guess who’s going to come over and do your initial assimilation combat training with your warmechs?”

“Kyva?”

“Yup. She’s been itching for another scrap with you, and she said this time she wants to do it in a Marauder. So, she’s agreed to do the combat merge training for the Reavers, and the Reavers will train everyone else.”

“That’s an even better reason to look forward to this,” he said eagerly.

“We’ll finally get to see this Kyva that Commander Gen goes on about,” Bei said.

“Kyva is the only warmech pilot to ever beat me in combat, Captain,” Gen said with candor. *“She’s the most talented warmech pilot I’ve ever seen, and she’ll be the perfect trainer to introduce the Reavers to jack operations. Besides, I wouldn’t accept any trainer that wasn’t at least as good as I am in a warmech.”*

“That’s the other reason she’s coming. We figured that only Kyva could really train you correctly in piloting using a jack, Gen. She’s the only one that could possibly understand your skills, since the two of you are in a league of your own when it comes to piloting a warmech. With her teaching you, we know it’ll be done right.”

“I need to call her and thank her,” he said. *“I’m looking forward to the match as much as the training.”*

“She’s still mad over the last match,” Jason laughed. “You beat her fair and square. I think that’s what infuriates her most of all. Losing was a new experience for her, and one she doesn’t like one bit.”

“That’s the proper attitude of a warmech pilot,” Gen said approvingly. *“But in fairness to her, it did take me nearly three orbits to finally do it.”*

“True enough,” Jason chuckled. “But I get the feeling that once you have a jack of your own, she’ll find you to be even more of a challenge than you are already. I think that win loss record is going to skew in your favor once you finish your assimilation training.”

Bei gave him a nearly disbelieving look...probably over the concept that someone could *beat* Gen Lun Ba Ru in a fight and had been doing it consistently for over two orbits.

Jason spent most of the flight back explaining what jacks were to Bei, and by the time they landed in the landing bay back at HQ, she was completely sold on the idea. "The technology your people possess almost seems like magic," Bei said as they came down the steps, several ground crew securing the ship behind them.

"Magic is an entirely different thing," he chuckled. "Science is the main reason that my house exists, Bei. We are completely focused on it. In many ways, we are the Confederation's version of Dynamax. So it's no surprise that our technology is a step ahead of everyone else's."

"So what *is* magic, then?"

"The definition we use is that it's a force or power that can't be explained by science that can perform actions that go against the natural order, yet exists despite that seeming impossibility," he replied. "And I've seen it before, so it's very real."

"Really," she said dubiously, looking over at him. "Magic is real."

"I've seen it with my own eyes," he replied. "Of course, the person who performed the magic doesn't believe that it is magic, but I disagree. I can't explain how she does what she does, and our science can't explain it either. That is the very definition of magic. At least our definition," he added lightly.

"What did she do that was magic?"

"She stuck her hand elbow deep into a tree and pulled an object out of it, without doing any damage to the tree," he replied. "I still have that object. I look at it any time I start to allow my engineer's training to dominate my thinking. It reminds me that the universe is far bigger than I could ever imagine, and I should never allow narrow thinking or my own preconceptions to blind me to that reality."

"Huh," she sounded, looking at the deck as they walked.

"Don't think about it too hard. Trust me, I speak from experience," he said, patting her on the shoulder. "Thank you for your diligence today, Bei."

You kept me safe, and the security of knowing that let me keep my mind on the meeting.”

“I was doing my job, Executive Jayce,” she said modestly.

“And an outstanding job it was. Now, I’m going to go delink and get some sleep. I’ll be back over here in a couple of days with more information about the upgrades.”

“We’ll be ready.”

“I know you will.”

Koira, 3 Shiaa, 4408, Faey Orthodox Calendar

Friday, 8 July 2022 Terran Standard Calendar

Koira, 3 Shiaa, year 1333 of the 97th Generation, Karinne Historical Reference Calendar

Foxwood East, Karsa, Karis

His body was on Karis, but his mind was on Terra.

Checking his item storage, Jason made sure that Cyvanne didn’t prank him by not transferring everything over. He was on his character, but it was the copied character on the Methrian server in Terra’s server cluster, and he’d be meeting with Sano, Xen, and Rita as soon as he could get to the Citadel. Xen had bought a house in Citadel City, an NPC up there that hosted players as they adventured across Citadel, and from what he was told, that was more or less the hang-out of Xen and the few friends he had in the game.

Getting up there would be easy. The Citadel was already unlocked on Primus, and he had the scion just outside Citadel City marked, so he could use the Teleport spell to get to it from anywhere in the game. Cyvanne had made sure to copy his scion markers over to Methrian.

Confident he had everything, Jason equipped his gear (he’d been copied over naked, with all his equipment in item storage) and spared a moment to wander around Twinfang a little bit to see how different it was on a

different server. Most of the main buildings were all the same, he noticed, but some of the smaller buildings were different, and there was a whole lot of empty space within Twinfang on this server. The different buildings were most likely player-owned buildings, and all the empty lots were where players could buy land and build their own houses or shops. Methrian was the least populated server in the Terra server cluster, and the Golden Lion faction wasn't very popular on this server, so Twinfang looked almost... deserted.

Seriously deserted. He walked around the merchant district of the city and only saw nine other players, where on Primus, he'd see *hundreds* of other players walking the same route.

But there were lots of players on at the moment. Methrian may be the smallest server on Terra, but it was the server that had advanced the Grand Crusade further than any other. The big final battle of the epic questline was coming up in a few days, and from what Jason learned preparing for this, tons of players from other servers in the Terra cluster had created characters on Methrian just to take part in the battles. They'd done so about ten days ago and had been working to raise their skills and get some equipment so they could participate in the event. So right now, there were swarms of newbie players in the starting areas of the faction, working hard to get as prepared as possible for the battle that was going to take place in the human capitol of Freeport in five days. From what he'd read about it, it was going to be a naval invasion of some NPC human faction called the Kanlon, who had allies called Sahaugin, which were aquatic scaled humanoids. The two NPC factions were trying to capture Freeport, which was the largest city on the west coast of Arcavia and a major seaport, and it was part of an overall campaign where the Kanlon was trying to take complete control of the oceans to the west and south of Arcavia. They were also going to attack a city called Vistara, which was a player faction city on the central southern coast, which was also a major seaport. To do that, the Kanlon had enlisted the aid of the Salamanders, a subterranean race of fire-dwelling creatures whose objective was to burn the entirety of the surface of Arca to ash, the way they had destroyed the sister world to Arca in the game, Netherim. Netherim was a blasted wasteland of ruins and vast deserts because of the Salamanders, and now they were trying to do the same thing to Arca. The Salamanders were going to simultaneously attack Vistara and the player

faction east of Vistara, the Silver Blade faction, which was located within a gigantic ancient forest called the Luran Forest. While they did that, the Sahaugin and their sea giant allies would attack the western side of the Golden Shire player faction, invading just west of the faction border in an area known as the Sea of Grass. The two fronts would split the Golden Shire forces, while the attacks on the Silver Blade and the Golden Lion factions would prevent them from aiding the Golden Shire.

It was a convoluted battle plan, but the tactician in Jason saw the value of it. By attacking on multiple fronts, they were preventing the players and their NPC allies from massing into one giant army to take them on. In game terms, it meant that instead of the Grand Crusade ending in one giant, glorious battle the way the orc invasion event did last year, it would instead be spread across three battlefields across the entire southern coast of the continent.

That was truly a *Grand Crusade*.

Since Jason had two Blackfangs on two different servers, he'd get a chance to fight in two different battles with all his skills and gear, so he was looking forward to that.

But he was wasting time. He teleported to the scion on Citadel and moved into the city, and that was almost the same as Primus. Citadel City didn't have any open plots, all the buildings were already built, so it was almost like walking down the street of Citadel City on his own server. He had an address, and when he found it, he was a bit surprised. The house that Xen owned was *very* nice, it was only a block or so from the largest player marketplace in the city, and it was a four story building with a shop on the ground floor and a three story townhouse over it. Like many buildings in Citadel City, it had a private garden on the roof, the branches of a tree up there visible from the ground. He didn't go in the shop, he instead went around to an alley and ascended a stairwell on the back of the building that opened to the lowest floor of the apartment, then he knocked. The door opened immediately—a house's owner could make the doors or windows open from anywhere in the house—and stepped into a very, very odd room. The furniture in this room, and the room beyond, was all built for someone that was three meters tall.

We're on the top floor, Sano messaged him.

He moved to the stairs, through the rooms with furniture too big for a human—someone much taller was renting the floor from him perhaps?—and then glanced the middle floor, which was set up as a research library, then reached the top floor. The stairs opened into the main parlor, the living room of the apartment, and three people were sitting there. One was a human, one was a high elf, and the last was a Savasa, which was a bipedal feline race that closely resembled a Terran cheetah. That was Sano, she told him she played a Savasa in game. The high elf woman was Emelda, Rita in the real world, and the human was Kevin Ball, who went by the name Xen in game.

The name Xen wasn't his own creation. The character Xen Quickstrike was a character from the *Starblade* vidy show. He was Ethera Starblade's first officer and was a master swordsman. Both Rita and Kevin looked very disquieted as they looked at him, but Sano stood up and gave him a smile. "Your Grace," she said.

"Thank you for allowing me to see you," Jason said as he walked into the room, his tail slashing a bit behind him. "I'm sure Savar told you who I am and why I'm here?"

"She told us who you're supposed to be, but I find it hard to believe that you're the Grand Duke," Kevin said honestly.

"He is, Xen, he came to see me in Sao Paolo a couple of days ago," Sano said. "I know it's him."

"I asked Sano to arrange this meeting," Jason nodded as he reached the couch opposite them, then sat down, curling his tail around to keep from sitting on it. "I know she told you that her sister is in the Karinne Navy. I asked her sister to talk to her, she agreed, we met, and Sano agreed to talk to you for me."

"Why? Why go through all this subterfuge?" Rita asked.

"I thought it would be easiest on all of us, and more comfortable, if we met here," he replied. "I'm here to talk to both of you, and this way, all three of us can talk without us having to travel in real life to a single place."

"Us? Why us?" Kevin asked suspiciously.

“Because both of you are farm survivors, and there’s something going on in the U.N. government that I don’t like,” he replied. “I wanted to talk to you about your experiences dealing with the Farm Services Department. But there’s another reason I want to talk to you, and I’ll get into that a little later. So, both of you, how easy have you found it dealing with the DFM?”

Jason interviewed them about their experiences and to a lesser extent their history, from when they were first released from the farms to getting their settlement from the Trillanes to the support and services they were supposed to get from the DFM as survivors. And what he heard made him very angry, because neither of them had gotten virtually *any* help from the DFM since the day they were given their settlement money. Neither of them had any idea there was even a stipend program that was supposed to be paying them every month, and none of the other farm survivors that Rita knew—she kept in touch with several former workers from her farm—knew about the stipend program either. It was like the DFM had just wrote them off once they got the cash settlement from the Trillanes. They didn’t do any follow-up like they were supposed to. They weren’t doing the annual interview to see how they were doing. They weren’t keeping them informed of changes to DFM policy and law concerning farm survivors. They weren’t doing *anything*, forcing the two of them to come to the DFM if they needed help, and when they did, they only revealed what information was absolutely necessary to make them go away.

If this was how they were treating all the survivors...Jason may need to send someone else in to fix it, cause he may strangle half the DFM with his bare hands.

He had to keep his composure as he listened to Rita describe the last few years, which had been very hard on her, which prompted both Kevin and Sano to hold her hands so she could keep calm.

“This was *not* how things were supposed to work,” Jason said in a voice nearly trembling with outrage. “And I promise both of you, I’m going to fix it. And I’m going to fix it *fast*.”

“I’m so very glad to hear that, your Grace,” Sano said with a smile. “Xen and Rita are my dearest friends, and I want them to be okay.”

“Oh, they’re going to be okay, I promise you that,” he said in a strong voice. “Tomorrow morning, both of you are going to receive a package from a courier at precisely nine o’clock in the morning your local time. It’s going to hold a certified voucher representing the money that you were entitled to but weren’t paid,” he declared strongly. “Take it to your bank and they’ll take care of it. And by lunchtime, both of you will be contacted by the DFM, and they’re going to give you a comprehensive list of all the services that you should have been receiving all along. Look over the list and choose whichever services you feel will help you. And if the DFM gives you any grief, or they refuse to render those services, I want you to call me *immediately*. I’m going to give both of you a contact number for my office. It will connect you directly to Chirk, my executive secretary. You tell her what problem you’re having, and she’ll bring it to me. And I’ll fix it. Just be warned, guys, she’s a Kizzik, so if you’re using video comm, be ready. She doesn’t appreciate it very much when people who call her scream.”

“Thank you, your Grace,” Rita said, giving him a surprised look.

“Just Jason will do, Rita,” he said with a gentle smile. “Now, as to that other thing I wanted to talk to you about. Kevin, we noticed that you’ve discovered that you can use your in-game skills in the real world,” he said, which made him gasp.

“You mean you *knew* it was happening?”

“Of course we did, the game was programmed that way on purpose,” he replied evenly. “The game had to be done that way to allow people to use their real-world skills inside the game and be able to improve them. That has to work both ways, so it means that the skills you learn inside the game, you can use in the real world. Well, some of them. Skills that rely on the physics that exist inside the game don’t really work in the real world, but the others will. So, it’s not a bug, or a fluke, it’s the way the game was designed to work. But we did notice something very interesting, and it involves you. It seems that the third generation simsense is having an interesting side effect on you. It’s sped up your reaction speed and reflexes, in effect, it’s trained you as if you were an athlete or a martial artist. You have reflexes so fast that it very nearly makes you superhuman, and we’re positive that it was the simsense rig that did it. With your permission, we’d

like to investigate that a little further. We'd like your permission to access your Medical Service records, so we can try to find out why only certain players seem to be affected by this."

"You're not going to shut down CO, are you?" Rita asked fearfully.

"Oh good lord no, we see this as a good thing," he replied immediately. "There's nothing wrong with the game helping you achieve your full potential, and we've already determined that this side effect is not harmful in any way to those who are being affected by it. We're just trying to track down why some players are being affected and some aren't, and we need access to the affected players' medical records so we can start looking for a common denominator. So, Kevin, you think you can give us permission to access your files?"

He was quiet a long moment. "It was like he was moving in slow motion," he said, mainly to himself. "I could see everything. Every little move he made. The shifting of the angle of the knife. Everything."

"That's why. Your reflexes have been affected by the third gen rig you use and honed by the game to make you faster than Bruce Lee, Kevin," Jason told him. "I dare say it's one reason why you're such a fantastic player, on top of your impressive skills. You have the reaction speed of a soldier or a professional athlete, Kevin, not a desk jockey. The game taught you to fight, but the simsense rig helped you develop the reflexes to use those skills to their maximum potential."

"You said other players are being affected too?" Sano asked.

He nodded. "We're not sure how many, the game devs are running tests while players are logged in and trying to find them. What we do know is that people who are very sensitive to a simsense rig, you know, the ones that have to turn up the limiters to prevent sensory overload, they're the ones that are being affected the most by this side effect. And we're not really planning on telling them about this, because we don't want to frighten them, and it's not hurting them in any way. We see this as a good thing, an unforeseen and beneficial side effect of a third gen simsense rig, and like I said, I have no problem with the rig helping people achieve their maximum potential. If it's helping them, I'm all for it continuing to help them. I'm telling you, Kevin, because I'm confident that we can trust you

with this, that you won't blow everything out of proportion and cause a panic. But I promise you, all three of you, we'll never ask you to do any tests or experiments. We're fully aware that the time you spent on the farm may make the idea of that very frightening, and I'd never ask you to do anything you find uncomfortable," he said in an adamant voice. "All we want is access to your medical records, so we can try to find out why you're sensitive to a simsense rig. That's *it*."

Kevin was quiet a long moment. "I...okay. You can have the access," he said. "Do I have to do anything?"

"I'll send you a form that you have to authorize and send to the Medical Service," he answered. "And now that the business is out of the way," he said, leaning forward a little bit. "I'm gonna pick your brain a little bit."

"Over what?"

"I play the game too, and I'm a lot like you. I play by myself most of the time. That's because my job is very demanding, and I can't commit to a schedule, or even be assured I won't be interrupted two minutes after I log on and have to log off. I've been told that you're one of the most experienced solo players in the entire game, so I want to learn a few of your tricks. I have a goal, I want to learn how to beat overworld boss monsters solo so I can try to get Lone Wolf, and you're the only player I know of in the entire game that can kill them so consistently. So, I want to learn how you do it," he said with a smile.

"You *play*?" Kevin gasped.

"This isn't just some random character the devs whipped up for me to come talk to you," he said, patting his chest. "This *is* my character. My avatar's name is Blackfang, and he's a magician archetype. But, since I have real world fighting skills from my training as a rigger in the Karinne military," he said liltily, pointing at the hilt of the sword jutting over his left shoulder. "They copied my character off the server I play on, and I'm going to be allowed to keep any loot or spells or items that I get while over here and take it back with me when I go home," he chuckled. "So, when the battle happens at Freeport, I'll be here and I'm gonna fight in it. And I'm looking forward to it. I did the orc invasion event last year, and I've been hoping that they'd do something like that again."

That confession seemed to break the ice with both of them. They got much more interested and animated to find out that he played the game as well, and he quickly found himself in a deep discussion about spells with Emelda, who was also a magician archetype, and using his real-world fighting skills inside the game. They spent nearly an hour just talking about the game, Kevin and Rita getting more and more comfortable with him, to the point where they told him some stories about their history in the game. He was a bit surprised to learn that Kevin and Rita had been mortal enemies since the start of the Grand Crusade, but when they found out that they were both surviving farm workers—they called themselves *pickers*—the feud ended like *that*, and they'd been hanging out together inside the game ever since. The loyalty of the farm workers to their own was far stronger than anything that could ever happen inside a game.

The fact that both Jason and Kevin had a somewhat similar approach to the game allowed them to find some common ground. Jason was a magician archetype like Rita, but since he had real world fighting skills, his gear wasn't completely centered around magic. He had enough Strength and Agility on his gear to allow him to do respectable damage, and his sword was custom made by a blacksmith to enhance his spellcasting abilities but also hit very hard in combat. Jason's physical stats were far higher than a typical magician archetype to take advantage of his real-world combat training, and that let him fight with a sword very effectively. Kevin came at it from the other direction. He was primarily a melee warrior archetype, but he had very high spellcasting skills and his magic spells hit fairly hard. Both of them were more of the "magic swordsman" archetype than just a magician or a warrior, they just came at it from opposite directions.

And what mattered most to him, he got some advice on how to solo overworld boss monsters, so he could try to get Lone Wolf for himself.

"Huh," he mused after hearing Kevin's advice. "I never thought consumables could be that powerful."

"You don't know the right enchanters," Kevin answered. "The NPC enchanter that makes the consumables I use can make almost anything. I tell her what I need it to do, and she comes up with something. It may not be perfect, or as powerful as I need it to be, but it always helps. And if

you're gonna take on a boss monster solo, you need every bit of help you can get."

"I've seen some of the consumables he's used, and yeah, they're pretty crazy," Sano chuckled. "The NPC merchant he buys from must have an insanely high enchanting skill."

"I have enchanting skill, and it's at 1,093," Jason told them. "But I can't make anything like some of the things he described."

"Then I guess you're just not high enough yet," Rita told him.

"Well, gives me a reason to keep working on enchanting," Jason chuckled. "I practice it mainly to help out my guild. I'm the only enchanter we have."

"You're in a guild?"

"On my normal server, yeah. It's made up of most of the kids and our friends around my neighborhood that play the game. My 17-year-old neighbor is our guild master, and she's very good at it," he said.

"I'd have thought that you'd be the guild master," Kevin said.

"I don't have the time to commit to the game to handle that kind of responsibility," he replied. "If I get to play for three hours in a takir, then I'm lucky. I'm even luckier if those three hours are uninterrupted."

"I guess you're really busy, running a planet and all," Rita said. "And I can't believe I'm sitting here talking to someone that does."

"Us planetary rulers are still people, Rita," he grinned.

"We've heard stories that you just walk around on your planet like everyone else," Kevin said.

"When I can. My guard captain sends guards with me if I'm going to a potentially unsecure place, like when I come to Terra, but I don't really need them at home," he said. "I shop at the store, take my kids out to the park, and go to baseball games like anyone else. I don't even live in a mansion, or on an estate, I live in a colonial on the northwest side of Karsa. The only way my house is really different from anyone else's in the neighborhood is there's a guard barracks behind the house for the Ducal Guard that protects my family, and there's a security fence that encloses the

neighborhood where I live to give the guards control over who comes and goes. But that fence isn't around my house, it encompasses the entire neighborhood. I wasn't born into this nobility crap. I was born and raised a normal person, and I like to be a normal person as much as possible. I find all the primadonna superiority complex bullshit the others have to be super annoying."

That made them all laugh. "My sister said you're too good to be a Grand Duke. Now I see what she was talking about," Sano said.

"Mikano's been talking about me, eh? I'm gonna have to get her for that," he threatened, which made Sano laugh again.

"You know her personally?" Rita asked.

"I know all my ship captains personally," he replied immediately. "And Mikano also happens to be one of my wife's best friends. They hang out together all the time."

"Mikki's told me about that much," Sano said. "She's told me some pretty wild stories about Duchess Jyslin."

"They're most likely true. And even if they're not, Jys will claim that they are just to make her look cooler," he said, which made Sano laugh again.

[You need to log out. I have some info,] Cyvanne communed to him.

"And speaking of work, it just called," he sighed, standing up. "Afraid I'm gonna have to go, guys. Thank you for the game advice, Kevin, and thank you for giving us access to your medical file. Remember, both of you, a courier is going to come to you tomorrow at nine o'clock your time, so make sure you're either at home or at work. And I promise you, I'm going to get to the bottom of what's going on with the DFM and I'm going to make sure that all the farm survivors get everything they were promised," he declared strongly. "I made you guys a promise when I took over Terra from the Trillanes, and I'm gonna make damn sure that that promise is kept."

"Thank you, your Grace," Rita said. "It's been so long since it felt like anyone cared about us."

"I always have, and I always will," he told her.

Cyvanne had her bionoid there at the house, and she greeted him when he climbed out of the merge pod in the office off his bedroom. It was connected to the vidlink that had the game program in it, which was the same vidlink that everyone in the house that played the game used to connect to the game server. *[What cha' got, Cyv?]* he asked as she helped him out of the pod.

[It's more like what we don't have, and why we don't have it,] she replied as they walked into his home office. *[Miaari managed to get into the Medical Service mainframe on Draconis. But when she tried to access the eyes-only files for Kevin Ball and the other farm workers, she triggered some kind of failsafe program that completely purged all that data from the database. She wasn't able to stop it, but she was able to get some data fragments before the purge was completed. She sent those fragments to Siyhaa to see if she can reconstruct it and get anything out of it.]*

[That's the kind of safeguard you'd see in an intel mainframe,] Jason observed as he sat at his desk.

[Yeah, the Medical Service must have gotten the IBI to set it up,] she agreed with a nod. *[Siyhaa said she'd send status reports to you twice daily until she has something.]*

[Did they trace it back to us?]

[No, Miaari's too good to get traced,] she answered. *[But they do know that someone penetrated their mainframe and tried to access that data. That means that we'll be suspected, given we've been asking questions about that data for the last few days.]*

[Yeah, guess I'd better get ready for the nasty call from Dahnai,] he agreed. *[But, now I'm curious enough to be more direct. Do me a favor and ask Zaa if she's available for a chat.]*

[She's over in Jaxtra right now,] Cyvanne said.

[Really? Cool. Zaa,] he called over the planetary biogenic network.

[Yes, cousin?]

[I'd like to talk to you about a job,] he replied. *[I want an operative to go to the Medical Service on Draconis and extract some information. It'll have to be done by accessing the memories of the commander of the*

Medical Service herself, and they'll be expecting someone to try to steal that information, so it's not going to be an easy task,] he told her.

[Handmaiden Miaari has kept me informed about what's going on with the Medical Service,] Zaa noted. *[I'll send one of my best infiltrators to Handmaiden so she can brief him on what information she needs.]*

[Thank you, cousin,] he replied. *[I appreciate your help.]*

[You are most welcome, cousin,] she replied.

[I heard that, so I'm sure we'll know what's going on soon,] Cyvanne noted lightly.

[Stop eavesdropping, woman, it's a rude habit,] he accused, which made her grin.

Chapter 7

Daira, 5 Shiaa , 4408, Faey Orthodox Calendar

Sunday, 10 July 2022 Terran Standard Calendar

Daira, 5 Shiaa, year 1333 of the 97th Generation, Karinne Historical Reference Calendar

Training Range 3 (“The Badlands”), Joint Base Lambda, Karga, Karis

It was like being in a race car.

The ground under his mechanical legs seemed to narrow in his field of vision until it was a straight line under him, everything to the sides a blur as he raced over a salt flat deep in the Karga Desert with two other Cheetahs hot on his tail and two more in front of him, the dust and salt powder kicked up by their feet threatening to limit his vision. At the speed they were going, he only had maybe eight or nine seconds before they exited the salt flat and returned to the narrow, twisting canyons of the Kedrin Badlands. So if he wanted to make up any ground, this was the easiest place to do it.

This was where it mattered, this was where months of training was going to come into play. Whoever had most acclimated to the quadrupedal movement style of a Cheetah was going to have the biggest advantage here. The other members of the Storm Riders who still hadn't fully embraced running on all fours were slowly falling behind, unable to match the coordination and ground-eating sprint of the other Cheetahs, while those most comfortable with running on all fours were slowly pulling away. Jason was within that pack, along with Tara, Kenli, and Fellan from the Storm Riders, and Sirri, who was doing this training run with them. What they were doing was a race, an old-fashioned race, which ran through the badlands and over the salt flat that stood in the center of it. The salt flat used to be a wide but very shallow saltwater lake, but after the destruction

of Karis 1,300 years ago, the lake evaporated to form a relatively flat plain crusted with salt and the hills that had surrounded it had become a series of narrow, twisting passages through the bedrock that had once been the bones of the hills that had ringed the lake. The passages were a great test of a rigger's ability to control his Cheetah, challenging the mecha's agility and the rigger's ability to control his rig.

Third place wasn't nearly good enough for him. He put his nose lower and focused everything on his loping gait, doing everything he could to maximize his speed and efficiency, and that allowed him to nose up between the two leaders, Tara and Fellan. The broken walls of the badlands got bigger and bigger in his forward view as the three of them jockeyed for position, until he realized that his middle position was going to prevent him from getting into a passage...especially since Tara and Fellan were intentionally boxing him in. They were forcing him to slow down to get behind one of them so he could get between the irregular rocky pillars.

If he thought conventionally, anyway.

Instead of slowing down, he sped up even more, inching ahead of the other two Cheetahs, and only at the last possible instant did he slow down, all but slide over the salty crust of the flat as he retracted his traction claws and nearly went over his own front legs, then planted his back legs and jumped almost straight up. Tara and Fellan didn't see it because they entered the passages to either side of the rocky pillar, and the other two may have caught a glimpse of his Cheetah slamming into the side of the pillar feet first, his traction claws now fully extended. Those claws found purchase in the rocky wall, and he used his momentum to drive himself upwards, tearing chunks of the reddish-brown rock away from the cliff face as he started scaling it.

He'd just went through his extreme vertical terrain training yesterday, and those lessons were fresh in his mind.

The tops of the rocky mesas of the badlands weren't flat, but they were flat enough for him to see the goal on the far side of it, the operations building about 7 kathra away, built on the other side of the formation. He landed on the top of the mesa and surged forward, leaping over a chasm to the next formation, and he set himself on a direct course, a straight line that the others could not follow—

Almost everyone. In his rear display, Sirri's Cheetah vaulted up and onto the top, and it immediately turned towards him and started after him. *[You're not getting away with cheating, Uncle Jason!]* she barked at him as she vaulted over a chasm, trying to catch up with him.

[They never said we couldn't run over the top,] he replied cheekily as he found a smooth pace that allowed him to jump from mesa to mesa without breaking stride, allowing him to run with some impressive speed over the top of the badlands. They weren't allowed to use grav pods for this exercise, which forced them to concentrate on their footwork.

[It's still cheating!]

[If you haven't figured out by now that I'm an outrageous cheater, then you don't pay very much attention, girl,] he replied tauntingly as he opened up more distance between them. Since he was running in a straight line, it only took him a minute and a half to run across the top of the maze of narrow passages below, then slid nearly to a stop and started down the cliff on the far side. It was a 137 shakra high cliff, the height of a 15 story building, and far too high for both the legs and the ground to be able to handle the impact of trying to jump off of it without using grav pods to soften the landing...and he wasn't allowed to use grav pods for this exercise. So he instead half scampered, half slid down the cliff face, hit the ground at the bottom, and stretched out into a full sprint, heading for the finish line. Behind him, he saw Sirri get down from the top and chase after him, and seconds after she did so, Tara emerged from the passage and opened into a full sprint as well.

But it was too late. Jason had too wide of lead. He sprinted over the finish line nearly two seconds before Sirri and four seconds before Tara. The other 45 members of the Storm Riders, both active and reserves, rumbled over the finish line in twos and threes...but all of them finished before the target time. That meant that all 47 of them passed the exercise.

[How the fuck did you get in front of me, Jayce?] Tara demanded over company STG.

[I went up and over,] he replied jauntily as he slowed to a nearly prancing walk, heading for the outdoor staging area. *[That's what you get*

for trying to drive me into the cliff, woman. I just went up the cliff and over the top.]

[Well, that was pretty clever.]

[Clever is a job requirement for 3D,] he replied playfully as he entered the staging area and headed for his maintenance bay.

Half an hour later, he got the news he wanted to hear. He, the other Storm Riders, and Sirri had officially passed the Cheetah basic operations training course, and they could now start training on the combat operations training course. From now on, they'd be training in the special tactics that Cheetahs used on a battlefield and with the mecha's weapons and pod systems, which would include learning how to pilot the rig when it had pods equipped. Pods changed the operational characteristics of the mecha far more than other heavy mecha, so they had to learn to run and move with unequal weight distribution across the mecha's body. When there was more weight on the front legs than the back legs, or vice versa, it changed how the rigger had to move the mecha to keep it stable. That was why the mecha would have ballast units to place to try to equalize the weight distribution as much as possible if the mecha only had either shoulder or hip pods mounted.

Just another aspect of why Cheetahs were more difficult to pilot than bipedal mecha, but it would be worth it in the end.

Sirri punched him in the arm when they left the debriefing room, making him laugh and put his arm around her. *You'll get another chance at me when we start doing the wargame simulations, silly girl,* he sent teasingly.

Finally! she sent happily. *I'm so looking forward to the combat training course!*

Methinks you like the Cheetahs better than a Titan or Valkyrie.

Not really, but it is a whole lot of fun.

Shh, this isn't supposed to be fun, he protested with a slight smile.

They chatted on the way back to Karsa, and when they got there, Sirri gathered up Aria and Yuri and they headed for the shopping district for a little teenage girl time—Sirri *loved* being able to move around on Karis

without needing security escorting her everywhere, though members of the Imperial Guard were always close by in case they were needed—and Jason went up to his office and caught up on the status reports that had piled up while he was over on Karga. It had been two days since Jason had sicced Zaa on the Medical Service, but the infiltrator they sent in had yet to recover any valuable intel yet. The Director of the Medical Service was behind some impressive security for her just being a doctor, which had slowed down the Kimdori's attempts to get anything out of her. But Banlia had certainly made sure that Jason knew how she felt in a call she made to him yesterday. She (correctly) blamed him for the hack on their mainframe, and she made some pretty nasty threats for someone that was supposed to be about healing people. She threatened to recall the entire Karinne branch of the Medical Service...which amused Jason, because the Medical Service here was loyal to the *house*, not *her*. There were no Imperium doctors, nurses, or administrative staff in the Karinne Medical Service, all of its members were Karinnes. If Banlia used that nuclear option, she'd be in for quite a shock when the Medical Service here on Karis simply went back to being autonomous.

Songa had built her Medical Service the Karinne way from the beginning.

A bigger status report was a vidy that Dahnai recorded of Kaen chasing, and then being chased by, his tabi Neena through one of the parlors in the summer palace. Kaen was proving to be a handful for Saelle and Evin, nearly Kimdori in his energy and curiosity and absolutely fearless. He got into absolutely everything, requiring constant supervision (which he got thanks to the Imperial Guard), and also requiring them to keep him more or less isolated for now.

Kaen had been full of surprises, and the biggest of which was that he expressed at the age of *three*. And just like his big sister, he was a *listener*.

Dahnai couldn't be prouder of her son. Any child that expressed that early meant that he was going to be a prodigy when it came to telepathy, and him being a boy wasn't going to change that fact. He may not have the raw power of girls who expressed at the same age, but he'd still be damn strong, one of the most powerful male telepaths in the Imperium. And the fact that he was also a listener was just the cream at the top of the bottle.

What they didn't know yet was if he'd inherited his mother's telekinetic power. Mrar said it was too soon for her to determine if he had or not, but she was very optimistic. As strong as Dahnai was, and the fact that strong TK ran through her family line, it was a very good chance that Kaen would also be telekinetic.

Four-year-olds aren't exactly known for their tact or ability to keep a secret, so Kaen was currently sequestered by the Imperial Guard so they could both train him how to control his talent and also teach him not to blurt out everything he overheard while he was eavesdropping on private sendings. It was even more problematic because Kaen knew that his mother and sister were Generations, having picked that up before anyone realized he was a listener. He didn't entirely understand what it meant, but that one reason alone was enough for them to keep Kaen separated from just about anyone that didn't know that secret. It was why Saelle and Evin had been on Karis for nearly a full year, and Dahnai came over much more than normal to both keep tabs on her son and also stay close to Saelle, who was her best friend. Dahnai was spending one takir a month on Karis, but when she came here, Kaen was moved to the strip to keep him away from the *Siann*. She had to come here to see him and Saelle, so she was a fairly regular houseguest on the strip.

This was unusual behavior, and it had been noticed. Yila in particular was working hard to unravel the mystery of why Dahnai was keeping Kaen isolated, and she'd been underhanded enough to try to talk Dara into worming that information out of the strip kids. That was because Dara spent nearly as much time on Karis as Dahnai did. Yila's evil plot to marry her brat off to one of Jason's boys was showing some results, because Dara and Zach were nearly inseparable. Zach, like Rann, was quickly approaching puberty, and Jason had the sinking feeling that when he finally got there, started showing interest in girls, he might seriously consider asking Jason to betroth him to Dara. Dara was 14, approaching marrying age by Faey noble tradition, but the betrothal would lock her down for Zach and make sure Yila didn't marry her off to someone else.

What made it dangerous in Jason's mind was that Dara had just started puberty herself. That wasn't unusual for a Faey girl, who could start puberty anywhere from age 15 to age 12, so Dara was only just a little bit ahead of the average age for a girl. Dara's infatuation with Zach was going to turn

into something major very quickly, because she was already looking at him with hunger in her eyes. Dara's puberty might very well entice Zach into asking for a betrothal, since she'd be chasing him with far more determination than she was now.

Zach couldn't quite wrap his mind around the fact that Yila was trying to marry Dara off to *him*, so she'd never in a million years betroth her to another boy...unless it was a ploy to force Zach to make a move.

He was more or less resigned to the idea of it...and truth be told, he did like Dara. What he didn't like was the string tied around the girl that led back to her mother. It would be far harder cutting Dara loose from Yila than it had been to cut Shya loose from Dahnai, because Shya had hated being an Imperial Princess and she was quite eager to embrace her new life and the rules that came with it. Yila would be an eternal whisper in Dara's ear, and if Jason didn't cut that string quickly, it could cause both him and the house some very real problems.

He had no idea where the time went. It seemed like just yesterday, his oldest kids were building sandcastles on the beach, and didn't come up to his hip. Now they were on the verge of puberty—Sora had just had her first menstrual cycle, so she *was* in puberty now—and very soon, he was going to have to deal with a pack of teenagers with raging pubescent hormones that were going to shake his moral foundations to their core.

Thinking about that, about his little girl becoming a woman...it made him feel *old*, for the first time in his life.

And it was going to be harder for him than he was willing to admit. He may be married to a Faey, and live in a more or less Faey society, but he was *Terran*. Parts of Faey society, he'd been able to adapt to without much trouble, like the Faey attitude towards sex. They didn't hide sex from kids because they saw nothing inherently wrong or shameful about it. To them, it was a natural part of daily life, and they didn't attach any religious mores to it. Nowhere in the Faey religion did their gods dictate how Faey were supposed to behave when it came to their sexuality, which was why Faey society was so accepting of homosexuality. There was no religious basis for them to believe it was wrong, leaving them to accept the science that said that homosexuality was a part of the natural order, that homosexuals were born that way...and besides, most Faey weren't entirely straight to begin

with, both men and women. Jason had adjusted to the idea of his kids seeing sex just about everywhere they looked, but when they started partaking in it themselves, like Aria had, he knew it was going to push the boundaries of his ability to adapt and accept a culture very different from the one in which he was raised. It was one thing for them to see it, but it was an entirely different thing for them to do it.

Children in Terran society weren't supposed to get involved in sex until they were adults, but in Faey society, they were encouraged to explore their sexuality early, even the boys were. Since they saw it as a natural part of life, they saw no reason to deny it to those who were physically old enough to engage in it. While there were social conventions in place that prevented Faey adults from having sex with teenagers, there were no such conventions preventing teenagers from engaging in sex with each other. To the contrary, they were actively encouraged to engage in it by their parents, by Faey society as a whole. And now that his kids were reaching that age, he would have to step back and allow them to do things that his father would have *murdered* him for if he'd have been the one doing it.

Of course he did it anyway, but the difference was, he hid what he was doing from his father, where here, his kids wouldn't have to hide what they were doing from their parents.

He'd had years to prepare for this, but it seemed like it hadn't been long enough, if his reaction to Aria's "*active*" social life was any indication.

He wasn't *that* old. He was only 35, he still had some of the best years of his life in front of him—34, he was 34 damn it, he was *not* adding a year to his age like the Faey did—and the advances of Faey medicine would keep him active and spry well into his 80s so long as he took care of himself. But no matter how long his life may be, he couldn't help but feel the weight of the years when he thought of the idea that in just a few years, his oldest boys and girls wouldn't be children anymore. And that couldn't help but make a parent start feeling the marching of the years, start feeling that they weren't young anymore.

But, if Rann and his eldest siblings approaching adulthood made him feel old, then Jon and Julia made him feel young. He watched a vidy feed of the two of them playing down in the living room with Sanjira and Hann, Maya and Vell's 3-year-old son, as they waited for dinner. Tika was a

toddler now along with the twins, but they were no longer the youngest generation of kids on the strip. Maya, Min, Sheleese, Lyn, and Temika all had infants, Temika and Mike's son Andre only one month old, representing the next wave of children to add to the gaggle of kids that lived on the strip. Two of the other women on the strip were very pregnant, Bryn and Myra, so there would be more babies added to that wave soon.

For the first time, none of the kids in the newest wave were Jason's. He still strayed from Jyslin from time to time, but not as much as he used to... but that was mainly because many of the strip girls that chased him were now either married or had long-standing relationships with men that would become marriages as soon as the pair stopped dicking around and finalized things. The only truly single girls on the strip now were Myri and Kumi, and that was because Myri was married to her job and Kumi was *never* going to marry, because she felt it would cramp her decadent lifestyle. All the other girls had found husbands or steady boyfriends over the last three years, even Aura and Yana, and most of them were Generations. Jenn was just the first in a wave of Generation men that moved from the outside of the fence to the inside of the fence. Jason had expected that most of the girls would lose interest in him when they had men of their own, and he'd been proven right.

But there were exceptions. Aura was now married to a Generation, Herran, but Jason's relationship with her was so strong that it was nearly in *amu* territory. Most people called Aura his *amu dorai*, even though it wasn't really like that. Jason didn't consider it *amu* because that required romantic love, and their relationship wasn't really about that. They were just very, very good friends who were sexually attracted to each other, and in Faey society, they were allowed to explore that attraction without getting slaughtered by jealous spouses.

But, his relationship with Yana, *that was amu*, at least from Yana's side. Jason didn't feel the same way for Yana she did for him, but he always honored her feelings by being there for her and being a very good friend to her. Yana still hadn't married, but she did have a boyfriend now, one of the younger Generation men named Vann. And while she did love Vann, and was going to marry him, she still harbored love in her heart for Jason. Jason felt that in a few more years, after she was married and had a husband of her own in her life for a while, her feelings for him would slowly change

into something like what he had with Aura, a deep friendship with some sexual attraction mixed in with it. But until they did, he would be there for her in the ways she needed him to be.

Jason hoped none of his boys found themselves in his situation. He sometimes felt like he was being unfair to the women in his life because there seemed to be way too many of them. But he'd also felt that way for about the last ten years, so there was that.

He blinked and got his mind back on business but was distracted again almost immediately. *[Totally unfair, baby, you finished the training course first!]* Symone complained over the biogenic network. *[You were supposed to let me finish first!]*

[Stop playing around then, woman,] he teased in reply. The Renegades, being an Army exomech squadron, were going to be assigned Cheetahs, so the company was undergoing Cheetah training. They'd started five days after Jason did, but the entire company had performed so well that they were threatening to graduate up to the combat section of the course first. *[Aren't you doing the race today?]*

[This afternoon,] she told him. *[You pulled strings to get in this morning, didn't you?]*

[Of course not, you goofy thing,] he retorted. *[I swear, woman, you have the weirdest mood swings when you're pregnant.]*

She returned pure amusement over the connection. Symone had been pregnant for only about three months, so she was still considered on active combat status. She hadn't even started to show yet. *[Sirri run with you?]*

[Yeah, and she passed with the rest of us. Why do you ask?]

[She just cancelled running with us.]

[She's out in town with Aria and Yuri,] he told her. *[No doubt celebrating.]*

[Boy hunting is more like it,] Symone thought with a dirty undertone to her thought. *[Too bad Sirri can't invoke Imperial law until she's Empress. Trelle, would I ever love to have the power to make any man I want get between my legs.]*

[I can do without the open fantasizing over the network,] he replied, the current of his thought making her even more amused.

[You are still such a prude...and it still turns me on as much now as it did back then,] she teased. *[Nothing's hotter to a Faey woman than conquering a defiant man.]* That was certainly true enough, it was why a man saying no to a woman was actually a form of flirtation, and about the fastest way a man could secure a woman's interest in him.

He bantered with his *amu dozei* for a few more moments, then broke it off when a report hit his panel. It was a message from Rita Estobar, sent over the CO mail system to his character, which Cyvanne had routed to his home office panel. Yesterday, she and Kevin Ball no doubt had quite a happy shock when couriers dropped off certified vouchers to them that were worth C517,495 each, which was the money they should have received over the last 14 years through the monthly stipend program. Both of them had never signed up for the program, and why they never did was something else that Jason's office was investigating. It seemed that all the farm workers who had "eyes only" classification in the Medical Service had not been enrolled in the stipend program. The records showed that Rita Estobar had applied for the stipend about three months after it was put into place, no doubt hearing about it from another farm survivor, but her application was denied.

As was the application of every other "eyes only" farm survivor.

The more he dug into this, the more worried he was getting. Something...something big had gone on over there, and it seemed like all of this was a coordinated attempt by both the U.N. and the Medical Service to hide it...but he had the feeling it was for different reasons. The DFM was hiding it because someone in the department was stealing that money, but the Medical Service just had to have another reason. It couldn't be as simple as embezzlement, not for them to go to the extreme of locking that data behind top-tier security clearances and behind a "kill switch" feature that would usually be found in an intelligence operation's mainframe.

What he was seeing now was a perfect example of that mystifying cooperation. It was just too damn convenient that the "eyes only" farm survivors seemed to be the ones that the DFM worked the hardest to keep from getting any benefits.

It was more than Miaari and Zaa hunting this down now. Kiaari was also involved, and she was understandably furious that she had never heard anything about any of this. She considered it a failure that she hadn't heard anything about this, and Jason felt her self-incrimination was a bit misplaced. This wasn't very big in the scale of things that went on over on Terra, it involved just a few people that Kiaari's pack almost never interacted with in the pursuance of their duties, so it had slipped through the cracks of her operation. She couldn't keep track of *everything*, but Kimdori were big on blaming themselves when things didn't go perfectly. So, it was a particularly incensed Kiaari seeking to regain her honor as Terra's Gamekeeper that was rampaging across Terra at the moment, and that motivation was no doubt going to produce some results.

Kiaari was also a bit miffed at him that he hadn't brought this to her in the first place, but she well knew that Jason tended to go to Miaari first whenever he needed information.

So far, they hadn't gotten very far in their investigation. Zaa's operative hadn't yet gotten close enough to Banlia to extract any info, Siyhaa was still hunting down the financial paper trail, and Miaari was still gathering information from Terra's governmental computer system to try to figure out what was going on. But Jason did feel that they'd gotten at least a little progress in the form of paying Rita and Kevin the money they deserved. And when he found out who else had been denied their rightful money, he would rectify that injustice...and then take that money out of the hides of whoever stole it. For now, it was coming out of Karinne's budget, but he would get it back. Oh, would he *ever* get it back.

He had to smile as he read the letter, as Rita thanked him about fifty times for the money and promised that she would use it wisely. That was what made this job worth it, in his opinion, when he was in a position to help someone else, and when he made someone happy. Besides, he felt at least a fleeting kinship with the farm survivors, and he'd felt that he'd been remiss in his duties to make sure they were okay since all this mess started.

He was about to contact Chirk to make a change to his schedule when Meya's face appeared on a flat hologram over his desk. "What's up, Meya?" he asked as he heard the door open. Amber padded up to his chair, and he picked her up and put her in his lap.

“Just to keep you up to date, we just had a near miss with a mapping ship in Mostara B,” she said without preamble. Mostara B was a small globular galaxy on the edge of their side of the home galactic cluster. Along with Mostara A, they were the most distant galaxies of those that orbited the Milky Way. “It jumped into a system to map it and almost immediately came under attack.”

“How? Aren’t they jumping in at the edge to do scans before they move into the system?”

“Yes, but the civilization that was there jumped a warship to its location within 20 seconds of it dropping into normal space,” she answered. “They have real time jump engines.”

“Oh. Any damage?”

“No, the attacking ship’s weapons couldn’t penetrate our shields. It managed to escape in mode one, and the attacker didn’t follow.”

“That’s good. Just mark that area as off limits and have them explore a different part of Mostara B,” he said. “But send a couple of hyperspace probes in so we can map out how big that civilization is, so we don’t trespass again.”

“Put them on the do not contact list?”

“Yup. If they’re that trigger happy, we stay the hell away from them.”

He thought that was the last he’d hear of that problem, at least until just before dinner. Meya contacted him again while he was playing with Jon and Julia. *[They’re back, Jayce,] Meya communed to him from KES headquarters. [The scout ship Baistara just reported a brush with a ship of the same design as the one that attacked our mapping ship a few hours ago. Ships in that galaxy have been keeping their sensors tuned to catch real time jumps, so they saw it coming and had time to get their defensive systems up.]*

[Did it attack as soon as it came out of hyperspace?]

[Yeah. Whoever this is, they must have a good sensor network to detect the scout ship. It was exploring an uninhabited system a good 370 light years from where the mapping ship was attacked. The scout ship took fire just before it retreated from the system.]

[Whoever they are might be a galaxy-spanning civilization,] Jason speculated. [Mostara B isn't all that large as galaxies go, and this civilization has real-time engines. It would only take them about 35 minutes to jump from one end of the galaxy to the other.]

[I'm going to pull all our exploration assets out of Mostara B for now,] Meya told him. [There are plenty of other galaxies to explore where we're not being shot at.]

[Works for me, do it,] he confirmed. [Send in some more hyperspace probes to gather some generic data about the galaxy, then we'll be done there and never go back.]

[Already did that. They should be done in about ten hours.]

[On the ball I see.]

[Always.]

Jason thought that that was the last he'd hear of Mostara B, but he was wrong. Cyrsi woke him up about an hour before the alarm went off. *[We have a situation, Jason,]* she told him after pestering him enough to wake him up.

[What now?]

[A large fleet of warships from Mostara B came out into flat space where the Adralix was sitting, collecting data from the probes we sent in to the galaxy, she reported. The Adralix was a Vanguard class scout ship, and was the "flag" vessel for exploration operations in Mostara A and Mostara B. [There were enough of them to force the ship to use aggressive tactics to clear a lane to escape.]

[Why didn't the ship retreat immediately when they saw them coming?]

[They had the engines down to do scheduled maintenance,] she answered. [They didn't get them back up until nearly twenty seconds after the alien fleet dropped into normal space. Jason, the enemy fleet tried to capture the ship. That was why the Adralix had to get very aggressive, it can't jump or use mode one when it's grappled.]

[Can't blame them there.]

[What Meya wanted you to know was that the crew was attacked telepathically as well. The enemy had multiple high power, well trained telepaths,] she told him. [If not for the Faey on the ship, they would have been taken over.]

[Get that ship back here and have the entire crew checked over by mindbenders. Let's make sure the enemy didn't break anyone and plant any post-contact suggestions.]

[Meya already ordered it. The ship should be back at Kosigi in about forty minutes.]

[Good. Any damage or injuries?]

[None to the Adralix, but it did significant damage to two ships making its escape. Enemy casualties are unknown.]

He barely paused. *[We're completely withdrawing from that region. Have Meya pull all assets from both Mostara A and Mostara B, including hyperspace probes. If they're willing to come out into flat space to get at our ships, I don't want our ships within a twenty day jump of either Mostara galaxy. There's a whole universe out there to explore, so I'm not going to quibble over two small galaxies. If this race is that determined to keep us away, we'll oblige them.]*

[I'll tell her,] Cyrsi answered.

He laid back down and yawned, then scrubbed his face, pondering if it was worth it to go back to sleep for another 50 minutes or just get up. The balcony doors were open, letting in a salty, cool breeze that livened up the bedroom. Jyslin was over at Tim's tonight, so it was Symone sleeping in the bed beside him. She snuggled up to him almost instinctively in her sleep. He closed his eyes and thought about it for a few minutes, then sighed and extricated himself from Symone and got up. He went down to the kitchen, where Ayama was already awake and getting breakfast started. *Isn't this a little early, even for you?* Jason challenged as he came in. Ayama almost immediately went over to the brewer and poured him a cup of coffee. *Thanks,* he nodded as she handed it to him.

I promised Shya I'd make quiche this morning. That has some prep time, she replied. *Besides, I was already up. Now, why are you up? It's only six.*

Work woke me up, not worth it to go back to sleep, he answered. You guys decided where you're going for vacation?

Sarga, but we haven't decided where yet, she answered as she started chopping vegetables.

No skiing this time?

I'm sick of skiing. I told Surin if he takes me skiing one more time, I'd have you melt all the snow on the planet.

He laughed. I'm not sure that would be a very good idea, he grinned.

I don't care.

You should talk to Merra. She lived on Sarga for over a year, so no doubt she'll know the best places to go.

We did. We know generally where we're going, we just haven't decided on which town or hotel yet.

Ah. And how excited is Sanni?

She can't sit still, she replied with amusement. That has to be Surin in her.

I'd say that's a good thing. The less of you there is in her, the better she's going to turn out.

Ayama gave him a long, direct stare.

Keep trying, I stare down galactic rulers on a daily basis, he replied cheekily, giving her a grin.

You'd better eat at work today, Jason, she threatened, which made him laugh.

Despite the threat, Jason got an early breakfast and decided to get an early jump on today's paperwork. He went up his home office and pulled the queue off Chirk's panel and managed to get nearly half of his paperwork done before the kids started waking up. Aria was almost always the first up because she worked out before school, but a steady, heavy rain outside sent her over to the guard barracks and the gym they had there. Usually, the girls woke up next, and someone would have to go roust Rann and Shya out of bed not long after that. Today was only a little different because both

Danelle and Sirri were in the house. Danelle was in her usual bedroom—she had her own bedroom in the house—and Sirri had stayed over rather than go back to the summer palace, given how late she and Aria got in last night. The Crown Princess wandered into his home office while he was working through his paperwork, yawning as she opened the door and padded in, wearing what attractive Faey teenagers usually wore to bed... nothing. Jason did spare a slightly appreciative glance at her unclad form—she really was just as sexy as her mother—as she padded up to the desk and flopped into the guest chair on the far side. *[Morning, Uncle Jason.]*

[Why aren't you over at the gym with Aria?]

[I'm about to go over. Just wanted to let you know that Aria had the same dream last night, but she didn't find out anything new. Same dream, same result.]

[She's been keeping me informed,] he nodded. *[But I appreciate you telling me.]*

[You aren't bailing on the training today, are you?]

[Not planning to,] he answered. *[And you'd better get moving. Don't you have a training session with Mrar this morning? You know what she'll do to you if you're late.]*

Sirri laughed aloud. *[She doesn't respect my title at all.]*

[That little Pai can tie you in a knot whenever she pleases. She has no reason to respect you,] Jason replied lightly. *[You mastered light manipulation yet?]*

[Still working on it. It's really hard,] she fretted. Sirri had surprised just about everyone, both those who knew she was a Generation and those who didn't, with her telekinetic ability. Even without a gestalt boosting her ability, she was an exceptionally strong telekinetic, able to lift nearly 90 konn with her power. That was more than her own body weight, meaning she could effectively levitate using her ability. She was stronger than her mother, stronger than Jason, stronger than just about every other TK on Karis except for Samin, Zachary, and a few others...and not all of those were Generations. Because of her immense base power, she was an absolute monster when boosted by a gestalt, and Mrar had spent the last three years training her in how to harness and control that power.

And the Imperium knew about most of it. Dahnai didn't hide Sirri's rare gift, was damn proud that her daughter was such a prodigy when it came to TK. The whole Imperium knew that Sirri was one of the most powerful Faey telekinetics alive, and that she took personalized training with the Pai to fully develop that power.

But the real surprise had been Kellin. He was just barely stronger than Dahnai in TK, but he knew far more applications of it than she did because he had a natural aptitude for TK training. Mrar called him a natural, someone that just instinctively understood how TK worked, and that let him pull off tricks of skill beyond most others. Dahnai had accepted this fact with at least a modicum of grace, though she secretly fumed a bit that her husband was better at her at something...at *anything*, truth be told, it stung at her Faey woman's pride to be beaten by a man.

[I'm sure you'll get it soon. It's a fun skill to have. You can do some neat things with it.]

[I know, that's why I'm working on it so hard. At least when I'm not recovering from a long night of partying,] she grinned.

[Change the subject,] he warned. He didn't much care what Sirri did, but he did care what she talked Aria into doing along with her.

She laughed brightly. *[I'm all grown up now, Uncle Jason, I get to do all the fun things,]* she teased, even being going so far as to cup one of her ample teenage breasts. Despite only being 16, Sirri looked almost fully grown...and the fact that she wasn't hinted that she was going to be as tall as her mother. Maybe even taller. But in the ways that Faey girls *wanted* to be grown, Sirri had more or less already got there. She was 16—15 in reality—but she looked more like she was 18 or 19. She'd started puberty earlier than most Faey girls, and had had three years to develop into the beautiful and well-curved young woman she was now. *[And one of the benefits of being the Crown Princess is tons of guys want you. I let Aria have the leftovers.]*

[Girl, I'm about to spank you,] he threatened, which made her laugh again.

[I need to get over to the gym anyway,] she grinned, standing up. *[See you after lunch, Uncle Jason.]* She then sauntered her way out of his office,

making sure to wiggle her butt for his viewing pleasure.

Seriously, she was a lot less annoying before she hit puberty. But that was Faey society. Sirri was 16, having just celebrated her birthday two takirs ago, and she was the Crown Princess to boot, so she had every right in both Faey law and custom to hunt playmates...and not all of them were her age. And she was also right that her celebrity would make her very appealing to boys and young men, who could crow to their friends that they slept with *royalty*.

He'd bet that the Faey would act entirely differently if it was much easier for teenage girls to get pregnant. The same mechanism that made it almost unheard of for Faey women to conceive quickly after giving birth was also at work in pubescent and recently post-pubescent teenage girls, which allowed them to monkey around with very little fear of getting pregnant. A Faey woman didn't really have a good chance to get pregnant until she was nearly 25...which was the reason Jason suspected that 25 was the official age of majority in Faey society.

They'd better feel lucky that biological quirk was there, given that virtually no Faey girl would use birth control of any kind.

Maybe it was time to marry Sirri off. Maybe having a husband in the house would curtail some of her more predatory inclinations.

Probably not. Besides, as the Crown Princess, Sirri wouldn't marry until after she took the throne, and it would be to the man of her choice. The Empress did not marry for political gain, she married purely for personal preference.

Today was Daira, which meant that the kids didn't have school, Jason didn't usually go into the office (though he did clear his in-box from home), and it also meant it was match day for the Paladins. The Paladins hadn't won the Empress' Crown since their second, back-to-back win two years ago, but they had established themselves as one of the major powers in the IBL despite falling short the last two years. They were in the playoffs every year now, and they got deep into them every year. Two years ago, they were beaten in the finals by the Immortals (which made Dahnai almost insufferable for six months), and last year they were beaten in the semifinals by the Jerama Warlords. The Tigers had won the crown last year,

beating the Warlords in the crown match. That made them the defending champions, a fact that had made Yila quite mellow the last few months. Finally getting her title had taken a huge burden off her back. Today was an away game, with the Paladins traveling to Kaidora II to take on the Executioners. It wasn't a division match up, but in the IBL, every game *mattered*. Jyslin didn't go to away games in person due to Aya's security, but she attended every single one of them through a moleculartronic bionoid that she kept on the team's transport. As was usual for Jyslin on a match day, she was up early and merged to her bionoid almost as soon as she finished breakfast, traveling with the team. She spent every away game not in a skybox or as a guest of the home team's owner, but on the sidelines with her team, cheering them on.

Today was an important match for the Paladins. If they won, they clenched a guaranteed playoff spot, so no way was Jyslin not going to be there with the team for a match this big. It had become almost the usual for the Paladins to clinch this early in the season, and the rest of the season would be about making sure their seed in the playoff bracket was as high as possible.

Jyslin was one of the most active owners in the IBL, and Jason felt that her personal attention and her passion for the Paladins was one reason why they'd become such a success. She did everything right in his opinion, and the biggest thing she did right was to understand that she wasn't an expert on batchi. Her front office and her head coach were the experts, and she was always very careful about getting their informed opinions for every decision she made. She was the boss, she made the decisions and she signed the checks, but she never made a decision that wasn't backed by consulting with multiple advisors and a lot of research. Though, after running the team for six years, Jyslin could very well be considered an expert on batchi now. But despite her years of experience, she still made sure to consult with people who had far more experience than she did about the running of the team.

She ran it on her own now. Frinia still owned ten percent of the team, but her advanced age had caused her to retire from active participation in the team. She did come to the matches from time to time, when she felt up to it, but she had turned running the Paladins completely over to Jyslin after the Paladins won their first crown.

Usually, Jason would have attended a match this important, but not today. He didn't want to be committed to anything while he was waiting for more information about what was going on with Terra and the Medical Service, so he would stay home and watch the match on vidy with the kids...and with Jyslin.

She was skilled enough with merging as a Generation to have two splits strong enough to operate a bionoid while her real body was engaged with other tasks, as long as one of them, her passive split, was sitting or laying down and didn't do anything too complex or strenuous to break the merge. She'd worked hard on her splitting skill after Jason managed to finally figure out Kellin's trick, and he'd gotten to the point where he could do just about anything except fight from his passive split. It had taken him nearly three years to master the extremely difficult trick, but he'd done it. He could now perform light physical activity with his real body or a second bionoid while merged to a bionoid. He could walk around, talk, engage in complex physical tasks so long as they didn't become too intense. If they went over the line, became so intense that they dominated his attention, he would lose the merge. But still, it was a trick that mightily impressed most of the other Generations, and now many of them were trying to learn it too. What Jason and Kellin could do with their real bodies or a second bionoid while merged to another bionoid was very, very impressive.

And Faey being Faey, they were too competitive to allow only Jason and Kellin to be able to do that trick.

Jyslin was learning the trick now as well, and she was to where she could hold a conversation and move her arms around while merged to a bionoid, but she couldn't do anything intricate, strenuous, or required too much of her attention. She couldn't walk or move too much while she was sitting down, but she could do it.

So, when match time came around, the kids were gathered around her real body as she sat on the couch in the main living room, and a hologram of her bionoid was on the vidy as she walked out onto the pitch with her team. Jason joined them just as they went through the pre-game ceremonies, sitting down beside Jyslin. It wasn't only family however. Kreel was over from Grimjar to hang out, and they had a slightly rarer visitor as well in High Princess Mrrri of the Pai.

Over the last three years, Mrri had almost been a *pest*. Despite being the first in line for the Pai throne, Mrri was, by profession, an astrophysicist, and she had been utterly enthralled by Confederation and Karinne technology since the day she came to Karis to negotiate a treaty to allow the Confederation to put an interdictor in her home system. Since joining the Confederation, her main mission, straight from her father, was to integrate Confederation technology into Pai society as quickly as possible. She was the one that was in charge of the modernization effort on Paian, and Jason had to admit, she'd done an outstanding job so far.

The Karinnes and the Pai had become very close over the last three years for more reasons than just modernizing Pai industry. Since Pai telepaths could hear communion, the two empires had done some in-depth research into their ability, and it had produced some interesting results. Where all Pai telepaths could hear organic communion, about 20% of them had also learned to actively commune themselves, able to send via communion as well as hear it, and Mrri was one of them. Mrar was another. That all but made them Generations themselves, only lacking the ability to have their power boosted by a gestalt and the ability to split, which did choke down their commune ability somewhat due to having much more limited bandwidth in their commune. The Karinnes had taught the Pai telepaths that could commune many of their tricks, including the ability to merge without using a jack, even though Mrri had one—regular telepathy just didn't have enough "bandwidth" to handle a merge—and they'd learned much about communion and the Pai over the last few years. They'd learned that it was the Pai's unique brain architecture that gave them the ability to hear commune, an architecture almost exactly identical to a Generation's, and those with an architecture most similar to a Generation who were the ones that could actively commune. That made the Pai and the Generations almost related, in a bizarre way, and that fact had drawn the two disparate species together over the years.

It did fit, in an odd way. Most every Generation that had trained under Mrar just *adored* her. There was something about Pai that *clicked* with both Generations and Kimdori.

The fact that Pai could hear commune had required the Karinnes to invest some trust into the Pai, and that trust had not been misplaced over the last three years. The Pai knew some of the Karinnes' secrets, but they kept

those secrets out of respect for their relationship. But it did mean that only Pai that passed Miaari's screening were allowed to come to Karis, since they were all a potential security risk.

As a result of both her work and her participation in the commune research project, Mrri had been one of the more frequent visitors to Karis over the last three years, frequent enough to establish lasting friendships with many people on Karis. She was here almost every other takir, either doing research with the communion team or trying to talk the Karinnes into this project or that which would modernize Paian's infrastructure faster. Truth be told, she was quite well liked by just about everyone, having wormed her way into his inner circle much the way Kreel and Enva did. And the other members of Jason's inner circle of Confederation rulers liked her just as much as he did. She was solidly entrenched in their clique within the Council, joining Zaa, Dahnai, Sk'Vrae, Kreel, and Enva, and to a lesser extent Shakizarr, Brayrak Kruu, Magran, Grayhawk, and Ethikk.

There was an aspect of Mrri that appealed to almost everyone. Mrri was adorable, but she also had a wonderful personality that made everyone like her. She was generous, kind, and had a rich sense of humor, but she was also one of the smartest people Jason had ever known. She was young enough to know how to have fun, she loved to play like a little kid sometimes, but her scientist's training and exceptional intelligence made her a brisk conversationalist. She was well trained in statecraft by her father, Mrrshan, and that gave her the ability to navigate the murky political environment of the council and the *Siann* with grace and style. But the one thing that Jason never forgot was that her Adorable Cute and Fuzzy Highness was exceptionally dangerous *because* of her intelligence and her charisma, and he respected her nearly as much as he liked her.

You're almost late, Jason, Mrri chastised. Though she usually communed with Generations, Kreel being here restricted her to sending.

Mrri was one of the very few non-Generations that knew Jyslin's and Shya's secret, that they were Generations. She'd found out quite by accident with Jyslin and found out about Shya because the girl had very little self-control around Rann. But she had kept their secret, proving herself to Jason and the Karinnes. However, she didn't know that Dahnai, Kellin, Miyai, and Sirri were Generations.

I like to avoid all the silly ceremonies and sit down just in time to see the action, he replied as he sat down beside Jyslin and took her hand. “Thanks, Merra,” he said as she handed him a glass of *oye* juice from a tray she was carrying. “Where’s Seido?”

“Running a bit late at the restaurant,” she replied. “She asked me to make you all some refreshments while she finishes up and heads home.”

“You sure you’re okay with filling in for Ayama and Surin while they’re on vacation?”

“Of course I am,” she smiled in reply. “I arranged a reduced schedule so I can be here to fill in when Seido’s busy.”

“Well, I’m sure we’ll appreciate your cooking more than Ayama’s,” he replied lightly.

“Oh no, you’re not going to start a war just before they leave and make me fight it when they get home,” she protested. “Ayama made sure to restock *that* spice rack before she leaves, and I have permission to use it.”

That made him laugh brightly. “Then I’d say that meals around here next takir are going to be adventurous.”

“Only yours, Dad,” Shya stated. “We don’t want anything to do with the *spice rack*.”

“Truth,” Rann agreed

“Hush, the match is about to start!” Jyslin demanded.

Merra handed out drinks to everyone and cleared out from in front of the vidlink just in time. Mrri had been here enough to know the rules of batchi, and she enjoyed watching the sport, so she was fully invested in the match, sitting on the back of the couch between Jason and Kreel. And it was a good match, both in that it was a nearly dramatic back and forth through the second half, and that the Paladins pulled it out with a 16-14 victory, clinching a playoff spot. Jason found it a little weird to watch his wife jumping up and down on the sidelines with the other players on the viddy while she pumped her fist in the air and gave out a whooping cry of victory on the couch...which had to be how a lot of other people felt when they saw Jason driving a bionoid with his real body close by. Jyslin nearly lost the merge in the celebratory hugs, which caused Jason to laugh when

her bionoid on the vidy jerked a little bit and lost its coordination, but she quickly regained control of the merge. She made sure to pay everyone a little attention before she closed her eyes and fully committed to the merge, to deal with the post-match celebration in the locker room, press conference, and interviews.

After the match, he did do a tiny bit of business. He sat out on the deck with Mrri, the Pai sitting on the table rather than a chair, as Kreel hit the beach with a few of the kids. *[Sometimes I find it hard to believe he's one of the most dangerous rulers on the council,]* Mrri communed impishly as they watched Kreel get mugged by several of the younger kids, because he stole their beach ball.

[Don't ever let his attitude or his irreverence blind you to fact that Kreel is one of the most savvy politicians you'll ever see, Mrri,] he answered honestly. *[And the Grimja know it. He can only run for re-election and serve one more six-year term as High Councilor after this term ends, and there's some serious talk in the Union about changing the law to allow him to run for another term after that. But Kreel wouldn't allow it. As much as he'd love to serve beyond the three term limit, he's rightfully worried that someone not as gifted as he is somehow gets in and has an extra six years to run the Union into the ground in the future. Populist demagogues who are better at talking than leading are something of a recurring issue in the Union. That's why they instituted the term limit law in the first place.]*

[These democracies and republics are so...weird,] she complained. *[It's almost against the natural order.]*

[Hey, watch it now,] he warned lightly in reply. *[If I could make the house a democracy or a republic, I would in a heartbeat. I believe they're the most effective forms of government. Unfortunately, the secrets we have to keep more or less require a Grand Duke to rule the house. There has to be someone ultimately responsible, someone that can be held accountable to keep the oaths of Karinne and who doesn't change with the next election.]*

[See, that's why we get along, you understand the reality of power,] she told him, giving him a sly look. She then laughed when he flicked his finger against her shoulder, nearly knocking her down.

[Arrogant little kitties barely bigger than my tabi aren't allowed to have opinions,] he teased with a sly smile.

[I may be small, but I can pick your butt up and toss you across the deck, Jayce,] she threatened, balling a tiny fist and shaking it in his general direction.

[Damn heavy gravity species, you just ruin everything, you know that?]

She laughed. *[It keeps you giants honest,]* she replied. *[And reminds you that size isn't everything. Now, stop being a jerk and let's talk about the ridiculous deal that Kumi is trying to foist on us. I don't think she realizes that we can do math.]*

Jason laughed brightly. *[If she's trying to scam you, it means she likes you,]* he grinned at her. *[She's a pirate at heart.]*

[Well, she can take her piracy and stuff it. My father would murder me if I ever sent a deal like that to his desk.]

[That may be her plan,] he told her with a sly look. *[You drive Kumi up the wall, Mrri. She doesn't see how someone so adorable can be so viciously ruthless. It violates the foundations of her reality.]*

She gave a high-pitched, squeaky laugh. *[Are you making fun of me, Jason?]*

[Am I?] he countered with that same slight, sly smile.

[I think you are. I may have to do something about that. And the first thing I'm going to do is take Kumi to the cleaners over this Letremite deal.]

[Told you before, Mrri, if you can swindle Kumi, go for it. It keeps her on her toes.]

[You could just order her to let me swindle her.]

[Oh no, you have to work for it. And Kumi will definitely do that,] he replied.

They discussed the deal that Kumi and the Pai were trying to close—at least some realistic terms rather than what Kumi was trying to get away with—at least until Mrri got roped into playing with the kids and Kreel. And that in itself was often a lesson in how different other races and species

could be. Mrri was only a shade over two shakra tall, three times smaller than Jason, yet she could lift nearly 220 konn in Karis' gravity...that was over twice Jason's weight. Her strength was absolutely nuts, a tiny thing that could pick up a small hoverbike, but in her own gravity, she was only slightly stronger than average for a Pai. Paian's gravity was the strongest known gravity that had developed an organized civilization at a nearly mind-boggling 17.6 standard, lethal to even most other heavy gravity species like the Faey and the Haumda. Of all known species, only the Drakk, Meroi, and Prakarikai could survive on Paian without an inducer. It was no surprise that all life on Paian was so small, because only such a small being could survive in gravity that heavy. The Pai were one of the *larger* species that lived on Paian, most life there was insect-sized. Mrri would need an inducer here just to walk if she wasn't specially trained to operate in light gravity, else she'd vault shakra into the air every time she tried to take a step. Pai were agile enough to learn how to walk in lighter gravity without an inducer, a technique they'd developed that involved flicking their tails downward when they generated upward force in their walking gait to generate downward force that kept them from lifting off the ground. It was a little funny to watch, but it worked.

Jason could almost imagine how hard it had been for the Pai to launch rockets off their world, before they came into contact with the Confederation and acquired grav engine technology. The amount of thrust they'd need to overcome Paian's insane 17.6 gravity to achieve escape velocity...he couldn't fathom how they did it using rockets that required conventional reaction fuels. And that was a fantastic indicator of just how smart the Pai were as a species. That they'd developed rocket technology capable of launching off a 17.6 gravity planet using only archaic chemical reaction engines...that was *impressive*. Just about any other species wouldn't have been able to figure it out and would have been trapped on the planet.

Granted, Paian was rich in many chemical compounds that had significantly more kick than a liquid hydrogen/liquid oxygen engine used by the Terrans before the subjugation, but it was still a testament to Pai innovation that they managed to find those compounds and adapt them to use in rocket technology. Then build rockets to launch Pai into orbit without the launch killing them.

But then again, Pai were built for heavy gravity, so handling those crushing G-forces wasn't all that difficult for them.

Truly, the Pai were tiny, and they looked delicate and vulnerable, but they were, beyond doubt, one of the *toughest* species in the universe.

But ultimately, as it always did, work found him. It was in the form of Siyhaa, contacting him over the biogenic network that she'd found something. Jason opted to talk to her face to face, so he excused himself from the beach, got dressed, and headed over to 3D, where she had her personal office...sort of. Siyhaa's office was the room holding the biogenic mainframe they used in 3D as a data processing node for Cybi, something of a *really* external asset that was nevertheless directly tied to Cybi's I/O tree. Outside of Cybi, no other external asset could access the mainframe, a bit of computer wizardry that Siyhaa, Myleena, and Cybi cooked up a few years ago. All of 3D's most sensitive data was stored directly in Cybi's core, but their less secret data was kept in that mainframe. The large room held several different computers of various sizes and multiple architectures, which were Siyhaa's experiments and research units as she worked with the other commonly used computer architectures in the Confederation, as well as the Syndicate. The prototype of the newest iteration of a mesotronic computer they were going to sell to Dynamax was sitting on Siyhaa's desk, which was 31% faster and had 46% more storage capacity without increasing its size. The prototype on her desk was a handpanel model, built to almost exactly resemble the handpanels that were so common in the Confederation...just built for a Benga. All that extra size certainly gave the unit all kinds of extra space to buff it up, to the point where the "handpanel" on her desk that was nearly the size of an old-fashioned Terran flatscreen TV was nearly as powerful as the palm model of handpanel the Imperium used, the smallest handpanel commercially produced.

"I'm here, Hadhja," he called as he came in through the door and closed it, a door whose knob was at his chest. The door was built for a Moridon.

"At my desk, Jason," she called in answer. He had to walk nearly 70 shakra to reach her desk, which was near the center of the room. "You got here quickly."

"I wasn't doing much but sitting around," he said, getting in the "high chair" she kept for smaller races so they could sit more or less at eye level

with her at her desk. “What did you dig up?”

“Much, and none of it good,” she replied, tapping on her desk to put the room into secure mode, then she touched her interface and brought up a hologram from the room’s emitters. “With the help of the Overseer, we’ve traced the flow of money through the Department of Farm Management, and it is as you suspected. There is rampant corruption within the department,” she declared. “Tens of millions of credits are being embezzled from several funds the department manages on a yearly basis, and most of them involve the surviving farm workers.”

“Okay, that’s confirmation of what we suspected. Did you identify the perpetrator?”

“That was what made this difficult to trace, Jason. Whoever is doing this is clearly a professional, and whoever it is is *not* within the department. The employees in on the scheme don’t know the launderer’s identity, they only know that they get a cut of the money he or she is stealing. What’s surprising is that only sixteen employees within the department are a part of it. They’re all upper level managers, including the Secretary of the department, with the power to set rules the bureaucrats follow, who unwittingly helped conceal the scheme within a complex web of convoluted regulations.”

“Okay, that’s definitely not what I expected,” Jason grunted. “You have names?”

“Yes, we have all the names, at least within the department. We still haven’t tracked down who is behind the money laundering operation. Because of that, we need to hold off on breaking up the operation until after we find out who it is. If we move now, the person responsible for the laundering will disappear.”

“I take it that was a request from the Overseer?”

She nodded, her horns bobbing. “He has agents from the Oversight Commission working on it.”

“Then it won’t take long.”

She nodded again in silent agreement.

“Alright, I’ll leave you to it, Hadhja,” he declared. “Let me know when the Overseer lets us put a hand in. Think I’ll check in with Miaari and see how her side of it’s going.”

In a word, slowly. Jason visited her office and was directed to her office, which she put in secure mode as soon as he stepped inside. That required him to speak Kimdori. “Just touching base on what you’ve found out from the Medical Service,” he said as he approached her desk.

“Not much, but what we have found deeply disturbs me, cousin,” she replied soberly as he sat down.

“Disturb how?”

“Something very big is going on over there,” she told him. “And it’s so secret, that even *we* are having serious difficulty finding it.”

He whistled. “What about the infiltrator sent in to lift info off Banlia?”

“So far, he hasn’t been able to get anywhere near her,” she told him. “The main administration building attached to the hospital annex in Dracora has the kind of security we encountered when we broke up that cloning operation the IBI was running, Jason,” she told him. “They’re using the kind of biometric locks that not even a shapeshifted Kimdori can get past, since we can’t perfectly mimic the specific DNA of an individual’s shape who we hold. Twice, our specialist was nearly discovered, and only his quick thinking allowed him to evade capture. What he’s learned is that the entire east wing of the admin building is outfitted with similar IBI-level security. Biometric locks, extremely sophisticated sensors and scanners, roving patrols, both physical and biometric security on every computer terminal in the wing, and he’s learned that there’s a mainframe in the building that has no connection whatsoever to CivNet or any other computer, and is only accessible by a small number of terminals in rooms with heavy security. It is a *cold* system. You should understand exactly what you keep on a cold system, Jayce.”

“3D’s mainframe is a cold unit, so I know damn well,” he said with a grunt, leaning forward and putting his elbows on her desk. “But the question we have to ask is, what on earth would the *Medical Service* need with a cold mainframe?”

“That is the question, cousin, and the hidden answer has piqued Denmother’s curiosity. She’s put her own hand in. Me and Jinaami are no longer running the operation.”

“Ouch,” he grunted. “That’s not entirely fair.”

“On the contrary, cousin, we don’t see it as a reprimand. And with *Denmother* commanding the operation, its success is not in any doubt. She is as far above us as I am above you. In a Gamekeeper sense,” she added with a slight smile.

“Arrogant puppy,” he teased, which made her chuckle. “What I’m surprised over is that the Kimdori didn’t already know about all of this.”

“It’s the *Medical Service*, Jason,” she said simply. “I fault Jinaami in no way in not knowing about this before this came to light. The Medical Service has been a benign, open, forthright organization for nearly six thousand years. There’s no *need* to keep eyes on them. Or there wasn’t until now,” she amended.

“One thing’s for certain. I don’t think that the medical files of the survivors have anything to do with that mainframe. I think we stumbled across sleeping prey while searching for a bone, cousin,” he said, using a Kimdori idiom. “And the irony is, if they’d have just given us the information we wanted from the start, they wouldn’t have incited us to start digging.”

“I think that’s a valid argument. I disagree with it, but it’s valid,” she replied.

“You’re wrong. If the survivors had something to do with it, their files would have never been in the part of their system that has access to CivNet in the first place,” he countered. “Banlia should have seen this coming. She knew I wanted those files when I asked Songa to get them, she should have known that my connections to the Kimdori would have caused me to go after them the hard way.”

“Perhaps she believed that you would never dare raise your hand against the Medical Service.”

“I’m not a Faey,” he said bluntly. “And speaking of the files, any luck there?”

She shook her head. “But with Denmother overseeing things, I’m sure we’ll have them very soon.”

“Alright then,” he said, standing up. “Keep me up to date, cousin. I’m going to go back home. It’s almost dinnertime.”

“Alright, cousin. Don’t get too drunk tonight.”

“That’ll be Jyslin, not me,” he chuckled.

Kaista, 10 Shiaa, 4408, Faey Orthodox Calendar

Friday, 15 July 2022 Terran Standard Calendar

Kaista, 10 Shiaa, year 1333 of the 97th Generation, Karinne Historical Reference Calendar

The White House, Karsa, Karis

This was *nuts*.

Just barely avoiding getting his furry ass cooked by a blast of fire, Jason—or Blackfang at the moment—performed a water skiing slalom maneuver to avoid a cone of fire unleashed by a flying drake holding two Kanlon riders on his flying disc, then rotated on it and chanted the words of power to the Lightning Bolt spell. The spell went off before they flew out of range, which blasted the rear seat rider off the back of the drake, his body falling to the sea below.

This was the final battle of the Grand Crusade, the first of the battles fought, and it had only just begun...and *wow* did it start hard and heavy. They’d had no idea the Kanlon had flying mounts, and certainly nothing as large or as dangerous as drakes. Drakes were very small cousins of dragons in the game, not very smart but equipped with breath weapons, and that made them very nasty. They had two riders on each, one guiding the drake and the other an archer or mage, who was attacking the Drakkin and mages like him, who were riding on flying discs. The drakes were protecting a vast armada of hundreds of Kanlon ships below, who were sailing for Freeport harbor.

He'd almost missed this. He was almost rude to the council when he bailed on them halfway through a rather important meeting just so he could log on in time to participate in the first of the final Grand Crusade battles. But it wasn't all purely for selfish reasons. Kevin was going to be in this fight, and Cyvanne had strongly hinted that he really wanted to be here to see him shine.

He was certainly...doing something. Instead of waiting at the dock like all the other warrior types, he was out here instead, on a ship directly below him, fighting his way across the deck by himself. And man, he was kicking some major ass, demonstrating just how lethal someone with skills as high as his could be. The NPC Kanlon he came up against were absolutely no match for him, and he was mowing them down left and right as he seemed to be fighting to reach the steering deck...to kill the captain, maybe?

The guy Jason knocked off the drake nearly hit him when it fell the long distance down to the ship, and then Jason had to deal with another drake and riders that were banking towards him. He held his "ground" as it were and chanted the words of power to another Lighting Bolt spell, and he released it just as the drake started to turn to give the man in the back seat a clear line of sight on him with his crossbow. The bolt hit the drake in the head, and much to Jason's surprise, it killed it. The riders were flung from the saddle when the drake plummeted towards the ocean below.

Jason nearly winced and knelt down in sudden concern when the drake he felled landed on the ship Kevin was on! It smashed through the deck and made the ship buck wildly, rolling and causing the stern to rise up out of the water and rotate from the impact, then it slammed back to the water and immediately began to sink.

He nearly got Kevin killed...Cyvanne was probably going to whack him for that.

He forgot about that quickly enough, because it was way too crazy up here to watch what Kevin was doing. Their job was to try to clear out the drakes so they could attack the ships, and they had to do it because any mage or Drakkin that descended low enough to have range on the ships was swarmed by several drakes, leading to almost instant death. He had to keep an eye on his flying disc, since it only lasted about five minutes at Jason's

current skill level in Conjunction, so he had to recast that spell often to keep the disc from vanishing and sending him plummeting to the ocean below.

Rita gave him that spell, and 13 others. They were delivered by a mail page a few days ago when he logged on to move his character to Freeport, so he'd be in place to fight in the final battle. She'd scribed the spells and mailed them to him, which she could do because he'd given them his avatar's name when he talked to them. That was very thoughtful, and he really appreciated it, since she'd sent him spells he didn't have. He could use all of them. The Flying Disc spell was usually a spell that only dropped in raids, and she'd made a copy of that spell and over a dozen other spells that also only dropped from raids and sent them to him.

Well, he did give her half a million credits, the money she was due that had been withheld from her, so he guessed in a way he paid for them... using real life money.

It certainly came in handy now, because it allowed him to engage the drakes with the other mages that had the spell and the Drakkin, doing more than just standing at the docks waiting to do something. That was probably why Kevin was also out here, because standing there waiting sucked when you'd been looking forward to this for nearly two takirs.

But this wasn't a cakewalk battle. Hundreds of Drakkin and mages were killed as they struggled to clear the drakes to reach the fleet, and Jason was almost ashamed that he was one of them. That would usually force him to make the "run of shame" back to his corpse, but he had a fairly rare spell of his own that allowed him to summon his corpse to him at the graveyard. It was his most valuable spell and had cost him his entire gold savings when he saw it for sale in a player market, because it only dropped from the higher tier raids. The seller had scribed it and was selling copies...for 50,000 gold a pop. But Jason was willing to pay that price because that spell would save him tons of time and frustration running back to his corpse from the graveyard. It was a highly coveted spell because if you died in a place that was infested by monsters, or in a place like deep inside a cave system, it was often difficult to get back to your corpse and get your stuff back. Many players kept a set of "corpse run" gear in the bank, usually made up of the gear they'd most recently replaced in every slot with new gear, which would give them the ability to fight their way to their corpse

and get back their top-tier gear. Jason felt that 50,000 gold was a justifiable expense for a spell that would save him potentially hours of time getting his corpse back, for his playtime was precious to him and he didn't want to waste it doing a corpse run.

It took him nearly two takirs of continual practice to raise his Necromancy high enough to use the spell, but this situation right here, where he'd have to try to go through a war zone to reach his corpse, made it worth the effort.

He ended up staying at the docks, because by the time he got rebuffed and back to the front lines, the Kanlon were invading the Harbor District. He landed on a roof with some archers and another mage and they did what they could to slow down the advance, but it was clear very quickly that things were getting out of control. The Kanlon were very smartly tying their ships up together so they could unload large numbers of troops at once, them coming in huge, coordinated waves, and between each wave was an almost uncountable number of Sahaugin climbing up the docks and rushing into the city, and that pushed the defenders off the docks, then steadily back through the Harbor District. Jason and the others had to move to another rooftop almost every three minutes to keep from getting behind the front line.

[What the hell did you do, woman?] Jason complained to Cyvanne as he ended up crossing Sea Spray Boulevard, which separated the Harbor District from the Trades District.

[Whatever do you mean?]

[Are we supposed to lose this battle?] he asked caustically. *[There's too many of the to fight off!]*

[Then I guess their raid leaders aren't all that smart,] she replied smugly. *[The battle is winnable, but not by morons.]*

[Girl, you have turned into such a bitch,] he accused as he tossed a fireball into a throng of Sahaugin, which then exploded and killed most of them.

Jason was seriously starting to think that they were going to lose this battle when he ended up standing on the walls of Falcon's Roost, the fortress in the Military District overlooking the harbor, which was

considered the heart of Freeport. If the Kanlon took Falcon's Roost, they could easily take the rest of the city.

But then something completely unexpected happened. A bunch of Djinn seemed to come out of nowhere, hundreds of them, and they formed three rings over Falcon's Roost and started casting a spell. What was going on? He had no idea the Djinn were allies of the Golden Lion faction...that had to be specific to this server. Each server was different because the actions of the players caused different things to happen on different servers. Well, Djinn were powerful NPCs, so whatever they were about to do, it would no doubt help quite a bit.

He was in no way prepared for what happened. And he doubted anyone else was, either.

The Djinn had a *game-changing* impact on the battle. They summoned some kind of swirling vortex of magic high over the city, and then it cast a beam of magical energy down on the tallest tower of Falcon's Roost. That glow quickly spread over the fortress, then over the city, and in a matter of moments, it was covering the entire city.

Oddly, the glow also covered over all the humans of Freeport, causing them to rise into the air, held aloft by the magic.

Jason then found himself trying to not fall over the parapet when an earthquake struck the city, shaking the walls, shaking the fortress, shaking the city. He saw a small building in the Trades District collapse from the shaking, and he realized that it was the Djinn doing it. The humans hovering made sense now, the Djinn were protecting them from the shaking by lifting them into the air...but didn't do it for anyone else, which was a bit, well, *rude*.

Then, from his vantage point on the wall, he saw something he wasn't going to forget anytime soon.

The entire city began to *rise up from the ground*.

At first, he couldn't understand what he was seeing, but he could tell after hearing the sound of tearing rock and seeing the horizon shift that the entire city was starting to rise up from its bed. Several more buildings collapsed as the shaking got intense, then it settled down to a minor temblor

once the city tore completely free of the ground below and rose up. What the *fuck* was this about?

The city rose up over a kathra, and then it came to a slow stop, the vortex of magic still high over the city after the beam of light faded. The humans were put back where they started, and there was nearly a stunned silence and a stop to the battle raging in the city.

When he had a moment to think about it, he understood why it was done. When they lifted the city off the ground, they made sure that no more Kanlon or Sahaugin could get into the city. And when the harbor drained of its water, it swept all the Kanlon ships out with it, leaving only the enemies currently in the city to deal with...and they had no way down. Even if they took the city, they would slowly starve to death up here, given the Djinn left the city where it was. If they took the city, the Djinn could just end the magic making it float, which would kill them all when the city crashed back to the ground below.

The battle was over, and while the Golden Lion might not win this battle, the Kanlon had most certainly lost it.

It took nearly another hour for the battle to conclude, with the players coming out victorious. Jason managed to get into a position where he could eavesdrop on the human king and Djinn ruler talking after the fighting, and he was quite surprised to find out that the city would remain floating in the city, and that all humans from Freeport had been granted the Djinn's ability to fly.

So *that* was the new human racial ability! That was pretty cool!

After it was all over and he logged out, he found himself looking at the nearly eager face of Cyvanne. She'd brought her bionoid to the office while he was in the battle. "So, was that cool or what?" she asked expectantly.

"You must have a master plan," I accused.

"Sure do," she grinned. "But was it cool? Tell me it was cool, I thought it was cool!"

"Calm down, goof," he chided, which made her laugh. "Yes, the battle was very cool, and the Djinn came completely out of left field."

“For you. For some players, it didn’t at all,” she told him. “Those who know what’s really going on.”

“So, what’s the master plan?”

“It’s the first step in the release of the next expansion,” she replied. “The Grand Crusade was the first pre-expansion event, setting things up for the expansion. That vortex over Freeport is the gateway to the plane of Air. There will be three more events that will open the other three, and when all four are up, the Elemental Planes will be accessible for players.”

“Oh. Ohhhh,” he breathed. “Very clever!”

She gave him a broad smile.

“So, is that it for the Kanlon?”

“No. There will be more pre-expansion events involving the Kanlon, and it’ll stretch into the new expansion to become a major campaign that all players can do. They’ll want their revenge, after all. The ongoing war with the Kanlon will give players who aren’t ready for the elemental planes something important to do that will reward them with some good quality gear that will help them get to the Citadel, because the planes will only be for endgame players, at the absolute minimum able to clear dungeons on the Citadel. So there’s going to be a major pre-expansion storyline with both the Kanlon and the Salamanders that will expand up to Netherim, and will eventually lead up to another continent on both Arcavia and Netherim being opened to the players. We’re introducing six new player factions and twenty-four new races that populate the new continents, and also a bunch of new skills, items, spells, and tons of other stuff.”

“Anything big?”

“We’re nerfing the difficulty of research and scribing, to make them easier. We’re not too happy with how rare some spells are, especially since those spells are going to be very important once players reach the elemental planes. Some spells take such a high research skill to discover it’s making them far too rare, way too many spells haven’t even been discovered yet, and too many raid spells have way too high of a scribing skill requirement to copy. There are still over four hundred spells that no player has managed to discover through research, even after nearly three years, so clearly there’s

a failure in the research system. So reworking research is definitely at the top of the list.”

“I’m happy to hear that,” he chuckled. “And if you want a suggestion from a player that uses research, *please* make it less boring,” he told her. “Reading the books about magical theory and magical interaction with the physical world is fun for the first five hundred points or so of the skill, but then it gets boring and repetitive. It’s the least fun skill in the game to practice in my opinion, but I struggle through it because it’s so important.”

“That’s good feedback,” she said professionally. “I’ll see what I can do to make the dusty magical tomes more engaging, make research more fun. Maybe I’ll add an active laboratory component where you do magical experiments,” she mused.

“Well, it sounds pretty good, Cyvanne,” he told her. “I’m looking forward to seeing it. Now, did you mirror the new spells I have and the skillups I got over to Primus?”

“Yes, I did,” she replied, almost tartly. “You want me to delete your toon on Methrian?”

“Not yet, I may need to talk to Kevin or Rita again,” he answered. “Besides, I think I’d like to watch what’s going on in Freeport on Methrian for a little while and see how things turn out, see how much different it will be from the Freeport on Primus. I get the feeling that the city’s going to change a whole lot in the next few months.”

“Yup, but I won’t spoil it,” she nodded. “You *might* want to think about buying some property in Freeport on Primus, Jason,” she said lightly. “You’re on the faction, so they’ll sell it to you. They’ll charge you more than a human, but they’ll sell to you.”

“I bet that’s gonna happen on every server,” he chuckled. “Since I’m guessing that the city getting pulled out of the ground and the vortex thing is going to happen on every server.”

She nodded. “Freeport’s going to change a lot over the next few months, but how it’s going to change is going to be a little different on each server,” she told him. “The Djinn are going to establish a presence in the city, they’re going to be an NPC ally of the Golden Lion faction, and it’s going to attract a lot of new NPC merchants. The more important people will be a

whole ton of NPC mage archetypes who will come to study the magic keeping the city floating. Their work will have an influence on how players operate in the elemental planes.”

“And why will they be different?”

“That’ll depend on what the players do in the city after the Grand Crusade ends,” she replied. “Where the Djinn build their enclave and where the mages move in and set up will depend on where the available real estate is, so the Freeport on every server will be slightly different as those new groups move in and start building things. For example, a large contingent of high elven mages from the Nine Circles are going to move to Freeport and establish a new permanent base, so they can study the magic coming from the plane of Air. They’ll eventually start a new magical academy to teach humans magic, since their connection to the plane of Air increased their magical potential.”

“You mean flying isn’t the only racial they got?”

She shook her head. “As they level up Gift of the Djinn, it will unlock new child skills and abilities. At 500 skill, they gain an ability called Wind Breath, which lets them blow out a strong breeze that can break up gas clouds and gaseous attacks or blow away small objects and whatnot. It doesn’t do any damage, but it can be useful for a clever player. The skill has a hard cap on how strong a wind the player can create so that it can’t get so strong that it can deal real damage, but a clever player can find a way for it to be an offensive weapon. That’s how we set it up. When they reach 1,000, they gain a skill that increases the damage they deal using magic that creates or uses lightning, whether it’s generated by a spell or a skill, or even an item they use like the Rod of Lightning. They can’t create the lightning themselves, but they can enhance it. At 1,500, they gain the ability to deal electric damage by touch, an ability we’ve conditionally named Jolt, and that *does* get enhanced by their increased lightning damage skill. That’s a child skill, and once they level it up pretty high, it can deal some respectable damage. When they get that skill over 1,000, they gain the ability to project it short distances, up to a maximum of about ten meters. Jolt also gives the human a damage reduction bonus against lightning used against them, reflecting their growing connection to lightning magic. When they reach 2,000 skill in Jolt, the player becomes completely immune to

lightning damage. And when they get Gift of the Djinn to 2,000, they gain the ability to pass into the plane of Air through the vortex above Freeport without having to use a spell or item.”

“Setting it high so only high skill players can get there easily,” Jason mused.

“Yup,” she nodded. “But the humans won’t be the only ones to get something new We identified the four least played races in the game and we gave each one new skills using the same general gist of the humans. We put four legendary skills into the game that only the target race can learn, each one infusing the player with the magic of one of the four races of genies. Djinn, Efreeti, Dao, Marid, air, fire, earth, and water. Those four races are the keys to unlocking the elemental planes as the player that got the Legendary skill skills it up and gains mastery over it. Kevin has the air skill, Touched by the Djinn, and he was the key to the Djinn aiding Freeport in the battle. On the other servers, the human that has the skill will be the key to their Freeports being raised out of the ground. The Selkies in the Covenant faction have Touched by the Marid. The Utaku in the Dark Sun faction on Netherim have Touched by the Dao, and the Saberak in the Bloody Skull faction on Netherim have Touched by the Efreet. This way, we’re buffing the lesser played races to make them more attractive, and we’re also advancing the overall storyline in a way that keeps the players very much involved, so they feel that their decisions have real impact and ramifications in their game world.”

“That’s pretty damn clever,” Jason complemented, which made her smile.

“I thought you’d like it.”

“I do, I just wish I had more time to enjoy it,” he chuckled. “Since I’ve used up almost all my free time, I have to get the paperwork done before I go home.”

“I’ll leave you to it,” she said.

“Gee, thanks.”

“Your job, your paperwork,” she winked.

“Bite me, Cyvanne.”

“Let me bring my giruzi bionoid over from Kosiningi and I’ll fulfill that request,” she teased.

Chapter 8

Raista, 16 Shiaa, 4408, Faey Orthodox Calendar

Saturday, 21 July 2022 Terran Standard Calendar

*Raista, 16 Shiaa, year 1333 of the 97th Generation, Karinne
Historical Reference Calendar*

The White House, Karsa, Karis

He was almost late for a very important appointment, and it seemed that the fates were conspiring to make him even more late.

Actually, it wasn't so much an appointment as it was the opportunity to witness the dismantling of a massive embezzlement scheme personally. Brayrak Kruu had finished his investigation and given them the green light to take down the DFM, and Jason wanted to be there in person to watch as the Secretary was dragged out of his office in handcuffs.

The results of that investigation was going to create some friction in Jason's personal life, because they'd tracked the identity of the computer mastermind that set up the embezzlement scheme back to *Yila Trefani*. He hadn't confronted her over it yet, and for that matter wasn't sure if she knew about it, but the hacker that set it up was one of hers, a hacker that worked for one of House Trefani's many front corporations that concealed their illegal revenue. The question was, was he working freelance or was this one of Yila's schemes.

That would have to wait for tomorrow, though, because Kim had told him that they were moving on the DFM in about two hours, so he needed to get over there. But there was someone standing in his way, someone that he couldn't just browbeat into moving so he could go about his business...
Songa.

There was an outbreak of a new and fairly nasty strain of Shio Danza Flu in New York City, so Jason was waiting for her to send over a viral monitor he'd have to take with him that would detect the virus if he was exposed to it. Danza Flu was a very rare but exceptionally nasty virus, like Terran Ebola on steroids, and it was invariably fatal if left untreated. The problem was, it had no inoculant or vaccine, no way to vaccinate to protect against it, because the virus mutated so much that a vaccine was no longer effective against it after barely a month. There was a medicine that could counter the active virus, but the Medical Service didn't administer that medicine unless the patient was infected to prevent the virus from adapting to the medicine. The only way to fight Danza Flu was to cure it once it infected the patient. The current strain had a shockingly short incubation time, able to kill within 30 hours of the victim contracting it, but treating it was as easy as taking a pill or getting a shot once it was diagnosed. That was why he needed a viral monitor, because of that very short incubation period.

So, while this may not be the best time in the world to go to New York City, Jason was determined to see this through. He had a very personal connection to the farm workers, and he wanted to be there in person to watch them take down someone that was harming them.

[Hurry up, woman, I'm going to be late!] Jason barked over the biogenic network.

[We're almost done programming it, dear, so put a sock in it,] she retorted. *[We had to download the most recent analysis of the virus to catch four different new mutations of the base virus. Remember, if the sensor indicates exposure, you have to go through level three decon when you get back to the ship, then report immediately to sickbay once decon is complete.]*

[I know decon protocols woman, sheesh,] he sniped acidly.

[As loose with the rules as you've been over the last couple of years, we're just making sure,] she teased. *[We're starting to think your title is going to your head, dear.]*

[Oh, it's on now, bitch,] he threatened, which caused her to return pure mirth over the network.

Fifteen minutes later, during which time Jason armored up, a courier delivered the sensor and he was on his way. Aya still wouldn't let him go to Terra in anything less than a KMS vessel, so he was ferried over on the destroyer *Stralla*, one of the newest ships in the fleet. It had built as part of the fleet expansion and had only been activated after sitting in mothballs for eight months. It had taken that long for Juma to scrape together a crew for the ship. Like most new destroyers, it was commanded by a captain that came up from the frigate fleet. The *Stralla* and her crew were still very green, so green that the navigator nearly bottomed out the destroyer trying to make a water landing at the dock on the strip. It was a good thing he was going slow, else he would have created a giant wave that would have swamped the beach.

He chose to ignore that. Besides, he was sure the navigator was *humiliated* over it, and certainly would be getting an earful from Captain Demial once Jason was off the ship.

He met the chagrined-looking Jirunji captain at the hatch once the ship was at the proper level with the dock, and he had the grace not to mention it as he came in. "I'm in a hurry, Demi, so get me to Terra quick," he said as Dera and Ryn filed in behind him. "We're on a schedule."

"Yes, your Grace," she replied in a nervous tone, looking up at him. Jirunji weren't exactly a tall species, most of them only came up to Jason's chest. "I'm sorry about—"

"Less talking, more moving," he said in a kind tone, giving her a slight smile.

She returned it. "Yes, your Grace," she replied, putting a finger to her interface and ordering the navigator to get them moving, even as the hatch closed. Demial escorted him to the stateroom just off the landing bay, and he sat down and reviewed the charges they were going to file against 19 workers in the DFM, the Secretary, both of his Undersecretaries, five section managers, and eleven middle managers, all of which were in on the embezzlement scheme and who were receiving a cut of the profits from it. He reviewed a report Miaari sent him about the hacker, who was known in the Imperium underground as ShadowXV, real name Stonn Doherre, 29 years old and a known member of a hacking ring that was run by the House of Trefani as part of their cybercrime operation. He was one of the most

prolific and notorious hackers in the Imperium, whose claim to fame was hacking the CivNet site for the Imperial Palace and replacing a picture of Dahnai with a picture of Ba'mra'ei M'ber, the Bari-Bari member of the Alliance Council, who had been High Staff before Ethikk. That stunt cost him eight months in prison (he was only 24 when he did it, so he was still a minor under Imperium law and thus got a very light sentence), but it hadn't dissuaded him in the slightest. He went underground and right back to hacking after he was released. The Kimdori had kept a passive eye on him, mainly for curiosity's sake, but also because a hacker with his kind of talent could be very useful if the Kimdori needed to take a very subtle approach to a problem. That was how they'd known where he was when his involvement in the ring became apparent. According to the file they had on him, he had a very selfish and self-centered personality. If they put some pressure on him, he'd cut a deal and turn on his co-conspirators to get a reduced sentence.

Like that mattered, since the Kimdori could learn everything he knew about the operation with a single touch.

He hoped Yila had nothing to do with this. If she did...*fuck* was it going to cause some major upheaval in the House. The Trefanis were deeply intertwined in Karinne business operations, part of Yila's above-board business empire, and he really, *really* didn't want to have to start untangling his house from hers. That was why Jason suspected she might not have anything to do with this, because she knew that Jason could bring ruin to her house, and she knew how protective he was over Terra. She should have the sense to stay well the hell away from any criminal operation that involved Terra's government.

Demial got him to Terra a good 45 minutes before the Imperial Marines were going to move on the DFM and managed to get to their staging area in the New York barracks. The Imperial Marines still worked on Terra as law enforcement, for they were the "global police" the U.N. used to enforce global law inside the individual nations. Local and national matters were handled internally, but when it turned into a global issue or a suspect crossed international lines, the Imperial Marines had jurisdiction.

The very threat of the Imperial Marines kept the nations or Terra from testing the authority of the U.N. They enforced U.N. law, and they were

damn good at it.

Despite it being so long since Jyslin was a Marine, and her not serving with any of the Marines on Terra, Jason was greeted as one of them when he entered the barracks. The Marines saw Jason as the husband of a Marine far more than they saw him as the Grand Duke Karinne, and once a Marine, always a Marine. That was something that annoyed Dahnai to no end, that Jason was very nearly as popular within the Imperial Marines as she was.

That was her fault. The entire corps knew that a division of the Imperial Marines was attached to the KMS. Kei was part of a unit of 200 Imperial Marine mindstrikers that still worked with KMS riggers and fighter pilots, as well as trained KMS mindstrikers in the craft. The Imperial Marines were, by far, the best mindstrikers in the business. Kei and the others in her unit were all but part of the KMS anymore, permanent residents of Karis that worked in a permanent detachment of Marines attached to the KMS, which was set up by Lorna and had Jason and Dahnai's full approval.

Kei was still his assigned mindstriker when he ran missions that required one. They worked well together, and Kei was someone that both the Kimdori and the KMS trusted explicitly to work with the Grand Duke.

Jason more or less had to do it, Kei was friends with half the strip girls and was part of Jyslin's inner circle of close friends, and they would have rioted if Jason sent her and her unit back to Draconis after the Syndicate War. It was an arrangement that both Jason and Dahnai found eminently satisfactory. The KMS got top-tier mindstrikers for both active missions and training, and Dahnai had some of her own soldiers inside the KMS to keep her apprised of what was going on, as well as having training on KMS equipment far beyond any other military unit in the CCM. Kei was rated on every rig in the KMS inventory except Cheetahs, knew how to operate every military drone in the inventory, and like KMS Marines and Tarks, had training in Naval damage control operations so they could assist a ship's crew with damage control when needed. No other member of an outside military organization had that kind of training on KMS assets, with the exception of the Imperial Guard.

The Guard was *technically* a military organization, but its sole mission was the protection of the Empress and her family. In the pursuit of that mission, the Imperial Guard was trained on every KMS mecha and weapon,

and many of them had Naval training that would allow them to crew a KMS vessel. They had that training for the simple reason that Dahnai rode on KMS ships often enough for them to need it, so the Guard was capable of crewing those ships if some kind of disaster occurred and the crew was incapacitated.

The Guard was trained on *everything*, a shining example of the complete trust Jason had in the Imperial Guard. He trusted them with his life and the lives of his family, and he would honor that trust by teaching them things, revealing to them secrets, that no one else would ever learn.

It took the Marines only about fifteen minutes to get ready for the operation, and then they were on the move. Jason rode with them in their transport, which was big enough to hold all the prisoners, and filed out with them when they reached the building holding the Department of Farm Management, a skyscraper in Manhattan not far from where the twin towers once stood. It was a big building with 31 different departments, and the department they were going to raid was on the 45th floor, which meant they had no way to escape once the Marines sealed off the ground floor exits and the rooftop landing pad. But, just in case someone in there had a hoverboard or something, twelve Marines used the grav pods in their armor to surround the building along the 50th floor, staying out of sight of their target floor and keeping an eye out for anyone that might try to bail out a window.

Jason could barely contain a smile as they got off the elevator and entered the Office of Farm Worker Services, which covered the management and benefits of both current farm workers and the survivors of the Trillane slave farms. He stood in the small lobby that led into the cubicle farms and offices and watched with satisfaction as the Marines stormed the office and started dragging people out of offices, one of them by the hair, lining them up inside the lobby. He then went with ten Marines that went up to the 83rd floor, and there, they dragged the two Undersecretaries and the Secretary of the DFM out of their offices, much to the shock of their secretaries and the security personnel stationed on the floor.

They had the sense not to say a word or try to stop the Imperial Marines. They knew that the Marines were very heavy-handed with anyone that challenged their authority.

It was Jason himself that stepped up to the indignant older man, screaming at the Marines that he was going to have their heads for this outrage, and who fell silent when he realized that the Grand Duke Karinne was with them Marines. “Steven Flint, you are under arrest for the embezzlement of benefit funds earmarked for the farm worker survivors from the subjugation,” he intoned formally, his voice calm but carrying the weight of a thousand anvils.

“That’s a shameful lie!” he snapped and flinched when one of the Marines slapped him lightly on the top of the head.

“Taking the money meant to help those suffering people was the biggest mistake you ever made, asshole,” Jason grated at him. “And if I can prove that any of them died because you denied them the services they were entitled to under the law in order to steal the money that funded those services, you will be charged with *murder*,” he said with sudden heat in his voice.

“The U.N.—”

“Has ceded jurisdiction over your prosecution to the *House of Karinne*,” he snapped in reply, which made the man pale. “Under the Terra Operations Management Proclamation of 4392, the House of Karinne can claim jurisdiction over anyone who violates the order’s provisions, and one of them set up the farm worker survivor program you’ve been robbing very nearly since the day it was created. That means that all three of you will be prosecuted in the *Karinne* legal system, not *Terra’s* legal system. Lieutenant, take them in, book them, and prepare them for extradition to Justice One,” Jason ordered the Marine officer in charge. Justice One was an orbital station orbiting Janja that held a detention facility and all the infrastructure needed for trials to be held, both for the prosecution and the defense. Not even criminals from the outside arrested by the house were allowed to come to Karis.

“With pleasure, your Grace,” she replied with a cutting smile while looking at the Secretary and his two lackeys.

It was the high point of his month watching the Marines drag the two men and woman towards the elevator, who had all the bluster sucked right out of them by the revelation that the *Karinnes* would be the one dropping

the hammer on them. People like them, high in the U.N. government, they had power and connections that would let them get off the hook with light sentences, or even get off completely, but they had no such sway within the Karinne justice system. By being tried by the Karinnes, they would be held fully accountable for their crimes, which was why Jason claimed jurisdiction over them. The U.N. would prosecute the other 15 participants in the scheme, while the three participants with extensive political connections would face justice from a system they could not influence.

Jason got back on the ship in a very good mood, which was immediately soured when the viral monitor attached to his armor triggered before the dropship could open the hatch. He and the flight crew had been exposed to the Danza virus, which meant they had to go through level three decon...and that was *not fun*. The first step was using the “surface purge” mode of the dropship’s IP system, sending a sufficient charge through the hull using the IP system to fry any viral structures clinging to it. The bay was evacuated and its atmosphere pulled out, reducing it to a vacuum, and then Jason and the two pilots had to put on their helmets, step outside into the vacuum and allow a team to enter the dropship to decontaminate the interior, and then enter the decon chamber. There they had to strip naked, their armor put in a sealed container for decon, then endure nearly thirty minutes of various liquid showers and exposure to low-intensity radiation that would kill all viral structures on their skin and in their hair. After all that, they put on maintenance jumpsuits and reported to sickbay, because exposure to the virus meant they had to take the counteragent.

And that ran him into the first snag of the day. As he and the flight crew sat in sickbay, the ship’s lead doctor approached him with a chagrined look on her face. “They loaded the wrong antiviral agent, your Grace,” she told him. “I’m afraid you’ll have to go to the Medical Annex when we get home and get it there.”

“Given we’re going straight home, I don’t think that’s going to be a big problem, Doctor,” Jason told her.

“Well, you’ll have to wear an E-suit,” she said apologetically. “You’re only permitted thirty minutes outside of containment after decon to get vaccinations. There’s a chance that by the time we get to Karis, the virus

might have had the chance to start to reproduce. So we're bringing E-suits for you and the flight crew to wear until you get to Karis."

"Eh, medical E-suits aren't that bad," he shrugged. "Now engineering E-suits, on the other hand, no."

She chuckled. "I apologize again for the inconvenience, your Grace," she said as a nurse brought in three medical E-suits. They were made of a soft, supple material that was actually fairly comfortable, since they were designed to be worn by someone wearing a skinsuit under it, which was a paper thin polymer material that medical personnel wore that protected the skin from potential exposure to microbes.. That was very much unlike an engineering E-suit, which was built to be able to handle being rubbed and pressed and snagged on metal surfaces that may have sharp edges. The interior lining was very soft, but the suit's sturdy material didn't like to bend, which led to chafing in some very sensitive areas.

So, instead of going back to the office to find out if ShadowXV had been picked up yet, Jason instead got thrown into Songa's tiger cage, where she absolutely adored aggravating the ever-living fuck out of him while she had him on her table. After giving him the small red pill that was the antiviral agent that would purge the Danza virus from his body, She took the opportunity of him being there to run a few tests that had nothing to do with why he was there. Jason supposed it was his fault, since he tended to blow off Songa and her endless tests and needles unless he felt he had a good reason to go, and his behavior just reinforced his desire to avoid Songa because it meant that any time he did go, he ended up getting stuck there way longer than he intended.

And today was no different. When the flight crew was in and out in twenty minutes, it took Jason nearly two hours to escape Songa's clutches, after she ran a full body scan looking for cancerous cells and then doing a test on the endolimbs and the nerves connected to them that she'd wanted to do last month. That annoyed him a little bit, since he'd had no problems with the endolimbs at all since they were grafted onto his arms three years ago. He was fully used to them now, and in a way, he preferred them, because he found them very useful for those times when he needed an inhumanly strong grip.

No degradation of the nerve sheaths at the connection point, she noted via sending, mainly to the two other doctors in the room. No inflammation in the flesh in contact with the endolimb.

There never was, silly woman, he protested.

It can show up over time, dear, even years after an endolimb is implanted, she answered absently. That's why you need periodic scans of your arms.

Oh.

I don't do this for fun, dear, much as you think I enjoy making you sit there. Well I do, but not for this, this is a boring test, she amended with a sly smile at him. I much prefer the tests where I get to stick needles in you.

God, you doctors are all sadists, he accused.

Brave thoughts to share when you're sitting in the annex, Jason, Songa winked.

Not as brave as telling me to my face that you enjoy sticking needles in me.

We all have to have a hobby, dear, she teased.

The second snag of the day came when he got back to work and found a handpanel sitting on his desk. It was a crypto panel from Miaari's office, and that meant it held the kind of report that would only be hand delivered by a courier on a dedicated handpanel. He sat down at his desk and started working his way through it. It was a report mainly about the Kimdori effort to crack the security surrounding Ward Six in the HQ of the Medical Service on Draconis, and to put it briefly, those efforts had been stymied. Zaa had sent the report to him, and he could tell her writing and could tell that she was *extremely* frustrated. And that was a nearly unknown sensation for a Kimdori of her skill and ability.

The report described a level of security that Zaa had never encountered before, almost as if it was specifically designed to target the Kimdori. The biometric locks were only the first layer of the defenses around a ward in the hospital known only as Ward Six, which was mostly underground and was more secure than the freakin' IBI. The entire ward was under constant high-sensitivity scan that searched for *any* DNA that was not allowed

within the ward. Those allowed into it had to go through extravagant cleansing procedures to enter the ward, which removed all foreign DNA from both on and in their bodies. They went to the extreme of killing every single microbe and virus inside the bodies of those allowed into the ward, which wasn't exactly healthy because Faey, like Terrans, relied on certain probiotic organisms primarily within their digestive tract to help keep them at optimal health. That insane level of thoroughness made it virtually impossible for any Kimdori to get into the ward, and even if they did, there were multiple other intrusion detection systems inside the ward. Attempts to get anyone or anything into the Ward had met with failure, from Kimdori infiltrators to special bionoids all the way to spiders.

The bionoids Rook developed for the attempt to get into the ward crept Jason out and made him almost feel like old Terran movies were coming to life. To get around the mechanical detection systems, they had taken the specs for a Benga infiltrator bionoid, which held SCM systems in it that defeated sensors, and Rook grew *living tissue* over the endoskeleton. That was right out of the fuckin' *Terminator* movie, and the movie might have been where he got the idea for it. They'd managed to get a DNA sample of one of the doctors that had access to Ward Six, then used that to grow living tissue around the bionoid to create the most lifelike bionoid ever built, because it had living components. They'd gone to the extreme with it, giving it the doctor's retinal pattern and fingerprints on top of having identical DNA. Three days ago, they sent that bionoid into the Medical Annex to try to gain access to Ward Six, and it was only in there for a grand total of six minutes before it had to literally dive out a window to escape security forces within the building.

The reason why was simple. The Medical Service was employing dozens and dozens of listeners and mindbenders as an additional layer of security, and the bionoid couldn't hide from a telepath. Listeners with the skill to sense commune were stationed at every access point that allowed access to Ward Six, and every entry into the ward was defended by a mindbender that subjected the person trying to get in to telepathic interrogation. While the SCM units in the bionoid could hide it from the sensors, it couldn't hide the fact that it broadcasted commune as it communicated with its driver. And telepaths with sufficient power and skill could hear commune. They couldn't understand it, but they could hear it.

Attempts to lift information off those able to get into the ward had also met with failure, mainly because everyone able to enter the ward had gone into it six days ago and had not come out since. It was almost as if they feared that Karinne telepaths were lurking within the building and the listeners and mindbenders serving as security in the building were keeping any telepath from even trying to probe anyone that might know anything.

It was almost getting to the point where the only way they were going to find out what was in that Ward was to mount a military expedition to invade the building to take it by force.

All of this was pissing Zaa off like she'd never been pissed off before. Zaa was not used to failing at anything, and she'd been very nearly rash the last few days because every idea they came up with failed...and every failure caused the Medical Service to stack even more security around Ward Six. The Medical Service had been in a state of heightened security since the hack of their mainframe.

The one thing they'd managed to figure out was that the Medical Service's lock on the records of the farm workers wasn't part of whatever was going on in Ward Six, or at least they weren't directly connected. When Kevin Ball submitted the authorization to give the Karinnes access to his medical records, the Medical Service complied, sending them. That seemed to be unrelated, but as he'd noted earlier, them trying to get those records had caused them to all but stumble across the existence of this deep secret the Medical Service was hiding, and now they were going to find out what it was.

There was little he could do about that, so he put it aside and got back to work, trying to clear his inbox before going home for the day...which brought him to his third snag of the day. He was summoned to Cybi's facility when an alarm went off, one that only he, Myleena, and Siyhaa would receive, and the three of them spent the rest of the day troubleshooting a problem in the external stacks in Cybi's core chamber. This problem wasn't as bad as the one that ultimately created Rook, but it was a fairly nasty problem in her primary I/O tree that was causing periodic lag spikes in the biogenic network.

"You'd think these things wouldn't go down after just two years," Myleena fumed as she and Jason tested biogenic boards. "I swear, her

original fifteen-hundred-year-old components were built better than this.”

“This isn’t the first issue we’ve run into since we upgraded Cybi’s external systems,” Siyhaa told her patiently. “Jason, I think we need to devote some time to do a comprehensive inspection of every stack in here. We may have a bad unit somewhere causing other units to fail.”

“That’s gonna take us a takir,” Myleena complained.

“Better to spend ten days now preventing a problem later that might take a month to fix,” Siyhaa replied sagely.

“You know how busy I am, Siyhaa?” Myleena protested. “I can’t drop everything and spend ten days chasing down a gremlin in Cybi’s I/O tree!”

“Your concern for me is quite touching, Myli,” Cybi said over an external speaker, putting an impressive amount of snark in her voice.

“I’m siding with Siyhaa on this one, Myli,” Jason said. “Arrange some time off from Project H, and I’ll arrange some time out of the office. Siyhaa, build a team of 3D techs authorized to work on CBIMs and get them ready. We’ll come in here and do a hardcore inspection to see if Siyhaa is right.”

Myleena gave him a very long, very dirty look.

[Where are you, babes?] Dahnai called over the network.

[Cybi’s facility. We’re doing some work,] he answered.

[Well, hurry up and finish, I’ll be there in about half an hour,] she ordered.

[I’m not dropping everything and running whenever you snap your fingers, woman,] he retorted, only half playing. *[We’re hunting down a problem in Cybi’s I/O tree that deals with her connection to the network. She’s sending lag spikes into the network, and it’s jacking with almost everything. This is a little more important than your dinner plans.]*

[Huffy,] Dahnai returned, both amused and slightly annoyed.

“I found it,” Siyhaa announced. “Output routing board 137B-17 in the network processing stack.”

“Finally,” Myleena breathed. “Burned out or malfunctioning?”

Siyhaa gave her handpanel a long look. “Odd. The spiders damaged it,” she noted, looking at them. “I’ve never seen that before.”

“Me either. And maybe that’s our gremlin,” Jason said. “Cybi, run a level one diagnostic of the entire spider control system.”

“It’ll take about half an hour. I’ve ordered a replacement board from the Shimmer Dome, they should have it ready in about two hours. They don’t have any pre-fabbed.”

“I’d be surprised if they did,” Jason mused. “That’s a specialty board.”

“I’ll bring up the auxiliary output control stack, you’ll have to run on that until we get your primary repaired,” Siyhaa said, going over to a manual control unit—a security measure to prevent a CBIM’s I/O tree from being attacked by remote—and jacking into it using a datafiber from her interface. “How’s that, Cybi?” she asked barely five seconds after doing so.

“That did it, the lag spikes are gone,” she answered. *“Thank you, everyone but Myleena.”*

“Bite my ass, Cybi,” she shot back, which made Jason laugh.

“If we have two hours, I’m gonna run out and grab something to eat,” Jason said. “You two hungry?”

“I could go for something,” Myleena replied.

“As could I. I found the most interesting restaurant the other day, they serve a Terran food style called Mexican. It was quite good.”

“I had no idea you like spicy food, Hadhja,” Jason said. “And I know the best Mexican restaurant in Karsa.”

“Well then, let’s see if it’s better than the restaurant I found last takir.”

They managed to get back to Cybi’s facility just as the new board was ready, and Jason and Myleena installed it as Siyhaa went over the diagnostic results with Cybi. “There’s definitely something there,” she reported when they regrouped near Cybi’s core crystal, Cybi projecting out a hologram. “There’s a signal aberration just at the edge of the tolerance in the datastream being broadcasted to the spiders. I suggest for safety’s sake, we completely replace the entire spider maintenance system, including the

spider units themselves. They may have been corrupted by the errant datastream.”

“I agree,” Myleena nodded as they studied a hologram showing the results. “That won’t be that hard, we can knock it out in a couple of days. The most time-consuming part will be Cybi gathering up the spiders. It’ll take some of them days to get to the container.”

“We’re not trashing them, we’ll send them back to the Shimmer Dome and have them check them. If they check out, we’ll add them back to the tier one pool. Those kinds of spiders are too expensive to just trash.”

“We need to go over them anyway, it may not be the control unit. The datastream fluctuations may be right on the borderline of tolerance, but it shouldn’t be jacking the spiders, we designed them better than that. There might be a flaw in the production run of spiders we put in here, it just took it this long to manifest.”

“That’s always possible. We’d better have the other spiders in that run tested,” Jason nodded.

“We should replace them with brand new spiders, just in case,” Siyhaa suggested, “not recycled ones.”

“Yeah, Cybi, put in the order for the control system and a new full production run of tier one spiders.”

“I’ve sent the orders. ETA for them to fill the order is five days. I think I can live without spiders for five days.”

“True, but I want to install an external sensor to monitor your systems while you are without spiders,” Siyhaa told her. “One not connected to your primary system would be safest.”

“If you think it best, Hadhja,” Cybi demurred.

The last event of the day happened after he went to bed, which was over at the Summer Palace. Dahnai was over for her takir of residence on Karis, and as was customary, she claimed Jason for her own while Kellin spent the night with Jyslin. Just before midnight, he was woken up by the KES. It was Myra, who, after he merged to a construct in the house’s mainframe that resembled his work office here on the island, appeared as a flat

hologram floating just past his desk within the construct. “I thought you were with Dahnai,” she noted, looking around.

“I am, this is a construct. No way am I letting you see into Dahnai’s bedroom,” he replied, which made her grin. Myra was on the bridge of a KES vessel, which was currently located in galaxy C7A-14, which was nearly 19 days away from Karis in mode three. It was 7 clusters away, nearly as far as the nearest galaxy in the opposing string in the Greater Evanis formation.

“Spoilsport,” she grinned.

“Why are you waking me up, Myra?” he asked pointedly.

“This is why,” she said, and the screen split to show either a live image or a picture of something he’d never seen before...at least live. He’d seen something akin to it in a movie, a very, very old movie called *The Last Starfighter*. It was a wall of evenly spaced artificial devices that stretched beyond visual range in all four directions, like The Frontier from that old movie. Each device looked to be about the size of a corvette, and they were evenly spaced 3,270 kathra apart. On the other side of them was an elliptical globular galaxy about a quarter of the size of the Milky Way, shaped roughly like a disc

“Are they mines or sensor nodes?”

“We don’t know, we can’t scan them,” she replied. “We’re not even sure what metal makes up the outer hull. So, the obvious reason why I called is because I’m not about to cross that, that, whatever it is without your approval.”

“Don’t cross it,” he ordered. “Have you found out how far it goes?”

“I’ve sent sixteen probes out, jumping hyperspace along the border and dropping at regular intervals to do a visual, and so far, they haven’t found an edge in any direction. I’m starting to think that they may circumnavigate the rim of this entire arc of the galaxy. So far, we’ve counted 17 decatillion of them, and that number keeps going up as the probes keep going.”

“Damn. Whoever made them must be insanely advanced. Probably way more advanced than we are. But the question I have is, what would make

them erect a barrier of some kind that looks like it's trying to enclose an entire *galaxy*?"

"No idea, but what I can tell you is that we can't scan the devices, or *past* them. So we've pulled a page from the Kimdori playbook and we're using light magnification to visually survey stars within the galaxy. We'll be seeing them as they were hundreds or even thousands of years ago, but if whoever's in there could make *that*, then odds are we'll see signs of an advanced civilization even looking that far back."

He regarded the devices. It was either a sensor blind or a minefield—or both—and it was clearly built by someone with exceptionally advanced technology. And it looked like it protected a vast, vast area at the galaxy's rim...and might even conceivably enclose the *entire* galaxy. He doubted that it did, the amount of time and resources it would take to do something like that would truly be mind-boggling. To enclose the entire galaxy, they'd need so many of them that counting would damn near require imaginary numbers.

But one thing was for certain. "Myra," he said seriously. "Recall the probes and pull the ship back into flat space while you wait for them to return. I want you a minimum of five light years from that wall. Once you recover the probes, turn around and leave that galactic cluster," he ordered. "I don't want any part of a civilization that could do something like *that*, and I sure as hell don't want anything to do with whoever might have motivated them to build it. If that was built to keep someone out, I don't want to find out who it is or why they went to such lengths to keep them out. Mark clusters C6K, C7A, and C7B off limits for exploration, and I mean go so far as to ban travel within a full day of travel in mode three around those clusters. If you want to explore C14 and the other clusters directly behind those three, you go *around* that area."

"I'll put Cyrsi on plotting out the restricted area," she nodded, then looked to the side. "Captain Sa'Kra, recall all probes and pull us back away from the devices by five light years. Once we're deeper out in flat space, prepare a jump back to our forward outpost at C5D in mode three."

"Aye, Myra," he heard Sa'Kra respond. She was one of their most experienced KES captains, an Urumi. She had to be in order to be assigned to a Vanguard class scout ship. "Helm course 0 mark 1, speed 20, get us

five light years from the formation. Hold at that position and begin plotting a course back to C5D-6 in mode three.”

“Aye, Captain, answering course 007 mark 347, mode one, speed twenty.”

“Captain, I have a visual on something moving this way,” someone else called. “Putting it on the main viewer.” Jason looked at the other side of the split screen, and he saw what looked like a very small ship approaching at sublight speed from the other side of the plane formed by the devices. It was about the size of a KMS frigate, and like a frigate, it was long and sleek, having the look of a warship.

“That tears it, I’m merging to a bionoid so I can keep track of things,” Jason said. “Cyrsi, send me the ID code of a bionoid aboard that ship.”

“Sending it now.”

“Should we back off?” Myra asked him.

“Yes,” he answered. “They may see us being this close to their border to be a hostile act, so back off five light years.”

“You heard the Grand Duke, navigator,” Myra said, turning and looking at him. He was a Terran male, about thirty or so from the looks of him.”

By the time he was merged to one of the generic crew bionoids and was on the bridge, they were at their new position five light years away from the border. The ship that had been approaching at sublight, however, reappeared on visual almost as soon as they came out of mode one, about 100,000 kathra away, and it resumed a sublight intercept course. They couldn’t scan the ship, since it looked to be made of the same metal as the units, and it clearly had FTL or jump capability given it got out here so fast. They were letting them see them coming, Jason surmised, which he saw as a peaceful act.

“They’re letting us see them coming,” Myra said, mirroring his thoughts. “I think they want to parley.”

“Any signs of us being hailed on any monitored comm band?” Jason asked Sa’Kra, who was petite for an Urumi, only looming over him, with a smaller crest that betrayed her youth. The older the female, the larger the crest. She was a damn good captain despite her youth, however.

“No indication, your Grace,” she answered, leaning over the shoulder of one of the six comm officers on the bridge. “No organized signals on EM, tachyon, modulated light, hyperspace pulse, or gravband. “Should we jump out?”

“Let’s give them a chance,” Jason said, to which Myra nodded in agreement. “But be ready to jump out at a second’s notice.”

“Aye, your Grace, keeping the drive in standby and the coordinates locked in,” navigator said. “Should I turn the ship?”

“Yes, then hold position,” Jason nodded. “Sa’Kra, blink the running lights so they know we see them.”

“Aye, your Grace.”

When they got within 70 kathra, the ship slowed to a stop, and both Myra and Sa’Kra gasped. “They’re talented!” Myra said, putting a finger to her temple. “Can you hear them, Sa’Kra?”

“Aye, Myra,” she answered. Sa’Kra, like Sk’Vrae, was a telepath.

“What are they saying?” Jason asked.

“They’re warning us not to cross the border. Now they’re asking us who we are,” she answered. “How honest should I be?”

“Fairly,” he replied. “Don’t reveal where we’re from but admit that we have intergalactic capability. I think they’ve figured that out by now. Tell them we’re exploring the galactic clusters near our home. And tell them that we pulled back to this position to make sure we stayed well away from their territory.”

Since Jason was in a bionoid, he wasn’t privy to what Sa’Kra and Myra were hearing...as was everyone else on the bridge, from the look of it. The telepath in the other ship must be sending so that non-talented minds could hear him. Sa’Kra let Myra do the talking, and she leaned down and spoke in Jason’s ear. “They call themselves the Allu,” she relayed. “They refuse entry into their galaxy. Myra assures them we have no desire to trespass. She asks why they built such a thing, asking if it is safe to explore the other galaxies in this cluster. The Allu answer that it is not,” she warned. “There is a highly hostile race that dominates the largest galaxy in this cluster that has intergalactic capability, their perimeter was built ages ago by a coalition

of races within the galaxy to prevent them from attacking. They say that all civilizations in the galaxies surrounding the hub galaxy in this cluster have faced attack from the enemy. The Allu say the hostile race are religious zealots that believe that all other forms of intelligent life are abominations that must be destroyed. The Allu say that their galaxy unified into a single government to answer that threat, long ago. The entire galaxy is a single empire.”

Now *that* was interesting. That almost sounded like how the Confederation came to be, created to deal with the Consortium.

“They ask from where we come. Myra is being evasive, only saying that we traveled a great distance over a very long time, that we come from another galactic cluster after only recently developing intergalactic capability. The Allu are not pressing the point. They warn not to enter the other galaxies, we will be attacked by either the hostile race or other empires that will think we are the hostile race, and it would be safest for us to go back from where we came. Myra tells them that we are marking this entire cluster as prohibited, so we will not bother them again, nor risk confrontation with the hostile race in the hub galaxy. They say that would be wise. They ask if we would be interested in establishing diplomatic ties. Myra answers that she can’t make that decision, that she will have to inform her superiors when she gets back and they will have to decide. She asks for a procedure to contact the Allu should her superiors accept. The Allu answer to leave a communication device at our original coordinates by the border, that they will detect the device and investigate. They offer to meet face to face before we leave so we can trade languages to be able to talk over a comm device, should we decide to open channels.”

“Your call, Myra,” Jason told her. “If you think it’s safe, we’ll do it.”

“They’re offering to board our ship, so I’d say it’s safe enough,” she replied.

“Then tell them we’re good with it.”

Jason, Myra, and Sa’Kar moved down to the landing bay, where, moments after they arrived, a single very small shuttlecraft landed. It looked barely the size of a compact car, and a single being exited it from the front; the entire front of the craft opened like a hatch. The Allu was very

tall, a touch over six shakra, which put it a head over Myra. It was a canoid species, with dark gray fur and a muzzle and triangular ears atop its head, but Jason couldn't tell if it was male or female. Like many mammal species, if it was female, it didn't have pronounced breasts, and it was wearing a plain brown jumpsuit of sorts as a uniform, which hid its genitals. It stepped up and offered a clawed hand, and Sa'Kar advanced and took it. Moments later, a new language was uploaded into the bionoid's memory, known as Galactic Common, the trade language all species used in their galaxy.

"I find it most curious that you have a telepathic robot and a Ulala on your crew," the Allu said aloud, looking at Jason and Myra.

"My species is called Faey, your Excellency," Myra told him easily. "And this robot is here for our protection, since it can't be telepathically dominated."

"You exactly resemble a race known as the Ulala in my galaxy," he told Myra. "Your skin color is different, but everything else is the same. You're even telepathic, like they are."

Jason and Myra exchanged surprised looks. "This isn't the first time we've encountered a race that closely resembled us, your Excellency," Myra told him. "We have a theory that species that evolved on planets with extremely similar conditions will have many similar traits and might even look similar to one another. Your people resemble a race from our galaxy known as the Hrathrari," she told him. "Just taller."

"Interesting," he said, staring at Jason's bionoid. "And the robot? I see you've developed telepathic resonance technology. Is it being controlled by your ship's computer?"

"It's being controlled by a security expert elsewhere on the ship, just in case this meeting was to turn violent," Myra told him. "But it's clearly no longer needed, so I'll send it away."

Jason took the initiative to delink from the bionoid and merge directly to the ship's computer, then he brought up the feeds for the sensors in the landing bay to continue listening. He watched as the bionoid, now controlled by the ship's computer, walked towards the nearest hatch.

"If I might ask, what is telepathic resonance technology?" Myra asked as the bionoid left the landing bay.

“Machines that can use telepathy. That robot is an example of it,” he said, pointing at the bionoid. “I can hear it using a type of telepathy I’ve never encountered before.”

“Now that’s most interesting, your Excellency. You’re the first civilization we’ve encountered that has technology similar to ours,” Myra told him.

“I’m surprised you don’t have a connection to your home base using telepathic comm,” he said. “Any race that’s developed resonance tech should have thought of it.”

“Oh, we have, but we don’t have a relay beacon out this far,” she replied, twisting the truth a little bit. “We have to get in range of a beacon to communicate with HQ. We don’t set those beacons out in unexplored and unsecure space, to prevent others from capturing them and stealing their technology.”

After a few more minutes of them politely stonewalling the Allu, he got back in his shuttle and returned to his ship. They waited for him to safely dock with his ship, then Sa’Kra had the ship enter mode three, getting them out of the cluster.

“Ulala,” Jason said distantly. “He said you look just like the Ulala, and they’re telepathic. The way he said it, I think he meant they were *all* telepathic. Could it be a case of Gora’s Law, or are the Ulala another splinter branch of the Faey race?” he asked, looking at Myra.

“All the way out *here*?” Myra protested.

“If the Dreamers could get to Andromeda, who’s saying that the Ulala couldn’t have made it all the way here?” he countered calmly. “We may be the first civilization that we know of that has intergalactic capability, but I doubt we were the first ever. And over the last two years, I’m convinced that we’re not even *close* to being the first. I mean, we just left a galaxy that’s most likely entirely surrounded by an artificial mine system. An entire *galaxy*,” he stressed. “I can’t even imagine how long that took to build, and how much resources it required to do it. I’m sure Cyrsi would have to work a while to do the math,” he mused. “I’d almost bet that they have engines capable of intergalactic travel, because we know for sure that

this hostile race they're afraid of *does*. How else would they get to their galaxy to attack?"

"That's a prudent thought, your Grace. Sensors, keep an eye behind us, look for any potential followers," Sa'Kra ordered, looking over at her sensor officer.

"Aye, Captain," the Faey at the post answered.

"Navigator, prepare several possible course changes so we're not leading any followers back to C5D."

"Aye sir."

"So, Jayce, are we opening channels with them?" Myra asked.

"Maybe. We'll have to do some research and I need to talk to the usual experts before I make a decision like that."

"Bringing in stealth probes?"

He nodded. "Comm one, call back to C5D and have them prepare a frigate carrying stealth probes," he called, looking over at the comm bank. "Tell them that they are not to enter the cluster. They'll stop two days from the cluster and launch the probes from there."

"Aye, your Grace."

"It'll take them a while to get anything out this far, but I want more information about this cluster before I do anything. Cyrsi."

"Yes, Jason?"

"Tell Myri to bring in a full tactical task force led by a command ship and picket them at the forward research outpost at C5D-6. Just in case."

"I'll relay the order."

"A task force?"

"I'm not taking any chances, we have six thousand people on that research station," he answered. The research station was one of the KES' super-ships, which had been converted to be used as a forward research station. They had 112 of them in service of the 250 they had planned, and all of them were currently deployed. The super-ship was armed—heavily armed at that—including carrying GRAF cannons, but they weren't

considered tactical assets. The armament on a KES super-ship was primarily defensive, outside of the GRAF cannons. If there was a chance it may come under attack, Jason wanted warships in the vicinity to do it. "I'm going to assume that this race of zealots have intergalactic capability until I'm proven wrong. And besides, our girls could use the experience of a deployment."

"The task force will reach C5D a full day before we do," Sa'Kra noted, to which Jason nodded.

"If we're bringing someone back with us, we'll have a full tactical task force there to greet them," he grunted. "Cyrsi, do the Kimdori have any ships in this area?" he asked, looking over at the camera pod she was using."

"Not any that could get here faster than a ship using the Stargate at C4J-32," she answered.

"Meh. Ask Denmother if she can send a scout ship to C5D, so we have some Kimdori explorers and infiltrators on site if they're needed. Besides, I think she'll be fascinated by this and will want to investigate herself."

There wasn't much more he could do, so he delinked so he could go back to bed...and once again, he returned to awareness with Dahnai propped upon him, a hand under her chin as the other played with his hair. *[So, you do have Stargates to other galactic clusters.]* *[I've told you not to do that, woman,]* he retorted shortly, a tiny bit of honest anger bleeding into his thought.

[You should know better than to merge to something when you're in bed with me, baby. I can hear everything, especially now that I can commune,] she answered shamelessly. *[And it's not that big of a secret. It's only common sense for you to set Stargates so your ships don't have to travel for days to get there. And I will admit one thing. All your talk talk talk about being cautious and being careful, well, you justified every bit of it. If there's an empire out there that can build a shield around an entire galaxy, there's no telling what else they can do. And we should be very careful.]*

He gave her a long, unfriendly look, and she answered it by giving him a quirky grin, then leaning down and kissing him playfully on the tip of his nose.

Maista, 28 Shiaa, 4408, Faey Orthodox Calendar

Thursday, 2 August 2022 Terran Standard Calendar

*Maista, 28 Shiaa, year 1333 of the 97th Generation, Karinne
Historical Reference Calendar*

Foxwood East, Karsa, Karis

He knew that this day was coming, and he still wasn't sure if he was ready for it.

Standing by the deck table, he was leaning against the railing in nothing but a pair of shorts and looking down at his son Zachary, who had a nervous but very determined look on his face. Zach had asked to talk to him about something *important*, and Jason had a feeling that he knew what this was about. And the look on Zach's face hinted very strongly that he was right.

It was quite a lovely day, with a gentle breeze caressing the beach that carried the heady aroma of *oye* flowers, and the occasional petal drifted down from the canopy above. Jason's tree was flowering, and from the looks of it, it was going to fruit again very soon. Late afternoon sunlight filtered through the edge of the canopy as the sun neared the horizon, the shade dancing and shifting as the branches above swayed in the sea breeze. It was an idyllic end to a fairly good day for Jason, but he had the feeling that it was about to get put on its ear.

Zach took a deep breath, then looked up at him. *[Dad...I think I want to marry Dara,]* he declared, though his thought was much more certain than the words he communed, given he was framing.

[Marriage is not something you think you want to do, son,] he answered. *[It's for life, so you'd better be damn sure that it's what you want before you even entertain the idea of pursuing it. You won't be able to just make Dara go home if she starts to annoy you. She'll be living with you, every minute of every day for the rest of your life. That is a commitment, and you'd better be sure you're ready for it.]*

[I am. I mean, I know what marriage is, I've talked to Ranny about it. And it's what I want. When Dara's not here, she's all I can think about. I miss her all the time when she's back on Tamiri. Not even talking to her over her interface is enough, because it's just her voice, it's not her.]

[So, you thought about this before asking me.]

[For a while,] he nodded. [Dara moving here is gonna be hard for everyone, because she has to get used to the strip, and we have to make sure that she'll keep our secrets. If I can even get her to marry me,] he communed, worry worming into his thought. [I mean, I know she loves me, but marriage is a big step. And then there's her mom. She might not like Dara leaving her house and coming here. But I can't wait much longer, Dad. Dara's almost fifteen, and I know what that means in the Siann. She should have already been betrothed by now, but she's not. If I don't get her betrothal, Aunt Yila might betroth her to another boy.]

[Son, sometimes you are oblivious,] Jason told him honestly. [Yila has been all but hitting you over the head with the idea that Dara is available for betrothal since the day you met Dara. She hasn't betrothed her to another boy because she was waiting for you to ask. She's been fishing for a betrothal from you for years.]

[Really?]

[Yes, really,] he answered, a tiny bit caustically. [But despite that, I made you and the other kids a promise, and I'll keep it. If you want to marry Dara, if you really want it, then I'll do what I can to make it happen. I promised you that you could marry whoever you wanted, and if you want Dara, then you get Dara. But,] he stressed, [I'm not the one you have to convince. Your mother has to approve, especially since Dara will be moving into your house. You convince Ilia to approve of the betrothal, and I'll talk to Yila about it.]

[I already talked to Mom. She said I had to convince you.]

Jason almost had to chuckle. *[Is that so? Hold on a second.]* He reached up into the network and located Ilia, who was at work up in Kosigi. *[Ilia, Zach asked.]*

[He did? Are you okay with it?]

[Only if you are.]

[I'm alright with it, at least if Miaari clears Dara to move to Karis. Just because she's marrying my son doesn't mean she gets to bypass screening.]

[It kinda does, but—]

[No. If she can't pass the screening, then she's not worthy of him or worthy of being a Karinne,] Ilia interrupted adamantly. [She goes through the same screening as any other applicant. She has to prove she belongs here, Jason. If she refuses, or fails, or Yila tries to interfere, then we know that we can't trust her. And I will not let my son marry a girl I can't trust.]

[That...well, alright. I think it just became a deal-breaker, but if that's your position, I'll honor it.]

[You think she won't pass? And you were going to bring her here anyway?]

[I think she may not pass now, but after we had some time to work on her, we could bring her around. The way we did Shya. I was willing to give her the chance, but if you say she has to pass screening, then that's that. He's your son too.]

[Thank you for that.]

“Oh boy,” Jason breathed aloud, shaking his head. “Ilia will allow it, son, but she has one hell of a condition. She said Dara has to pass the screening the Kimdori give to all applicants to the house before she'll give her blessing,” he told him.

“She can pass it, I know she can,” he said aloud, his voice absolutely certain. “Dara always talks about how she'd love to live here, but she can't just leave her mom because she's a noble.”

“So you agree to your mother's condition? If Dara fails the screening, you won't argue about it?”

“I won't,” he said. “Because I believe in her. I know she'll pass.”

“Part of being the Grand Duke is planning for the impossible, Zach. So you'd better be ready to accept it if Dara fails,” he warned. “And I want to hear you say it. Will you accept that you can't marry Dara if she fails the screening?”

He gave Jason a long look, then sighed and nodded. “I won’t like it, but I won’t argue about it,” he answered.

“Alright then.” *[Miaari.]*

[What is it, cousin?]

[Zach just asked me to betroth him to Dara. Ilia won’t bless the marriage unless Dara passes the applicant screening. So I wanted to give you a head’s up about it. I’ll schedule the time for Dara to be screened. But I want you to do it. And I want you to be completely fair. Use the same screening protocols you use for any other applicant and allow her to pass or fail on her own. No bias.]

[I can do that, cousin. Just tell me when she’ll be here, and I’ll arrange my schedule around her screening.]

[I haven’t gotten to that part yet. I’ll let you know.]

[I’ll be listening for you.]

He again reached up into the network, this time casting out into the galactic biogenic network, searching for Yila’s interface. It pinged on Terra, and he queried her. *[Yila.]*

[Hey Jason. What’s going on?]

[Zach has asked me to secure Dara’s betrothal,] he told her, almost ceremonially.

[Oh really now?] she replied, nearly coquettishly, but he could sense wild elation behind her thought, something so powerful that it was even bleeding through her moleculartronic interface. The only reason he picked it up was because she was wearing a simsense-capable interface. *[And I take it you’d like to meet to discuss it?]*

[Not quite yet. Ilia will only bless it if Dara passes the screening process we use to induct new members into the house. If Dara fails that screening, then that’s that. So I need to arrange to have you bring her to Karis so she can be screened. What happens after that will depend entirely on if she passes.]

[You’re Zach’s father,] she protested. *[And you didn’t screen Shya.]*

[Dara will be living under Ilia's roof, and Ilia makes the rules when it comes to her son,] he returned.

[You're being entirely unfair. If Dara fails the screening, she'll be totally crushed.]

[Life isn't fair,] he told her. [Ilia won't bring Dara into her house unless she can trust her, and the screening will tell her if she can.]

There was a long silence. *[When do you want us there?]*

[Whenever is most convenient for you,] he answered.

[How long will it take?]

[Given Miaari is the one that will be conducting it, maybe an hour. She can bring in one of our best screening telepaths.]

[Then we'll be over as soon as I finish my meeting here. Dara gets out of school in an hour. I'll have Dara sent over from Tamiri and I'll meet you there when I get done.]

[Fair enough,] he answered. He ended his connection to Yila and got back in touch with Miaari. [Dara will be on the way over in a little over an hour. Yila said she'd be along when she finishes her meeting.]

[I take it I don't give Yila the chance to talk to her?]

[No. Begin the screening the minute Dara arrives. I'll have her shuttle sent to the White House instead of here.]

[The proper choice,] she replied approvingly. [That way Yila has no chance to try to contaminate the outcome.]

He looked down at Zach. *[It's all set up. Dara will be screened when she gets out of school and gets over here, in about two hours. We'll have to wait for the result before we can take the next step, one way or the other.]*

[Okay. Thanks, Dad,] he communed with sincere gratitude in his thought. [Now I spend the longest two hours of my life.]

Jason had to chuckle. *[Welcome to growing up, son. It's best to get yourself involved in something, you'll find it passes the time.]* He looked him up and down. *[And I think I know exactly what that should be. I'd say*

that you're old enough for some real responsibility, son.] Aya, he called, sending openly.

Yes, Jason?

Effective immediately, Zach is in the rigger training program, he called, which made Zach gasp and sit up quickly. He's ready.

I'll schedule the training sessions and send his vidlink the simulation programs and add his biometrics to the strip exomechs so he can merge to them. Zach, come to the armory as soon as you can, you have to be here to be added to the access list.

Aw, no fair! Shya protested. I want to do it too!

Yeah, why does Zach get to do rigger training but not me? Kyri added in.

Prove you're mature enough to handle the responsibility of having control of a machine that costs hundreds of thousands of credits and can kill people if you misuse it, and you will. Zach did.

Zach jumped up and gave Jason a crushing hug. [Thanks Dad!]

[Don't thank me for something you did yourself,] he chided lightly. [Now, you can spend your time waiting over at the armory, where one of the guards will give you an introductory tour to the training program and tell you what it entails, at least after you get added to the access list for the mecha. Just be ready to work, son, rigger training is demanding.]

[I'll make you proud, Dad.]

[You already have,] he smiled, then turned him around and swatted him lightly on the rump. [I'll let you know when we know something.]

[Okay.] Aya, I'm coming over to the armory right now.

I'll meet you there.

He'd been meaning to do that for a couple of takirs. Zach and Rann were the elder children ready for rigger training, but Rann came with the baggage of Shya. Jason knew better than to put Rann into the program and not Shya, it would cause some real friction between them. So until Shya was ready, Rann was being held out of the program. And this way, putting

Zach into the program before he was betrothed to Dara—if she passed the screening—Dara couldn't bitch about being left out too much. Then again, Dara wouldn't really care. She was devoted to her batchi, and she'd see having to do rigger training as an intolerable distraction.

Jason got involved in paperwork up in his home office while they waited, mainly so he could stay out of it. He didn't want any distractions for either Miaari or Dara. So, he was a bit surprised when Miaari called him over the network, while he was plowing through the numbers for next fiscal year's budget that Kumi had sent him. *[We're done, Jason. Dara is on her way to the strip now.]*

[The verdict?]

[She passed. She's all but pair-bonded to Zach already, and she won't do anything that might risk that relationship. The biggest thing she's worried about is that living on Karis may make it harder for her to get onto a pro team once she's old enough to sign on.]

[I think we can work around that,] Jason communed dryly, which made her chuckle. *[Guess I should tell Yila.]*

[You can tell her yourself in about five minutes. She's on her way down to the strip now.]

[Figured. Bring Dara over, will you?]

[She's already on her way, one of White House guards is bringing her.]

He met Yila on the landing pad, and she was dressed for negotiation... which meant she was wearing almost nothing. She had on knee boots and a pair of scarves draped over one shoulder and crossing her torso that only covered her left breast, and that was it. *Is Dara here? Is she still being screened? What news?* she pressed as she came down the steps from her luxury dropship.

She'll be here in a few minutes. She completed the screening interview.

And?

And we need to talk about an official contract.

Yila's blue face lit up as bright as the Karis sun...which amused Jason. Little did she realize that if Dara passed screening, it meant she wasn't

going to give her mother any secret information. She *would not* risk her marriage with Zach. *Where's Zach? He should be here for this.*

He's over at the armory. He started his exomech training today, Jason answered. *Zach, come to my office,* Jason called, increasing his power enough to be heard from the armory.

In a minute, Dad.

Have you told him yet?

Not yet. I wanted to let Dara do that.

Dara got to his office first—Aya held Zach up at the armory for some reason—and when Zach came into the office, she got up and crushed him with a fierce hug. *I can't believe it, Zach! We're gonna get married!*

You passed? You PASSED! Zach thundered, unleashing his full power as a telepath, which was quite impressive. No doubt people 40 kathra away heard that declaration, and it made Yila wince a bit.

“Now that that's out of the way,” Jason said aloud, rather dryly, as Zach let Dara pull him to the empty chair in front of his desk. Zach sat down and pulled Dara into his lap. “Zach has asked me to secure a betrothal to your daughter, Yila,” he said officially. “Are you going to fight about it and piss me off, try to negotiate and infuriate your daughter, or just give over on it and hand it over without you leaving this office missing your ears?”

She had to laugh. “As long as you allow her to keep her Duchess title, I have no need to negotiate, Jason. I want this as much as Dara does. So let's draw up the contract and sign it. As soon as Dahnai gives official consent, we'll start organizing Dara's move to Karis. Is she still here?”

“No, she went back to Dracora three days ago. We'll have to take the contract over there and have her finalize it.”

“Well then, I hope you have some parchment handy.”

As Zach and Dara watched in gleeful anticipation, Jason and Yila drew up the official betrothal agreement between them. Dara would move from the House of Trefani to the House of Karinne. She would retain her title and rank of Duchess (which wasn't giving her anything, all the spouses of his children would hold that rank), and she and Zach would be married on

Zach's 15th birthday, since he was the younger of them by two months. As was an ancient tradition in the *Siann*, the contract was written on parchment, not paper, and even the ink and pen used were special. They used something akin to a fountain pen for these kinds of written contracts. Betrothals were one of the most ancient customs of the *Siann*, so when it came to them, they adhered to some of their oldest traditions, which went all the way back to the Faey's Iron Age.

After the contract was written and signed by both Jason and Yila, it became a road trip. The four of them were herded into a destroyer and ferried over to Draconis, where it was just before noon, and they changed into formal robes and crashed the palace while Dahnai was holding court. Because of that, the entire *Siann* found out quickly what was going on, mainly because Yila rather obnoxiously asked Dahnai's consent to the betrothal right there in the throne room in front of the *Siann*. She wanted to rub the others' faces in the fact that she'd gotten her daughter married off to a Karinne.

Dahnai gave them a very long look as she took the contract from a guard that brought it to her, then she spent a *long* time reading it. But after she did so, she looked much less suspicious. "Duchess Dara Trefani, the terms of this contract require you to leave your house to join the House of Karinne, which is customary for the boy to do. So I must ask, do you consent to leaving your house to join the House of Karinne?" she asked, looking at Dara.

"I do so consent," she answered immediately.

"Very well, the throne gives its blessing to this betrothal," she declared, and an aide brought her a pen and a board so he could sign the contract herself. She did so with a flourish, then handed it back to the aide, who blew on the ink to dry it "The wedding will take place on the 15th birthday of Zachary Karinne, being the younger of the two. Congratulations, you two. May you have a long and happy life together."

And that was that. Zach and Dara were betrothed, and in about seven months, they were going to be married. And that was going to put a bit of a pinch on things, since Rann and Shya would be having their state wedding ceremony, the "official" wedding despite the fact that they were already legally married, just 16 days before them. Shya and Zach's birthdays were

only 16 days apart. But now would come the ugly part of it, and that was Dara and Zach figuring out how they were going to move into his room, given Dara had tons of stuff and Zach's room wasn't all that big. And then there was Dara living under Ilia's roof, who was far more strict than Yila was.

Jason had the feeling that things weren't going to be quite so rosy in the short term, but he was also sure that things would settle down once Dara moved in and got used to her new normal.

He needed to discuss a little remodeling of her house with Ilia. Zach's room really was too small for both of them. Red Horn could build a modest extension on the side that could house a small apartment for Zach and Dara, give them a little more space and some storage that didn't eat into Ilia's closets. He'd put Rann and Shya into an apartment within the house once they got older, and Zach really deserved the same.

They'd figure it out. They always did.

Maista, 2 Hiraas, 4408, Faey Orthodox Calendar

Sunday, 12 August 2022 Terran Standard Calendar

Maista, 2 Hiraas, year 1333 of the 97th Generation, Karinne Historical Reference Calendar

Training Range 6 ("The Gauntlet"), Joint Base Lambda, Karga, Karis

He was getting the hang of this.

Well, it was more precise to say that he was getting used to the rather finicky targeting system in a Cheetah. It was much more sensitive than in any other mecha, relied much more on the pilot's ability to aim without using a physical movement, which tested a rigger's ability to control a physical object that wasn't part of his own body, like learning how to control a tail or an extra pair of arms. So far he'd not missed a single target as he ran the Gauntlet, which was a training range used for Cheetahs to test the pilot's ability to aim at targets while moving at high speed or

performing evasive maneuvers or parkour. There were segments of the course where he ran at a flat sprint and had to shoot down targets, there were times when he had to avoid obstacles while shooting at targets, and times when he had to jump onto platforms and fire on targets, both on the platforms and in midair between them. He had to use specific weapons for each target based on its color, which tested his ability to manage multiple weapon systems in a fast-reaction situation.

He was nearly through the Cheetah's certification course, and he'd be taking his certification exam next takir, a full two sections ahead of everyone else. He was the only Storm Rider up to this part of the training, and he was almost done with it. The only section of the course he had left after this one was training on the unique pods that were only used with a Cheetah.

The reason why was simple. Despite the others having more time to practice, Jason had adapted to the unique aspects of the Cheetah faster than any of the others, and his experience in merging as a Generation and his ability to split allowed him to quickly adapt to the Cheetah's systems, such as its unique combat targeting system. One reason he was such a good Titan rigger was because he could split to manage its systems, and that skill translated well into a Cheetah.

But he wasn't done with the training. When they finished the certification course, then he and the other Storm Riders would begin training in group tactics and advanced applications, learning how to fight as a team rather than as a collection of riggers. This course was only to earn the privilege to pilot the mecha, there was still a ton of training awaiting them once they gained their rating.

Truth be told, the last month or so, once they'd dropped the hammer on the DFM for embezzling the money meant for the farm survivors, he'd had plenty of time to work on his rating. Outside of the whole Medical Service thing and the distraction of Zach's betrothal to Dara, things had been fairly quiet. The Kimdori still hadn't broken into Ward Six, and not for a lack of trying...which had become something of a holy crusade for Zaa now. She was going to crack their security even if she had to level the annex with an antimatter bomb. Since there was nothing he could really do about that but

wait, it gave him time to work on rigger training once he finished the paperwork that came with his day job.

Well, there was one thing that was different, and he'd been thinking about it most of the day. Aria's dream had changed.

It was still mostly the same. He and Dahnai were fighting a dragon, but before, when the dream would end before she knew what happened, last night, she had seen more of it. When, in the dream, he and Dahnai hurl themselves at the dragon holding swords to kill it, the dream would end before they struck any blows. But last night, she'd seen the dragon swipe down Dahnai with its paw, sending her plummeting towards the ground, while Jason drove his sword into its upper neck, which made it roar in pain. But the dream ended before she saw if the blow killed the dragon, or if the dragon struck *him* down in retaliation for the blow.

And that concerned him. It meant that Dahnai was going to fall or fail.

But they still had no idea what the dream was warning them against. There'd been nothing unusual outside of the usual shenanigans since Aria started having the dream, and there didn't seem to be anything that had changed that would change the outcome of the dream. Dahnai hadn't done anything new or different for like six months, things had been quiet and peaceful in the Imperium, maybe even a little bit boring.

He shot down two more targets and jumped up onto a ledge, then swiped at a target that sprung out in front of him with his forepaw without breaking stride, one coded to be hit by a melee attack. He jumped across the narrow gorge to another platform, shot down four more targets using his pulse cannons, then struck a distant target using his particle cannon. He then shifted to his main rail cannons, which were mounted under the mecha's head and neck, the gunport doors in the lower chest, then slid to a stop so suddenly his rump scraped sparks across the metal platform under him, and dead-centered a target nearly 30 kathra away. He then charged forward again and jumped back down to the ground and shot down a series of targets along the home stretch. The final target was just in front of the finish line, which bloomed a hole almost dead center as he sprinted by. He slowed to a canter as he turned back for the staging area. *[What's the verdict, controller?]*

[No missed shots, course finished with twenty seconds to spare. Well done, K1.]

[Awesome. So is that a pass on the combat skills block?]

[With you passing the close quarters combat section last takir, yes it is. You start the final block of training tomorrow. So study on up on Cheetah pod systems for tomorrow and be ready.]

He trotted his Cheetah to its bay and rose up out of the cockpit between the shoulder blades, then took off his helmet and took a moment to enjoy his achievement. The Gauntlet was the hardest part of the certification course, most Cheetah pilots said, and he'd finished the block in just nine days. All he had left was weapon pods, learning the various pod systems used with Cheetahs and demonstrating his aptitude using them, and he'd take the final test, which in the spirit of all heavy mecha, was a fairly nasty practical skills test where Jason would have to shoot down a target mecha in a fortified fixed position, that was being actively defended by five heavy mecha. It was the ultimate test of a Cheetah rigger's command of his mecha and how he could use the mecha's speed, agility, and advantages to break the enemy defense and take out the target without being shot down.

That seemed severe, but the fact that Cheetahs had *CMS* gave them a fighting chance to pull it off. Cheetahs were the only heavy mecha with *CMS*, and the ability to slip through sensor sweeps undetected would allow the Cheetah to get in close to the target. When Jason took the test, all he had to do was avoid visual contact with the defending mecha and get close to the fixed position holding his target, then find a way to break in and take out the target without getting shot down.

Sadly, the test wasn't administered at night, or that would be almost too easy.

CMS and stealth operations was Block Four of the Cheetah rating course.

Much like the Titan course, few riggers passed the final test in the Cheetah course on the first try. But unlike the Titan course, failing the final test in the Cheetah course did not mean he had to do sections of the course over again, or even the entire course if he failed it spectacularly. He could keep taking the final test every five days until he passed it.

After a quick ten minute debrief and a change out of his armor and into a pair of shorts, tank top, and sandals, Jason, Dera, and Shen were on their way back to Karsa, his guards flying Wolf fighters escorting him and him using his brand new skimmer. KSV, one of the Karinne corps that built civilian skimmers and dropships, had designed a new luxury skimmer, and since he was the Grand Duke, he *was* entitled to a little luxury from time to time. And he *bought* it just like anyone else, he saved for nearly six months to buy the skimmer once it was available. What he bought was for him, a down payment of his upcoming midlife crisis, a six passenger skimmer that he would use almost exclusively for flying himself, his wife and *amu*, and maybe a guest or two from one place to another. It wasn't meant for the kids, he had a 12 passenger "family skimmer" for family trips, and if he needed more space than that he could hijack the KMS' personnel transports. This was his brand-new work skimmer, which he would primarily be taking to work and back and taking a friend or two out for dates or to catch a baseball game or something.

And in a word, this skimmer was *awesome*. It had everything anyone could ever desire when it came to toys and gadgets, from seat warmers to a near military-grade autopilot system that could fly the skimmer in case he didn't want to fly it himself. It was also a dream to fly, smooth and responsive, with powerful engines capable of speeds that would make a Wolf work to keep up and powerful inertial dampers to make the ride inside the cabin so steady that he could pour a glass of wine while the skimmer was executing a high-G turn. It was even a joy to look at, a long, sleek design that cut through the air and exuded an air of elegance and sophistication. The thing even had a helper bot in it.

Helper bots were something that just about everyone on Karis except Jason owned. They were household robots that helped with basic chores, the AI in them sophisticated enough to do things like sort and fold laundry, cook basic recipes, run simple errands like going down to the market and picking up a few items, and do daily cleaning chores. The unit in the car was very small, but it followed the same design as all helper bots. It was a hovering disc-like unit that had two long, slender robotic arms attached to it, with hand units dexterous enough to perform most any household task. It was programmed to keep the car clean, both inside and out, inform Jason if it found anything wrong, like a tear in the upholstery or something, and

could perform simple fetch and carry tasks like retrieving something out of a bag for him. When not in use, the helper bot was stored in a socket in the ceiling. The AI in them wasn't that complex, but it was complex enough to be able to be useful.

Ayama had an abject hatred of them and refused to allow one in the house, insisting on doing all the chores and cleaning by hand. That meant that Jason would have to keep the helper bot in the skimmer, else Ayama would do something truly graphic to it if she caught it doing something.

Helper bots were a Karinne product, because the Karinnes were the most advanced people around when it came to AI applications in machines. All the work they did on drones in the KMS and Rook's work with commercial bionoids had filtered down into civilian life in the form of a simple, relatively inexpensive robot that could perform fairly complex tasks. They'd been selling them for two years, and they were one of the House's best-selling products. They sold them all over the Confederation and beyond.

So, Jason was thoroughly enjoying his 92 minute trip from Joint Base Lambda back home, letting the autopilot do the work while he leaned back in his almost sinfully comfortable seat, took off his sandals and put his bare feet up on the dashboard, and read some reports on a handpanel that Chirk had sent while he was in his Cheetah. The first report was a very welcome one from Grik'zzk, concerning the terraforming operation over on Alakis. She reported that the orbital stabilization project had been completed successfully, with the planet now having a stable 11.4 degree tilt on its axis, which she felt was ideal for maximum agricultural output. The planet would have very mild seasons even at the poles with an axis tilt that gentle, and in about 217 years, the weather patterns would calm down to the point where the weather there would be very gentle. There would be rain and fronts and storms, but the planet wouldn't have too much violent or severe weather. The stabilization of the axis tilt meant that four of the super-ships they had there to do the job could be removed, but two of them would have to stay in a specific orbit to keep the axis stable, becoming permanent artificial moons. The planet was right on the border of becoming survivable without life support equipment—for them, it was within tolerance already for 62 species—and the next phase of the process was about to begin, organic soil infusion. As it was now, the planet was wrapped in clouds and it had been

raining there for over three years, part of the water replication process, but that was going to scale back because they couldn't do the organic infusion of the soil with it raining so much. The water replicators would stop releasing vapor and would instead release liquid water into the ocean basins, in effect filling the oceans the way he would fill a bathtub.

That would have sounded outlandish to Jason 14 years ago, but he knew it was possible. They had 271 terraforming-scale water replicators, and they were set at strategic locations that would allow them to fill the three ocean basins that would form on Alakis. It would be like dripping water coming out of faucet filling a hot tub, but give that steady dripping water enough time, and it could fill the tub. Between the rain that had already and would continue to deposit water into the ocean basins and the water replicators, Grik'zzk estimated it would take about three and a half years to fill the ocean basins.

A hologram of Songa appeared over the console, his feet nearly blocking the emitter built into the dash. "*Jason!*" she said urgently. "*Come to the annex immediately!*"

"I'm about half an hour out from Karis, dear," he answered, looking up at her.

"*Go faster!*" she ordered. "*I've already activated Cyvanne and FERA!*"

That got his attention, making him put his feet down quickly. "What's going on?"

"*We have another retrovirus outbreak, Jason!*" she told him quickly. "*And this one is not specific to the DNA of a family!*"

He gave her a long look, and then his heart nearly froze over in his chest. Another retrovirus! "Do you have it contained?" he asked as he put the car at max throttle and activated his priority beacon, warning traffic control that he had right of way over *everything*.

"*Not yet, we don't even have a clear picture of how many people are infected,*" she answered.

"How many so far?"

"*We have twelve confirmed cases, and they're scattered all across the entire planet. Jason, that is not good,*" she said grimly. "*That means the*

virus has had time to spread across the planet before we detected it.”

“But the other one—”

“Started affecting Miyai’s family immediately upon infection. This one did not. It seems to have an incubation period before it starts affecting the victim, and during that time, the patient is infectious. In reality, we don’t really know. We just detected the virus about fifteen minutes ago, and we haven’t had time to figure out how it works.”

He gave a dark frown. “Is it like the Jaisho virus otherwise?”

“Yes. The twelve cases we’ve found so far have all begun the transition. Jason, only four of them are Faey,” she warned. “Six of them are Terran, and two are Sha’i-ree.”

“What?” he gasped.

“This virus affects more than just the Faey. It affects any species with similar enough DNA to a Faey. For those that aren’t sufficiently compatible, the virus is completely harmless.”

“How many species are susceptible to it?” he asked quickly.

“Ten. Faey, Terrans, Shio, Rathii, Aridai, Sha’i-ree, Subrians, Keelo, Strath, and the Muri. Humanoid races like the Imxi and the Kouï are showing no signs of susceptibility, but they can carry the virus. Jason, we don’t know if the two Sha’i-ree will survive the transition,” she warned. “Their DNA may be similar to Faey DNA, but we have no idea how the retrovirus is going to try to rewrite their DNA. It very well may kill them.”

“Do you think you can stop the transition?”

She shook her head. *“Once it starts, there’s no stopping it,” she told him. “The altered cells become highly aggressive and alter the cells around them without need of the virus. The only way to stop the transition is to kill every single altered cell. And once it progresses to the point it has in our two patients, it would kill them to try.”*

“Cyvanne,” he called, and a hologram of her appeared beside Songa. “What steps have you taken?”

“I’ve ordered a complete planetary quarantine for all susceptible races,” she told him. “They go to their homes and they stay inside until we

tell them to come out. I'm arranging keeping them supplied using maintenance bionoids and robots so they don't have to leave their homes. No direct contact between them and any living thing. I've enacted a complete quarantine of the entire planet. No ships may enter or leave the atmosphere. I've mobilized FERA's response teams, and the other CBIMs are going to keep track of all quarantined citizens on their continents to make sure they're alright. We're going to mount sensor pods on KMS dropships and other assets to give Songa more sensor coverage. The medical sensor system is really only very sensitive in the large cities. The dropships will give her a more detailed view of what's going on in the smaller towns and villages. I've also activated the orbital sensor arrays we usually keep in standby and they're conducting sensor sweeps now."

"Good deal. Songa, have you figured out how it's being transmitted?"

"Not yet," she replied. "We're not detecting it in the air as an airborne agent, but it's clearly being transmitted by more than touch for it to spread to all five continents. We honestly have no idea how it's being transmitted, Jason. It's almost like it just appears in the infected. Our medical scanners aren't even detecting it until it begins the transition. Like it's not a retrovirus until it is."

"Which CBIM is assisting you with the research?"

"Cybi primarily, but Cyvanne said that every CBIM is going to be assisting," she answered.

He nodded. "Cyvanne, alert the other Generations and pull them from whatever they're doing and put them on standby," he ordered. "Raise the planetary shield and divert all inbound traffic to Kosigi, that will prevent anyone from trying to flee the planet in a panic." He blew out his breath. "Cyvanne, warn the council that we have an outbreak of a dangerous disease on Karis, and that until the emergency is resolved, the House is suspending all activities and obligations. And inform all trade partners that because of the medical emergency, all scheduled cargo that was going to arrive on or leave the planet is on hold until further notice."

"I'll send that out now."

"I'll be there in about ten minutes," he told Songa. "Cyvanne, warn Denmother about this and see if she can dig up a couple of Elder medical

specialists to come and help Songa with the analysis. They know more about viruses than any other species, and besides, they have records on the original retrovirus that created the Generations. Maybe they can help.”

“*Good idea, dear,*” Songa nodded.

It was one of the longest ten minutes of his life. This was the worst-case nightmare scenario that they’d been dreading since what happened with Miyai. Generation DNA was aggressive, and it looked like another virus had been altered by a Generation to create a new version of the retrovirus that created the original Generations, and this one was *extremely* broad in who it could affect. It was even affecting non-Faey.

Sha’i-ree. If they survived, they would be *Sha’i-ree* Generations. And Songa said that they were just one of ten races that were susceptible. Terrans weren’t a stretch, since they were the most genetically identical to the Faey, but the other nine, they were genetically very, very similar to Faey and Terrans. Not similar enough to produce offspring, and in the case of the Shio not even similar enough to have the same color blood, but close nonetheless.

This was going to be very ugly. The planet locked down, a new retrovirus rampaging across the planet, with the potential of altering God knows how many citizens if they couldn’t isolate the virus quickly and prevent it from infecting anyone else. All those new Generations, it was going to cause a massive strain on the house and the existing Generations, because they’d have to be trained...and there was no telling how gaining those powers was going to affect them. The existing Generations all lived by a strict code of conduct that ensured that their abilities didn’t infringe on the rights of others, but how would these twelve new Generations act once they learned about what they could do? And how many more of them would there be before they managed to stop the virus? Hundreds? Thousands? *Millions?*

Good God, that would be an absolute nightmare.

Jason turned on the skimmer’s vidlink and saw that they’d been getting it done. Every channel was broadcasting the same emergency message, that a state of emergency had been declared and all the affected races had to quarantine themselves at home immediately. The air traffic gravband

channels were warning that the shield was going to be raised, so in about ten minutes, the planet would be sealed off from the outside, preventing the virus from getting out.

If it hadn't already done so. Songa said they had no idea how it was being transmitted, it had an incubation time, and that it didn't show up on medical scanners until it began to transition the host. There was no telling how long that virus had been on Karis, and how many people were carrying it...both those it could affect and those it could not.

He got Myri on hologram and issued a series of commands as he came in over the city of Karsa, then landed on the roof of the Medical Annex. Songa didn't meet him there, and he didn't expect her to; she was far too busy. He was directed down to the medical emergency office on the 83rd floor, the command center where the Medical Service would respond to a disaster or emergency. And this certainly qualified as both a disaster and an emergency.

"Any news while I was coming in?" Jason asked quickly as he rushed into the room, where Songa and three other red-coated doctors stood around a circular holographic table display that was projecting a map of planet. There were twelve red dots on that holographic globe, and they were scattered all across Karis. Four on Karga, three on Virga, one on Hirga, two on Kirga, and two on Sarga. They were all over the place...that meant that the virus had spread across the *entire planet*.

"Nothing new, dear."

"My God," Jason breathed in French as he looked at the map. Twelve was just the start. If the virus had spread so far, then there had to be others infected with the virus that hadn't started to transition. And if they couldn't find a way to stop the virus *fast*, they were looking at the worst-case scenario that Songa had always feared.

Jason's heart sank as he looked at that map. He very well may order the planet permanently quarantined, and no one would ever leave Karis again. Those on Kosigi and their other holdings might be forever denied the chance to come home, leaving them exiles, vagabonds...unless he made the conscious choice to allow them to come home and be infected.

But that wasn't a choice he could make alone. Zaa and the Kimdori would have a big say in that kind of a decision.

"Cybi, assemble the cabinet for an emergency meeting," he ordered of her hologram, which floated nearby in her no-legs form. "And tell Tren, Grik, and Rund that I want a complete list of all resources available both on Karis and at our colonies and outposts. And warn Jrz'kii to bring the entire merchant marine in, just in case we have to move large amounts of cargo to keep people supplied."

"Cyvanne's already done all of that, except call a cabinet meeting," she told him.

"Did Zaa get back to you?"

"Not yet, but she's aware of the problem."

They discussed strategies to respond to the outbreak—Songa had long feared it could happen and had developed plans of action for it—then Jason went over to the White House complex to lead a very nervous and intense cabinet session. Everyone had done enough to at least present some basic information, from arranging for supplies to making sure quarantined people were well cared for while they were effectively imprisoned in their homes, when Songa interrupted the meeting. A flat hologram of her appeared over the meeting table. *"Jason we have three more confirmed cases. Two on Karga and one on Kirga,"* she informed him. *"A Faey, a Terran, and a Strath."*

"Damn it. Are the sensor grids helping any?"

She nodded. *"We found the Strath by orbital scan,"* she told him. *"The Kimdori brought in a large number of their sensor platforms and integrated them into our system. It's quintupled our scanning sensitivity."*

"Still no idea how it's being transmitted?"

She shook her head. *"Not even the Kimdori sensor platforms are detecting the virus. They're as puzzled as we are, dear. It shouldn't be possible for this virus to hide from a sensor scan. The only thing we can think of is that the virus starts out as something else, then once it finishes its incubation period, it mutates into the retrovirus. So we're doing extensive scans for any viral structures on the planet that weren't present when the"*

terraforming department did the semi-annual planetary scan four months ago. If it is mutating from another virus, if we can find that virus and develop an antivirus for it, we can stop this before it gets out of control."

"Good deal, dear. Keep us informed."

She nodded, and her hologram vanished.

"Not good news," Jerrim grunted, looking over at him.

"Tell me about it. Jrz'kii, how quickly can you put together a schedule?"

"I can have a preliminary plan ready in an hour, Revered hive-leader," she answered. "My office has just finished compiling a list of available KMM assets on our side of the shield. With additional manpower added from the KMS and the planetary guard, I can draw up a plan that keeps all quarantined citizens supplied with sufficient food for however long it takes."

"Keep it open-ended," he affirmed. "We have no idea how long we're going to need it. Jerrim, you and Grik work out exactly how much food we have, how long it will last, and how much we'll need to import to keep the planet fed. Myri, have the KMS bring in an orbital station that will act as the entry point for the planet," he told the hologram hovering to his left. "Work it out with Songa for maximum safety transferring food containers in through the shield, but I don't want any ship leaving the shield. If there's even the slightest chance the virus can attach to the hull of a ship and survive in space, it could potentially get out to infect the rest of our holdings. So keep in mind that any container that comes in through the shield *stays in*," he stressed. "Anything that comes inside the shield can't leave until we kill this virus."

"I'll have our factory blocks on Janja start manufacturing standard Stick shipping containers, just in case," Trenirk piped in. "We could run out of containers fast if they can't leave the planet once they come in."

"Good idea, Tren, do it," Jason nodded.

As they were about to wrap up the meeting, Cybi warned him over commune that Zaa wanted to talk to him. He excused himself as the others discussed a few final points and hurried to his office, which entered secure mode as soon as the door was closed. A hologram of Zaa was already inside

the office, pacing back and forth in front of his desk. “Cousin,” he called in Kimdori as he rushed towards his desk. “What news do you have?”

“Very little,” she answered. “I’ve sent an entire staff of medical experts to Songa to assist, they arrived while you were in your meeting. Thus far, our scanners have been unable to detect this virus, either the retrovirus or Songa’s theorized pre-mutated form. I’ve sent some merchant ships to assist in the movement of supplies, Cybi informed me that your Merchant Marine may need additional resources.”

“Thank you, cousin. Did Songa tell you who’s being affected by the virus?”

She nodded. “Two Sha’i-ree and Strath,” she said. “That makes this the worst-case scenario, cousin. This is a retrovirus not restricted to the Faey. It has mutated.”

“I know,” he nearly groaned. “I may need your help, Zaa. If we end up with thousands infected, that’s thousands of neophyte Generations. With no training, possibly with quite a few expressing telepathic and telekinetic ability they never had before, and probably scared out of their minds. That’s a recipe for disaster. I just hope that the Kimdori accept these accidents the way you’ve accepted us.”

“They will be cousins, Jason,” she said simply. “And we can teach them to respect their newfound heritage. Did we not accept Dahnai and her family?”

“Warily, as I recall,” he said, which made her chuckle despite herself. “I’ve put the other Generations on standby, and I’m going to assume we end up with way more than 14 new Generations and organize them into groups that will be responsible for teaching these new Generations enough to hold them over until they can get more comprehensive instruction. I’ll most likely put restrictions on the planetary biogenic network to lock them out of most of it. As it stands now, a Generation can cause quite a bit of mischief in the network. We never put those controls in because there was no need to do so. We original Generations obey the rules, but these new Generations... I don’t know.”

“A wise precaution, cousin,” she nodded. “Cybi, are you listening?”

“I am, Denmother. I’ll talk to Siyhaa about it. She should have something to present in a couple of hours.”

“Cybi, have you had the chance to analyze this retrovirus? Can you tell just which Generation spawned it? That might help Songa isolate it and counter it. We can trace that Generation’s steps to see where she has been, and who she may have been in contact with.”

“I haven’t done that, Denmother. Give me a few minutes to analyze the data Songa has compiled on the virus.”

“Clever idea, cousin,” Jason said with admiration.

“It has to have been spawned by one of the Generations, the way Miyai did,” she said evenly. “It seems that the dynamic aggressiveness of Generation DNA might have been a critical flaw in the design.”

“Spilled milk, Denmother,” he said calmly. “That decision was made close to 2600 years ago. It’s too late to second-guess it now.”

“I was alive when the Generations were created, cousin,” she said absently. “It’s not too late for me.”

“Oh yeah, that ridiculous Kimdori life span,” Jason said in a dry tone, at least attempting a little humor in this dire situation.

She took the appearance of sitting in the chair, then they discussed the dry and dusty numbers and figures of figuring out the logistics of the Kimdori giving assistance, from how many ships they were sending to bolster the KMM to how many Kimdori would be allowed onto the planet to potentially help Jason keep order if a very large number of citizens were turned into Generations and they became lawless or violent. Too many would overwhelm the current Generations, even with gestalts, so the Kimdori would bring in security forces in non-Kimdori forms to subdue any new Generation that may lose control or go rogue. They had some very hard debates over what to do with new Generations that wouldn’t obey the rules, from imprisonment even up to the death penalty.

Zaa was still there when Cybi pushed through Dahnai. She appeared on a hologram in the situation room in her palace, where dozens of Faey staffers ran back and forth in a complete tizzy. “What’s going on, love?” he asked her.

“It got off Karis!” she said in a nearly strangled tone, which made Jason’s heart skip a beat. “We have nearly three thousand confirmed cases on *Draconis*!”

“Oh my God,” Jason said woodenly, slumping back in his chair.

“I’ve ordered the entire Imperium quarantined!” she said quickly. “Every planet, moon, and station! No traffic! Jason, you have to order Kim to lock down Terra! If it spreads to Terra, it’ll spread across the entire *Confederation*!”

“Three *thousand*? Why so many when there are only a handful here?” Zaa asked quickly.

“Do I look like a doctor, cousin?” she demanded, giving Zaa a short look.

“That is critical information. Cybi, tell Songa,” she ordered. “Have her get in touch with the Medical Service on Draconis. There’s a good chance the virus originated on Draconis. If so, that means that Dahnai, her daughters, or Saelle is the origin. If we can isolate just which Generation spawned the virus, we can counter it much more quickly. It may have been spread here by members of the Imperial staff during one of Dahnai’s stays at the summer palace.”

“I can tell you that now, Denmother,” Cybi called. “I’ve analyzed the virus, and it carries elements of both Jason and Dahnai’s DNA. It’s not specific to either of them, and it’s not spawned from Raisha. My guess is, the virus originated from one of them, spread to the other, and then mutated when exposed to the other’s DNA, picking up elements of the second Generation. Given that Jason and Dahnai are two different species, it’s not a complete surprise that the virus mutated when exposed to the second Generation. Generation DNA is exceptionally dynamic. This cross-species mutation is why the virus can affect species outside of them. It made the retrovirus generic,” she explained, “and able to affect any species with DNA sufficiently compatible to them. The species most closely related to the Faey and Terrans are susceptible to the virus. And if the virus mutates again, even more races may become susceptible.”

“Oh God, please don’t even make me think that,” Jason said in a gloomy tone, scrubbing his hands over his face. “And now I know that *I’m*

responsible for this mess.”

“It’s not your fault, cousin. You have no control over how a virus interacts with you,” Zaa soothed.

“And it’s also my fault,” Dahnai added. “But now we have to be responsible parents and minimize the damage to our three thousand new kids, Jason. I’m going to need your help. We’re gonna have three thousand new Generations in a few days, and I have no idea how I’m going to train them. We have to send them to Karis to be trained.”

“You’re right,” Jason sighed. “Though since the Faey are already telepathic, we won’t have to deal with a potential newly expressed telepath put on edge because of all this, which would make him potentially dangerous.”

“Truth,” Zaa nodded. “But this does put Generations in the Imperium, outside of Dahnai and her family” she said with a slight edge in her voice.

“I’ll talk to Kim,” Jason said. “Dahnai, any word on if they’ve identified the virus and have a way to contain it?”

“Not yet,” she replied. “But I’d suggest that you don’t get anywhere near Banlia, baby. She’s still utterly pissed at you over what you’ve been doing.”

“That’s her fault, not mine,” Jason said, a bit pugnaciously. “And this is no time for a territorial pissing contest.”

“If you want her help, you’d better allow the Medical Service to re-establish its chain of command on Karis,” she said. “That chafed Banlia’s ass more than anything else, when you told Songa to ignore any orders from their HQ. You interfered in the *Medical Service*, Jason, you just *don’t do that*. Not even I would ever dream of doing something like that, it would get me bounced off my throne.”

“I had a damn good reason for doing it,” he said defensively. He looked down at his hands, and remembered what Aria told him. “But I think I know what Aria’s omen was about. This,” he said. “And the dream changed, Dahnai, so you’d better be exceptionally careful.”

“Changed how?”

“In the dream, the dragon hits you with its paw before you can connect with your sword and you fall. I think that means that you’d better be *very* careful how you handle this outbreak. Your throne might be on the line,” he warned. “I think the dragon might be this virus, and how we respond to the outbreak is you and me attacking it in the dream. If Aria’s dream holds, then you might make a mistake in your response that comes back to haunt you. So think *carefully* about what you do,” he told her seriously.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” she said with a nod. “I’ll talk to Banlia, but I won’t make any promises. I need to warn the council that the Imperium is under quarantine. Talk to Kim, babes, talk to him right now. If the virus is on Terra, we have to stop it before it spreads off the planet. If it’s not there yet, then we have to do everything in our power to prevent it from getting there. An epidemic on Terra could threaten half the galaxy,” she said seriously.

“I will. I’ll keep an ear out for you, hon, commune any new information.”

“I’ll keep you in the loop, Zaa,” she promised.

“I would appreciate that, cousin,” she answered.

She spared Zaa a smile despite the situation. Even after three years, she was still tickled every time Zaa called her that.

Zaa listened as he told Kim to seal off Terra, then they attended a hastily called emergency session of the council, so hasty that only about fifteen rulers were present. The rest were aides. “A dangerous virus has broken out on Karis and Draconis,” Jason told them from his office. “We haven’t learned how it’s being transmitted yet, and our medical scanners can’t even detect it. Because of that, the House of Karinne has enacted a full quarantine of the planet,” he explained. “Nothing that comes inside the perimeter of the planetary shield will be allowed to leave, not even cargo containers.”

“The virus has also been detected on Draconis, so as a precaution, I’ve ordered a full quarantine of all 116 systems under the Imperium’s control,” Dahnai added, nearly interrupting him. “Because of how central Terra is and the fact that both Faey and Karinnes have visited Terra in the last two takirs, we’ve asked Kim to seal off the planet until we can determine if this

virus has spread to Terra. Since we can't detect it with medical scanners, it's the safest thing to do," he declared. "The virus seems to have an incubation time, at least we think so, because the first cases we discovered were scattered across the entire planet. If the virus was carried by a single host, it had to have taken *takirs* for it to spread so far across Karis without us detecting it."

"What kind of virus?" Kreel asked.

[We're going to have to tell them,] Dahnai told him over the network. [There's no way we can keep this a secret.]

[No. If they find out that people can become Generations, Dahnai, the Faey will never be safe,] he replied.

[Jason is right, Dahnai. We keep this a secret, at least for now,] Zaa injected, using her memory band. [If they find out that Faey are being turned into Generations, they'll try to get samples of the virus to engineer it to work on their own species, or they may try to kidnap Faey to turn them into slaves, like the Dreamers were.]

[I didn't think of that.]

"Right now, Kreel, I can't really answer that, because we know almost nothing about it. All I can say is that it's spread across Karis and it's serious. We haven't had any fatalities yet, but the people who have contracted it are in very serious condition. The Medical Service is working right now to isolate the virus and come up with a cure."

"It's the same here," Dahnai added. "So far the virus has only been found on Draconis, but I've put the entire Imperium under quarantine just in case the virus got off the planet. We can't detect it either. We have no idea how it's being transmitted or how many are infected, the only cases we know of are the people who have been sickened by the virus. But we're positive that people can *carry* it without it making them sick, that the virus has an incubation time, and during that time, the carrier is contagious. That's why we've asked Kim to quarantine Terra. If the virus got *there*, it could infect half the galaxy," she said urgently. "That puts all of us at risk. So far the virus only seems to be affecting Faey, but if it mutates, it could become a plague that decimates the entire quadrant."

“I think that’s a wise precaution,” Shakizarr said, one of the few rulers in attendance. “Jason we should delink the Stargates leading to Terra immediately.”

“Terra has operational control of the Stargates, Shakizarr. Only he can issue that order from his side. But all of you can issue that order from *your* side,” Jason reminded him. “Remember, you have operational control of the Stargates leading into your territory. I suggest in the highest possible terms that all of you issue that order immediately. If the virus is on Terra, you must do everything in your power to keep it out of your empires, or we’ll have a galactic pandemic on our hands.”

After a little more discussion, and much to Jason’s relief, the rulers all ordered their Stargates delinked, as well as all catapults at Terra deactivated. He leaned back in his chair after he left the conference, then turned it around and looked out the window. And even from there, he could see how *empty* it felt now. Everyone had been ordered home, even those who couldn’t be infected by the virus, so there were no hovercars between the buildings, no pedestrians down at the fence hemming in the complex, no freighters taking off from the industrial district to the east. The city looked almost hauntingly abandoned, almost like when they first came here. The Kimdori rebuilt Karis as a nearly exact copy of the original city, but it had been empty. After all, at that time, there were only about 500 members of the house, Jason, the girls, the Generations, and a very select few Terrans brought over, like the members of the Legion. Was Karsa destined to become empty once again? Would the virus mutate into something deadly and kill them all?

He wasn’t sure if he’d ever felt this afraid, even when the Consortium had besieged Karis. After all, that was an enemy he could see, and one he could understand. This virus...there was no telling what chaos it was going to spread across the House of Karinne.

There was no telling, there was only Aria’s omen dream to give him a little hope. If he kept his head and reacted rationally, he was going to save the house.

But would Dahnai save the Imperium?

“I know, cousin,” Zaa said, her hologram stepping up beside his chair. “But it will be alright. We will find a way to stop this before it gets out of control, if that is what you wish.”

“What I wish?” he asked, looking up at her.

“There is always the choice to allow it to happen, cousin,” she said evenly, looking down at him. “The Kimdori welcomed you as cousins when the Program was set into motion. We will accept our new cousins, because they will be family. And the Kimdori do not abandon family,” she declared with quiet dignity.

“That does make me feel a tiny bit better, but I’d prefer not to turn a little over a billion people into Generations, Denmother. So long as there are only a small number of us, the risk we pose to the universe is contained. But that many of us, with the power that we have...I don’t know. I may never let them off the planet. The shield may never come down,” he said in a low, grim tone. “This planet may have just become a prison, containing the danger we pose, for as long as it takes. That wasn’t what I wanted for Karis. For our people,” he said, standing up and putting his hand on the transparent titanium. “All the work we’ve done, all the sweat, the tears, the blood, and it all comes down to this. To become prisoners on our own planet because we may very well destroy the outside world,” he sighed. “And that’s just us. To keep biogenics away from the Generations on Draconis, we’ll have to turn Karis into a complete fortress. If they get their hands on a gestalt—” he closed his eyes and sighed. “And I am become death, the destroyer of worlds,” he quoted in an emotionless tone.

“Let us see what happens before we reach that point, cousin,” she told him, setting her holographic hand on his shoulder. “Who knows, this might be a blessing in a very frightening disguise.”

“I don’t see how, but I’d love to think so,” he said quietly.

“You need to get out of this office and do something, cousin. If you sit in here and brood, you will only depress yourself.”

He was about to say something, but Cybi manifested a hologram on the other side of the desk. “*News, friends. More infected have been detected.*”

“Oh joy,” Jason sighed. “How many?”

“Nearly a hundred. Jason, everyone on the strip that can be affected is in transition. The strip girls, their children, the guards. Everyone that has been in close contact with you over the last month is in transition.”

“Why didn’t the sensors around the strip catch it?”

“Because it just started within the last twenty minutes, with all of them. Jason, that is not natural,” she said. “I have no records of any virus that will have infected different people at different times syncing their incubation time to begin affecting their hosts at the same time. Something had to have triggered this, some environmental factor must have incited the virus to either mutate or accelerate. Songa is investigating the matter, trying to find out what that might be in hopes that we can remove its effect and slow down the virus. And there’s more. Now that we’ve had time to watch the virus, it’s clear this is not the Jaisho virus. This virus is specifically attacking the immune system first. It hijacks the white blood cells, antibodies, and T cells and turns them into carriers of the virus while simultaneously disabling their normal operation, spreading it through the entire body quickly. And with the host’s immune system temporarily disabled, the risk of rejection of the gene therapy is drastically reduced. So, the good news is, there won’t be many complications for those affected,” she reported. “Songa predicts that only about one tenth of one percent of those affected will suffer any effects of rejection, and she’s preparing all annexes and clinics to handle those cases as they arise. She’s put in a request with Cyvanne to activate the emergency medical cloning facility on Joint Base Delta, and Cyvanne has approved the request.”

“That was the right call,” Jason agreed with a nod.

“The virus disabling the immune system of the host will make the transition for those infected very safe. There should not be any Dahnai’s among those affected. The most prevalent side effects will be infections and secondary illnesses caused by the host’s immune system being disabled during the transition, which can easily be treated.”

“Well, that is good news,” he said, turning and looking at her hologram. “It affected everyone on the strip?”

She nodded. *“From Ayama and Seido to Mike Junior, as well as 17 people just outside the strip. Yeri and Rahne’s husband Adam are among*

them,” she answered. “As well as the entire guard detachment. It seems that you were carrying the virus for a while, Jason, and you infected everyone inside the fence.”

“Oh joy,” he grunted.

“Kumi is ecstatic over it,” Cybi noted dryly. “She’s always been jealous of the Generations. Now she has her chance to be one. I’ll arrange training for them once they finish transition, particularly the guards. Being Generations will only make them that much more formidable,” she observed.

“Have Songa do everything she can to make the transition as painless as possible,” he told her. She nodded, then demanifested the hologram.

“Curious,” Zaa noted.

“What?”

“That the virus attacks the immune system first,” she said. “I seem to recall some Terran virus that did the same. Could it have mutated from that virus?”

“The AIDS virus, and maybe. I did go to Terra last month for the council summit,” Jason said, looking at her. “But that virus is transmitted *sexually*, and I didn’t exactly do anything that would have exposed me to it,” he noted dryly.

“Then perhaps Dahnai did. She also attended the summit in person,” Zaa mused. “And if she had it, then you *definitely* could have picked it up from her in the usual way the virus is transmitted.”

He gave her a tart look, which made her chuckle despite herself.

They discussed the problem a while longer, then Zaa left to receive some briefings on the matter from her children she’d set on it, leaving Jason alone in the office. And all he could do was look out the window and accept some concerned attention from Chichi, who sensed his disquiet and came into the office to try to calm him down and cheer him up. The tabi laid in his lap and let him pet her, an act that soothed him. His friends and their children, infected. Yeri and Adam, infected. Aya and the other guards, infected. They would become Generations, and some small part of him was not unhappy about that. It meant that he wouldn’t have to keep secrets from

them anymore, and in a way, it would bring them closer together as friends and as a community. But those people, he felt, would obey the rules by which the Generations lived, since they knew what Generations could do and knew about how disciplined and careful the Generations were. But what worried him, concerned him, were the random citizens that had been infected, and would become Generations. Would they adhere to the strict code of conduct of the Generations, or would they go rogue and force the others to bring them to heel? Would it tear Karis apart as Generations fought Generations?

One thing he knew he'd better do right now was to install access systems on all non-imprinted gestalts so only Generations with clearance or permission could use them. That was never an issue before, but it might become one now. And he'd have to control access to imprinted gestalts, so that only those that earned the right to have one would get one.

And what would it be like to have Generations of new races? Seido and Merra were infected, would become Generations. There were two Sha'i-ree and a Rathii that were also infected. What would it be like for them? How would the transition affect them? Would they come through it alright, or would the attempt of the retrovirus to rewrite their DNA kill them? He was genuinely worried, particularly for Seido and Merra. Seido may be his employee, but she was also a dear, dear friend, as was Merra.

And what of Draconis? What about the three thousand Generations that would be outside of his control? Even without a gestalt, a Generation is a very formidable person thanks to their telekinesis and their powerful telepathy...and he had the feeling that those converted Faey were going to be strong talents.

Talents that would *outnumber* the Generations of Karis.

But that was where gestalts would even the score. His people would have gestalts, and they wouldn't. If Dahnai needed his help to quell an uprising of converted Generations in the Imperium, Jason could send combat trained Generations using tactical gestalts hardwired to only allow them to access them to put down the uprising.

He could handle that, if it came down to it.

He had no idea what was going on, or what was about to happen. But the one thing he did know was that from this day forward, nothing would ever be the same again.

And he feared what the new normal would become.

Chapter 9

Kaista, 4 Hiraa, 4408, Faey Orthodox Calendar

Tuesday, 14 August 2022 Terran Standard Calendar

Kaista, 4 Hiraa, year 1333 of the 97th Generation, Karinne Historical Reference Calendar

Karsa Medical Annex, Karsa, Karis

It was a feeble ray of light in what had been a very dark two days.

With a wan smile, Jason took the hand of a just-awoken Aya, who was in a bed in the Medical Annex after undergoing the transition. As Cybi predicted, her transition had been without any complications, mainly since the virus disabled her immune system and prevented it from attacking her body as the transition ran its course. It was Dahnai's immune system attacking her liver that had damaged it when she was changed, but this new iteration of the Generation virus got around that.

It was the only real good news in all this. Right now, the Medical Service didn't have the beds or the resources to babysit every Karinne citizen that was going through what Aya had just finished. Most of them were being told to stay home, stay in bed, and just sleep through it. They simply didn't have the doctors and nurses to assign every transitioning citizen medical assistance. But there was observation there. Every citizen suffering through this at home had a maintenance bionoid being controlled by that continent's CBIM, keeping watch over them and doing checks on them to ensure that they were suffering no complications. If one of them was showing any sign of complication at all, a nurse or doctor was dispatched to the residence to evaluate the patient to determine if they needed to be taken to a clinic or annex. The system had been hastily thrown together by Songa and the CBIMs, but Jason had to admit, so far it was working fairly well. They had the bionoids to do it, pulling virtually every

bionoid in the entire inventory, both military and civilian, and sending them out. Even Jason's own personal home bionoid was pulling observation duty, watching over Yeri as she rested at home and underwent the transition. Cyra couldn't merge to his bionoid, but its onboard AI was developed enough to be able to handle the task of observing Yeri without being guided by someone else. All it had to do was monitor Yeri's vital signs, taking them every ten minutes, and if they drifted out of the safe zone, it would notify the Medical Service.

Jason hated that. He hated the idea that people that may be scared or anxious over what was happening had no one there to soothe them, to hold their hand...but there was just nobody available. He'd recorded an explanation to everyone and did his best to be as supportive and reassuring as he could, but that was no substitution for having someone there to hold a hand and assure them it was going to be alright.

Aya wasn't the first to awaken from the transition. The first had been a Terran, Dana Prescott, who represented the greatest danger in all this in that she had not been a telepath before she went to sleep and was one when she woke up. When her telepathy expressed, she represented a very real potential danger to everyone around her. A neophyte telepath, keyed up from fear and anxiety, could be extremely dangerous for another telepath to subdue if she lost control and lashed out. Aya looked up at Jason calmly, then blinked and rose up and sat up in the bed. *I feel...not different at all, she observed. But I look at you, and I know. I understand now.*

Welcome to the family, Aya. Our rapidly growing little family, he sent with dark, nearly depressed humor. *Rapidly growing* was the mother of all understatements. As it stood now, 27, 463 Karinnes had contracted the virus and begun transition, and Songa was no closer to figuring out how the virus was being transmitted or how it was evading their scanners than she'd been two days ago. Those affected represented all ten races susceptible to the virus, and some of them had already completed the transition and were now full Generations. They were completely healthy, according to Songa, the transition had done them no harm, but they were just as much Generations as Jason was.

And that was the hardest part of all this to fathom, that there were now Shio, Keelo, Strath, Aridai, Muri, Subrian, Rathii, and Sha'i-ree

Generations. Despite the Shio having green blood, despite the Keelo having venomous fangs, despite the Aridai having four fingers, they were similar enough genetically to Faey for the virus to affect them. Jason had met with the two Sha'i-ree that had been changed, both female, but one of them he already knew. It was Eliara, who worked in Kumi's office...and had probably contracted the virus from Kumi, who contracted it from Jason.

I'm not nearly as upset at this as you are, Jason, Aya admitted. With us being Generations, the Imperial Guard can now be much more effective in the discharge of our duties. As soon as we master our new abilities, we will be ready.

That was a true statement both on Karis and on Draconis. Much as Jason had infected everyone around him, Dahnai had infected virtually the entire Imperial Palace, including the entirety of the Imperial Guard that worked within it. And in a bit of karmic justice, she also infected Maer and his wife, who had been in the palace during the window when Dahnai was contagious. That meant that she and Maer's sisters wouldn't have to lie to him or keep secrets from him anymore.

And because of that, the Imperial Palace had let it leak to the public that the Imperial Family had all been infected, as had most of the *Siann*... including *Yila*. Dahnai had infected every noble that attended court, and they infected the rest of their houses when they went home. Once Faey became Generations in the Imperium, they would know the instant they looked at Dahnai that she was one too. So, she was more or less forced to reveal her secret...just concealing it in the virus that was infecting others.

I have instructors lined up for you, he told her. But some of it you won't really need to learn. Once you have a little time for your mind to fully settle in and open up your bandwidth, you'll be able to commune without any real training. That's instinctive, it's a genetic memory programmed into us.

But we don't know if us new Generations have that knowledge, Jason. One of the things we'll be doing is helping your people learn if we're any different from you, and how you can best go about teaching us.

I can look at you and know you're a Generation, Aya, he told her. If that's the same, I think everything else will be.

Aya dear, you're free to go, a rather harried Songa sent from down the hall.

I'm not going anywhere, she replied, sliding her legs off the bed and standing up, displaying to Jason the full glory of her nude body. Though she was middle age, Aya was the epitome of an Imperial Guard, a body of sculpted muscle and not even the tiniest bit of fat anywhere it wasn't supposed to be. *Jason is being escorted everywhere he goes until things settle down, just in case. And since I'm the only guard not in a hospital bed at the moment, I'll be providing that security.*

Mai and Dera are already up and out, Jason told her. *Dera felt that leaving the strip unprotected was the bigger issue and ordered Mai to return with her to the strip. She felt I was safe enough here in the annex.*

She made the right choice, Aya decided as she started arranging her armor, preparing to put it on.

After Aya got her armor on, Jason returned to the situation room that Songa was using to try to stop the virus. He stayed out of the way as doctors and Kimdori huddled around holodisplays or studied test results, as they tried to find some way to stop the virus...though at this point, Songa had made it somewhat clear that stopping the virus may be pointless. Songa herself had just completed the transition four hours ago—she too was infected by Jason—and had spent nearly half of it doggedly staying at her desk in the room, trying to isolate the virus. Only when the virus went to work on her brain did she get put into a bed to sleep through the last of it.

They had enough information to understand how the virus worked. The first thing it did was shut down the immune system, and once that was done, it used the converted cells of the immune system to spread the virus throughout the body. It altered the antibody-producing parts of the body, the red blood cells, and the cells in the bone marrow first, mainly because those places were where the immune system was concentrated, and from there, it attacked the rest of the body all at once. Exactly how that happened was random, it seemed, but it happened swiftly once the glands and bone marrow was converted, because by that point the virus was being mass produced by the body. But, when the virus invaded the brain, it triggered an autonomic response in the host that caused them to fall asleep—go into a coma was a better description—and they slept through the majority of the

rest of the process. When they woke up, they were Generations. Songa had stayed in the situation room working even as the virus was changing her, right up until the virus entered her brain and triggered the coma-like state, all but shutting the brain down while the virus did the work of altering it to make her a Generation.

For a couple of hours, he sat or stood off to the side and listened as the doctors and scientists worked feverishly, and then he went out into the annex to visit those in transition. These were the ones whose vital signs fluctuated enough for them to be brought in to be observed, and they represented all ten races that the virus could affect. Most of them were asleep, but those who were not, he spent a few minutes with them, trying to allay any fears, holding hands, and doing his best to reassure them that everything was going to be alright.

He just wished he could hold the hands of those who were laying in bed at home.

He returned to the situation room after doing his rounds and found that nothing had changed, so he went back to sitting on the edge and watching, as well as getting updates. Just in the time he was out visiting people, 183 new cases had been reported. None of his other friends had awakened yet, but Kaera from the guard had awakened while he was out, and Aya had her report to the situation room in armor so she could help guard Jason. Siyhaa had sent him a report informing him that she'd completed her work in locking out the biogenic network's more sensitive areas from the new Generations, and Cybi and Cynna had reported that the effort to install biometric locks on all non-imprint gestalts had begun. Those locks would only allow those who had access to the gestalt to use it.

The planet was still quarantined, but it had been expanded to include the rest of the house's holdings. That was because there were cases on nearly all Karinne colonies and holdings, including being rampant throughout the KMS. Dellin had been infected, as had Palla, Jeya, and dozens and dozens of his best ship captains. Mikano had been infected. *Kei* had been infected, as well as most of her unit of Imperial Marines. It seemed that about the only part of the house that hadn't been exposed were members of the KES who were out on exploration missions and KMS vessels who had been on extended deployment.

It was reaching the point where Jason may have to make the decision to which Zaa alluded a couple of days ago. If the virus was already spread across the house, he very well may have to allow those few parts of the house that *hadn't* been infected to be exposed to the virus, if only because the crews on those ships would never be able to return home if he didn't. And that decision...he felt like that was the last decision he wanted to make. To have it happen by accident was one thing, but to make the deliberate decision to create new Generations...that felt like he was going too far. But he may not have a choice. Those crew members had lives on Karis, they had families, and never allowing them to come home would be the epitome of cruelty.

The status report that Dahnai sent him was no more optimistic. The virus had indeed gotten off of Draconis because of the traveling nobles, and there were now cases on 77 planets or stations, with 118,953 reported cases. From the look of it, and from the predictions of Cybi and Zaa, there was no stopping the virus in the Imperium.

It was very nearly reaching a point where they may be looking at the possibility that the *entire Faey race* may become Generations. Songa estimated that if they couldn't stop the virus within 20 days, then they would cross a point of no return for the Imperium where the entire population would be infected.

If that happened...he didn't know what he was going to do. He really didn't.

The news from Terra, at least, had been cautiously optimistic. So far, no cases had been detected, but that in no way meant that they were out of the woods yet. Both Jason and Dahnai had visited Terra within the last month, and if they were contagious when they did so, then they could have spread the virus onto the planet. But if the virus did make its way there, it wasn't getting off the planet. Terra was completely quarantined right now, with nothing being allowed on or off the planet.

"Jason, we have something," Songa called, motioning towards him.

He got up and went over to the holodisplay where she, two other doctors, and three Kimdori were standing. One of them was Kereth, Miaari's son who was her clan's Elder when it came to medical matters.

“What is it, dear?” he asked, joining them.

“We’ve finally got some data from the main Medical Service, and it’s gotten more complicated. There are *two* strains of the virus.” Two different squiggly lines were projected over the display, which Jason assumed were images of the viral structures. At casual glance, they both looked the same. But when he looked very closely, he could see tiny variations between the two. “The one in the Imperium is different from the one here. The one there is only affecting Faey, so it must be the original strain. The one here is the mutated strain. That suggests that the virus originated from Dahnai, and when she passed it to you, it mutated into the new strain.”

“I don’t know much about this, dear. What does that mean in simple terms?”

“It means, cousin, that a cure that we discover for one virus may not work for the other,” Kereth told him. “Much like strains of your Terran influenza can resist vaccines made for other strains, the other strain of this virus may not be affected by an antiviral agent or vaccine made for this strain.”

Songa nodded. “But we still have no idea why our medical scanners can’t detect it, or how it’s being transmitted.”

“Any headway on a vaccine for it?”

She shook her head. “If it were a normal virus, we’d have one by now. But this virus attacks the immune system that a vaccine is meant to teach it how to kill, which is making it extremely hard to come up with a vaccine. All attempts to create an antiviral agent have also failed. Even the most generic antiviral does nothing to this virus.”

“It has resisted everything we’ve tried so far,” Kereth added. “It is even resisting Kimdori attack viruses.”

“And still no idea why our scanners can’t detect it?”

“I have a theory, but it hasn’t yet been proven,” Kereth said.

“What, cousin?”

“I suspect the virus doesn’t transmit by itself. Simply put, we’re not detecting the virus because it is hiding inside something else, and while so

hidden, it doesn't appear as a virus to our scanners. It piggybacks on something else, and that something has to be airborne. Only an airborne agent could transmit across Karis so quickly. I have a theory that the virus is attaching itself to the Kirri symbiotes, hiding within them, and it exits them and enters a host when those symbiotes enter the body. Of all microbes, Kirri symbiotes are one of the very rare few that can easily move in and out of a host body. I have the suspicion that the virus is attaching to the symbiotes, and only when the symbiote enters a host body does the virus either use the symbiote to reproduce itself or exit the symbiote to attempt to infect the host's immune system."

"When can you find that out?"

"As soon as the test results of the labs I ordered get back to us," he replied. "Since the virus doesn't show up on our medical scanners, they're using old-fashioned microscopes to visibly search for the virus within symbiotes."

"If that's how it's moving around, do you think you can find a way to stop it?" he asked.

"We'll see. But I will say that understanding how the virus works, even the smallest detail, gets us one step closer to beating it."

[Jason, Aura's awake now,] Cybi called.

[I'll be right over.] "If you guys don't mind, I'm going to go back home for a while. Aura just woke up."

"There's nothing you can do here, dear," Songa told him.

It only took him about twenty minutes to get home, given that the skies around Karsa were almost deserted, and he went straight to Aura's house after landing. Vella was sitting in the living room reading a handpanel when he entered, as the boys played with building blocks by the couch and Sera napped in the big chair, her favorite place. *[Cybi said she's awake.]*

[Not long ago. The first thing she did was take a bath,] Vella answered dryly. Vella was one of Aura's best friends.

I was a mess, of course I took a bath, Aura replied. She stepped out of the hallway leading to the interior of the house, a towel wrapped around her

hair...and nothing else. *See, love? I'm just fine*, she smiled as Jason stepped up and gave her a warm embrace.

I see you can hear communion.

Can't quite get the hang of using it, though, she smiled.

That will come in time, after you've had a couple of days, he assured her, then leaned down and kissed her. *Sorry I wasn't here to greet you when you woke up, but I think you can imagine how busy I am at the moment.*

Yes I can, and I'm sure you couldn't really spare the time to run back home just to see me, she smiled radiantly.

I...just hope that you're alright with what's happened to you.

Jason, love, how could being closer to you, and to the roots of our house, be anything but a good thing? she asked simply. *The only thing I'm worried about are the kids, like Latoiya and Sami and Jari. Are they doing alright?*

All the kids are fine. All of them have already finished with the transition. Since they don't have as many cells as adults, it doesn't take as long. The ones too young to express won't feel any different. For that matter, neither will the older ones. After all, do you feel any different?

No, but when I look at you, I feel...something.

That proves that the transition was complete. Generations know other Generations when they see them, he told her.

You're one of us now, Aura, Vella smiled at her from the couch. *And I think I rather like that.*

Just wait 'til you start meeting Generations you don't know, Vella, Jason told her.

Eh, they're cousins. Family, she shrugged. *Doesn't matter if there's only a few hundred of us or a few million of us. We are still connected by who and what we are. And for one, I'm overjoyed that some of my best friends are now on our side of the fence*, she winked at Aura.

I just hope the newcomers can understand that, Jason sent worriedly. *Especially since there are ten races of Generations now. I tell ya, Vella, it*

was the weirdest feeling in my life to look at Eliara and sense her, he told her ruefully. Like I was in some kind of simsense or something.

I think it's kinda awesome, Vella bubbled. And hey, now we're not gonna get overtaxed manning the big ships as primaries, she added with an audible laugh. If anything, we're gonna have lots of people available for ship duty.

True enough, at least once we get them trained, Jason agreed. And since the virus got into the KMS, we won't have to bring in civilians to do it. We can find suitable Generations already in the service and train them for ship duty.

Hell, we can install tacticals in the smaller ships and have all of them with a primary, Vella grinned. That's maximum protection for our ships and our crews, at least if we can make them strong enough to let the primary warp space.

Most likely, it's not all that hard, Jason shrugged.

And that's the part of this I'm most eager to learn, the telekinesis. I think I've dreamed of being able to do it since I was a little girl back on Exile. It was so useful for the few of us who had it, Aura smiled. They could gather the dairu fruits so easily just by pulling them down with their power.

That does beg a question, Jayce. Will Unit Alpha still be a thing? Vella asked.

Of course it will be, he replied. Obviously, we won't be drafting the entire population of Generations into it anymore, but there will still be a Unit Alpha. And it'll consist of us original Generations and the strongest and most suited of the new Generations for military duty.

Sounds like you've talked to Myri about it.

We have, he nodded. She wants to form four more units, one for each fleet, with Unit Alpha being the unit they send in when they need the best. We've been in Unit Alpha for years, Vella, there's no doubt we're the best at it.

Too right, she smiled, her Faey vanity peeking through. So I take it we're gonna be training the newbies?

Yah. I've been working up a schedule, putting who's best at a role as a trainer for the new recruits. Naturally, you'll be a tactical mecha operations trainer. You, Jezzi, Saelle, and Jenn are the best exomech tacticals we've got, he sent glowingly, which made her preen.

And the silly thing is, I wasn't a rigger before Unit Alpha, she laughed. *I just fell in love with it the way you did, Jayce. So I take it Kaili and Mara will be the main primary trainers?*

They have the highest scores, he agreed.

I'll definitely be putting in my application for a unit, Aura told them. *I'd be honored to join you two as a defender of the house. It's why I became a fighter pilot, after all.*

“Does that mean you'll be going away on the ships again, Mommy?” Kevin asked, the twins looking at them.

Jason gave his son a sudden look, as Aura gasped and Vella looked back at the boys. “You heard that, Kevy?”

“Kinda. It was weird,” Kaelan answered.

Jason just had to laugh. Maybe something good did come of all of this. “Oh, my beautiful boys!” Aura gushed, rushing over to them, kneeling down, and crushing them in a hug. “We were sending! You've both expressed! I'm so proud of you, my ducklings!”

“They've just gotta do everything together, even express,” Vella laughed.

“It has to be a twin thing,” Jason agreed, then he went over and joined Aura in hugging his sons. *Aya, Kevin and Kaelan just expressed. Since Ryn is still at the annex, can you send someone over here to teach them to close their minds?*

Certainly. I'll be right over, Aya replied happily.

Everyone, the boys have expressed! Aura announced to the neighborhood. So please keep the chatter down until they have a chance to learn how to close their minds!

Despite the situation, everyone that was home and awake found the time to congratulate Aura. For Faey, there were few things more important than a

child's talent expressing. Now, Aura had something much more important than her own transition to think about, and that was the initial training of the boys' talent and their passing party.

Expressed at five...that betrayed their potential. And it gave Jason a brief moment of unburdened happiness to hug his sons and celebrate their unwitting accomplishment, and that moment extended into nearly an hour of just talking, being with one of his extended outside families, giving his sons and his awakened daughter the attention they were due as he discussed the future with Aura and Vella.

After that, he spent nearly four hours making the rounds at the strip, visiting others who had awakened and were now Generations. He explained things to them, including "visiting" Jyslin after she "woke up" from her own transition—at least that wasn't a secret they had to keep anymore—and making it all the way outside the strip, talking with Rahne and Adam after he woke up. And in that one tiny regard, Jason felt like something good had come of this. Rahne and Jason weren't the last of their kind anymore—at least in one way, since they *were* still the last of the original Terran Generations—and Adam and the other Terrans that had been changed represented the solidification and continuation of the Terran Generation line. Cybi was already classifying all converted Terrans as the 98th Generation, for since the virus originated from Jason's DNA, she was classifying them all as Jason's progeny...at least from the view of the records Cybi kept concerning Generations. It was Jason's basic genetic footprint that the virus had inserted into the Terrans, which in a very technical sense made them the next generation in the Generations...so to speak.

The other races, Cybi was classifying as the first Generation *of their species*. So, she'd expanded her genealogical database to include all the new races.

[We have an update, Jason,] Songa called over the network.

[Is it a good one or a bad one?]

[You don't want to know. Come back to the annex quickly, dear. I don't want to discuss this over the network.]

Okay, *that* was bad.

“Songa just recalled me to the annex,” he told Rahne, standing up. Adam had excused himself to use the restroom. “Sorry to chat and run. When are you going to start training Adam, Rahne?”

“As soon as he recovers,” she replied. “Once he can commune, I’ll know he’s ready.”

“Yeah. [*I just got called back into work, Adam, see you later. And don’t try to answer this, you’re not ready yet,*] he communed lightly, which made Adam laugh from down the hall.

“I did hear that!” he shouted from the bathroom.

Jason returned to the annex with Aya, who was joined by Ryn, Shen, and Suri, who had all woken up while he was out and were ready to resume their duties. “I’m here, dear,” he called, coming over to the holotable where she stood with two Kimdori and three other red-coated doctors. “Now what’s the bad news?”

“The bad news, dear, is that the Karis mutation of the virus has gotten out,” she told him grimly. “*Krirara* carried it back to Kirri’arr, and she has been affected by it. High Councilor Kreel has also been infected, he must have contracted it during his last visit.”

He gave her a long, shocked look. “But it was only affecting humanoids!”

“The virus mutated *again*, Jason,” Kereth told him. “And that is the bad news we must discuss. The virus is adapting itself to any species it infects, but it takes it time to do it. The more different the species is from the Faey-Terran genetic footprint, the longer the virus takes to adapt. We have nineteen new cases, and they represent eleven new species. Koui, Prakarikai, Yood, Imxi, Udra, Farguut, Imbiri, Aggjat, Colonists, and now the virus is starting to affect species outside your genus in the Kirri and the Grimja. By our estimation, in six days, cousin, the virus will have adapted to infect every race on Karis.

“But there is good news in this, cousin,” he said. “While the virus is trying to adapt to a new host, it is *not* contagious,” he stressed. “And it seems that thus far, *only* Kreel and *Krirara* are in transition. Since *Krirara* was on Karis when the planet was put on quarantine, she is still here and thus isolated from the other Kirri. As for Kreel, their medical people put

him in medical isolation as soon as we announced the outbreak because he had recently been to Karis. And that seems to have prevented it from spreading beyond him. It looks hopeful that their quick reaction may have prevented it from spreading before the virus adapted to Grimja DNA and became contagious.”

“Thank God for small favors,” Jason breathed.

“There’s more, cousin. Both Kreel and Moderator Krazrou have ordered a full quarantine of their empires as a precaution, since Krirara had been home as recently as yesterday and Kreel brought the virus with him from Karis. Krarrik, Krirara’s husband, is in medical isolation on Kirri’arr as a precaution. But the more problematic information is that the Draconis version of the virus made it to Terra.”

“But the generic version didn’t?”

“As far as we know,” he nodded.

“There’s a snag in that, dear. It turns out that the Draconis version of the virus *will* affect Terrans,” Songa told him. “Faey and Terrans are genetically similar enough for the virus to spread to them. There are about 1,700 reported cases of infection of both Terrans and Faey, on all six populated continents. So as of now, Terra is in full medical emergency protocol,” she told him, giving him a sober look.

“Well...fuck,” Jason sighed despondently. “Are they in danger of rejection?”

“We don’t know yet, but we’re watching,” Songa answered. “Just as a guess, I’d say no, because Faey aren’t suffering rejection either. The virus is affecting Terrans in the same way it is Faey, by disabling their immune systems and then spreading into the body from there.”

“At this point, we may be looking at the conversion of the entire Faey and Terran species,” one of the other Kimdori intoned soberly. “It’s spread to sixteen planets or stations in the Imperium, and the distribution of infected Terrans on the planet hint that it has already achieved widespread distribution across the planet. And we are no closer to stopping it. It has very nearly reached the tipping point where it cannot be stopped.”

“What we have learned, cousin, is that I was partially right,” Kereth told him. “The virus is indeed being spread on Karis by the symbiotes. The virus rides inside them, then it exits the symbiote when they enter a host body. From there, a single virus can reproduce in sufficient numbers to begin infecting the host, so long as the host is compatible. If the host is not, the virus adapts itself to the host’s DNA in order to affect it, which slows down the infection and renders the virus non-contagious while it’s adapting to the host. What is of interest to us is that the virus is *not* trying to convert the symbiotes, and the symbiotes do not try to destroy the virus. We may be able to use that information to stop it, conceivably come up with an agent that tricks the virus into thinking that the host is a symbiote.”

“That’s not good news, dear. The symbiotes are spread throughout the entire Karisian biosphere,” Songa told him. “Purging the virus may mean purging the symbiotes, and that would be *exceptionally* difficult. It would be like trying to pick up every grain of sand on a beach using only a pair of tweezers.”

“It seems that our symbiote infusion project worked *too* well,” Jason said woodenly, trying to process what he’d just been told. “If it’s in the symbiotes, does that mean that there’s no real way to stop the virus?”

“There is always a way, cousin, but what it means is that quarantining citizens is a moot point. The only way to stop the spread would be to put everyone in medical isolation, and we simply do not have the resources to do that, not the entire population of a planet. We can isolate only about twelve percent of the population using airskin shields, hard shields, and bioscreen units. Cyvanne has ordered that all air conditioning units be set to recycle internal air to slow down the spread of infected symbiotes as much as possible. The one thing we could conceivably suggest is that people stay in their showers,” he speculated. “Most Karisians have airskin units in their bathrooms. But I doubt that there would be enough room in them for families. And besides, by this point, that may be moot. If the virus is in the symbiotes, and we can’t detect it, there’s no telling who has infected symbiotes in them and who doesn’t. At this point, our only realistic option is to find a vaccine for the virus to prevent it from converting hosts and do it as quickly as we can. If the virus can’t transition people, it renders it harmless.”

He was quiet a long moment, looking at the statistics on the hologram over the table. The virus had spread across the Imperium, and what was more important to him, the non-mutated form of the virus had managed to reach Terra before the planet was quarantined. That meant that his entire race was now exposed to it, in danger from it, and it had the potential to cause absolute chaos. Terrans would suddenly become telepathic, and they'd have an untold number of new telepaths expressing all at once, overwhelming any attempt by the Faey or other telepathic species to help teach them even the basics.

But there was something they might be able to do about that. He hijacked the table and caused it to connect to Terra, and a hologram of Ayuma's bionoid appeared. "*What's going on, Jayce?*" she asked.

"What I'm about to tell you does not leave that office," he told her. "Are you alone?"

"*I will be in ten seconds.*" She made a shooing motion, waited a moment, then looked back to him. "*I am now.*"

"The virus has spread to Terra, and it's affecting Terrans," he told her, which made her gasp, then frown. "That means that you may have untold numbers of newly expressed telepaths there, and nowhere near enough telepaths to give them even basic instruction face to face. My question is, cousin, can you come up with some kind of Academy course that can be taken by remote that will help those Terrans? If they have *each other* as practice partners, could we have an instructor walk them through the basics from remote?"

"*It wouldn't be anywhere near effective, but it might help. If anything, it would keep them calm, make them feel in control, which might prevent any episodes,*" she said, tapping her cheek with a finger as she thought. "*I can come up with something, and I'll set aside blocks on the Academy's educational network for it. And I think I'm going to arrange some auditorium space at the main Academy and all satellite campuses where two or three instructors teach hundreds of students at a time. I could design a one-week course that teaches how to close the mind and the basics of sending, which is all that they'd really need to know. We can come back afterwards and teach more advanced techniques when we have everyone trained enough to not cause any psychotic breaks. In the meantime, I'd*

suggest you talk to Dahnai and get some additional Imperial Marines on Terra as fast as possible. The U.N. may need them to keep control if things start getting crazy.”

“I will. And good deal, cousin, I knew I could count on you.”

“I’ll do what I can, cousin,” she smiled. “I’ll send you some preliminaries when I have some.”

“Send it to Jerrim as well,” he told her.

“Will do. Talk to you again when I have something to give you.” And her hologram winked out.

“There’s no more we can tell you, cousin, so it might be best if you go home and get some rest. You look exhausted,” Kereth told him, leaning down and putting a hand on his shoulder.

“I guess, though I’ll be too busy to get any rest,” he said, looking up at the massive black-furred Kimdori with a wry smile. He’d always been rather fond of Kereth.

He left the annex with twelve guards in tow, who had woken up from their transition, and they let him sit up front with Aya and not bother him as he considered what he’d learned. If they were right, then every species on Karis was going to get infected and transitioned. All of them. Over three billion people on this planet, and every single one of them would be a Generation...even the *Kizzik*. If the virus could adapt to any species, then it was no stretch that the *Kizzik* would also be infected, and that made him ponder just what that was going to do to their society. Drones weren’t very smart, and if they were suddenly telepathic, it very well might induce chaos into their hive structure. And then there was the fact that insectoid minds were so alien to most other life that they couldn’t be communicated with telepathically. If those alien minds were suddenly telepathic...how was that going to work? Would *Kizzik* telepaths be able to communicate with non-*Kizzik* telepaths?

But it went beyond that. Was it going to affect *Amber*? Did the virus have the ability to adapt to vastly different living things, like animals? Jason had the feeling that it didn’t, since it wasn’t trying to convert the symbiotes. There had to be some kind of range that the virus could affect, maybe people with a certain number of chromosomes, or only species that had the

ability to accept the segment of new DNA that made them Generations and still be viable. So, he had the feeling that they wouldn't be dealing with a sudden rash of household pets and food animals becoming telepathic. A quick check of the data Songa had available to him told him that he was right, the virus seemed to have a range. It would only affect species with sufficiently developed brains to accept the DNA segment that changed them into Generations.

He had to accept the reality of the situation, that they may not find a cure in time to prevent the entire planet from being infected. That they would have three billion Generations on Karis...and potentially *223 billion* Generations outside of it. That was the current population of the Faey in the Imperium, on Terra, and in the Collective. And that included the current population of Terrans on Terra.

There was one tiny comfort out of it, and that was the idea that Terra would be beyond safe if the entire Terran population were Generations. The Faey showed the folly that was a non-telepathic race attacking a telepathic one, and the entire Terran race becoming telepathic would make attacking Terra even more daunting than it was with the Confederation protecting it.

There was nothing he could do to stop it. The only thing he could do now was mitigate the potential damage as much as possible by ensuring that those Generations never, *ever* got their hands on biogenic technology.

But it did beg one very disturbing question...would the Imperium become warlike once they fully adapted to their newfound power as Generations? He doubted it ever would with Dahnai on the throne, or Sirri, because Jason had too much influence over them, but what about Sirri's daughter? Or Sirri's granddaughter? Would there come a time when the Generations of the Imperium used their powers to make war on others?

He really didn't want to think about that...at least not right now. He had much more immediate problems.

Chiira, 6 Hiraa, 4408, Faey Orthodox Calendar

Thursday, 16 August 2022 Terran Standard Calendar

Chiira, 6 Hira, year 1333 of the 97th Generation, Karinne Historical Reference Calendar

Foxwood East, Karsa, Karis

He was *so* tired.

Sitting at his desk up in his home office, he looked over the most recent figures from Songa. The number of infected had just went over one million, and they represented 71 of the 137 races that lived on Karis. The virus had adapted to most humanoid species and had also spread to nearly half of the mammalian and reptilian species, such as the Verutans, Skaa, Hrathrari, Beryans, Urumi, Rakarri, Crai, and the like. It had yet to spread beyond them, but if anything, Jason knew it was just a matter of time. In time, even exotic species like the Araban, Birkons, Stevak, Kizzik, and Jakkans would be infected.

And they still had absolutely no idea how to stop it. Songa and Kereth had thrown the proverbial kitchen sink at the virus, and nothing had worked. They also didn't still didn't entirely understand how the virus was evading sensors. They'd developed a technique to cause the virus to appear on medical sensors when it was piggybacking inside symbiotes, and when it was present in a host, but they still couldn't detect the virus when it was outside of a host body. And they were convinced that it had to be airborne, because the models showed that if the virus was only being spread by symbiotes, it wouldn't have spread the way it had. The symbiotes were an alternative method of spreading the virus.

He looked over the latest report. Jerrim and Ayuma had come up with a training schedule where current Generations would be training new ones in large classes, some a thousand in number and held in smaller stadium venues, where they would be taught the absolute basics, as well as taught about the rules that Generations lived by on Karis. The average citizen would only learn the very basics, while those in the KMS, in government, and those who proved themselves would receive more comprehensive instruction. Only those the house trusted would be trained in the secrets of the Generations, while the vast majority would learn how to commune and the basics of moving things with telekinesis. They would not be taught how

to split, since that had potential tactical value, nor would they be taught any intermediate or advanced telekinetic technique. If they wanted to learn more, they could enroll in the Academy and take TK courses from the Pai.

Siyhaa, Myleena, and the CBIMs had busted their butts and “child-proofed” their systems. The biogenic network now had blocks in it that kept untrusted Generations out, and every non-imprint gestalt on the planet now had a lock on it so that only those on the gestalt’s access list could use it. They sorted that out by security levels, with the more powerful gestalts having higher security levels, all the way up to the CBIMs. The original Generations in Unit Alpha and Jyslin held the highest clearance, able to use any gestalt on the planet, and below them they’d created seven security levels that would unlock gestalts of progressively more powerful levels. Tactical gestalts in vehicles would carry a clearance that would allow most any member of the KMS or the government to access them. The mobile tactical gestalt units, the big boys they used to bring in a heavy hitter onto a battlefield, would be restricted only to those KMS members specifically trained to use them. Fixed position gestalts would have an even higher levels, three different levels, restricted only to those who had training in high-power gestalts. The ship defense gestalts that the Primaries used would have an even higher clearance that would only allow members of a tactical Generation unit to use them, since only a trained member of a Unit would be pulling Primary duty on a ship. And the highest level would be for the CBMOMs and CBIMs, which would only allow their assigned Primary, Secondary, and four reserves to access them. But then again, the sentient biogenic units had control over their own merge, so they could kick someone off that was trying to merge who wasn’t supposed to. Jason and Jyslin would have Level Seven clearance, while the lowest clearance, Level One, would be for KMS members, government officials, and other Karinnes that had earned a measure of trust through training and screening.

Miaari was setting that up now, putting in a screening process to ensure that only those Generations with loyalty to the house and no ulterior motives would gain access to gestalts, and only trustworthy workers would gain access to the sensitive parts of the network.

His personal life had been fully swept by the virus. Every one of his friends, all of his co-workers in the White House, every member of 3D, virtually everyone within his social circle of friends and co-workers had

either finished or was almost finished with the transition. The only ones that had *not* were Chirk and the Kizzik members of his cabinet, and it was only a matter of time until the virus adapted to Kizzik DNA and affected them. The last report said that Talty and Siyhaa were in the last stages of transition and had suffered no complications. Siyhaa had done most of the work fighting the fatigue that came with transition, and she'd managed to finish only about an hour before the virus put her in that light coma to complete the conversion of her brain. Tom, Maggie, Jenny, Bo, Leamon, Luke, Mike, all the Terran members of 3D, they were all Generations now, and had already started learning about the new aspects of their lives. As were the non-Terrans, like Emia, Eraen, Vi'Dar, Mha, Gado, and the others.

They'd also be gaining a temporary guest. In about an hour, Kreel would be arriving on Karis, and the main reason was because it was safest for the Grimja and the Union to get him completely off the planet until they were absolutely sure he wasn't contagious. It would give Jason a chance to teach him the basics about his new abilities, along with Krirara...and a tiny part of him rather liked that. Kreel and Krirara were some of his best friends, and it felt, well, it made him feel closer to them that they were now Generations.

And progress had been made. All of the guards and most of the strip girls had learned how to actively commune today, as had Seido, Ayama, and Surin. Jenn had spared a few hours to teach Aya, Kaera, Hara, and Dera how to split, and now they were teaching the other guards how to do it. Tomorrow, Mrar would come to the strip to teach the guards the exercises to awaken their TK. Mrar was also a Generation now, but given she was a Pai, she could do almost all of what Generations could do anyway. The only thing she got out of it was the radiation resistance and the ability to split, though it did open up her bandwidth when communing considerably. But only those who had been telepaths before they were changed were making progress. Merrra, who hadn't been a telepath before, was still trying to express, and couldn't commune until she expressed, though Jason suspected she could learn how to split without being expressed. Seido had been working with her all day to try to trigger her telepathy.

Seido...*fuck*. Like Jyslin and Dahnai, becoming a Generation had boosted her telepathic power, to the point where she was stronger than he

was now. She was in the top 10% when it came to Generations when it came to raw strength

But the true shining stars when it came to that little aspect of becoming a Generation were, unsurprisingly, Yana and Temika. They had been documented as two of the most powerful non-Generation telepaths on Karis, but now both of them were two of the most powerful telepaths *period*. Temika was maybe just below Jezzi now on the power chart, while Yana was more powerful than Jyslin, and possibly eye to eye with Saelle. Myleena was still the top dog, however.

The strip was a microcosm of what was going on all over the planet at that very moment. A newly changed Generation would wake up to a bionoid watching over them, who would give them a quick medical check and then play a recorded message from Jason, explaining what they'd be doing for the next few takirs...learning. Since quarantine was still in effect to slow down the virus, they'd have time to practice in their houses. The bionoid would then go to their next appointment while the new Generation ate a hearty meal and then read the literature they'd written that explained what a Generation was and what they could do in more detail. If the Generation hadn't been a telepath before, they received a lot of stuff explaining how telepathy worked and were put on a watch list for expression. If they expressed while in quarantine, a telepath would be dispatched to them immediately to teach them how to close their minds, which was *the most important* thing they could do to prevent a new telepath from suffering a schism or psychotic break. All the mental voices of unshielded minds around them constantly filling their heads was the fast track to unbalancing a neophyte telepath and causing them to become dangerous. After reading through the material, they would then schedule their orientation course with the CBIM that ran their continent. And after that...there was little they could do but wait at home and keep close to the vidlink to keep up with the latest news. A planet-wide quarantine was still in effect to try to slow down the spread of the virus as much as possible, so right now, the only traffic moving around were bionoids, robots, Sticks delivering food to emergency distribution centers, and a very select few living things that had clearance to be outside...and the original Generations were on that list. If a new Generation suffered a schism, it would take a

highly trained Generation backed up by a tactical gestalt to contain them, so they didn't do themselves or anyone else any harm.

He finished the report and brought up another one, looking over the projected rate of spread of the virus, and all it did was depress him. He felt...felt like he'd failed. Like he'd failed the house for allowing the most dangerous aspect of the house to escape. There were now millions of Generations, both inside and outside the house, and any potential evil they did in the future would be completely and wholly his fault. He should have taken the threat of another outbreak more seriously. He should have had Songa do extensive research into the problem, come up with a plan of action to stop it if it happened again. But he hadn't taken it seriously enough...and now this. Generations on Terra, Generations in the Imperium, Generations in the Collective. The rulers of two outside empires now Generations in Dahnai and Kreel.

A hologram winked on over his desk, but he didn't bother to look up at it. "What now?" he asked despondently.

There was a long silence. "We have something, Jason," Songa said.

"More bad news," he sighed, looking up at her. "I'll be there in a little while."

He didn't bother to put on armor, or even put on nicer clothes. And he didn't bother telling Aya he was going to the annex, either, but she was one step ahead of him by having a guard posted at the landing pad. Aya herself decided to accompany him. He entered the situation room and saw the same faces, many of them now looking haggard, and he fit right in with them. He stepped up to the table where Songa and Kereth were standing and allowed Kereth to put a hand on his neck in greeting. "What's the bad news?"

"It's both bad and good, cousin. We've learned that this won't be a permanent issue for the galaxy, but that information comes with a troubling connotation."

"In plain words, cousin?"

"The virus has a life span, which is a constant through all mutated forms of it," Songa told him. "It's only viable for about six Terran weeks once it's created. After that, the virus just falls apart and its resulting components become harmless. We've also learned why we weren't detecting it, dear,

and it's related to that life span. The virus transmits through the air in *components*, and those components assemble into the virus inside the cell of a host. When the virus reproduces, it creates both copies of itself and the components to assemble new viruses. That makes the virus volatile, susceptible to alteration and mutation, which is why the virus mutated when it was passed from Dahnai to you. But that compartmented structure also makes it temporary. A virus and the components that make it only have a life span of about 44 days, and the virus can only assemble itself inside the cell of an unaltered host. So, the key to stopping this virus, dear, is for us to go 45 days without a new case. A new case produces new viruses and components, and those viruses and components reset the clock. If we can go 45 days without a new case, the clock runs out and the virus goes extinct."

"We've learned how to determine the age of a virus to know how much longer it has before it dies," Kereth added.

"Have you come up with a way to stop it?"

Songa shook her head. "Despite understanding how it works, it still resists any treatment we come up with," she told him. "No matter what we do, the virus either repairs itself from available components or reassembles itself and continues on. And we think we know why."

"Cousin, this virus is not *natural*," Kereth told him intently. "The way it assembles itself from components and the way it can repair itself if damaged is not anything that exists in a natural virus. The only biological agents that have that kind of behavior are artificial. The Moridon bio-agent is one such example," he explained. "Cousin. Jason. This virus was *engineered*. It was engineered to be unstoppable, but it was also engineered to have a life span, so the virus would die off on its own after it did its work."

He felt a sudden fury rise up in him. "*Ward Six!*" he hissed.

Kereth nodded gravely. "That is our suspicion," he agreed. "Denmother suspects that Ward Six created this virus, with the intent to give the Imperium Generations. But I don't think whoever made it intended for it to mutate the way it did and make it *generic*. The virus in the Imperium will only affect Faey and Terrans, and no other species, which is probably the original virus. Even then, I suspect it wasn't meant to affect Terrans. I

personally suspect that the virus broke containment and got out before they had perfected it, and to cover it up, they intentionally released it to make it appear to be a natural outbreak. After all, if the virus swept through the Medical Service before anyone else, it would look highly suspicious. The speed with which it spread through the Imperium and jumped quarantine lines hints to me that it was deliberately released at strategic points within the Imperium to maximize the spread of the virus.”

Jason had to clench his fist so tightly it caused pain, the endolimb underneath going passed natural limits, to focus him. Those...those... *asshats!* He didn't want to believe that the Medical Service would be capable of something like this, but in truth, they were the only ones in the Imperium with the skills to do something like this! He very nearly ordered Myri to blast the main annex HQ on Draconis into dust, but fortunately for him he got hold of his temper before he went over the edge. But still, it took almost everything within him to not fly into an immediate rage. The Medical Service had betrayed the Imperium, the House, had perverted everything it meant to be a Generation, and may have unleashed a monster that may ultimately destroy the galaxy. If the wrong people got their hands on biogenic technology, it would be a disaster of epic proportions.

And most of those *wrong hands* were within the Imperium itself. The Grand Duchesses of the *Siann* would turn on Dahnai in a heartbeat if they felt they could use their newfound Generation powers and gestalts to dethrone her. They were being good girls right now because they liked the money and they saw no real way to get Dahnai out of the way, but this changed things. He had no doubt that right now, more than one Grand Duchess was carefully counting how many Imperial Marines had become Generations and weighing those numbers against their own forces. And they were also no doubt scheming up some way to get off the island and locate and steal a gestalt the next time they came to the Summer Palace for court.

He desperately wanted to thrash Banlia and the entire Medical Service, but even he knew that would be a dreadful mistake. There was no organization more revered and loved by the Faey people than the Medical Service. To openly go against them would permanently poison the image of the House of Karinne in the eyes of the common Faey. The only way to go after Banlia would be to make an ironclad open and shut case against her,

and her making a public confession of her crimes would also be almost required. The common Faey would never think a doctor capable of wrongdoing, even if confronted with evidence of their misdeeds.

This had to be handled carefully.

Kereth got his attention. “This information requires you to make a decision, cousin,” he said. “It’s our professional opinion that we cannot stop this virus without months, possibly years of research and experimentation, and by then, it may be too late. We must make a decision on if we should waste resources trying,” he prompted. “It may be a wiser use of resources to manage the virus as it runs its course, to give it no new hosts to infect and have the virus die off after 45 days, because nothing we do can stop it. I will be honest here, cousin. Right now, the only way I can see this playing out is the virus infecting every person on the planet,” he said honestly. “By the time we come up with a counter to it, it very well may be too late. If we manage the spread of the virus, we can have it run its course in an orderly fashion that doesn’t stress our resources and start the clock where it dies off quickly. Because that is important, cousin. The more time we give this virus, the greater the chance it’s going to spontaneously mutate into something deadly,” he warned.

He gave Kereth a long look. “You’re serious.”

“It’s a viable option, dear,” Songa said. “If we give this virus months, years to mutate again and again, it may turn into a plague that will kill us all. As a doctor, it’s my recommendation that we do what we have to do to make this virus die off on its own as quickly as possible. The virus itself is a far greater potential threat than what it is doing. Think about it, dear, it’s already mutated over a hundred times. What happens to the house if an unstoppable virus turns deadly?”

All murderous thoughts of Banlia and the Medical Service drained out of him as their suggestion hit home. They were asking him to deliberately allow people to get infected and become Generations, to do the one thing he did not ever want to do. Becoming a Generation, after all, carried much more baggage than the benefits it gave. Those people would become hunted, wanted, would have to stay on Karis for their own protection, especially if they weren’t Faey or Terran. The governments of their old empires probably wouldn’t blink over abducting them and dissecting them

to learn the secret of how they became Generations, then try to reproduce that effect in their own population. And part of that was Jason's own fault, because they knew what a Generation could do after seeing them in action during the Syndicate War. Generation Primaries had made the KMS ships on which they were stationed all but invulnerable, and that was a power that any empire would want for themselves.

They were asking him to make an impossible choice...refuse and risk killing the entire planet if the virus turned malignant, or accept and sentence every member of the House to being imprisoned on Karis for the rest of their lives..

Though, that choice was already more or less out of his hands, because of the Imperium. He would already have to safeguard biogenic technology from them.

"I...I...I have to think about that," he said wearily.

Instead of going home, he went to his office, which was empty. The entire building was empty, because of the quarantine, with only Chichi there, who was being fed by a bionoid. She was quite overjoyed to see him, nearly dancing in circles when he came into the office, and he had to stop and pick her up and get her to settle down a little bit. "I'm so sorry, little girl," he told her softly. "I had no idea they just left you here. I'll speak very sternly to some people once things settle down. Until then, by God, you are coming home with me," he declared. He stroked the petite tabi's fur—she was a fully grown adult, but wasn't much bigger than she was when she first came to the office—then carried her into the office and sat at his desk with her in his lap, rubbing her head against his hand happily as he considered Kereth's nearly unacceptable solution to the problem.

It really was a no-win situation. To protect his people, they were asking him to condemn them to isolation and separation from the rest of the universe. At least as it was now, they could go on vacations off world, go see friends and family. They had lives, they had options, they had freedom, and becoming Generations would take that freedom away from them. Most citizens probably didn't know that, know that the Generations were all but prisoners on the planet, with only a rare few allowed off of it.

There was another part of the equation that he felt nearly as sacred as their freedom...their *free will*. To order the virus to be allowed to spread would take away the right of his people to choose, choose who they wanted to be, what they wanted to be. The right of free will was cherished by Jason and most of the house, because it was built entirely on that free will. Every person that was here was here because they wanted to be here. They had chosen the House of Karinne, and Jason felt that it would violate the trust those people placed in him when they came here to take the freedom to choose away from them.

The counter of that argument was basic survival. If the virus became deadly, they'd have no way to stop it. Songa had made that fairly clear, that since the virus was engineered, it was built to be basically unstoppable. The only way to stop it was to not give it any more people to infect, and since it had already all but spread throughout the entire ecosystem, they weren't going to do that by isolating people. They'd tried that, and new cases were still being reported in the thousands. If Songa and Kereth were right, they could end the threat of the virus by letting it convert the population, then die off when it couldn't infect any new hosts.

But that came back to the problem of sentencing his people to life in prison...the prison of Karis.

For hours, he struggled with it, going over the pros and cons of each decision over and over, until it became a repeating cycle of circular logic.

But really, there was only one choice he could make. He had to protect the lives of his people, even if it meant that their lives were spent in a gilded cage. If Kereth and Songa truly believed that the only way to stop the virus and prevent it from mutating into a deadly plague was to allow it to infect the entire planet, then he had to believe it. They would never lie to him about something like that. But he also would not take away the right of his people to choose who and what they wanted to be.

A few swift commands activated the FERA alert system, and he hijacked all media on the planet to give an address. Every vidlink, handpanel, interface, and holo-emitter on the planet was taken over, and his face appeared on all of them. "Hello everyone," he said in a tired, defeated tone, scratching at the scraggly beard that had grown in over the last few days. "I've been given news about the current situation that I feel you

deserve to hear and deserve to hear from me. The Medical Service has studied the virus, and they've determined that modern medical science simply cannot stop it," he declared. "Not without years of research into the virus, which by then would be too late. Their greatest fear right now is that the virus is going to mutate into something far more dangerous than what it is now. I'm not sure everyone has been keeping up with the news, so I'll explain a little bit. The virus is highly volatile, altering itself so it can infect any host it comes into contact with. That makes it very easy for the virus to mutate in unexpected ways, and the Medical Service's greatest concern is that this volatility causes the virus to mutate into something life-threatening. But we've also learned that the virus has a life span. It only lasts about four and a half takirs. If the virus doesn't find a host and infect them, which allows it to reproduce fresh viruses, then the virus dies. The Medical Service has recommended that the only way to really stop the virus is to allow it to run its course, to infect every person on Karis, so that it simply has nobody left to infect. They're confident that at that point, the virus will die off before it has the chance to mutate into something deadly.

"That may sound like a logical solution on its face, but I find myself in great disagreement with it," he said. "Not because I'm afraid of the Karinnes becoming Generations, but because it takes away your right to choose," he added, his voice becoming adamant and strong. "To just give that order would be taking away your right to be who you want to be, to choose the path that your life takes. Some of you may not *want* to be Generations, because of the restrictions that come with that title. There are some serious drawbacks to being a Generation that many of you may not know about, and the biggest of them is that Generations are restricted to House territory. We're not allowed to leave because of the danger we'd be in from the outside world, who have tried in the past to abduct us or use us to unlock the secrets of the Generations. As it stands now, you have freedom. You have options. You have choices. But those will be restricted if you become Generations, because preventing others from weaponizing the powers that Generations wield is one of the primary responsibilities of the house. I have a duty to the galaxy to protect it from *us*, to protect defenseless planets from falling prey to empires that have managed to gain access to Generations. But I also have a duty to you, the people of the House of Karinne, to look out for you, protect you, and above all, keep you alive and safe.

“The Medical Service has made it clear that the longer this virus is allowed to exist, the greater the chance it’s going to mutate into something truly dangerous. But the only solution to that problem is going to force me to betray my duty to you, the people of the house,” he said in a tired voice. “There’s only one way I can fulfill the obligation to protect your lives but still defend your rights. So, everyone, I’m offering you a choice. I’m going to send every citizen of the House a file that explains exactly what a Generation is and what we can do, but also lists the duties, obligations, responsibilities, and restrictions that come with being a Generation. I want you to read that file, and I want you to think about it, think very hard if you can accept living under those rules. If you can, and the idea of being a Generation appeals to you, then you will inform your continent’s CBIM that you are *opting in* and are willing to voluntarily be exposed to the virus. You’ll receive instructions from the Medical Service on what will come and how you can go through the transition comfortably, as well as instructions on what will happen after you undergo the transition and become a Generation.

“If you decide that it’s not what you want, then you will inform your CBIM that you are *opting out*. If you choose to opt out, we will do everything in our power to protect you from the virus until it ages out and dies on its own. Just to warn you, it’s probably going to involve wearing a medical E-suit and being in complete isolation for however long it takes for the virus to die off. It may take months, and it may not even work. There’s every chance that you’ve already been infected by the virus, and it’s only a matter of time before you begin the transition,” he warned. “But if that’s what you want, we will do everything in our power to make it happen.

“I want you, I want all of you, to choose the path you take as we move forward in this difficult time,” he said strongly. “I want everyone to feel comfortable with the decision they’ve made. I want you to feel that you made the right choice when you joined the House of Karinne. I—” he cut off, closing his eyes. “I want to apologize to everyone that this happened at all,” he said, scratching Chichi between the ears, which made her give a little chirp of pleasure. “I thought we were ready for a situation like this, but now I see just how unprepared we were. It’s my responsibility as the Grand Duke to keep everyone safe, to protect your rights, and I failed. I can only hope that those who were infected by the virus and had no desire to be

anything but what they were can forgive me for this, at least some day,” he said earnestly, looking back at the holocamera.

“That’s all. The file holding all the information should be arriving on your vidlinks or interfaces within the hour. I ask all of you to please read it, think about it, then make an informed decision about what you want to do. Thank you for your time, and good luck to us all.”

He ended the broadcast, then leaned back in his chair and endured Chichi trying to climb up his chest to nuzzle his face. She could sense his disquiet, his sense of disappointment in himself, and above all, the crushing feeling that he had failed the people of his house. *[Cybi, do me a favor and write up that file and push it out,]* he called.

[I’ll take care of it. For what it’s worth, Jason, I think you did the right thing,] she answered, her thought supportive, even hopeful.

[I certainly don’t feel like I’ve done anything good,] he told her honestly.

He turned his chair and looked out the window, out over the nearly deserted city of Karsa, and he was quiet a long time. Eventually, he gave a forlorn sigh, stroked Chichi’s sinfully soft fur, and closed his eyes.

“My god, Chichi,” he intoned without emotion. “What have I done.”

Raira, 8 Hiraa, 4408, Faey Orthodox Calendar

Saturday, 18 August 2022 Terran Standard Calendar

Raira, 8 Hiraa, year 1333 of the 97th Generation, Karinne Historical Reference Calendar

Salura’s Imports, Shopping District, Karsa, Karis

Karsa was alive again.

Wearing a tee shirt and jeans, Jason and Jyslin were greeting people and shaking hands outside Salura’s, one of the larger stores in the Bali Building in the shopping district. These were the people who had opted in, and who had been allowed to end quarantine, so they were back about their daily

business. They were back at work, back to living their lives, with all three phases represented. Some had yet to be infected, some were in the first stages of transition, and most had already completed their transition and become Generations. And with them trying to get back to some semblance of normal, Jason was out there to talk to them, to hopefully make them feel like things were going to be alright.

Aya had vociferously objected to him coming out, but she knew better than to push too hard over something like *this*, so she and a complement of nine other guards were hovering around them. Jason needed to do this, he needed to talk to the people of Karsa and hear their opinions, listen to their concerns, and hopefully be reassured that he'd made the right decision.

Thus far, they'd had no problems with Jason's decision and the actions that followed it. A staggering 98% of the population of Karis had opted in, and they were still being released from quarantine in stages because of the sheer number of people the Medical Service had to process. Songa had drawn up a schedule of deliberately infecting citizens to spread out the burden on those who had to take care of them when they completed transition, but there was always the possibility that they would be infected before their assigned date, so there was a lot of flexibility in that schedule. Everyone who had already become Generations had been released from quarantine, so they represented the vast majority of the people out and about in the city.

It was the strangest feeling to Jason to sense Generations everywhere he went, to sense them of other races. And there was a feeling in the streets that something had changed, was different. Karinnes were usually polite to each other, but there was the strangest sense of *camaraderie* in the streets. People were going out of their way to greet complete strangers, even stop and talk a moment. Anyone in the slightest need of assistance got six or seven people offering it. And people were generally just...*happy*. And he hadn't the slightest idea why. Despite not entirely understanding it, he was overjoyed it was there, because it kept everyone calm, everyone relaxed, and everyone optimistic.

The only real problem they were having was digging up instructors. Most of the house's population of telepaths had been scheduled to help those who had become them in the transition, which was going to cause a

little chaos. Telepaths only represented about 38% of the House's population, with the vast majority of them being Faey, and most of them having no experience teaching. And now they were going to have to give 66% of the population basic instruction in telepathy. Experienced instructors were going to be used as much as possible, but just about anyone with experience with talent was going to be lending a hand to help new telepaths close their minds. Once they learned that, a more experienced teacher was going to teach the very basics of sending, and from there, it was up to the new telepath just how much they wanted to learn about their new ability. Telekinesis wasn't going to be taught, though anyone in the house would have the opportunity to learn, they just had to do it themselves. They'd be given the chance to enroll in remote courses with the Academy and learn about TK, as well as learn the exercises the Pai used to help their people coax out the ability.

And those exercises were effective. As of last night, four of the 45 guards in Aya's detachment had managed to move something with TK; Dera, Brae, Mai, and Zena. Those four along with Aya learning how to split proved that all the abilities of a Generation had passed through the virus. The new Generations were just as much Generations as Jason and Myleena were, as much as Dahnai and Jyslin were. And now, as much as Seido, Krirara, and Kreel were.

That still seemed a bit outlandish. His Grimja friend was standing not far away chatting it up with an Urumi and a Verutan, and all three were Generations. He was wearing a Terran tank top and his beloved Bermuda shorts. He'd arrived two days ago and settled in at the house, doing his job as High Councilor over hologram, and he wasn't alone in that he wasn't the only non-Karinne on Karis right now because they'd been infected. Standing beside him, and looking entirely too pleased with herself, was Enva. She'd been on Draconis when the virus hit, but she'd been infected with *Jason's* strain because she'd been on Karis a few days before. Since the palace was put on quarantine about two minutes after Enva walked through the door, it had prevented the Karis strain of the virus from propagating on Draconis. In all the chaos since this started, Jason had simply not known that Enva had been there and had been infected. And she became contagious while within the palace.

That did put the Karis strain of the virus on Draconis, but it was currently completely sealed inside the Imperial Palace compound. When they turned on the hard shield to seal off the palace, it trapped the virus inside. It did infect the non-Faey members of Dahnai's staff inside the palace, but it prevented the virus from getting any further. Since Enva and the non-Faey members of the staff were infected with the Karis strain, they were brought over to Karis, so they didn't have the chance to potentially spread the virus. Enva was staying on the strip at Jason's house, while the members of Dahnai's staff were over at the summer palace.

She and Kreel represented a couple of complications in all this, Generations not only outside of Jason and Dahnai's control, but rulers of their own empires. But in that regard, they'd seriously lucked out in that neither the Grimja nor the Sha'i-ree were aggressive or expansionistic. The chances that either used their own DNA in some plot to create new Generations to use to expand their empires were slim to none.

They also, thankfully, represented the only instances where the Karis strain infected outsiders. Krirara had been exposed to the virus, but there were no signs of it on Kirri'arr, and her husband and children also showed no signs of infection. She must not have been contagious until after the quarantine was ordered, which prevented the virus from spreading on her home planet. Kreel too had not spread the virus on Grimjar, they'd gotten him into medical isolation before he became contagious, and that saved Jason a whole lot of anguish and heartburn.

Not that Kreel looked like he was suffering. He was actually quite excited over the idea of being a Generation, and the jerk had not only learned how to commune already, he'd also managed to use his telekinesis for the first time this morning.

Amazing what an hour or so of instruction under Mrar could do. She was truly an incredibly gifted teacher.

Neither Kreel nor Enva had entirely worked out how they were going to deal with their newfound status when it came to their home empires. Thanks to the *fucking* Medical Service, it had become common knowledge that those infected by the virus had become Generations, those morons had released that information publicly without clearing it with Dahnai first. So now the Union and the Sha'i-ree knew that their leaders had been infected

by the virus and turned into Generations. What was much more concerning, however, was that now the council knew that there were millions of new Generations in the Imperium and on Terra, Generations not locked behind the impenetrable wall that was Karis, and that Enva and Kreel were as well.

Plans had already been made to prevent any Faey or Terrans on Terra from “mysteriously disappearing.” Jason was going to build a biogenic planetary sensor network at Terra capable of tracking Generations by their very presence, the biogenic units sensing them the same way Generations could sense one another, and a system was being worked up by Jrz’kii that would ensure that a Generation wasn’t smuggled off Terra by matching passenger manifests with ship passengers. To force ships to go through those checkpoints, he was going to have a planetary shield installed on Terra, which would force all ships to enter and exit the planet using established gates. Those gates would become the chokepoint preventing the abduction Terrans for nefarious purposes. Terra would remain a neutral and open planet, it would just have much more stringent inspection protocols for anyone leaving the planet.

His people went through that once already with the Trillanes. *Never fucking again.*

The reason why was simple: it looked like the complete conversion of both the Terran and Faey races was inevitable at this point. The virus was still spreading like absolute wildfire across the Imperium, and it had picked up speed in its spread across Terra. There were confirmed cases in every major metropolitan center in North America, and there were cases being reported in multiple cities on all five other continents. Their own experience with the virus told them that at this point, the virus could not be stopped.

Jason wasn’t sure if he hated that idea or not. But at this point, he was resigned to it.

[It’s certainly a lot more noisy now,] Jyslin noted in a cheery mindset, communing privately with him. *[And I can’t make fun of the guards like this anymore. Dera will hear me,]* she added, giving the Imperial Guard a wink.

Dera stared her down in return, which made Jyslin all but giggle like a little girl.

[I'm still not sure I made the right decision, but I can't help but feel encouraged by the sense of positivity on the streets,] he answered, shaking a Colonist's hand and greeting him aloud. *[I expected a lot more fear and uncertainty than this. And I sure as hell didn't expect nearly the entire population to opt in.]*

[Love, I don't think you understand just how much the people look up to the Generations,] she told him. *[And the chance to be one, to do the things they've seen you do, and for many the chance to become telepaths, it's almost irresistible. How is Zaa handling it?]*

[She told me I made the right decision,] he answered. *[Kereth told her that it's absolutely vital that we get rid of this virus as fast as possible, and this was the fastest way, given they have no idea how to stop it. Besides that, Zaa seems...happy about the virus for some reason. I can sense it when I talk to her. She seems quite content with the idea that it looks like two entire species are going to be converted.]*

[We're family, love, and the bigger the family, the better,] Jyslin answered easily.

[Huh. Love, it may be just that simple.] "I'm sure you'll be just fine," he assured the Colonist, patting him on the shoulder. Holding two separate conversations at once was child's play for an experienced Generation. "The Medical Service hasn't had a single major complication yet. It's so safe they're allowing people to go through their transition at home, with a bionoid or robot with you to monitor your vital signs. If you have any problems, the bionoid will alert the Medical Service, and they'll be there in a heartbeat to assist. The only complications we've had so far are people getting secondary infections during the transition. The virus shuts down the immune system while it's doing its job, and that gives microbes a chance to carry out shenanigans."

The Colonist laughed suddenly. "I don't think I've ever heard anyone use that word before."

"My wife has a deep vocabulary, and she taught me Faey," he said dryly, elbowing Jyslin.

"I had to properly educate you in a real language, not those guttural grunts and growls you call English," she replied playfully. "And which

language are we speaking now? That proves the superiority of the Faey language,” she added with a grin.

“I can change that,” he warned.

“You’d better not,” she retorted, and the exchange made the Colonist grin.

“We heard that you’ve finished the transition, Duchess. What’s it like?” the Colonist asked.

“I don’t feel all that much different,” she replied. “But then again, I was already a telepath before it happened. I do find commune to be...well, it’s much more pure than regular telepathy,” she said, struggling a bit to find the words. “I think once you do it for the first time, you’ll understand what I mean.”

“You’ve learned it already?”

“Communing is the simplest thing in the world,” she replied. “After you do it the first time, you wonder why you haven’t been able to do it your whole life.”

“It’s an instinctive ability,” Jason explained. “It’s part of the way Generations were genetically engineered. It’s a programmed instinct.”

“Huh. It sounds much more ominous when you use those words... genetically engineered, programmed.”

“It may have started out that way, but now it’s just *us*,” he told him with a calm smile. “I was born this way, I don’t know what it’s like to be anything different. To me, it’s *natural*. And I hope that soon, you’ll feel it’s *natural* too.”

“I do hope so,” he said with an earnest smile. “Is telepathy hard?”

“Not at all,” Jyslin told him reassuringly. “It’s relatively easy to learn, but it does take a lot of work to master. That’s why we’re letting people decide just how much training they want in telepathy once they learn the basics. The basic abilities are easy to learn, but the advanced techniques are difficult to master.”

“I’m looking forward to it. I’m hoping my empath training will give me a head start.”

“I’m honestly not sure,” Jason told him. He wasn’t surprised that the Colonist was an empath, they weren’t uncommon among the race. Colonists in general were widely known for the prevalence of psionic ability among them, with fully half the race having either telepathic or empathic ability. Yet, they didn’t allow that to create elitism in their society. Magran was the Grand Master, and he didn’t have either ability. “Maybe you could talk to some Colonists that are both, they’ll surely be able to tell you a lot more than I can.”

“That’s a good idea. I know someone that’s both, I think I’ll give him a call.”

Kreel wandered over to them after Jason talked to a few more people. *[We need to send someone out for some ale. This would be more fun with a tankard.]*

[I don’t think I will ever get used to that,] Jyslin noted, giving him a sly look.

[Believe me, I’m still in the incredulous phase myself,] he grinned. *[At least now I can say that all my visits over here finally paid off with something worthwhile...getting diseased by my best friend. Now I’ll live my life with this crushing illness,]* he communed mockingly.

[You’re enjoying this way too much, Kreel,] Jason observed coolly.

[Maybe a little bit,] he replied shamelessly. *[And you just wait ‘til I master TK. I’ve never forgiven you for that time you dunked me in the ocean. I will get my revenge!]*

[You can try,] he replied, his thought carrying an undertone of dismissal that made Jyslin crack up.

They stayed for about an hour longer, then Aya almost sighed in relief when they boarded a dropship and returned home. Enva was sitting out on the deck when they got home, reading from a handpanel that had her native language on it, no doubt a report from Homeworld forwarded to her by her staff. Maya was sitting at the table with her—the two were good friends—and Vell was in the act of joining them, sitting down at the table. “You two taking a break?” Jason asked.

“With most of the girls at home, they don’t need me to watch the babies,” she replied, giving him a warm smile and offering her hand to him as he approached. He took it, then leaned down and kissed her on the cheek before sitting down next to Enva. “How did it go?”

“I think it went well,” he replied as Kreel came out of the house and moved to join them. “The people were in a better mood than I expected, and I didn’t sense much anxiety in the crowd. It was almost...weird,” he fretted. “I thought people would be much more worried about this.”

“Speaking as one of those people, Jason, I wasn’t worried at all when I found out that it was a risk-free transition,” Enva told them. “I’m rather eager to learn how to use telekinesis. It’s like I’ve been granted superpowers.”

“That about sums it up. Who *wouldn’t* want to have TK, especially when you’ve seen what it can do firsthand?” Kreel agreed as he sat down. “And why are we talking? Everyone here is a Generation. I can feel it.”

“Because some of us have old habits that die hard,” Vell said. “We knew Jason from when he was actively hiding his talent from the Trillanes, so it’s custom for us to speak aloud. Besides, most of the children we care for haven’t expressed, so speaking is an ingrained habit in our house.”

Miaari stalked up to the table and came to a stop beside him. “It will take me years to get used to this,” she said wryly as she looked around the table.

“I know, right?” Jason agreed. “What’s up, Mee?”

“I thought Kimdori couldn’t catch the virus,” Enva said, looking up at her. “But I can sense you.”

“That’s because there’s a secret we didn’t tell most of the population,” Jason replied. “The Generations are tied to the Kimdori in ways that are hard to explain. We can sense them and they can sense us. It’s why they call us *cousins*.”

Enva gave Miaari a long look. “There has to be Kimdori DNA involved somewhere in the Generations,” she stated.

“Clever,” Miaari smiled. “I knew you were formidable, Enva. That is correct,” she admitted. “You are cousins because there is some of *us* within

you,” she declared. “Kimdori DNA was needed to make the original retrovirus that created the first Generations. A side effect of that fact is that you have the same sense of presence to us as we do to each other. Your ability to sense other Generations is derived from a *Kimdori* ability, our ability to sense our own, no matter what shape they may hold.”

“I’m surprised you’d admit that,” Kreel said seriously.

“We will not tell you *everything*, but that is something that you need to know. If only because we can’t hide it from you,” she admitted boldly.

“Don’t dwell on it, she won’t tell *me* everything either,” Jason said, which made Enva chuckle softly.

“We are a race of secrets, cousin,” she said teasingly. “Denmother wishes to speak to us,” she added.

“Here lately, that’s always bad news,” he sighed, getting back up.

Miaari sent Jason up to his home office alone, sitting at the table and engaging in the conversation, and a flat hologram of Zaa appeared over the desk after he put the room into secure mode and sat down. “I’m going to start calling you the harbinger of doom, Denmother,” he told her.

“Not today,” she replied. “Dahnai has decided to take your path, cousin. She’s realized that the virus cannot be stopped, so she’s implementing controlled introduction of the virus into every Imperium holding to expedite the transition and allow the virus to die off before it mutates into something deadly. She’s also offering the opportunity to those Faey who live in the Collective. She has Sk’Vrae’s blessing to do so,” she informed him. “The good news is that the Karis version of the virus looks to have been completely contained. There are no cases of infection in non-Terran and Faey on Terra or Draconis, and no new cases on Grimjar or Kirri’arr. It would have shown up by now, so that means that it was contained. We need only to arrange the purging of the virus, and that threat is neutralized.”

“Purge how?”

“Virtually nothing biological can survive extremely high temperatures, cousin,” she said. “The Grimja have already purged the containment area where they held Kreel. It was designed with an incineration feature that immolates the room with fire, reaching up to two thousand shuki. Much to

their chagrin, I suspect,” she noted lightly. “They purged the room *before* they found out what the virus does. They do have a couple of samples of the atmosphere of the room before it was purged, which my children are going to replace with fakes. Kirri’arr may be more problematic, because the only place the virus could conceivably be is Krirara’s house. To purge the virus, her house will have to, ah, meet with an unfortunate accident,” she said delicately.

He had to laugh. “If she finds out, she will *skin* you,” Jason warned. “She’s lived in that house for nearly forty years!”

“At my age, cousin, danger is an exciting deviation from routine,” she said with a slightly cheeky edge, which made him laugh harder. “Since we obviously can’t immolate the Imperial Palace, we will instead be ensuring that the hard shields trapping the virus inside stay up until the virus dies on its own. So, in about forty days, cousin, there will be no chance that the virus spreads off Karis.”

“Thank God,” Jason breathed in relief. “Have you made arrangements to make sure the Kirri can’t secure samples of the virus?”

She nodded. “Those operations are already under way. If they succeed, the samples will be switched with fakes and they will never know the difference.”

He sighed forcefully and slumped back in his chair. “Finally, some good news,” he said. “I was starting to hate you again, cousin.”

She had to laugh. “I’ll try to bring only good news for the next few days,” she smiled. “How do things fare on Karis? Handmaiden has reported that things are going smoothly. Are they?”

“A lot smoother than I expected,” he answered. “The people aren’t panicking, thank God, and some of them seem almost excited at the idea of it. Did Mee tell you how many opted in?”

“Very nearly the entire population.”

He nodded. “That shocked me. I thought a good quarter minimum would opt out.”

“Handmaiden mentioned that the Parri are immune to the virus?”

“Yeah, go figure,” he chuckled. “It doesn’t affect them. So it seems that the Kimdori aren’t the only species on Karis that are immune to it.”

“That is highly curious,” she mused. “The virus adapts itself to any biology with a sufficiently evolved DNA helix to support the changes the virus makes. The Parri must be evolved enough.”

“They are, but the virus doesn’t work on them. Why, we don’t know, but it doesn’t. Songa is going to study it after the crisis is over as part of our preparations to make sure this never happens again. She thinks we may be able to come up with a vaccine that blocks any future retrovirus from affecting people based on the Parri’s immunity.”

“That would be prudent,” she nodded. “A future retrovirus may not be quite so...convenient.”

“You mean engineered to be perfect for what it was designed to do,” he said darkly. “What are we going to do about it, Denmother?”

“Oh, there is *much* we will do about it, cousin,” she said in an icy tone. “But we cannot move until the crisis is over. The Imperium *needs* the Medical Service right now. When the virus has died off and things have settled down, we will have our opportunity. Until then, we observe, we plan, and we wait.”

“Let’s both hope we don’t have to wait very long.”

“Patience, cousin. Patience.”

“Easy for you to say, you’re like twenty thousand years old,” he accused, which made her smile wolfishly.

After going over a few minor points, they ended the conference and Jason returned to the deck. Aria was there with Rann and Shya, and the girls were playing on the deck nearby. “Hey guys,” he called, putting his arm around Aria, who was standing behind Maya’s chair. Aria didn’t like to sit any more than necessary. “Hey little treasure. Off to practice?”

“Now that I’m not quarantined anymore, yeah,” she replied. “I swear, Dad, I think I was going nuts being stuck in the house.”

“Tell me about it,” he said in a drawl that made Maya and Vell laugh.

“I’m gonna head down to the practice field with a couple of teammates and we’re gonna work on passing. Though the season’s been postponed until after this is over.”

“Did they opt in, or did they already catch it?”

“Already caught it, most of the kids in my school did,” she replied. “I don’t think they gave us the choice to opt in, that choice was given to our parents.”

“Minors don’t make very good life choices,” Jason said dryly. Aria elbowed him.

“How do you like it so far, Aria?” Enva asked.

“I love it! I always felt a little out of the loop around here, I mean, all Dad’s kids are Generations except me. And now I’m not the odd kid out,” she smiled, patting Jason’s hand, which was on her shoulder. “It’s like I’ve become part of the family in the last way I could, like I belong now.”

“You always belonged, silly girl,” he chided.

“Not really. I know there are things you couldn’t tell me that you’ve told Rann and the others, because of the secrets you have to keep as a Generation. And I was okay with that, because you never let me feel like I was being left out,” she smiled over at him. “But now you don’t have to do that. You don’t have to treat me differently because there are things you couldn’t tell me, things I couldn’t understand. But not anymore. We’re all family now, and it feels that way out there, almost everywhere I go. I feel closer to my friends at school now, because we have something that connects us. I may be a Dreamer and my friends are Faey, but now we’re all *Generations*. I look at them, and I *know* we’re a part of something bigger. It’s a common tie that binds us together,” she said. “And I think that’s pretty cool. We can all be different, but still have something in common that makes us all one big giant family. All the other Generations, they *are* like my cousins now,” she proclaimed.

“That’s something I’ve been feeling too,” Vell said. “I look at you, and I can feel it, feel that we are kindred spirits. It makes me want to treat people I’ve never met like more than strangers.”

“I think that may be a common thing right now,” Kreel said. “I noticed it when we were out. Everyone’s treating everyone like a friend, not just some guy on the street. And as a Grimja, I think it’s just right,” he grinned. “That’s the way we Grimja treat each other, and I like seeing it in others.”

“How are you going to handle work, Kreel?” Maya asked. “I mean, everyone there must know you’re a Generation. Is that going to cause problems for you?”

“Nah, you don’t know Grimja very well. We’re very laid back,” he replied. “The Congress won’t care, the people won’t care. I’d worry more about Enva than me.”

“You don’t know the Sha’i-ree, Kreel,” she chuckled. “As long as I do my job and everything runs smoothly, nobody is going to care.”

“There is one thing I’m really looking forward to learning about,” Aria said, then she took on an expression of intense concentration. On the table, Enva’s handpanel started to skitter a little bit, then it moved about two tikra across the surface. “That!” she said with an explosive release of breath. Almost immediately, her nose began to bleed.”

“You figured that out already? Awesome, Ari!” Shya said happily.

“Yeah, Zach was giving Dara some lessons this morning, and he let me sit in,” she said modestly, putting a finger on her nose to stem the flow. “I can’t make it happen every time. But I’m still getting nosebleeds when I try to do it.”

“That’s common,” Jason told her. “But still, well done, my little treasure. That was impressive.”

“A few more and you’ll have enough to for two teams for TK-ball,” Rann said.

“What’s that?” Kreel asked.

“It’s a game we made up when we were younger to practice TK,” he replied. “It’s kinda like Terran volleyball. The objective of the game is to make the ball hit a target on the other team’s side of the field, but we don’t use a net. The net got in the way too much,” he laughed. “We’d do three people on a side. The catcher caught the ball when it came from the other side, he defended the target like a Terran soccer goalie. He then passed it to

the setter, then the finisher would try to get the ball past the other team's catcher and hit the target. Each of us had to stand in a certain spot on the court, we weren't allowed to move around to force us to learn how to affect objects far away from us. And you couldn't try to TK the ball if it was on the other side of the court. It really helped us out, made us learn control. And since it was a game, it was fun."

"Sounds like a fun game, squirt," Aria said, "you gotta teach it to me. When my friends on the batchi team learn how to do TK, we'll play it to practice."

"It's not that hard. We tried to make up different rules for it, but it got too complicated," Rann laughed.

"It did do wonders for them," Jason chuckled. "Once they made a game out of practicing, they stopped complaining about having to practice."

He chatted with them for a little while longer, then decided to take a short walk on the beach. He had to admit, things weren't nearly as bad as he feared they would be. The people seemed to be embracing the idea of becoming Generations, and even those who were converted against their will seemed content about it. But what worried him more was what was going on over in the Imperium. Aria's dream was still in the back of his mind as he considered what Dahnai was going to do with all those Generations, and how being changed was going to change the Faey as a society. It had changed the way things were working on Karis, and he had the feeling that it would in the Imperium as well.

Then there was the Medical Service. Zaa wanted to hold off until the virus was gone before they went after them, and he could see her position and he'd go with it. But every day they waited would just make his ultimate retribution that much more savage. If they were right in their suspicions, Banlia had directed the Medical Service to make a new retrovirus, and then she unleashed it upon the Imperium. If they hadn't done such a great job engineering it, she may have killed *millions* of Faey. And on top of that, it put the power of the Generations in the hands of people who wouldn't respect that power, would misuse it, and the evil they did would be laid at Jason's feet because he was the one ultimately responsible. And that was a crime that Jason could not ignore.

There would be a reckoning with Banlia and the Medical Service, and it was going to be a reckoning they were never going to forget.

Chapter 10

Raista, 12 Hiraa, 4408, Faey Orthodox Calendar

Wednesday, 22 August 2022 Terran Standard Calendar

*Raista, 12 Hiraa, year 1333 of the 97th Generation, Karinne
Historical Reference Calendar*

Aderi Karinne Training Facility, Kosigi

When Jason said that *everyone* was going to be involved in training the new Generations, he was serious.

They were in one of the largest of the auditoriums in the training facility on Kosigi, where 377 ship captains and upper echelon members of the KMS were listening to a lecture given by Jason in the basics of splitting, preparing to do a simple exercise that would be displayed in front of them by hologram. This was the second phase of the day's training, where this morning Jason had worked with them to let them get the hang of communion. The early afternoon lesson was him explaining how splitting worked. Splitting wasn't very hard, but for people whose brains had always worked in "serial," them suddenly having "parallel" capability was going to be a touch confusing. It had been for Jyslin and Dahnai. Tomorrow, he would walk them through the basics of TK and teach them the exercises the Pai had developed to teach their kids how to manifest their ability. The entire day would be devoted to TK training. The day after that, they would do gestalt training, since all members of the KMS would have access to tactical gestalts and would be issued personal imprinted gestalts. And when that was done, he would do the same three-day course again with a new class of ship captains. And over, and over, and over, until there was no one left to teach.

Right now, the original Generations were being run nearly ragged. All of them were giving lessons like this one, teaching their new cousins the

basic abilities of communion and splitting. The TK was going to be handled differently and over time for the civilians, but all KMS personnel would receive TK training because they may need it in combat. Civilians would have the option to learn TK in an Academy course that Ayuma and Mrar were developing, but it wouldn't be part of the basic training they were getting now. Aya had put her foot down about him giving classes to the general public, so he was instead put on the schedule for the KMS, which Aya felt was trustworthy enough to be in the same room with him for extended periods of time. Since Jason was a member of Unit Alpha, one of the few Generations that trained to fight using their ability, he was an ideal teacher for the KMS. The other members of Unit Alpha were doing KMS courses as well, but they reserved the top tier of KMS ship captains and personnel like the command staff and Kosigi's management staff for Jason. Because of that, he saw many very familiar faces in the crowd, like Palla, Jeya, Juma, Sioa, Dellin, Haema, Kiya, Marayi, Sevi, Koye, as well as the upper command staff of the KES and the captains of the mobile bases (the super-ships) and Vanguard class ships that were in, like Rudy, Aloa, Kr'Vass, and Erim.

While Generations did that, the telepathic members of the house were teaching the formerly non-telepathic members the basics of telepathy. It was imperative that they did so, because a newly expressed telepath, unable to close her mind, was a danger to anyone and everyone around her. If they lashed out, if they suffered a schism, or even worse, a psychotic break, it would take a powerful and well-trained telepath to subdue her without doing any permanent harm. Jason had already put the most powerful telepaths in the house before they became Generations, like Yana, on a task force that would have to go subdue anyone that lost control, and if they couldn't handle it, an original Generation using a tactical gestalt would be deployed to handle it.

Of course, it required a bit of a demonstration as to exactly how deceptively powerful splitting was to make them appreciate the power for what it could do, and that was Jason controlling ten different avatars in the Merge Combat Simulator, which was a military-only version of the game *Vanguard*, shown on different holograms in front of the audience. The ability to focus on more than one thing at a time was one of the main reasons he was such a good rigger, able to manage all of a mecha's systems

and also keep his attention on everything going on around him at the same time. “While TK will be much more flashy, this ability, the ability to split, can be your greatest weapon,” he said, having the ability to split again to speak to the audience as he played the game with ten different avatars. Each avatar in the match was doing something different, which made it clear that Jason wasn’t just marching them all the same direction as a unit or something. “Even maintenance and damage control personnel can benefit from splitting while doing their jobs, but its greatest usefulness is for command staff and tactical personnel in combat. You, your XO, your bridge crew, your tactical officer, and your tactical asset personnel, your Tarks, gunners, fighter pilots, and riggers, should work the hardest on your ability to split, giving you the ability to manage all the information coming in during combat and allowing you to analyze it without losing your focus on the immediate situation. So this is a skill that all of you need to practice, practice, practice,” he stressed. “It’ll be a while until you can do what I’m doing, but all of you should be able to do this effectively with a couple of months of practice. It may look a bit confusing but trust me. Once you get the hang of it, it’s not that bad,” he assured them. This is the fundamental difference between how a Generation’s brain works and how a non-Generation’s brain works,” he told them. “Communing depends on our ability to send with a large bandwidth, in effect sending different flavors of our thought on different mental channels all at the same time. Splitting is the application of that bandwidth in other ways. Very few races have the ability to do multiple mental tasks at once, and I think most of you can guess which races those are without having to think about it too hard.” He ended the game, the holograms vanishing. “Alright, everyone pick up the controllers in the pocket on the seatback or dividing wall in front of you, and we’ll start your first practical lesson in splitting.

“We’re using manual controllers for this instead of your interface because the ability to control your body while splitting is a learned skill,” he said as they did as he instructed. “It takes practice to control your body while split without your splits fighting over which one is supposed to be in charge of moving you, which can lead to some motor control and balance issues. So, to do this right, you’ll be practicing your splitting while performing manual tasks, to give you a taste of it. And remember, all of you, that all of your splits have to share your senses. Only one split can control your eyes at a time, so the other splits you’ve got going have to

share what you see. Now, everyone make sure the controller that resembles a writing pen is in your main hand and the joystick is in your off hand,” he said, picking up two controllers from the podium, “and we’ll get started.”

He then spent nearly two hours helping them with a simple game where they had to draw a series of shapes using different factors, like size or color or number of sides, on one hologram while on the other they had to navigate a small avatar through a maze using the joystick. The holograms were just far enough apart to make them have to learn how to share their vision between splits, which was something they needed to learn to do. He roamed the auditorium, stopping to give advice here and there to those struggling with the exercise, and saw that some were picking it up much faster than others. Sioa, that old warhorse, seemed to get the trick of it almost immediately, completing the exercise in nearly record time—if there was a record—while Koye struggled with it to the point where Jason sat down with her for a good fifteen minutes and explained what she was feeling as she tried to split her attention, then walked her through it step by step. She seemed to do much better after that, getting the hang of using each hand independently as her eyes darted between the two holograms, one hand drawing on the flat hologram as the other moved the joystick to and fro to get her little dot through the maze.

After the exercise, their day was officially over...but most of them lingered in the auditorium, talking among themselves and to Jason. The “sorority” of ship captains was an exclusive one, but they rarely had the chance to talk to each other quite this way. So, whenever a large group of ship captains gathered in one place, they spent quite a while catching up with each other. Jason counted himself lucky that he was allowed into their little world, moving from small group to small group trading kisses, chatting, and giving little bits of advice and observations about how the next two days were going to go.

He boarded a corvette to be taken back home, which was one of the few ships right now that could put enough of a crew onto it to make it operational. If anyone attacked right now, the KMS was in no shape to fight them off, given that 61% of the KMS’ active duty and reserves were all on medical leave to undergo transition. The only ships that were active right now were the ones that had been out on missions when the crisis hit and were recalled, and they were going to stay isolated until enough Navy

personnel were back on active duty before they'd be allowed to undergo transition themselves.

The same was true for the KES. Every single member of the KES had been recalled to Karis, and some of them would take 20 days to get back here, they were so far out. When they did arrive, they'd be offered the same option Jason gave to everyone else, to become Generations or not...and thus far, not a *single member* of the KMS or KES had declined the offer.

[Only my first day and I'm tired already,] Jason complained a little to Dera as they headed back to Karis. *[And to think, I'll be doing this every day for the next fifty years.]*

She gave him an amused look. *[I'm sure you'll live,]* she replied, her commune strong and effortless. All the guards had gotten commune down quickly, but they had a lot more to learn before they truly mastered the medium. And they intended to master it fully, because it was their duty as Imperial Guards to be the absolute best at everything they did. Ryn was already under the tutelage of the most skilled Generation telepaths, the twins Ela and Ezi, who were both graduates of the Xerian Academy themselves. They weren't as powerful as women like Saelle and Jyslin, but they were more *skilled*...and telepathy was one of those abilities where skill sometimes mattered more than power. The twins would teach Ryn everything there was to know about communion, how it differed from standard telepathy and the tricks she could pull off using it, and then Ryn would teach the rest of the Guard.

[I'm almost used to hearing you do that,] Jason noted dryly, glancing in her direction. In his opinion, Dera was the most attractive of the guards dispatched to Karis.

[I'm getting used to it myself. I like it better than regular telepathy. It's more...more...encompassing. Complete.]

[It's how we have always talked to each other,] he nodded. *[If someone can commune, then I commune with them. Even with someone like Mrar, at least before she was changed. Even with her limited bandwidth in communion, I preferred it over regular telepathy. So did she, for that matter.]*

[Sounds like she's ecstatic to get the full meal.]

[Relatively, but right now she's too busy to do much of anything. Just like me,] he told her, his thought wry and a little intimidated. *[Mrar and Samin been running around like headless chickens for four days now.]*

[We're probably the most to blame for that,] Dera noted with amusement.

[Yeah, so I wouldn't be flirting with Samin anytime soon. As surly as he is, he'd bite your head off,] he warned, which made her return pure amusement.

[Jason, you need to come to the annex immediately,] Songa called over the network.

[I'm halfway back to Karis from Kosigi, dear. It'll be about half an hour or so.]

[Go faster,] came her terse reply, which made him frown. She only got like that she had bad news.

[Great, more bad news,] he intimated with a forlorn sigh. *Change of plans, take me to the Karsa annex as fast as you can get me there,* he told the pilot, who had yet to transition.

Yes, your Grace.

[Makes me wonder what will become of commune-capable interfaces after this,] Dera mused, tapping her interface. *[We don't really need them anymore.]*

[They'll still be useful,] he answered. *[Now you can merge to it without it being jacked in.]*

They got him to the annex fairly quickly, mainly since Jason could bypass the security checkpoint at the only open gate in the shield. He hurried into the situation room where Songa, Kereth, and their respective staffs were still hard at work, though now they were doing research and observation of the transition process instead of trying to find a cure for the virus. The research was into the virus itself, so they could understand how it was made and possibly come up with a counter to it if it ever showed up again. "I'm here," he announced. "What happened?"

“To put it bluntly, cousin, the virus has broken containment,” Kereth told him. “A significant number of new cases have appeared on Kirri’arr.”

“But they had it contained!”

“It got into the *symbiotes*, dear,” Songa told him wearily. “And they didn’t detect it. The virus managed to get into the symbiotes, mostly likely before Krirara’s house was quarantined. And the Kirri have had no more luck detecting the virus within a symbiote than we have.”

He looked at a map of Kirri’arr that Kereth brought up, showing new cases all over the planet, and it all but made his heart sink. They’d had it contained! The worst was supposed to be over! But now they were looking at the absolute worst case scenario, and that was the virus loose in another empire...and it was the *Karis* strain of the virus, which would genetically adapt to anyone that contracted it that had a sufficiently evolved brain to accept the alterations. The only saving grace in all this was that the Kirri were not an aggressive empire, and they were one of the few species he could stomach being transformed into Generations.

The key now was to prevent the virus from getting out of Kirri space. And also to prevent anyone from getting *in* when news of the outbreak hit the Confederation.

“Cybi,” he called, and she manifested a small hologram over the table. “Get in touch with Moderator Krazrou and tell him we’d like to help the quarantine effort by interdicting every planet and station in Kirri space until the virus is gone, and we’ll have the KMM handle cargo traffic and supplies during the disruption.”

“*Clever,*” Cybi nodded. “*I’ll contact him immediately.*”

“Keeping the other empires from sending agents to Kirri’arr to be deliberately infected by the virus,” Kereth said with an approving nod.

“That’s the idea,” he nodded. “I guess if the virus was going to get out, we lucked out that it happened with the Kirri. At least I know they won’t turn around and try to use their new powers to conquer the universe.”

Songa had to spare a chuckle. “That would be the most un-Kirri thing ever,” she agreed.

“We would gladly accept the Kirri as cousins,” Kereth nodded. “They are quite agreeable to the Kimdori.”

Jason stayed in the annex to organize the full blockade of Kirri space with Krazrou, who was amenable to Jason’s offer. Jason was quite fond of Krirara’s replacement, because he shared many of the same traits with her, traits that were crucial to be the Moderator. He was intelligent, observant, unflappable, well-spoken, prone to negotiation, and eminently practical, the hallmark trait of the Kirri race. Like Krirara before him, he gained the position of Moderator by convincing the other members of the council that he was the best choice, so he was quite a dangerous man to face across from a negotiating table. But, in some ways, he didn’t simply replace Krirara in the council. He had a different circle of friends, different alliances and allegiances, and Jason wasn’t in Krazrou’s inner circle, nor was Krazrou in his. They did have a sincere friendship, but it was a *working* relationship. Krazrou didn’t hang out with Jason the way Krirara did when she was Moderator.

It took nearly two hours to get everything arranged, and then he went to the office, where he picked right up where he left off with Krazrou, switching from the logistics of keeping the Kirri supplied to a more secure discussion about what was coming for the Kirri and what they could do to mitigate the impact of the virus. That included bringing King Mrrshan into the discussion, since the Kirri had so few telekinetics among them that they had no real idea how to go about teaching the changed Kirri how to use it. That more or less required them to bring Mrrshan into the secret, but Jason trusted Mrrshan and the Pai. He wouldn’t reveal that until Krazrou did.

After another three hours of in-depth discussion, he leaned back in his chair and turned it to look out the window. Somehow, he had the feeling that it wasn’t going to end with the Kirri. Their worlds were infused with symbiotes, and if just one infected symbiote got into a transport or cargo ship in that window after the virus reached Kirri’arr and before the planet was quarantined, then the infection was going to spread. And since the Kirri relied on outside trade so heavily for many of the things they needed, it meant that the infection could spread almost *anywhere*. The odds were very high that the infection had spread to other planets in Kirri territory, because Kirri’arr was the hub of all trade for the Kirri. All cargo and goods from outside came through Kirri’arr and was then routed to its destination. But

there was also a good chance that the virus had gotten out, because the symbiotes would be aboard those cargo ships when they returned to their home empires.

He pulled up some intel from the Kimdori, a list of the Kirri's strongest trading partners, information that Krazrou didn't know Jason had, then cross-referenced it with the cargo shipments that moved in and out of Kirri space in an estimated window when the virus was uncontained and undetected. He pulled up the incubation time from Songa's mainframe and then checked it against that list, then identified the four most likely empires that had infected symbiotes in them; the Aridai, the Grimja, the Ogravians, and, oddly enough, the Subrians. The Subrians had a ton of trade treaties with the Kirri, formed both during and after their membership in the Confederation. The three Confederation members...he could stomach it if the infection spread there. None of them were inherently aggressive, and in the case of the Grimja, they were fairly trustworthy. But the Subrians, that was a problem. Not only were they a fairly aggressive empire, they were outside the Confederation. If the Subrians were infected, they may spread it through the entire Coalition...and then the Coalition may attack Karis to gain access to biogenic technology. Jason trusted Holikk and the Subrians up to a point, but he did *not* trust the Coalition as a whole. There were too many empires in it that wanted to be top dog in the galaxy, to the point where they'd conceivably go to war with the Confederation to assert their dominance.

If the infection got out of the Confederation...he didn't want to think about that at the moment.

He discussed his worries with Miaari, who was in her office. Her hologram was projected in front of the window rather than over his desk. "We've been keeping an eye on all Kirri trading partners, but the four you mentioned do have the best chance. I've noted this to Denmother, who has Kimdori in position to alert us if any sign of the virus appears outside of Kirri territory."

"Good. I swear, Mee, this is going to give me gray hair," he said, rubbing his temples.

"Given how smoothly things have gone on Karis and in the Imperium, cousin, maybe this isn't as bad a thing as it appears," she ventured. "There

have been only a very few reported cases of telepathic episodes, mostly on Terra. Things in the Imperium are quite calm, almost routine. The Faey are simply sleeping through their transition and going back to work as if nothing had happened.”

“I’m a little surprised about that, but it’s not going to last. Aria’s dream makes that clear,” he said grimly. “It still hasn’t changed. Dahnai is still at risk, and nothing we’ve done has changed it. Or perhaps what we’ve done has caused it. God, sometimes I hate precogs,” he sighed. “I just wish I had more to go on than her dream.”

“We just have to keep trying, cousin,” she told him. “But in the short term, for now, there seem to be no problems in the Imperium.”

“I hope so,” he said, accepting Chichi into his lap and scratching her between the ears. “That reminds me, what word from Tir Tairngire? How are they handling the Haumda and others that were infected?”

“The virus has spread there as fast as it did here. Nearly half of the Dreamers are infected or have already gone through transition. The Elders adopted your own position with their guests and non-Dreamer residents. So, there will be a significant number of Haumda who will be Generations.”

“I...think I can live with that,” he said quietly. “The Haumda aren’t aggressive, at least in the way that concerns me most. This does mean we have to rethink our defense plans,” he added wearily. “With the virus out, it raises the risk drastically that we’ll will be attacked for our biogenic systems.”

“Myri and the command staff are going to present something to you either late today or early tomorrow. Needless to say, your decision to expand the fleet three years ago was positively prophetic, cousin. Those ships will be absolutely vital now.”

“We just need crews to man them,” he grunted. “We need to up our recruitment efforts. Or God forbid, I may have to institute conscription in the house. The one thing I really, really didn’t want to do.”

“There’s nothing wrong with conscription.”

“There is when you don’t want to do it,” he replied. “I’ve never been a fan of the draft, Mee. It’s my opinion that an unwilling soldier is a bad

soldier. I'm just surprised we have this problem," he said, looking past her and into the city, which was busy again. "Not three years ago, we had so many people in the reserves and planetary guard that—" He sat up. "Maybe that's the answer," he said. "What if we allocate a portion of each fleet as a reservist ship? Manned primarily by reservists? And we could make service in the *reserves* mandatory instead of active duty? That way everyone on the planet is trained to fight, but military service doesn't dominate their lives."

"It might work, but you need to talk to the command staff about that, cousin, not me," she replied.

"I'll definitely bring that up," he said, making a mental note. "And I need to go over to 3D and get them to work on new defense systems, stuff the others haven't seen yet. They saw a lot of our toys during the wars, and we haven't expanded the toy box much in the last three years."

"It would be good for you. Sitting in your office brooding is never a good thing, cousin. You are at your best when you're out there *doing*, not when you're sitting there *brooding*."

"Damn right," he said, standing up. "What about it, Chichi? Wanna go on a trip?" he asked her. "I'd love to have you along."

She gave an enthusiastic little chirp.

[Dera, we're going to 3D. Get the carry sling for Chichi, she wants to go.]

[I'll call in a corvette.]

[I don't need a corvette.]

[You do now. Captain Aya has increased security protocols until after the risk that a new telepath has a schism is reduced.]

[Oh good grief,] he returned, disgust staining his thought, which caused Dera to return pure amusement.

[I'll make sure it's a corvette captain you like,] she replied, half-seriously. *[I think Jax is currently in Karsa.]*

[I can go with that. I'd like to talk to her anyway, she always has her finger on the pulse of the city, thanks to her business. I can always rely on her for the outlook of the common woman.]

The trip did wonders for his mood...or maybe it was just going to 3D. He spent five hours over there talking with some of his oldest friends, getting involved in several discussions about new devices they could build, new technologies they were working to develop inside the unassuming warehouse across the compound from the Shimmer Dome. He was over there so long it was past sunset when Jax dropped him off at home, and he sat down to a full dinner table. And much like the trip to 3D eased his mood, sitting at the table bantering with his wife and kids helped alleviate the burden he felt on his shoulders. The only drama in the evening was Amber and Twilight getting a bit sulky that they got whipped by Chichi in a game of mock-battle, since Jason rarely brought her home...but he'd been bringing her home much more often since she got left behind in the office. Chichi was smaller than Twilight, but she was much tougher and meaner, which made her the perfect tabi for Jason. Amber seemed doomed to be eternally small, so she ran for the hills after the first thirty seconds when she made the grievous error of pouncing on Chichi when Twilight turned tail and ran.

Even after three years, he still fumed a bit that he wasn't usually allowed to bring *his* tabi home. So, he'd started taking her with him when he went out on excursions, letting her fulfill her role as empathic protector while he was on the move.

He was halfway down the beach on an evening stroll when Cybi called him. *[I'm sending a corvette down for you, Jason. You need to go to Tir Tairngire right now. You're the only person the wolves will listen to.]*

[Why for?]

[The wolves are being infected by the virus,] she replied. [Their brains are sufficiently developed to accept being altered. Two of the youngers have fallen into comas, and the alphas are very agitated. So you need to go over there and explain things to them, calm them down.]

[I didn't think that was possible,] he told her, almost incredulously, as he turned and hurried towards the dock on the far side of the beach.

[I don't think any of us thought to check them. It hasn't affected any animals, but the wolves are far too evolved to really be considered animals. They're as smart as Terrans and they're developed enough for telepaths to

understand their thoughts, after all. So if Terrans can be affected, we should have realized that they could be too.]

[True enough,] he agreed darkly. Aya, they're sending a corvette down, I need to go to Tir Tairngire right now, he called. I may need my armor.

I'll have it brought down to the dock.

It wasn't a corvette that landed at the dock, it was a destroyer, and it raced him to the vacation house in the meadow in barely forty minutes. Jason all but jumped out of the hatch once it came down to a parking hover near the coast—bigger ships weren't allowed to land there to prevent damage to the meadow—and used the grav pods in the armor to get down to the ground. The wolves were in the shelter in the compound, and he greeted two very, very upset parents just outside the opening, the female rearing up and putting her paws on his shoulders, which would have driven him down to the ground were he not in armor. “It's alright, it's alright, we know what's wrong with them, and it's nothing life-threatening,” he said soothingly, reaching up and putting his armored hand on her neck. “There's an illness spreading across the planet, and it looks like you're vulnerable to it the way the Dreamers are. But it's not a normal illness. It's going to affect all of you, and when it runs its course, things are going to be different for you.”

The alpha male gave a short, urgent bark, looking down at him expectantly.

“I'll explain in a moment, I want to check them and make sure they're alright. Cybi, bring a hoverbike spinner from the armory to the shelter,” he called.

“I'm booting one up now.”

He entered the shelter and knelt by the youngest and smallest of the three cubs, one of the two females, and touched her mind tentatively. She was indeed in a coma, her mind was inactive, which was what the virus did when it entered the brain and started altering it to grant it telepathy, the ability to commune, and telekinesis. The spinner from a hoverbike entered the shelter, and he took control of it by commune and had it scan the three cubs—though they were all adults, they were still the alpha pair's cubs, and he always called them that. Cybi downloaded some updates into the spinner

so it knew what to look for, and once it was updated, it showed that the two comatose wolves were indeed in the middle of transition, and both were showing no signs of complications or side effects.

“They’re both alright,” he announced. “The virus is affecting them the same way it’s affecting the Dreamers, which means that things just got very complicated for all of you,” he sighed.

The alpha female gave a short growling *whuff*.

“What this illness does is changes you to give you the abilities I have,” he told them. “It will give you my ability to communicate mind to mind, and to hear the machines in the compound that speak to each other the same way. It will also give you the ability to move things without touching them the way you’ve seen me do it.”

The male gave him a surprised look.

“I know it sounds good, and I guess from your perspective it can be,” he said ruefully. “But it’s caused us all kinds of problems over the last several days. Before there were only a small number of us, but now we know there will be so many of us that you couldn’t understand the number. And it’s even affecting species like you guys. I told you years ago that you may regret letting us move in, friend, and now that warning is coming back to haunt you,” he sighed.

The female gave him an inquisitive look.

“No, but it can be dangerous for an untrained mind to have these abilities,” he answered. “The danger comes when your telepathy expresses. Emotions fuel your power, and if your fear overwhelms you, it can cause you to lash out, become a danger to everyone around you. The most dangerous time for all of you is going to be after your telepathy wakes up but before you can learn the basics of how it works. This power can be dangerous, friends, very dangerous, and it’s at its most dangerous when you have no control over it.”

The male gave a dismissive snort.

“Easier said than done,” he replied. “But if someone has to teach you, then I guess it’s going to be me. After all, I can talk to you without having to use my mind. That may make it easier. But I can’t stay here,” he grunted.

“Are you willing to go to my home for more than a few days? It will take time after the virus does its work before your telepathy expresses, and we can use that time before it happens to teach you more about it, and what’s to come.”

The alpha male blinked slowly.

“Alright. I’ll have them send down some cargo sleds so we can move the cubs. But this does pose a problem. If the other packs are infected, then they’ll have no one to help them. Cybi, bring in a sensor dropship and check the forest,” he called. “Find out if other packs are infected. If so, have Yeri bring in one of her diplomats to fly low and slow over the forest and warn the packs what’s happening to them. I don’t want them to go into a panic, they might become dangerous to the Dreamers, or the Dreamers to them.”

“I’ll call Yeri. There’s a sensor dropship over at Joint Base Tau Sigma, I’ll have it mobilize.”

“If needs be, I’ll send people in that will teach them the basics of their new abilities,” he told the alpha pair. “This illness is, in a strange way, our fault, so it’s our responsibility to help those affected by it. We brought it here,” he said simply.

The male snuffled.

“Yes, it’s affecting more than just this world,” he nodded. “It’s rampant across Karis and dozens of worlds in the Imperium. And it was just detected on worlds in the Kirri empire. We’ve been trying to prevent it from spreading, but we’re losing that battle.”

The female looked at him curiously.

“Because while I may not object to people gaining the same abilities I have, I do object to what they may do with them,” he replied. “I told you two long ago that I have a responsibility to ensure that anyone who uses Karinne technology must use it responsibly, with care and regard for the lives and well-being of others. These abilities are no different, because they are abilities that were originally only possessed by members of the House. They come from us, they come from the Generations, so those that gain these powers must use them wisely and responsibly, the way we do. But the problem is, I can’t force those outside of the house to obey the rules that we

original Generations follow. So if they do wrong using these abilities, I'll feel that I'm ultimately responsible for the evil they do," he said strongly.

The two of them looked down at him steadily.

"That's what more than one other person has said, but I can't help feeling that way," he said as he patted the smaller female, who couldn't feel it because she was in a coma. "At least I know that you guys won't misuse it, so that's one small favor. Cybi, call back home and have Aya get the bay ready for our guests," he said. It wasn't the first time the wolves had visited Karis, so they had everything they needed to set up a guest bedroom of sorts for the pack in the mecha bay attached to the guard barracks. It was the only place on the strip that had doors big enough to easily accommodate them. "And try not to break anything this time," he added chidingly, looking at the alpha male.

He rolled his eyes, which needed no translation.

Four members of the crew arrived with large hoversleds used by maintenance teams to move around large equipment, and Jason helped move the comatose wolves to the destroyer, which had descended as far as it could without touching the ground. Jason had to resort to the tactical in his armor to lift the wolves up into the landing bay—they were too big to use a standard personnel hatch—and found that the crew had put out some blankets and pillows to give them a comfortable place to lay in the landing bay. The ship's doctor came down and gave the sleeping wolves an examination as the ship ascended up towards the Stargate, and she confirmed his diagnosis. "They're showing no complications or side effects. The virus is running its course in them the same way it has with every other species it's affected," she declared, looking up at the alpha pair. "They'll be just fine," she said reassuringly. "They'll wake up when the process is complete, which because of their size might take anywhere up to seventy hours. There's no real way for me to be more exact, not without knowing exactly when they went to sleep."

"About two hours ago," Jason supplied. "They called me not long after it happened."

"Oh. In that case, given their size, I'd say that they'll wake up in about sixty-eight hours," she predicted. "But that's a very rough estimate. The

larger the host, the longer it takes for the virus to complete the transition. And I hope you don't find offense when I say that you all are quite large," she smiled up at the wolves.

"They see that as a complement, Doctor," Jason told her dryly. "Given the size of the alpha pair, how long will they be asleep when it affects them?"

"Perhaps as long as one hundred hours," she replied speculatively, looking up at them. "Given their sheer size, it will take the virus quite a while to complete the transition."

Jason got a tiny taste of their parental concern when the third cub went comatose on the trip over to Karis, which forced Jason to calm them down and explain things again in more detail, then he helped the guards bring the three sleeping cubs and two worried parents to the garage once they landed at the dock. The big beds had been laid out for them, and Jason tucked the three younger wolves into beds and sat with the parents as they stood vigil over their cubs. Songa came over and used a portable scanner to give the alpha pair a more in-depth examination. "Both of you are well into transition," she announced. "You'll be going to sleep anytime now. I'd suggest that both of you get into a bed and stay there until that happens, you're a bit too big for us to easily move you."

"She wants to know why she doesn't feel sick," Jason translated.

"Because this virus doesn't make you sick in the way you'd normally associate with being ill," she answered.

"He wants to know why they'll go to sleep."

"Because the virus is going to change your brains to grant you the abilities of a Generation, and once it starts doing that, your brain can't do the normal things it does while the virus is changing the way it works. Your brain will effectively shut down until the process is complete, leaving only the autonomic functions working. So you'll sleep through the entire thing, and when you wake up, it will be over. I went through it myself, and I can promise you that it's painless and comfortable," she told them. "You won't even realize that it happened at first."

The male gave a low growling sound, then padded over to the largest of the beds. The female joined him, and they both laid down.

“I’ll make sure the cubs are kept safe and protected,” Jason assured them. “I won’t let them off the strip. They’ve been here before, so they know better than to try to jump the fence.” He chuckled. “Most likely, they’ll spend most of the time waiting for you to wake up playing with the kids. You know how much they adore them.”

The female gave a bit of a pant, then she shivered, closed her eyes, and her head very nearly dropped to the bed. The virus had reached her brain, and it had shut it down to begin its work.

“She’s just started the transition,” Songa told the male quickly. “She’ll be alright. She’ll sleep through it all and then wake up a new wolf. And so will you.”

He gave a nervous whine and nuzzled her, then he too passed out, his head beside hers on the bed.

“And that’s that,” Jason said, stepping over and patting the male on the shoulder. “Now we wait for about five days for them to wake up.”

“I’ll put a medscanner in here to keep tabs on them,” Songa offered.

“Thanks, dear. I just hope this doesn’t cause a wholesale disruption of the ecosystem on Tir Tairngire,” he mused. “The wolves are already efficient predators. I can only guess at how much more deadly they’ll be when they’re telepathic and able to coordinate in a way their prey can’t detect. And once they master TK, watch out,” he said, then laughed softly without much humor.

“I’m sure they’ll be fine, dear. The wolves are very smart, but they’re also very grounded. I’m sure they’ll adapt to their new normal and work it into the lives they’ve chosen to live. After all, even though they come visit us and enjoy our technology, they always go back home and return to the lives they led before they met us. Much like the Parri, they have chosen that simple life, and I don’t think this will change that.”

“True enough,” he agreed, patting the female. “In a weird way, I’m almost glad they were infected,” he admitted. “If anything, it proves they’re highly evolved, even if they look like animals.”

“If there’s one thing I’ve learned since coming here, dear, it’s to never judge the book by its cover, as you Terrans say,” she told him, patting him

on the shoulder. “Now go get some rest. I’ll get everything set up to keep an eye on them.”

“Thank you, dear. I’m going to go home and read the latest reports, then try to get some sleep.”

“Alright. Just remember, dear, things will look better in the morning.”

Raira, 6 Oraa, 4408, Faey Orthodox Calendar

Wednesday, 19 September 2022 Terran Standard Calendar

Raira, 6 Oraa, year 1333 of the 97th Generation, Karinne Historical Reference Calendar

Foxwood East, Karis

Things were both calming down and getting more nervous at the same time.

Sitting on the beach in the late afternoon with all five wolves surrounding him, he finished up the day’s lesson in telekinesis. All five had managed to access their TK, but they were still very clumsy with it. And unlike the other members of the house, Jason wanted the wolves to go home with a basic understanding of TK, since it was so useful to them. Since they didn’t have prehensile hands or opposable thumbs, they had come to rely on TK as their primary means of manipulating objects.

This was the end of a long day for Jason, and the days were starting to blur together. He’d been working 20 hours a day every day since this mess started, training class after class of KMS officers in the daytime then coming home to train the wolves in the evening. And he wasn’t doing anything less than the other original Generations. All of them were training classes day after day, some of them two or three classes a day. But they’d had enough time to start getting new Generations trained to the point where they could also teach classes, so more and more classes were being formed as new Generations were certified to teach. Jyslin was one of them, as were most of the strip girls, Seido, and Vell. Any Generation with sufficient mastery of their powers to be considered competent was now teaching the neophytes, which caused the training program to expand almost

exponentially over the last takir. Jason was teaching two different classes of KMS officers, one in the morning and one in the early afternoon, then he was coming home to teach the wolves in the evening.

What was happening on Karis was also happening in the Imperium and had started in the Kirri empire. Jason had accepted the first to be changed from the Kirri and trained them, and with the Imperium, he had trained the Imperial Marines permanently assigned to Karis, Kei and her unit, who were back on Draconis teaching right now. Those trained Generations were now training their own people. Krirara was back on Kirri'arr as an instructor, putting her project on hold, training classes of Kirri who would then train other Kirri, much the way they were doing it on Karis.

So far, the overall outlook was somewhat favorable in Jason's opinion. It had been 28 days since the virus was detected on Kirri'arr, and it had yet to be detected outside of Kirri territory. It had spread to every population center in Kirri space either on its own or by deliberate infection—which Jason approved, it would be impossible to keep the virus contained within Kirri'arr anyway—but had not spread beyond Kirri space. That was an eternal relief to Jason, allaying his greatest fear, that the virus had found its way to Subria.

Not that he disliked the Subrians and Holikk, but the Coalition getting infected would turn the political situation in the galaxy into an absolute quagmire.

But the virus did spread to one other empire over the last month, and that was the Collective. They should have seen that coming, since the Imperium and the Collective were so intermixed, particularly in the systems that were held jointly by the two empires. The virus had mutated to affect Urumi, proving that even the Draconis version of the virus was volatile, and that had triggered an even harder quarantine, to keep that mutated virus in Collective space. There were a whole lot of non-Faey foreign nationals that lived on Draconis, and Dahnai didn't want them affected by the mutated virus. Much as Jason and Dahnai had done, Sk'Vrae had allowed the virus to spread through the Collective, because it was both nearly impossible to contain the virus on one planet due to the need to trade food back and forth and to accelerate the dying off of the virus by just getting it over with all at

once instead of fighting a running battle with the virus over months, or maybe even years, and risking it mutating into something deadly.

Jason had mixed feelings about that, since the Urumi were very aggressive, but it did permanently cement the alliance between the Karinnes, the Imperium, and the Collective. They would all be Generations, all be cousins, and he had hopes that he and Dahnai could curb Sk'Vrae's more territorial impulses.

Or that he could curb both Sk'Vrae and Dahnai's impulses.

Thus far, the only real hitch in things was Tir Tairngire, and that was because many visitors to the planet had been infected by the mutated version of the virus and were currently trapped there by the quarantine. And they were residents of dozens of other empires within the Confederation, which made Jason very worried that those people might "mysteriously disappear" not long after returning home. He'd been discussing that with Zaa, who was developing a plan to keep an eye on those members of other empires that were infected. They were cousins now, Generations, and Jason would do everything he could to protect them.

Because now, they were *family*.

The last month had brought at least a modicum of resigned peace to Jason over the situation. So far, they'd had very few problems in either the house or the Imperium, and much like the house, it had brought the Imperium together in a way they hadn't been since the reconstruction after the Third Civil War. Jason could understand that to an extent, because their ability to sense their own made everyone seem at least familiar, almost like family, and it had had the curious effect on the Faey of making them much more considerate of each other. They certainly didn't think of themselves as family the way they did in the house, but it had definitely made the Faey in the Imperium feel closer to each other. That was a good thing in his opinion, since people who felt they had a connection to others weren't going to try to kill them.

But then again, they were Faey, so who knew.

Things had stayed remarkably calm and orderly both on Karis and in the Imperium, as people settled into this new normal that Jason was still trying to accept. And oddly enough, the first real sign of it came from the

Interstellar Batchi League. They had suspended the season when the outbreak hit and the quarantine took effect, but they'd just announced that the season was back on, and matches would resume on Daira. The season would be shortened so the championship match would still take place on the usual day, and the usual rules about roster sizes and calling players up from the lower leagues after the cutoff date were going to be temporarily suspended to ensure that all teams could carry a full roster of both active and practice squad players. Batchi was back, and that would bring back a definite feeling that normalcy was returning to the Imperium and the House.

The IBL did, however, remind players via memo that using TK during a match was strictly prohibited, and doing so would lead to a 6-match suspension for the first offense, and a full season suspension for the second. That kind of draconian punishment would scare the players into not even thinking about it. A six-match suspension could end a career. And that was probably a smart thing for the IBL to do, since now *everyone* was a TK.

Or they would be, once they learned how to use it.

"Ease it back a little," he said aloud as the youngest of the cubs, the female, tried to manipulate a volume of water pulled out of the ocean. "Affecting liquids is about subtlety. Trying to brute force it just makes the water globe fall apart."

[It's slippery,] she complained.

"I know. This is good practice to learn the light touch you need for more advanced applications, because later on I'll teach you an alternate means of using TK that makes it much easier to handle liquids. That approach has you affecting the space the liquid occupies, not the liquid itself."

[Then why learn this?] she challenged.

"I told you, you need to learn how to do this so you can do other things. So stop being whiny."

She smacked him on the side with her tail, which made him chuckle.

He worked with the pack all the way up until dinner, which was served out on the deck with the wolves invited. It was a bit of a tight squeeze with five giant canines sharing space with his wife, *amu*, and their kids. *[I think maybe five or six more days, and you'll be ready to return to Tir Tairngire,]*

he told the alpha pair, which was communed openly. *[Once I teach you how to affect space itself, you'll know everything you need to know to function. I'll come over and teach you more if you want to learn, though.]*

[I think we'd like that,] the alpha male answered. They had names, but their names weren't expressible any way but telepathy or commune, for they were *scents*, not *words*. The unique scent of each wolf was its name. When unframed, those scents translated roughly in Jason's mind to what they most closely resembled from the smells he knew. So to him, the alpha pair were the male Cedar and the female Cinnamon, and their cubs were the male Pepper and the females Butterscotch and Honey. But he never addressed them by those nicknames. He could telepathically "pronounce" their scent-names, so he used those. *[But I think we'll like going home more. As nice as it is to visit our friends here, this is not home.]*

[I can understand that,] Tim answered. *[No matter how much fun it is to travel and see new things, nothing compares to home.]*

[What news of our sister packs in the forest?] the alpha male asked. Their species of wolf was actually not very populous. There were only about 16,000 of them spread among about 300 packs, occupying the forest and plain to the west that ran south of the mountain range, which cut off the south on both sides, on the planet. That forest was actually quite isolated, with many species that existed nowhere else on the planet due to the natural barriers of the mountains to the north and the ocean to the south

[I think all of them accepted offers of help,] he answered. *[The Dreamers who have the most experience with TK volunteered to help teach them, so right now my instructors and the Dreamers are spreading out through the forest to arrange things with the packs. Quite a few of them have already figured out how to commune on their own,]* he noted with an audible chuckle.

[It's not that hard,] the alpha female declared.

[No it's not. Since there are so few sentient minds out there, they're not having any real problems with not having closed minds. They're only hearing their own pack, and that doesn't bother them all that much. So the main thing we'll be teaching them is closing their minds, standard telepathy, and TK, which we hope will make life a little easier for them.]

[It very much does,] the male cub agreed. [I never knew how wonderful it could be to scratch every little itch with a tool I can move exactly where I want it to go.]

[The science of telekinesis reduced to being a scratching post. Why do I teach you?] Jason teased, which caused the male to give him an amused look, his tongue lolling out of his mouth in the canine version of laughter.

[We could fix that itching thing with a razor, you know,] Symone winked.

[I dare you,] the male retorted as he bared his fangs, which made her laugh.

The wolves certainly did fit in around the strip. Quite a few people would miss them when they went home, and Jason would be one of them.

After dinner, he got in some quality time with the kids, both his own and others, playing with them out on the beach and on the deck, at least up until it was bedtime. Jyslin was still busy with all the paperwork from the IBL, since they'd be starting matches again on Daira, but the Paladins were going to cause a major problem with the schedule. The quarantine at Karis was for the mutated virus, and as such the planet had to remain completely quarantined. What that meant was that, in all likelihood, the Paladins would have to forfeit at least three matches due to being unable to play, and those forfeits would be officially recorded as losses in the record. That seriously jeopardized the team's chances of making the playoffs, but there was simply no way around it. The team couldn't leave Karis, and other teams couldn't travel to the planet. Jyslin had been conferring with the IBL since the announcement to try to work something out, but the simple fact of the matter was, nothing could really be done. The rules were clear.

Her quandary brought her down to the living room as he played a video game with Rann, Shya, Zach, and Dara, as the kids taught her the ins and outs of merging as a Generation. *[Love, can we talk?]*

[When can we not?] he replied. *[Sorry kidlets, Jyslin needs me. You guys fight it out.]*

[You were losing anyway, Dad,] Rann teased.

[Yeah, yeah, son, tomorrow we're playing Vanguard. We'll see how smarmy you are then.]

Jason went up to Jyslin's office, which was filled with Paladins stuff and dominated by a poster of Evala Desarre, their sensational true rookie left striker, in her playing uniform on the far wall. A hologram of two older Faey appeared over her desk as they approached, which he recognized as IBL executives, a man and a woman. "Alright, he's here," Jyslin said, sitting at her desk. Jason stood beside her.

"What we wanted to know, Jason, is if it could be arranged for the Paladins to play exhibition matches during the time slots where they would usually have played using bionoids," the female Faey said. Her name was Sedla Meronne, a former IBL superstar that was now in the organization as an executive. "The matches wouldn't count as official, but at least it would give us something to present. Can you build about fifty bionoids with exacting specs that each team can field?"

"Easily," he replied. "And I think that's a great idea, by the way. You just need to send me the exact specs you want. I can make the bionoids stay within Faey physical limits, or we can drop the limits and let the players use bionoids that are super-Faey."

"We want them to stay within limits. In fact, we want you to build bionoids that match the physical stats and characteristics of the players as closely as you possibly can. We can send you the physical exam data from the teams you'd normally be playing, they have exact measurements of the players' strength, speed, and agility. We need the bionoids to be as close to those numbers as possible."

"We can do it. Hold on, lemme bring in my bionoid expert." He contacted Rook and had him conference in via hologram. Jason explained what they wanted again where the execs could hear him, and Rook wasted no time.

"I can do that easily," he assured them. "I can match the bionoid systems exactly to the medical data so the players will feel that they are merged to their own bodies instead of a bionoid. I can further hard code the bionoids so only the bionoid's owner can merge to it. That will prevent any potential shenanigans."

“That’s an excellent idea,” the male nodded. Jason didn’t know his name but knew his face. “But we want that data isolated from the Paladins,” he said, glancing at Jyslin. “It may give them an unfair advantage.”

“I can do that,” Rook replied. *“You can send the data to my lab by crypto, that way the only one that sees that data is me. And I won’t divulge it to Jyslin, no matter how much she begs.”*

“Oh, bite me, Rook,” she grated, which made Jason chuckle.

“I will give you my contact number, so you can call my lab directly,” Rook told them. *“We can discuss how many bionoids you need and what systems and safeguards you want in them outside of Jyslin’s knowledge. That way she doesn’t have advanced knowledge of what the bionoids have in them or what they can do. That keeps the playing field fair.”*

“Then I think we’re done here,” Sedla declared. “Thank you for arranging this, Jyslin. We’ll call back after we talk to Rook and conference you in with Fara so we can hammer out the details.” Fara was Fara Strovarre, owner of the Adori Assassins, who were in Division III. That would have been their opponent in Daira...and now were again, just not in an official match.

“I’m sure my girls will enjoy playing, even if it’s just exhibition,” Jyslin said. “We need to shake off the rust. With us having to forfeit three matches, we’ll be up against the wall when the playoff chase starts.”

“I’m sorry, Jyslin, but we have no choice. Rules are rules,” she said simply. “But I’m sure that even with the three forfeits, the Paladins will make the playoffs. You’ve built quite an organization,” she said approvingly.

“And you’re not the only one that will have to forfeit matches. The Warriors are behind the Terran quarantine, they’re facing the same problem,” the male added.

When the conference was over, Jason leaned against her desk and looked down at her. *[I think this is gonna work out,]* he told her.

[Me too. It lets the girls get in some real quality practice in and hopefully won’t bite too deeply into our profit margin with us losing the

revenue from three matches. We can sell the exhibition tickets at a discount.]

[I think enough people will be intrigued by the idea of bionoids controlled by IBL players playing an exhibition match to sell out the stadium,] he replied. [And we'll still get the concession and merchandising revenue.]

[Yeah. So, I think I'm gonna ship some military grade bionoids over to the practice facility for the morning,] she communed impishly. [May as well get a head start on them acclimating to playing in bionoids.]

[Cheater.]

[I'm Faey, baby,] she replied shamelessly, grinning at him. [And I know how much bad girls turn you on,] she added, lust staining her thought a little bit.

[I've been known to fantasize about bad girls from time to time,] he communed playfully. [But I'm not sure you're bad enough to live up to my expectations.]

[You just earned yourself a long night of being proven wrong, baby. After the conference call, anyway.]

[I'm all aflutter with anticipation,] he teased.

[Go upstairs and get out my whips and chains,] she ordered with a wink.

The whips and chains, however, would have to wait. He was contacted by Chirk as he was putting the girls down to bed, but he wasn't about to walk out on his girls when reading them a bedtime story. He finished that most important of tasks, got them tucked in and ready for the night, and then went up to his home office. A hologram of Zaa was waiting for him, and holograms of Dahnai, Krazrou, and Sk'Vrae appeared beside it once he was at his desk. "News, cousin," Zaa said without preamble.

"Good or bad?"

"Bad," she replied. "It affects us all, so I have called the other cousins into this conference."

"I will never get used to hearing that," Sk'Vrae noted.

“Have you finished the transition, Sk’Vrae?” Krazrou asked.

She nodded, her crest bobbing. “Last takir,” she confirmed.

“Then let me welcome you, cousin,” Krazrou said with a nod of his head.

“The reason for this conference is for us to make a decision, all of us, on something that affects us as a whole,” Zaa continued. “My children have come to learn that two separate empires have acquired samples of the virus, but as of yet have not used them. Those are the Jirunji and the Subrians,” she declared, which made Jason frown. The Coalition getting their hands on the virus was Jason’s worst case scenario. It might provoke a war between the two over biogenic technology. “We’ve learned that the Jirunji have something else in mind for the virus. They have learned about that Generations can sense their own and consider them family and seek to use it to solve the biologically driven hostility of the males of their species,” she explained. “While they’re certainly not looking down at the other aspects of Generations, they see the simple fact that their race must restrict their males to one planet, and the male population is restricted by the number of them they can safely put in a small space, as potentially crippling liabilities of the species. It’s Sovial’s hope that they can somehow modify the virus to edit Jirunji genes so males don’t try to kill each other when in close proximity.

“The Subrians are holding onto the virus for a different reason. They see great benefit in their race becoming Generations, but Holikk has many of the same concerns as you, Jason. He fears that it may start a war, but not the Confederation against the Coalition. He fears that if too many species are changed, that the Generations reach such numbers that they represent a sizable portion of the galaxy, it might set off a war between the Generations and the rest of the galaxy. After what they saw the Generations do during the Syndicate War, there is a real fear among many empires that the Generations might become conquerors now that there are so many of them spanning multiple empires. Simply put, Holikk is holding on to the virus until he decides what best to do to prevent that war. Be it releasing it intentionally to make more species Generations, putting everyone on an even playing field, or researching it to find some way to impair or stop any changed species that suddenly becomes aggressive.”

He wasn't the only one that was silent. Jason had considered that possibility, that the rest of the galaxy would turn on the Generations out of fear, and he felt a tiny bit justified that someone else had the same worry, someone that was so afraid of it that it was staying his hand despite having the virus. And it fit with Subrian mentality. Despite being the most technologically advanced empire in the Coalition and having incredibly powerful weapons and war machines, the Subrians were actually a very peaceful race. That was one reason why the Karinnes got along with them so well. They were that main force that held the Coalition's more aggressive empires in check, both because they had so much influence within the Coalition and because they could kick the rest of the Coalition's ass if it came down to a civil war. The Authority was the most powerful member of the Coalition economically, scientifically, and militarily.

"I think what the Denmother suggests is that it is beyond time that we all sat down and discussed this situation, calmly, rationally, logically, and with an eye towards establishing permanent solutions," Krazrou spoke up. "And not just us. Everyone. The virus and the expansion of the Generations as a race is a matter of great importance to every empire and species in the entire galaxy. I think we should call a summit on Terra to discuss this in detail, so we might avoid the war that Holikk fears may happen."

"Kraz has a point," Dahnai agreed. "There's only the four of us, and we can't stand up to the rest of the galaxy by ourselves, not even with Jason's biogenic tech backing us up. There's just too many of them."

"I would agree," Sk'Vrae nodded. "And with outside empires holding samples of the virus, there exists a real chance that this could turn into a pandemic that could transform a large portion of the galaxy. If the Subrians and the Jirunji got hold of the virus, it means that there may be samples of it still lurking on Kirri freighters that left Kirri space before the quarantine was put into effect. I would assume that is how they got the virus."

Zaa nodded. "Recovered from sealed containers on Kirri ships holding infected symbiotes. Both empires have the technology to keep the viral samples viable despite them having a life span, as well as the capability of mass producing it."

"I can see what's driving Sovial," Jason sighed. "The male issue in their race is a major problem for them. It restricts their ability to colonize and it

causes them a tremendous number of headaches because they have to be so careful about unrelated males not crossing paths. But I'm honestly not sure if being a Generation would fix that for them. If it could, I might be inclined to give her my blessing to use the virus. The Jirunji are the kind of species I could live with being Generations. They're not aggressive, they're honorable, and they're loyal. The problem is the Subrians," he sighed. "Much as I admire the Subrians as a people, my worst-case scenario is the Coalition getting their hands on the virus. I'm convinced that it would trigger a war, because the Coalition would try to get biogenic technology. They'd have the first half of the key to military dominance and wouldn't stop until they got the other half."

"That is something we might be able to resolve at a summit," Krazrou suggested. "And I think there is something else that we might propose that might help our cause."

"What is that, Kraz?" Dahnai asked.

"Giving the rulers of the empires what Kreel and Enva already have," he said. "If the *rulers* are Generations, it might give us a means of keeping the peace among the empires in the galaxy, because the rulers are *us*."

"That may work for an empire like the Verutans, but what about an empire that has an elected leader that changes regularly, like the Alliance or the Kouii? Or your own people, Kraz?" Jason asked. "Each change of leadership adds another Generation to the species, and over time, they'll become a segment of the population. And that would cause many more problems in the long run as it solves in the short run."

"Jason, if you look at this with an eye for the future and use some logic, you'll see that what you describe is the inevitable outcome," Krazrou said calmly. "Denmother admitted to me that while this virus was engineered, there was an instance on Karis several years ago where a virus was spontaneously mutated by Generation DNA to become a retrovirus, and it affected several people before it was contained. The virus that changed us mutated from the engineered version that was released on Draconis, showing that even a carefully engineered virus can mutate to affect new species. A natural virus would be even more volatile, because it would not be carefully designed to be as stable as possible. It is a simple and inevitable conclusion that in time, maybe a few millennia, the entire galaxy

will eventually all be Generations. What we should be doing now is making sure that we plant the seeds that will make that very long process peaceful and smooth, to prevent a genocidal race war in the future that pits us against the those who are not changed. We must protect ourselves from that outcome, because all of our races are now affected by its outcome. Terran, Faey, Urumi, Kirri, we will all ultimately be Generations, and if that war comes, it will come against *us*. We must use negotiation and diplomacy to prevent the war Holikk fears, but also set in motion a plan to prevent that war in the future, when there is a time that there are far more Generations than *just* us, enough of us to cause non-Generations to fear us. That time will come. It is inevitable. And since it is inevitable, we must prepare for it.”

Jason gave him a startled look, one shared by Dahnai and Sk’Vrae. But the *logic* of his observation was solid. Generation DNA was volatile enough, and it was already proved that it had the ability, under the right conditions, to spontaneously create a retrovirus capable of changing others into Generations themselves. Dahnai was all the proof he needed of that. “You told him that, Zaa?”

“Of course I did,” she replied calmly. “He is now a cousin. That information is not so sensitive that it needed to be kept from him.”

“Well you didn’t tell *me*,” Dahnai said archly, which was a brilliant bit of acting.

“You didn’t ask questions that necessitated the release of that information, Dahnai,” she replied simply.

“Kimdori,” Dahnai snorted in disgust.

“Krazrou...has a point,” Sk’Vrae injected. “If this is true, that Generations can spontaneously produce the retrovirus, then we would be looking at two options. Either walling ourselves off from the universe, or accepting that eventually, perhaps next year or perhaps in ten thousand years, it happens again and new Generations are born from another virus. And that eventually, the virus will become a pandemic that will sweep across the galaxy. Walling ourselves off from the universe is not a realistic alternative,” she said calmly. “Not when the universe now has such a vested interest in keeping us from isolating ourselves. So I think we should discuss

the idea of a summit, with the objective of ensuring that the Generations do not become the enemy of the unchanged. After all, they will eventually become *us*, so we should not fight them.”

“Okay, that is the creepiest freakin’ thing I have ever heard you say, Sk’Vrae,” Jason grunted. “The *unchanged*? They’re not eggs, or raw material! They’re *people*! Giving them a label like that suggests that they’re not fine just the way they are! We are *not* better than them, Sk’Vrae, we are simply *different*! Good grief, it’s that kind of attitude I’ve worked my ass off over the last fourteen years to prevent! It’s that mentality that made me *glad* the Merranes destroyed my ancestors, because the idea that they were superior to the rest of the Faey had taken hold of the Generations of that time!”

“I don’t mean it that way, Jason,” she told him. “I only meant to describe a truth. Those who are not Generations are unchanged.”

“But it suggests that they’re *incomplete* the way they are,” he retorted. “You have to be careful in what you say and what you think, Sk’Vrae, else the temptation that our power represents can seduce you. Every one of us original Generations lives by a strict set of rules that prevents us from thinking we’re better than everyone else, because we’re *not*, and that is one reason why the other members of the House accept us. They know we live by those rules, they know we take their privacy and their rights seriously, so they trust us. That kind of thinking can set off the very war that both me and Holikk fear might happen, and it can start with the most innocent comment or idea, like calling them *unchanged*. That kind of thinking was why my ancestors were starting to build war machines just before the Third Civil War. If that war wouldn’t have happened, then maybe twenty or thirty years after they began their military buildup, it would have been the *Karinnes* starting that war as they moved to supplant the Empress and put a Karinne on the throne. Put someone they felt was *superior* to the Empress on the throne,” he said intensely. “The Generations that ruled the house at that time were starting to believe that they were better than the rest of the Imperium, and it was just blind luck that saved the Imperium from the *Karinnes*.”

“Listen to Jason, cousins,” Zaa said strongly. “Think back over the years over how Jason has acted, both in official settings and in more casual

settings. He is always exceptionally careful not to make the Generations seem *intimidating*, which might cause others to fear them, while still ensuring that everyone knows that their power will make them a force that they do not want to cross. It is this balancing act that has been his greatest success as the Grand Duke.”

“It wasn’t quite as successful as you may think, Denmother,” Sk’Vrae told her. “Quite a few of the rulers I’ve spoken to have been quite concerned about the Generations after seeing how they performed in the Syndicate war. They made KMS ships all but invulnerable thanks to them warping space, and more than one ruler worried that those invulnerable ships may someday be used against *them*. It was the primary impetus that caused the Coalition to leave the Confederation.”

“That’s completely illogical,” Krazrou protested. “Staying in the Confederation would ensure that the Karinnes would never attack them.”

“Logic has little place in fear, Krazrou,” Sk’Vrae answered simply. “They had no idea the Generations were *that* powerful, *because* Jason has constantly played down their—our abilities. To see them then unleashed against the Syndicate, it jarred quite a few of the members of the council.”

“Sk’Vrae does speak truth in that regard. Almost every large empire in the galaxy that knows of the Karinnes is engaged in secret research to come up with some way to bypass the spatial warping powers of the Generations,” Zaa told them, almost casually.

“The only way to stop that is with another telekinetic,” Jason said immediately.

“Yes, but they don’t know that yet,” Zaa nodded. “And that brings us to Krazrou’s recommendation. I think it would behoove us to have that summit, cousins. Krazrou speaks a truth, that there is a very good chance that another virus will manifest, and it will change more people. We need to take steps now to ensure that such an event doesn’t trigger the kind of war that the Jun wage.”

“We need to talk about this anyway, and it needs to be more than the council,” Jason grunted. “A potential galaxy-wide pandemic concerns *everyone*, no matter what the virus does to those it infects. We should talk about cooperating to come up with quarantine protocols and supporting

quarantined empires so their economies don't crash and their people starve. And since Terra is quarantined, we can ask Mesaiima if the Imbiri might host the summit on their homeworld. Their neutrality is beyond doubt."

"I think that's a good idea," Dahnai agreed.

"Yes, Mesaiima would be the perfect choice," Krazrou concurred. "We can make it a comprehensive summit, discussing the current situation and planning for possible future outbreaks. And most importantly, set in motion a plan to ensure that the galaxy does not try to wipe us out," he finished emphatically.

"We can discuss that more later. It's late here and I'm tired, and I want to think about this a little bit before we start making any solid decisions. So I'd like us to break for a few hours and reconvene at a time most convenient for all four of us," he offered. "And I think we should include Kim in that discussion. The Terrans should have a seat at the table when we discuss matters that will affect them."

"That is a good point," Krazrou agreed. "And the break will give me time to consider the issue and present a more comprehensive argument when we reconvene."

"I don't have a problem with it, but we should contact Mesaiima immediately and ask her if she'll host the summit. We can discuss what we're going to talk about at it later on."

"Agreed," Sk'Vrae nodded. "The summit must take place for the good of the galaxy as a whole."

"Then that is what we shall do," Zaa announced. "Jason, you have the best relationship with Mesaiima. You contact her and make the inquiry. We can reconvene in eleven standard hours, which is daytime or early evening for everyone. Is there objection to eleven hours?"

"That'll work for me," Jason said.

"Works for me, cousin," Dahnai nodded.

"It's a touch early for me, but I have no objection. I'm an early riser anyway," Krazrou smiled.

"It's a good time for me, Denmother," Sk'Vrae finished.

“Very good. Then we’ll meet again at 09:30 tomorrow Confederation Universal Time.”

“I’ll call Mesaiima right now,” Jason told them. “And I’d prefer to discuss things face to face,” he added. “Since all three of our empires are still undergoing conversion, it’s not going to screw up anyone’s countdown timer for us to meet in person. I know it’s breaking quarantine, but with the Draconis virus now mutated to affect Urumi, I think it’s a moot point,” he said dryly. “We’ll have to maintain the overall quarantine, but I think we can bend the rules a little to let you all onto the planet.”

“Actually, we should meet off the planet, just to be safe,” Zaa suggested. “Someplace both completely out of reach of the others but comfortable for all of us. Jason, we should erect a temporary meeting place on Oasis,” she proposed. “It’s remote, in a place so far that an interdicator will have time to reach full power before anyone can get there, and the planet has an agreeable climate for all of us. Plus, it traps the virus on a world where it won’t matter,” she concluded. “The only people have already been infected by the virus. So it can do nothing to them.”

“I think that’s a fantastic idea, I’ve always wanted to visit Oasis again,” Dahnai smiled. “The last time I was there I didn’t get a chance to enjoy the planet’s beauty.”

“I can set that up, if nobody minds roughing it in a stop and drop,” Jason said.

“A what?” Krazrou asked.

“Sorry, it’s KMS slang for prefab buildings that they set down to set up command posts and forward operation positions,” he explained. “We have prefabs that have fairly large conference rooms in them that allows the forward operations staff to plan troop movements. They can drop an operations building down to host us while we’re there, but to warn you guys, they’re not all that luxurious. They’re military, so they’re built to be practical, not fancy.”

“It’ll be like going on an archaeology dig. Besides, we can always sleep in staterooms on the fleet flagship that brings us there if the conference goes past a single day,” Dahnai smiled. “Just make sure they drop it on a beach.”

“I can do that,” he chuckled. “Kraz? Sk’Vrae?”

“It works for me, Jason,” Krazrou answered. “You know that Kirri are not demanding of pomp and circumstance.”

“I find it acceptable,” Sk’Vrae said.

“Then I’ll send down the order,” he said. “Denmother, could you please invite Kim to the meeting while I talk to Mesaiima?”

“Of course, cousin,” she answered.

They ended the conference, and Jason tracked down Mesaiima. It was early morning on Imbiri, so she was in her office, the unmatched beauty of the forest beyond the capitol city visible through a window behind her when her hologram winked on over his desk. “Hello, Jason,” she smiled. “What is so important that you’d devote time from managing the situation there to talk to me?”

“I’ve been in talks with the Denmother, and she feels that it would be best for everyone if we held a summit to discuss the situation,” he replied. “And not just those of us being affected by it. She wants to invite everyone, every single known spacefaring race in the galaxy, because what’s going on has the potential to affect every single one of us. She felt that it would be best to hold this summit on Imbiri, since Terra is quarantined,” he told her. “The neutrality of the Imbiri is beyond reproach, and your people have experience hosting emissaries and diplomats to hold talks. And of course, you would be the one in control of the summit, Mesaiima,” he added.

“I can understand Zaa’s reasoning for calling a summit,” she said with a nod. “And I believe that it’s a good idea. Let me discuss it with my advisors and get back in touch with you, Jason.”

“Can you call back in about ten hours? I’m about to go to bed. It’s late here.”

“It’ll take us that long to come up with a framework,” she smiled. “Have you told anyone else about this?”

“Just Dahnai, Sk’Vrae, and Krazrou,” he answered. “We were having a meeting about the quarantine efforts and Denmother brought up the need for a general summit of all races in the galaxy to discuss the epidemic and make some plans.”

“Alright. I’ll discuss it with my advisors and call you back in ten hours.”

“Sounds good. Talk to you then, my friend.”

She smiled, then her hologram winked out. Almost the second her hologram vanished, a comm query on a dedicated channel hit his panel, which was a direct line that Kim had to him. The Korean’s face appeared on a hologram. “Denmother just talked to me,” he said in Korean. “I can attend the meeting, Jason.”

“Good. I’ll make arrangements for a ship to pick you up and bring you to the meeting place.”

“When?”

“I don’t have a solid time yet, but it’ll be sometime tomorrow my time. In about twenty hours or so Terra time,” he answered. “I was just about to contact the KMS and have them send over the stuff we need for the meeting.”

“I thought it was being held on Karis?”

He shook his head. “Oasis. Since we’re all under our own quarantines, we felt it best to have the meeting on a planet where it won’t matter if the virus mutates again and gets out. The only things on the planet are a sensor outpost and a small farming operation, and both of them are on the other side of the planet from where we’re going to meet.”

“So, just us? No staff?”

“The smaller the staff the better,” he answered. “We can conference in any staff that we need to talk to via crypto commune. The only staff I’m bringing is Cybi. The Imperial Guard will serve as security for the meeting.”

“That’s all you need,” he said dryly.

“Been holding up, Duk?” he asked.

“I haven’t quite gotten the hang of telepathy yet,” he said with a wry smile. “It just seems to evade me for some reason.”

“It’s a skill, Duk, just keep practicing and you’ll get it. Can you close your mind?”

“Oh yes, first thing I learned. That’s not hard at all.”

“Then that’ll hold you over until you get the hang of it,” Jason told him. “That’s the most important part of it anyway.”

“Yes, we’re getting more and more cases of Terrans suffering schisms,” he said soberly. “The expression rate is higher than we predicted, and we’re scrambling to find enough trained telepaths to teach the newly expressed how to close their minds.”

“Are the online classes helping?”

“For some, but not for everyone,” he replied. “I’m one of those people that just did not get far at all with the online tutoring. I tried that approach first so I wasn’t taking a valuable trainer away from someone more needful than me, but I just couldn’t grasp the concept until I got personal instruction. But once a telepath showed me how to do it, I picked it up fairly quickly.”

“Talk to Ayuma, she might be able to spare more instructors from the Academy.”

“I already did, Jason. Trust me, every single trained telepath on Terra is part of the training effort. We’ve drafted absolutely everyone, even office workers from private corps. Right now, the primary focus of virtually every person on this planet is getting the expressed trained enough so they don’t suffer any problems until they can be more properly trained.”

“I...might be able to help with that,” he said. “A telepath doesn’t necessarily need to be in the same room with the students. I might be able to dispatch some KMS personnel to Terra and have them train without leaving their corvettes, or even use fighters and exomechs, that way they don’t break quarantine. We can decon the units fairly easily just by using charged decon mode for their IP armor. The IP will fry any virus or viral components on the hull, we’ve already tested that out and found it works.”

“I’d appreciate the help, Jason, but don’t you need those telepaths for Karis? I know that the majority of your population aren’t telepathic. Karis is in the same position as Terra at the moment.”

“You need help, Duk,” he said. “And I have a hell of a lot more telepaths on Karis than you do on Terra.”

“Which you need right now, my friend. I’ll talk to Dahnai about getting Faey telepaths to help,” he said. “If the Imperium’s version of IP will decon their ships, she can send more people.”

“We didn’t test it using their IP system,” he frowned. “But maybe we can work together. I can send mecha to Terra and have the telepaths ride in them while they’re being piloted by remote. The mecha can just hover over the building where the students are being trained. The trainer doesn’t have to be in the room, just close enough to send to the students.”

“Can you send them personal armor with your IP system in it?”

“Armor requires an exact fit to wear without it injuring the wearer, Duk,” he shook his head. “We’ll go with your idea. Let’s bring Dahnai into this. And Songa and Myli.”

“Why them?”

“So we can have them find out if the Imperium’s IP tech will kill the virus,” he replied.

Once the others were conferenced in, they got answers quickly. “Yes, Imperium IP will kill the virus, dear,” Songa told him once she was part of the discussion.

“She had us run those tests a while ago,” Myleena added. “We tested every affected empire’s IP against the virus, and all of them are effective. Any IP system with a purge mode can kill the virus, and all four of the infected empires have that in their IP systems.”

“Then help is on the way, Kim,” Dahnai declared. “I’ll call up some infantry from the house militaries and deploy them to Terra immediately. How does twenty thousand more trainers sound? Will that solve your problem?”

“I don’t know for sure, Dahnai, but I think we may need more.”

“Then I’ll send fifty thousand,” she said immediately. “And if they’re not enough, I’ll keep sending them until there are.”

“Cynna can help you organize those trainers, Kim,” Jason offered. “She’s got some extra time at the moment with the KMS more or less being on standby due to the virus. I’ll send her to your emergency planners so she can use that brain of hers to help you organize.”

“I’d be glad for the help of a CBIM, Jason,” Kim nodded appreciatively.

“Hear that, Cynna?” he called, looking up.

“I’m accessing Terra’s government computer network to download the necessary information as we speak, Jason,” she answered from the speaker in the ceiling. *“As soon as Dahnai sends me a list of trainers, I can start getting them organized.”*

“I’ll have to talk to Lorna before I can tell you who and how many, Cynna.”

“That’s fine, Dahnai. I can get some of the work done while I’m waiting for it.”

“You are never truly alone in that room, are you, Jason?” Kim asked lightly.

“I’m used to it,” he replied dryly as Cynna manifested a hologram in the room, already sitting demurely on her hip on the corner of his desk, much the way Cybi and Cyra loved to do. “It’s standard operating procedure for all the CBIMs to monitor my official communications. And sometimes they eavesdrop on my private ones,” he said, giving Cynna a cool look.

“So, if you’re always listening, why no hologram, Cynna?” Kim asked.

“To present the illusion that Jason is competent enough to do things on his own,” she winked, which made Dahnai burst into laughter. Jason swatted her hip irritably, which made contact because she was using a hard hologram. *“Seriously, though, we only manifest if we’re an active part of the discussion. It keeps things orderly around here. Trelle knows, Cyvanne would be injecting herself into everything every time Jason talked to anyone.”*

“Don’t start harping at me, sister,” Cyvanne threatened over the speaker.

“Well, Cyvanne is a rather naughty girl. That’s why she’s my favorite,” Dahnai grinned.

“*Brave words with me sitting right here, Dahnai,*” Cynna retorted, looking at her hologram.

“*And those not sitting right there,*” Cybi added.

“*I think the summer palace mainframe is due for a bit of customization,*” Cybri threatened sweetly.

“*I say we reprogram her bionoid and let it loose on the streets of Karsa,*” Cyra countered. “*That would be far more embarrassing.*”

“Just keep the war small enough to easily clean up the mess afterward,” Jason ordered, which made Cynna smile roguishly. “You ready to rock, Cynna?”

“*Ready. I’ll be over in your emergency operations center in a few minutes, Kim. Just warn them I’m coming. All I need is that list from Dahnai and I’ll have a plan ready for Kim by the time he gets there.*” “I’ll call Lorna right now, Cynna. I’ll have her send over the list as soon as she compiles it.”

“*I’ll make sure those troops know exactly where to go when they get here.*”

“Good deal,” Dahnai nodded.

They organized a few minor points, then the meeting broke up, leaving Jason alone in the office with Cynna sitting on the desk. [*You look worried,*] she noted as she looked at his face.

[*I am worried,*] he communed to the comm node in his office, which let the CBIMs and CBMOMs hear him. They were the only ones with free access to that node. [*Krazrou’s argument was solid, and it honestly scares me to death. He might be right. We may be looking at a scenario where, eventually, every spacefaring race in the galaxy is a Generation. And he’s also right about the potential for war. Terra has way too many examples of how both fear and a sense of superiority over others in the many genocides that took place over our history. The atrocities committed by the Huns, Persians, and Romans in the ancient period, the persecution of the Jews during the middle ages, the Armenian genocide carried out by the Ottoman*

Empire, Stalin's purge of Soviet citizens and the genocide in the Ukraine, the Holocaust, the Cambodian genocide under Pol Pot. Millions of Terrans died because others were either afraid of them or didn't think they were human enough to have the right to live. And now the Generations may be looking at the same scenario.]

[That's why he's right that we need to bring the galaxy together to talk about this, to not allow that fear to take hold or spread.]

He nodded. *[But I'm not sure I like the idea that eventually, the entire galaxy will be Generations. It makes me fear that we will become the monsters that I have worked so hard to prevent us from being,]* he communed, worry and concern straining his thought. *[I've said it many times, girl, that the Generations have the potential to be the worst villains the universe has ever seen. And some small, nihilistic part of me wonders if I should be angry if the galaxy declares war on the Generations and tries to wipe us out,]* he conveyed grimly. *[I've never felt angry about the Merranes wiping out the Karinnes, because I saw where the Karinnes were going before the war broke out. I felt that the Merranes may have saved the Imperium from us and God did they pay for it by being forever branded with the stigma of the atrocity they committed against Karis. If the galaxy declares war on us...do we have the right to fight back?]* he asked poignantly.

[We do, because we are not the monsters,] Cynna told him firmly. *[What our descendants may be or what they may do does not change who we are now. And right now, in this place, we have the right to live because we respect life, we respect the rights of others, because we are not the monsters that you fear we may become. And so long as you are here guiding the newcomers, guiding our people, that will never come to pass,]* she communed with love and loyalty and devotion, putting her hand on his face gently. *[It's time for you to do what you do best, Jason, and that's move people with your words and with your example. Show the new Generations outside the house what it means to be a cousin, the way you've inspired the people of the House to live up to the ideals and standards of the original Generations. Put them on the proper path that the original Generations have followed since the restoration of the house. Show the galaxy that the Generations are not their enemy. The shaman says that your greatest strength is speaking from your heart, and that people will listen to you when*

you do. It's time to prove her right, Jason,] she declared, sliding her hand down and pressing her fingertips against his chest. *[Tell everyone what's in here, and they'll listen to you.]*

[When did you get so smart, girl?] he asked with a slight smile.

[You programmed me to be curious, Jason. It's your fault if you weren't paying attention to what I've been curious about the last four years,] she winked.

He gave a wry chuckle, reaching up and putting a hand on her cheek. She leaned over and pressed her holographic forehead against his own. *[I'm so glad I built all of you,]* he communed sincerely.

[I'm glad too, else I wouldn't exist,] Cynna replied cheekily. *[But thank you for the complement. I'm glad you're the closest thing to a father I could have. I'm honored to be a part of your family, Jason.]*

[You are. All of you are. The CB units are as much family to me as my own children,] he told her, his thought backing up the words themselves. *[I love all of you. Even Cyvanne, God help me.]*

[Hey!] she protested, but her objection was brimming with love and amusement.

[Now I think I'd better go back downstairs before Jys comes looking for me,] he communed, patting Cynna on the holographic cheek gently. *[I made her a few promises that she'll be intent on me keeping.]*

Chapter 11

Daira, 7 Oraa, 4408, Faey Orthodox Calendar

Thursday, 20 September 2022 Terran Standard Calendar

Daira, 7 Oraa, year 1333 of the 97th Generation, Karinne Historical Reference Calendar

KMS Defiant, orbiting Oasis

He had a...strange feeling about this.

Of course, part of it was the fact that he was missing the match. The Paladins and the Assassins were playing at that moment, playing using bionoids built by Rook to the exact specifications that allowed them to mimic the physical characteristics of the players as much as possible. He watched some vidy of it on the trip over from Karis, and he had to admit, it looked absolutely identical to a match being played by flesh and blood Faey. The only difference was, the bionoids would not get tired, where the players might. Rook tried to install a stamina limiter into the bionoids, but he couldn't make it work exactly right before the match, so the match went on without it. But in Jason's opinion, that would just make the match more interesting. The players would be running at full speed the entire match, and the tactic of wearing out a team to get an advantage over them wouldn't work

If the sellout in both stadiums, both live and holo-casted, and live ratings for the match on IBN, the Imperium Batchi Network, were any indication, the fans were just as intrigued as the IBL over the idea of watching bionoids play rather than players.

Unfortunately, he had more on his mind than batchi, though it was a good distraction from those weighty thoughts. Simply put, Krazrou's belief that there might be a war between the Generations and the rest of the galaxy in the future was gnawing at him in a way that he did not like at all. As

much as he didn't want to believe that it could happen, he had considered that possibility himself more than once over the last fourteen years. But to hear Krazrou voice that old fear so concisely and so *logically*, it had kept it rattling around in his brain since the conference.

That conference was going to begin very soon. The four fleet flagships had gone out to retrieve Kim, Sk'Vrae, Dahnai, and Krazrou and their retinues, and Jason had come on the *Defiant* mainly because he didn't need a fleet flagship to move him around. He was here nearly three hours early, because he wanted to tour the stop and drop facility set down and give Aya the chance to inspect the security before they allowed the other rulers to come down. Since Dahnai and Jason were involved, security was being handled by the Imperial Guard, and the Colonel had put Aya in charge of the site because it was a Karinne holding and she could issue orders to KMS ships and personnel. Jason was standing on the bridge of the cruiser, a cruiser he once commanded himself, with Captain Mikano Strongblade sitting in the captain's chair watching on as the navigator inserted them into a synchronous orbit over their planned meeting site. It was on the beach as Dahnai requested, a small island in the tropical belt of the planet. The remote island was everything they needed, with no indigenous life larger than a marine bird, a large flat area on the south side of the island that was primarily knee-high golden grass with a small extinct volcano rising above it to the north dotted with sparse wide-canopied trees akin to Terran acacia trees, and an ample pristine beach with views of a beautiful aquamarine ocean. Oasis was truly a lovely planet, and the view down there would be absolutely gorgeous.

There were two other rulers that were going to attend the meeting, and that was Enva and Kreel. They were attending because while their people weren't being altered by the virus, they *had*, and so their input may be needed in their deliberations. And given that the Sha'i-ree and the Grimja were strong allies of the four rulers attending the meeting, what they decided very well may affect their two empires.

Krirara was also going to attend as a consultant, by special exemption granted by the Kirri Council to allow her to involve herself in politics despite no longer being in the government. That made Jason quite happy, because Krirara was a powerful voice of big old common sense.

It was a bit of an experience for Jason for another reason, and that was because every member of the crew of the *Defiant* was a Generation. It was a bit...weird meeting them in the companionways, looking at Mikano and knowing what she was, a reaction that had always brought about a sense of kinship in their formally small, tight-knit, intimate little community. He'd just gotten used to the residents of the strip all being Generations, and now he was adjusting to the idea that the entire crew of the oldest ship in the KMS were as well.

The ship was a good example of how the virus both had and had not changed basic operating procedures in the KMS. Even though nobody needed an interface anymore, everyone still wore one, because it was integral standard equipment in the KMS. Interfaces didn't just open doors around here, they were a unique ID that determined who had access to what area, and they were also the primary means of communication on the ship. The encryption protocols they adopted after meeting the Pai years ago were critically important now, now that more than just the Karinnes could potentially hear commune, so every member of the crew had to wear an interface to send and receive encrypted commune. There was quite a bit of both open commune and sending flying around on the ship, but those were *personal* communications. If it involved ship operations in any way, it had to be on what was called ELC, Encrypted Local Commune. However, as an extra layer of security, people who worked with top secret equipment or in top secret areas had to further verify their identity by communing with the ship's computer when entering restricted areas, to prove they were who they said they were. Someday, someone might find a way to spoof a military interface ID, but there was no way in hell they could spoof a Generation's organic commune. To get onto the bridge, Jason had had to verify his identity by communing with the ship's computer, who had his unique communal "voiceprint" on file.

The ability to commune was unique to each Generation, they'd come to learn, and it would serve as a unique proof of identification. No other Generation had Jason's exact bandwidth or "flavor" of commune, and it was something that another Generation could not copy, nor could a *biogenic unit* mimic it without it being detectable as artificial. A biogenic unit could detect the unique aspects of a Generation's organic commune, so it allowed a biogenic device to identify a Generation by his organic commune alone.

That had been instituted into the KMS to serve as a second layer of security, for now not only did a KMS member need an interface to get into a restricted area, he had to prove he was who his interface said he was by providing his unique communal “voiceprint” to the computer by organic commune.

The other, lesser-known aspect of a Generation was being used by the KMS as a security feature as well, and that was radiation resistance. They had plans to install radiation emitters on every KMS ship that would make the ship hazardous to non-Generations. The ships would have an internal low intensity radiation field that was just enough to cause radiation sickness in invaders after prolonged exposure, but not strong enough to irradiate the Generation’s belongings, thus making him or her a hazard to non-Generations off the ship. If the ship crew thought they had intruders aboard, those emitters could be cranked up to the edge of Generation tolerance, which would kill anything not resistant to radiation within 30 minutes. Their radiation resistance was a very rare trait among living things in the galaxy, especially among sentient species. Only the Generations, the Kimdori, and the Jakkans had strong resistance to radiation, at least of which they were aware, in the Milky Way. And since it was such a rare trait, that made it very useful when it came to increasing security on KMS ships.

[We are in stable synchronous orbit over the meeting site, Captain,] the navigator announced over bridge ELC. *[All ships in the squadron are also in stable orbit.]* There were two destroyers and four frigates escorting them, surrounding the *Defiant* in a defensive formation. That was by Aya’s insistence.

There would be many more ships here very soon, because each of the fleet flagships was part of a task force to provide security for their passengers, and those task forces would combine into a very formidable fleet over Oasis to protect the planet while they had their conference. There was a small task force already here, which was a carrier being escorted by a task force of 18 ships of almost all ship classes in the KMS, from the fleet battleship *Ori Ai*, which currently held the flag for this theatre, down to frigates.

[Very good, Lieutenant. Your Grace, you and your retinue can leave at your convenience,] Mikano answered, looking over at him.

[We'll be departing right now, Mikki,] he nodded. [Aya, we're in orbit and ready to go. Get everyone ready to bounce.]

[We're already in the landing bay, your Grace. We're just waiting for you.]

Mikano accompanied him down to the main starboard landing bay, where two large jumpers and five mecha were squeezed into the open space. Titans wouldn't easily fit on a cruiser, but Cheetahs *would*, because they were built on a horizontal base and were much sleeker. Three Cheetahs were packed shoulder to shoulder that took up the entirety of the landing bay, with the other main landing bay on the other side of the ship holding two armored personnel jumpers and a 12-passenger executive dropship. One of those Cheetahs was Jason's personal mecha, outfitted with a tactical gestalt, and he would be taking it down to the surface rather than ride in a dropship. Both Aya and Jason preferred him to move around in a mecha, because Aya felt it made him much harder to kill in a mecha and Jason simply enjoyed piloting a mecha more than riding in the passenger seat of a dropship. The other two Cheetah riggers were already in their mecha, and given that they'd be hosting rulers, those riggers were Kyva and Ebri from the KBB. The rest of the KBB was also here and would be launching from their Whale.

Ready to go, Jayce? Kyva called as he put on his helmet, then engaged the grav pods in his armor and floated up onto the mecha and then down into the armored box cockpit. He settled himself into the gel backing, and the box closed, completely immobilizing him. He merged up into his Cheetah and endured the moment of sensory deprivation as the unit came up from standby mode, until he could feel the quadrupedal mechanical body as if it were his own.

Ready here, Kyva, he answered as he had his Cheetah stand up. Kyva and Ebri did the same, the three Cheetahs motionless as they waited. *[We're ready to go, Aya. Soon as you give the word that everyone's aboard the jumpers, we can head out.]*

[We're almost ready, Jason,] she answered.

[You have clearance to launch whenever you're ready,] Mikano supplied.

[The last Marine is on and strapped in. We're ready,] Aya called. For this summit, Aya had 30 of her Imperial Guard on site with 60 Karinne Marines acting as additional security, all under Aya's command. In addition to them, the first cadet class of the Karinne Ducal Guard was on this trip to get some good in-field training, six Faey, one Terran, and one Shio. They'd been in training for two years so far and had about four more to go before they would graduate and become the first full members of the Ducal Guard. There was a second class about a year behind them holding only six, at least now. That class had started with 26. Most applicants washed out in the first year, which was universally regarded to be the most hellish experience anyone could ever willingly undertake. Imperial Guard training made the old USMC's infamous Hell Week to look like a vacation by comparison, and the first year was, by far, the worst. That was where the Guard weeded out the unfit.

That was about the normal washout rate for Imperial Guard training. It was beyond demanding, and only the most elite, determined people were going to pass it.

[Then let's get going,] Jason ordered, walking towards the open bay doors, the planet visible as a crescent across the bottom of the bay opening.

It was a short but very pleasant trip down from the cruiser, Kyva in the lead, he and Ebri to her flanks and behind her, and eight other members of the KBB in Titans in a defensive ring around the three passenger ships. The other 30 members of the KBB would stay up in space to serve as naval defense in case the task force was threatened, since there was no real threat present on the planet. They came in over the ocean and had the island slowly come into view over the horizon, a roughly triangular island about two kathra in diameter with the north side dominated by an extinct volcano that had been eroded down to a large, steep-sloped ridge that ran across the wide side of the island, with the southern grass plain tapering down to a peninsula. They landed in the designated mecha zone about a hundred shakra from the prefab building that had been put down yesterday, which vaguely looked like a trailer or mobile home. It had the same long profile. It also rested above the ground, sitting on six wide "feet" that put the entrance about eight shakra off the ground. The building was dominated by a large conference room in the middle, directly accessed from the main entrance, with small offices for support staff and equipment to each side. A set of

retracting stairs—the main entrance was on the other side from the landing zone—provided access to the interior. Beyond the conference building was a landed Thrynne Star Cruiser Executive yacht, a frigate-sized private luxury ship, holding a galley staffed by elite Shio chefs who could cook in nearly any style or tradition, executive lounges for relaxation, richly appointed staterooms so rulers could take naps or otherwise rest in private, and offices so rulers could call back to their empires and confer with advisors in private. Jason had bought the Star Cruiser just yesterday from Thrynne and primarily just for this conference, so the rulers would have somewhere to rest that was suitably fancy. He did it mainly to free himself from Dahnai's bitching about the conditions. After the conference was over, the KMS would take ownership of the yacht and convert it into an executive transport for very high-ranking military and civilian VIPs. The plan was to turn it into something nice enough to carry a galactic ruler, but only something that would be used within a security zone. If they were transporting rulers outside of a security zone, they would be carried in a fleet flagship. The Starliner was small enough to land in the main landing bay of a fleet flagship, which made it perfect as a luxury taxi to get rulers back and forth from the ship to their destination.

[Nice place,] Kyva noted as her mecha's head looked to and fro. [I didn't know this planet was so pretty.]

[You've never done training here?] Jason asked.

[Nope.]

[Huh, I thought you had.]

[We were on deployment in Andromeda doing training with the Reavers when the KMS did their yearly wargames here,] she told him. [We missed out.]

[Oh, I'm sure you were devastated to miss a wargame,] he told her cheekily.

[That one I was. Everyone who was there told me it was boring as hell.]

The jumpers and dropships landed, and the Guard and Marines boiled out under Aya's orders, quickly spreading out to their assigned posts as Jason exited his mecha and walked around the building. Krirara walked out of the last jumper to land along with the bionoids that would serve as

Jason's staff for the conference, all of them generic "administration" bionoids that Cybi would control. Kyva and Ebri joined the other members of the KBB, and they moved out to their assigned guard positions or patrol areas. That gave Jason free run of the place until the others arrived, which he spent inspecting the facility with Aya and Krirara, checking over the yacht, then changing into something more comfortable than armor. Jason had told the others that this was an informal conference, so there was no need for formal attire...such as attire would be worn in the first place. The Sha'i-ree, Kimdori, and Kirri didn't wear clothes, and the Urumi had a similar outlook to the Faey in that clothes were considered accessories, not mandatory. Sk'Vrae would wear a formal robe for official functions, but outside of that, in personal or unofficial settings, she usually preferred to wear nothing...and Jason could understand why. The bony dermal plates on an Urumi would make wearing clothing a trifle annoying, with the fabric constantly getting snagged on them. It was especially bad for males, who had that series of small bony spikes that run down their spines and the top portion of their tails, a feature that females lacked. For the Urumi, males had the spinal spikes and females had those bony crests that grew out of the top and backs of their heads. That just left Jason, Dahnai, and Kreel, and the only one among those three that might want to dress formally was Dahnai.

The first ruler to arrive was Kreel, and he came off the dropship wearing his favorite Bermuda shorts and a Hawaiian shirt, taking to heart Jason's warning that this wasn't a formal meeting. He took the Grimja's hand with a smile, and Kreel patted him on the shoulder. *[I figured you'd get bored waiting around for us,]* he grinned. *[So, I hope you stocked that fancy ship over there with Makati ale.]*

[I'm not letting you get drunk before the conference, Kreel.]

[Me? Get drunk? Just who do you think I am?] he communed with outrageously feigned innocence.

Jason sighed and shook his head, which made the Grimja laugh.

The others arrived more or less right on time, one by one, with Enva arriving the way Kreel did on a command ship, and the other four arriving on the four fleet flagships that went out to get them. They were standing out by the beach appreciating the view and talking when Zaa arrived on a Kimdori dropship, and Jason was quite surprised when the door opened,

and he saw that she wasn't alone. There was a Pai with her, King Mrrshan himself, the tiny Pai's head only just barely cresting Zaa's kneecap. He was dressed in a kilt-like wrap of soft yellow with a gold belt around his waist, his tail poking out from a split in the back of the fabric. Those kinds of kilts were favored by Pai males. "Mrrshan?" Krirara said aloud, her voice perplexed.

"I have no idea either," Jason answered the question she was about to ask. But as he looked at him, the realization dawned on him that Mrrshan being here was going to expose him to the virus. He'd *already* been exposed to the virus, the moment the dropship opened its hatch. Him changing was a statistical certainty at this point. Zaa had to know that, so there had to be some kind of dreadfully important reason that she would bring him here and expose him to the virus, especially since he would have to be quarantined and couldn't return to Paian for at least 45 days. "But he's stuck here now. And stuck with us."

"He's been exposed," Dahnai realized.

"If not now, then he will be before he leaves," Enva added.

"Then something massively major must be going on for Zaa to do this," Kreel said seriously.

"Truly," Sk'Vrae agreed. "She would not bring him here and expose him to the virus if not for a dreadfully important reason."

"Denmother, I think you'll understand why I'd ask why you brought Mrrshan with you," Jason said as they approached the ramp. "Not that I'm not happy to see you, Mrrshan, but you've now been exposed to the virus."

"I've already been exposed to the virus, Jason," the small male said in his high-pitched voice...just not as high as Mrar or Mrri. "That's one of the things I'm here to talk to you about."

"The virus is on Paian?"

"And Muros," he nodded gravely. "It's been detected on all three planets in the system. A ship should be arriving soon carrying Chancellor Elrin. We're not sure how it got there. Either my daughter carried it from Karis before the quarantine was put in place and it took this long to appear,

or it somehow got to one of the three planets in the system on a cargo container, and spread to the other two planets from there.”

“Which version is it?” Jason asked Zaa.

“The Karis strain, so it’s already started spreading across the entire system,” she replied. “In a matter of months, both the Pai and the Muri will become cousins.”

“Well, I think your theory just gained a lot of traction, Kraz,” Dahnai said, looking over at the Kirri.

“I don’t relish being right, cousin,” Krazrou replied soberly. “But this fact does put significantly more weight on this conference.”

“Elrin should be here momentarily,” Zaa told them. “The ship I sent to pick him up was only minutes behind us.”

“Then I think we can wait out here until he arrives, then get straight to business,” Jason said, turning to look back at the building. *[Cybi, set two more seats at the conference table. Make sure one of them is for a Pai.]*

[I’ll put that one on the table,] she replied seriously. All the CB units had bionoids on the planet, but only Cybi would be in the conference room. The others would be listening in.

“The Muri are going to complicate things. The Pai, not so much,” Dahnai said. “Mrrshan already knows way more than anyone else about what’s going on.”

“To be truthful, being changed won’t change us all that much,” Mrrshan said modestly. “It does mean that the rest of the population will gain telepathy, but our telepaths could already hear communion anyway.”

“And at least they won’t have to learn TK,” Jason said with grim amusement. “And you could probably hide the fact that the Pai were changed because of it.”

After Chancellor Elrin arrived, the current head of the ruling council of Muros, they moved to the conference room. Cybi was already there, standing by the table as they entered, wearing a very casual Terran tank top and a pair of cargo shorts. Administration bionoids, which looked entirely Faey but all had the same face, entered the room and set panels and

refreshments down for them. Jason sat down, and for a moment, he had to ponder the change that was represented in Sk'Vrae, Kim, and Krazrou. To see them, to *know* they were Generations, it hammered home the fact that permanent change had come to the galaxy, and it was a change that had the potential to ignite the entire galaxy in war. And in Mrrshan and Elrin, he saw the potential future, where the virus broke containment again and again, either by accident or design, and the ranks of the Generations swelled one planetary population at a time. He had no idea what was coming. He had no idea how this was going to change things. But what he did know was that this conference, and the conference on Imbiri, were absolutely necessary. "Alright, did Denmother explain what this conference is for, Elrin?" he asked the nearly elderly Muri, speaking aloud for the benefit of those at the table who couldn't commune.

"She did, Jason," he nodded. Elrin was a very handsome man, to almost any humanoid species, his age making him look austere and regal rather than old. His face didn't look old, it looked mature. His dark brown hair was tied back behind his head, and it had liberal streaks of white in it, betraying his age where his face did not. Like everyone else, he had dressed casually, wearing a Muri recreational tunic and a pair of leggings that ended at the upper shins, which was a Muri fashion. "And in the time reaching here to think about it, I can understand why we're all here. Very soon, all of our peoples are going to be Generations, and the rest of the galaxy is not. That might make us targets."

"The way things are going, the rest of the galaxy very well may be," Krazrou said seriously. "This virus has the ability to conceal itself, and the fact that it has spread to three other empires despite quarantine efforts demonstrates a need for us to make plans about how to deal with that, as well as the possibility that the rest of the galaxy might fear us so much that they may try to exterminate us."

"I'd find that hard to believe, but I'll admit that it might be possible," Elrin said, glancing at the Kirri.

"It's more than possible," Kim finally spoke up. It was the first time he'd spoken since greeting the others when he arrived. But then again, that was Kim's way. He was usually silent during meetings, since Terra was a neutral entity. He often felt he had no business sticking his nose in the

Confederation's business unless it affected Terra directly. "My own planet has any number of examples of what can happen when one group fears or develops hatred for another group. Part of what this conference is about is coming up with a plan to prevent that from happening on a galactic scale, at least as much as we can."

"There's a lot we have to discuss, including the upcoming summit on Imbiri," Jason added.

Krazrou stood up. "I believe our first order of business is to consider what I said yesterday," he began. "For those who were not privy to that conversation, let me explain. This virus has demonstrated an ability to slip through quarantine, because it is extremely hard to detect using medical scanners and it is exceptionally resilient. Add to that the fact that there is documented evidence that natural viral structures can be spontaneously transformed into a similar retrovirus by exposure to Generation DNA."

"Is that true, Jason?" Mrrshan asked, looking at him.

"Afraid it is, Mrrshan," he sighed. "Three years ago, we had a case of a Sha'i-ree virus called Jaisho-T which was mutated into a retrovirus after it was exposed to Generation DNA. Lucky for us, the virus was created in such a way that it could only affect members of a specific family, the Jaisho virus picked up too much of the creating Generation's DNA to make it generic enough to infect anyone. It infected the other members of the Generation's family who were not Generations before it was contained, who became Generations. We have strong evidence that the virus rampaging across our empires was engineered, but it's not the first retrovirus we've had to deal with. After the Jaisho incident, the Karinne Medical Service started researching methods to prevent another retrovirus from being created, but what's happened lately has more or less rendered that research moot."

"So it's a very rare thing?"

He nodded. "The Jaisho virus three years ago came about because Generation DNA was created by an engineered retrovirus, and that aspect of our DNA still exists, the potential to attack and transform other cells by adding the Generation segments of DNA into them. It's why cancer is so dangerous to the Terran Generations," he explained. "Our DNA is more

vulnerable to becoming malignant than Faey DNA, and when cancer appears in us, it spreads like wildfire because the programmed behavior of attacking and transforming other cells to match themselves is unconstrained inside them. Kim, Dahnai, one of the things you're going to have to do is have the Terran Medical Service massively step up cancer screening and detection for all Terrans," he told them. "Especially for anyone over the age of thirty. Unfortunately, being changed by this new retrovirus won't change the fact that Terran Generations are vulnerable to developing cancer. And when it appears, it can spread like absolute wildfire."

"I'll be sure to send that down when I get back," Kim nodded.

"I thought Songa was working on that," Dahnai said.

"There's not much she can do. Yeah, she developed some vaccines to prevent any cancer that can develop due to an outside source, but it can't stop cancer that spontaneously appears. That can happen any time a Generation's cells divide. The Terran Generations on Karis have a cancer screening every six months, and more often than not for me and Rahne, Songa finds malignant cells."

"Because of that, because a Generation can spontaneously create a retrovirus, we have to seriously consider the fact that there are going to be more outbreaks," Krazrou told them. "And that those outbreaks are going to become more and more common as there are more and more Generations. In time, the Generations are going to spread across the galaxy, until we reach a tipping point. Eventually, ultimately I believe, the entire galaxy will be Generations. It is a mathematical certainty," he declared calmly. "What we must do here and now is formulate a plan that prevents a panic, or even worse, a genocidal war between the Generations and those who are not. We must face the prospect that in the future, maybe ten cycles from now, maybe a thousand cycles from now, the rest of the galaxy becomes so fearful of us that they try to kill us all. Our duty, our responsibility to our descendants, is stopping that from happening by putting into place a plan that keeps the peace and makes the ultimate transition of the galaxy to becoming Generations peaceful."

Dead silence greeted him, even among those who had already heard him say it. They gave him sober, nearly grim looks, then Mrrshan blew out his breath. "That...is a convincing argument, Krazrou," the tiny Pai said

soberly. “If a retrovirus can form naturally, it’s just a statistical inevitability that another one appears when there are billions and billions of Generations. And if it gets created on a planet where a Generation is just visiting, it’ll have thousands, maybe millions of hosts to infect before it’s detected and the empire can move to quarantine the planet. And even then, the quarantine is only going to isolate it to a geographical area,” he surmised. “I don’t have the exact figures from the Imperium and the Kirri, but the speed that the virus spread across your empires makes it clear that it’s extremely hard to isolate.”

“This particular virus is, because it was artificially created, and was created to be unstoppable,” Jason told him. “The Jaisho incident we had on Karis, we were able to isolate and quarantine the virus before it had a chance to mutate to start affecting other people.”

“How did you do it?” Elrin asked.

“We used medical spiders,” he replied. “They were able to kill the viral structures. But the problem is, spiders are proprietary Karinne technology, they rely on biogenic tech, so it’s not something I’d be willing to spread across the galaxy to combat outbreaks. It actually puts me in a bit of a dilemma,” he grunted. “I don’t want any retroviruses to spread, but I also can’t release the only technology we have that can contain them quickly. A naturally occurring retrovirus won’t be quite as virulent as this engineered virus is, but as Mrrshan said, we’d be looking at the potential that they would appear much more often because of the sheer number of Generations there are now.”

“I’ve had time to consider Krazrou’s words, and I find they have merit. I think he’s right. The only options we would have would be to either completely isolate ourselves from the outside or plan for that eventuality,” Sk’Vrae said, mirroring her past statement. “The question is, how do we go about doing that. Walling ourselves off from the rest of the galaxy would be very hard, if not impossible.”

“Not impossible, but very hard. And one thing that I’d suggest all of you do very soon is start severely restricting travel into your empires from the outside. One of the things you’ll need to guard against are empires *trying* to convert their populations to Generations, so expect a wave of spies to invade your empires with orders to get samples of Generation DNA so

they can do what was done in the Imperium that created this mess, use our DNA to create a retrovirus. That was one of the reasons we've kept Karis closed off," he told them.

"It may be too late for that," Dahnai said. "But walling ourselves off may incite the exact reaction Krazrou says we should avoid. If the rest of the galaxy fears us, it makes it much more likely they'll come after us. And not even all of us together could fight off the entire galaxy. Not even with the KMS and their gestalts."

"It is indeed a vexing problem," Zaa spoke up, "made worse by the fact that there are some out there we do not see as deserving of becoming cousins. All those at this table we accept as family, even Kreel," she said, giving him a slight smile, which made him laugh. "For those we dislike to become as family to us will no doubt cause the Kimdori problems. Most likely, we will simply not associate with them."

"That's something you can explain to me, Denmother. Why do I feel you the way I feel the others? I thought that Kimdori were immune to the virus. Have you secretly been Generations all along?" Kim asked.

She shook her head. "The Kimdori were involved in the efforts that created the original Generations, Kim. To put it briefly, Generation DNA includes segments of Kimdori DNA. We are related by that fact, thus why we call the Karinnes *cousins*. And now you are cousins," she said, looking around the table. "Or soon will be."

"Generations share the aspect of Kimdori that allow them to know each other by sight," Jason elaborated. "Kimdori can sense each other no matter what shape they hold. Well, the part of their DNA that causes that is part of the DNA that was used to create the original Generations, and it has passed down over the generations to us," he finished. "That's why we can sense each other and sense the Kimdori. We see them, and we *know* they are part of us. In that way, we *are* related. Very distantly, but we are related. The Kimdori are our distant cousins by virtue of the fact that their DNA is part of us."

"Oh. Ohhhhh," Kim breathed. "I understand."

"It definitely has that effect on me," Dahnai said. "I look around this table, and I see *family*," she said sincerely, reaching to each side and taking

the hands of Sk'Vrae and Jason, who were sitting to each side of her. "And not just me. The morale of the Imperium has never been higher than right now. My people see each other as relatives, as family, and it's making them, well, very considerate of each other."

"We've had the same phenomenon on Karis," Jason said.

"And Kirri'arr," Krazrou agreed. "But we digress, friends. I've had time to consider this issue, and I have a preliminary plan to propose to you. "If I may?" he asked, picking up the handpanel.

"You have access, Moderator," Cybi told him.

He downloaded a file from his interface into the handpanel in front of Jason, which caused its screen to come on. He picked it up and read the title: **[TRANSITION PLAN A]**. "I think the best means of protecting our people from a genocidal attack is to prevent the easy drawing of sides," he said. "My idea is to allow *certain* members of all races in the galaxy to become Generations, people that the Kimdori screen to ensure they won't willingly turn against us. We can adopt a screening process similar to the one that the Karinnes use to induct new members of the house," he said, nodding towards Jason, "and select people to become Generations. Those Generations will reside in their home empires and will serve their rulers, granting other races the benefits and potential that comes with having Generations among them. The screening process is to ensure that we don't change people that will turn around and try to kill us. I believe that over time, those segments of Generations within their populations will prevent a genocidal war, because each empire will have Generations within their own population. And because they are within their empires, it would foment the eventual conversion of the entire galaxy to being Generations. And though it may sound a bit brutal, those Generations will be the first warning that something is amiss, if an empire attacks the Generations within its own population. That will alert us to the problem and give us time to respond. I know this idea is not perfect," he said, looking at Jason before he could make any number of objections to the idea. "But what this plan depends upon most is the Karinnes keeping biogenic technology away from the rest of the galaxy. Jason. Cousin. If that could be accomplished, if you can find some way to protect biogenic tech, would you be amenable to this idea?"

He gave Krazrou a surprised look. Truly, the Moderator knew Jason well, and knew exactly how to both formulate his plan and get past the biggest roadblock to it, Jason himself.

“Nothing is impossible, Kraz,” Jason told him. “But for argument’s sake, if I could do that, absolutely guarantee that biogenic tech never gets out...I’m not sure. Maybe,” he said. “The biggest reason we’ve worked so hard to prevent Generations from spreading outside of the House is exactly because of what they could do if they got their hands on biogenic tech. The misery and chaos that would create would be our fault. *My* fault. It would be a violation of the oaths I took when I took the title of Grand Duke. I’ve told most of you that I don’t personally object to some people being Generations outside the house, people I trust, people who have a cultural identity that doesn’t make them aggressive or expansionistic. The Kirri are a perfect example of that. I was only mildly annoyed when we found out the virus was loose there, and felt like I’d dodged a bullet, because the Kirri are one of the most peaceful and rational races in the galaxy. While the Faey violate those tenets,” he said honestly, looking at Dahnai, “and the Urumi do as well, there’s not much I can do about that except use the influence I have on Dahnai and Sk’Vrae to keep them from using this gift for war. They both know how I feel about it, and know I’d be bitterly disappointed in them if they ever did anything like that.”

“And you’d send the Karinne fleet after us,” Dahnai added lightly.

“And yes, I’d blow your ass to hell and back,” he agreed without emotion. “But the KMS isn’t big enough to keep *everyone* from doing something like that. Nor do I want to become the galaxy’s police or peacekeepers. Still speaking in hypotheticals, I guess I wouldn’t be *entirely* opposed to the idea. There are people out there I would trust with this gift. Like Kreel, and Krirara, and Enva,” he said, looking at each of them in turn. “If we could find others that are worthy of becoming cousins, and somehow prevent the rulers from seeing them as enemies being implanted into their empires by us, which would only cause the problem we’re trying to avoid, I could back a plan like that. Just with a hell of a lot of conditions.”

Krirara spoke up. “The idea does have merit, but it’s also got a lot of pitfalls you’re not taking into account. The largest one is one that Jason just voiced, if *we* dictate who becomes Generations, it’s going to make those

empires automatically suspicious of the Generations. They'll think they're agents of the Karinnes or the Kimdori, there to pretend to cooperate with their home empire but secretly working for us."

"That's going to be the biggest obstacle to this proposal," Enva said as she scanned through the text on her panel; Enva was a *very* fast reader. "Most of the Confederation is already somewhat suspicious of Jason and the Karinnes, and if they suddenly started offering to convert selected members of their empires, it's going to make the rulers very suspicious. I honestly don't see a way we can get around that unless we do the screening and conversion in secret...which goes against the intention of the plan in the first place. Secretly implanting Generations into the other empires would cause a violent reaction."

"I'd have to agree," Kreel said. "I don't think there's any way this plan's going to work, Kraz. I'm sorry. There's just going to be too much suspicion, and that suspicion very well might incite the genocide the plan means to prevent. The only way a plan like this would work is if we don't pick and choose who gets it. In effect, we'd have to just end the quarantines and tell people that if they want the virus, come get it. But we're not responsible for any mass casualties it might cause if it mutates into something lethal."

"You mean intentionally let it loose?" Jason asked.

He nodded. "It's going to get out eventually anyway, and if it doesn't, then it's only a matter of time before a new naturally occurring retrovirus appears. The fact that Mrrshan and Elrin are here is proof of that. I say if we've got gum in our fur, let's rip it out quick instead of enduring the pain of trying to pull it out slowly. Just get it over with. We use the time we have while the rest of the galaxy is adjusting to the new normal to turn Karis and the other Karinne holdings into absolute impregnable fortresses to keep biogenic tech out of the hands of everyone else. So long as the Karinnes have it, it'll act as a powerful incentive to stay peaceful. The threat of them swarming all over someone who's naughty will keep people from getting any crazy ideas. We'll have to watch some empires more than others, like the Prakarikai and the Chezan, but in my opinion, it's the only way it's going to work. At least Kraz's plan A, anyway," he said with a smile at the Kirri. "If I know Kraz, he's probably got five or six plans to present."

“Eight, actually,” Krazrou said mildly. “And what you propose, Kreel, is actually Plan D. I considered that very thing.”

“The problem with that idea is that it’s going to turn the Karinnes into a target,” Sk’Vrae said. “And you’re wrong, Kreel. The others won’t just sit on their haunches during the transition period, they’ll try to take biogenic technology before anyone else is in a position to do the same, so they have the capability to mass produce it by the time their population can use it. No matter which plan we ultimately decide to go with, the first act of *any* of them should be fortifying Karis to make it absolutely unassailable. We should all agree to a military alliance to protect Karis to keep biogenics out of the claws of those that would use it against us,” she declared. “And Jason, your primary duty to yourself, to us, and to the entire galaxy is finding a way to make Karis indomitable.”

“You don’t ask for much, do you, Sk’Vrae?” Jason asked darkly.

“You are the most technologically advanced civilization in the galaxy, Jason,” she told him. “If anyone can find a way to do it, it is the Karinnes. Set your 3D people on the problem and let them do what they do best.”

“I already have,” he answered. “The moment this chaos started, the fact that Karis might become a target has been on our minds. I put all of 3D on creating new tech to protect Karis, and so far, I haven’t heard that much from them.”

“Hypothetically speaking, Jason, if you could make biogenic technology unreachable by the others, would you, or Denmother, object to the idea?” Krazrou pressed.

Jason looked over at Zaa, who only shrugged. “Hypothetically speaking...I don’t think so. But that’s an awfully big hypothetical, Kraz. The first thing you have to assume about any technology is that there’s a way to crack it that you didn’t think about, but someone else will. No technology, no system is perfect. What we’d have to strive for is making a system that makes it so *difficult* to crack our defenses that it would give us time to catch them trying. From an espionage standpoint, that is. Militarily, I’m not too worried.”

“Why not?”

He blew out his breath. “For the last three years, the Karinnes have been carrying out a plan to vastly expand the size of our military,” he admitted. “Our goal was to have a military that could stand up against the CCM by itself, in case the Confederation ever turned against us. Right now, we have nearly eight thousand ships actively commissioned and nearly two thousand ships built but not yet commissioned because we don’t have the people to man them. We keep the full size of our navy hidden from everyone else, which isn’t that hard with translight drives. At any time, more than half of our fleet is out doing exploration missions in conjunction with the KES. That keeps those who are allowed to visit Karis from seeing the full size of our navy.”

Dahnai gave him a shocked look, then laughed ruefully. “I had no idea, and I’ve been on Karis more than anyone here but Zaa!” she blurted.

“I’m a little surprised you went that far, Jason, but I can see the wisdom of it,” Krazrou said soberly. “And that decision will only help us now. How many of those ships have gestalts in them?”

“Very soon, *all* of them,” he replied strongly. “All line vessels cruiser and above already have a gestalt in them, but we’re going to refit every destroyer and frigate in the fleet with a gestalt strong enough to protect it. As it stands now, Karis more or less *is* a fortress, between the Navy and the planetary defenses we have there. We’ve significantly upgraded them since the war,” he told them strongly. “But it’s still not enough. If we do this, Karis may end up being attacked by the entire rest of the galaxy. We could hold off the Confederation. We could hold off the Coalition. But we couldn’t hold off *both*, and that’s a definite possibility if they decide that just having Generations isn’t enough.”

“Alright, so in the short term, Karis will be safe enough. That brings us back to the idea to release the virus,” Krazrou said. “Would anyone else here object to that idea?”

“Potentially. It would depend on if we can hold the Confederation together,” Dahnai replied. “If we can do that, if we have enough of a unified front to scare anyone outside the Confederation from trying anything, I’d be alright with it. If anything, we’ll have the advantage. I can send my people out to teach yours how to use telepathy, and once we master it, communion. We *are* the galaxy’s experts on the matter,” she said with a bit of preening.

“That’s true,” Enva noted. “Having the Faey on our side is a major advantage. While everyone else is teaching their people, we’ll already have a very large force of military-trained telepaths to oppose them.”

“The trick of it comes after everyone else trains up,” Kreel injected. “But by that point, I think the new normal will have settled in and there won’t be as much threat. We just have to get past the *oh my gosh new toy* phase of this.”

“Not quite,” Sk’Vrae objected. “The threat will be even greater when the rest of the galaxy catches up to us. Our mission should be to be so strong that by the time they fully train their people, they want no part of us. And not just those at this table, the entire Confederation.”

“Plan C involves releasing the virus only within the Confederation at first, and then offering it to those outside the Confederation once we meet certain thresholds of security and defense,” Krazrou told them. “Perhaps this is the proper time for me to go over all eight available plans, so we might consider them either in full or in bits and pieces we can apply to other plans.

They listened as Krazrou presented all eight plans, which all had the same basic premise—releasing the virus—but had different approaches to doing it. They ranged from just letting it go and allowing the cards to fall where they may to a highly structured and regimented release of the virus in a carefully structured pattern that Krazrou felt would afford maximum protection for both the Confederation and the Generations. Included in each plan was the down sides of them that Krazrou could see, from the potential they’d be attacked by outside forces while implementing the plan to internal strife and resistance. After hearing the plans, they debated them for nearly six hours, one by one, and then discussing elements of them that they saw as favorable or unfavorable.

They took a break for a meal and so Sk’Vrae could get in a quick nap, which Jason spent mostly sitting on the beach down the hill from the building and watching the waves after a quick meal, leaning back on his hands, lost in thought. Krazrou was right. It was going to be impossible to contain the virus. Oh, they may contain *this* one, but it was a statistical certainty that another virus was going to appear, and that one may spread too quickly before it was detected for them to keep it contained. There

would be another Jaisho-T, and the next one may not be quite so easily contained, nor may it be effectively harmless. The potential still existed for a Generation-borne retrovirus to evolve into something deadly, a plague of biblical proportions, and the easiest way to reduce that threat was to make as many people as possible immune from *spreading* the virus. A Generation could be infected by such a killer virus, they weren't immune from retroviruses the way the Kimdori were, but since they were already Generations, it would vastly reduce the proliferation of the virus from that host. Retroviruses reproduced by invading a cell and copying its RNA into the DNA of the host cell, altering its DNA, then hijacking the cell's functions and using the cell's division mechanic to reproduce itself, cloning multiple copies of itself in the DNA division process. If a retrovirus ran into a cell that *already* had most of the virus' RNA encoding, it may not be able to insert its genome into the DNA to hijack the cell's division mechanic to reproduce. It would still corrupt the cell and make it potentially malignant to the rest of the body, but that cell may not be able to reproduce the virus, thus drastically cutting down on its proliferation.

Retroviruses were some of the nastiest pathogens in existence. The HIV virus that caused AIDS was the perfect Terran example of a retrovirus, which was exceptionally lethal and also extremely hard to stop.

It was also why the Medical Service used the HIV virus as its foundation when building the retrovirus rampaging across the empires present at this meeting. The unique way the HIV virus attacked the body, by attacking its immune system first, made it very, very hard to stop, even by today's modern, advanced medicine.

Dahnai and Enva wandered out to where he was and sat down on either side of him, and Mrrshan came right up behind them and stood in front of them...though his head was still well below theirs. "If you don't mind, I'd like to summon Mrri to participate in the rest of this discussion," he ventured. "She's one of my most trusted advisors, and she's very intelligent. Plus, she's already a Generation, so there's no risk there."

"I don't have an objection, Mrrshan," Jason said, looking over at him.
[Cybi, Mrrshan wants to bring in Mrri.]

[He already told me, I told him to ask you. I'll arrange transport for her.]

[*Good deal.*] “Cybi’s going to arrange it,” he told the tiny Pai.

“Are you looking forward to it, Mrrshan?” Enva asked.

He didn’t have to ask what she meant. “Oh, very much yes,” he chuckled. “I’m one of the unlucky ones in my family, Enva. Talent skipped over me and my brothers, it’s something of a peculiarity among my people. Telepathy will sometimes skip a generation. My father had it, my daughter has it. I’m the unlucky one in the middle. I’ll get to experience their world very soon.”

“Soon as you change, I’ll send one of my Imperial Guards to train you, Mrrshan,” Dahnai told him. “You won’t find a better trainer anywhere in the universe.”

“I can attest to that,” Enva chuckled. “Dahnai did the same for me. I had no idea I could do so much with telepathy until I was trained by Feta.”

“My guards are the *best*,” Dahnai said proudly. “They’ll turn you into a master telepath in no time, Mrrshan. Besides, it’s only fair given that your people are training us in TK.”

“We’ll need your help with that, Dahnai, both us and the Muri. We don’t have enough telepaths to train everyone fast enough to avoid potential upheaval. The Muri more than us.”

“We’ll hammer that out during this conference, Mrrshan,” she promised. “We’re already doing that for the Kirri, the Urumi, and the Terrans. I have a four hundred billion Faey in the Imperium, I can send them out to train everyone. They don’t necessarily have to be professional teachers in order to teach the basics.”

“That’s something we’ll have to keep in mind as we come up with a plan,” Enva said. “If we just let the virus loose, it might cause chaos as too many people express and have no one to train them.”

“That’s something we might be able to use to our advantage,” Dahnai said liltily.

“Dahnai,” Jason warned.

“What? If there’s chaos in the other empires, it will prevent them from organizing anything against *us*,” she said in protest. “They’ll be too busy

dealing with out of control telepaths to launch an attack against us. I'm not talking about conquering them, you jackass. I'm saying that their internal strife protects us from an organized attack."

"I'm sure Krazrou will have an entire folder devoted to that very subject," Enva noted lightly. "He is a very thorough fellow."

"All Kirri are," Jason said. "It's why I've spent years trying to recruit them into the house, even to the point where we're seeding symbiotes into the Karis ecosystem to attract them. They are a very capable people, and the House would be richer for them being part of it."

They got back to business after Sk'Vrae woke up, and started to debate not spreading the virus, but how the six races represented at the table would protect themselves from potential attack and upheaval as the rest of the galaxy both in the short term, when they were the only Generations, and in the long term, as the others started to become Generations. Jason wanted that plan in place first, before they even considered releasing the virus intentionally, and he convinced the others that it had priority...which was primarily convincing Krazrou. A plan slowly evolved from their discussion that prioritized protection, particularly protecting the Pai and Muri since their empires were so small and lacked the resources of the empires that may attack them as well as a detailed plan offered by Miaari that would protect Terra and the Terrans, given Terra was a neutral planet that had no standing military of its own, and it couldn't entirely depend on the CCM for protection if things went south in a hurry.

Four more hours of debate and some input from their military specialists resulted in the Oasis Accord, a military alliance of the six empires at the table over and above the Confederation, which would protect all eight Empires and the Terrans against anyone that may attack them. Granted, the vast majority of that military protection would come from the Karinnes, Faey, Grimja, and Urumi, but that didn't mean that the Kirri, Pai, Sha'i-ree, and Muri wouldn't help. Included in that was re-opening Kosigi for shipbuilding operations for their new allies, allowing them to use Kosigi's superior infrastructure and advantages to build their warships...which Jason didn't mind that much. Kosigi was slowly drawing down as they finished the fleet, and Dellin and Cynna would probably be overjoyed to have Kosigi jumping again. Plus, the Karinnes *did* earn money from other

empires using it, since they supplied almost all of their raw materials or earned money from bridge transit fees from them shipping their equipment to the base. The only sticking point that took the others a while to push down Jason's throat was to open Karis to the other members of the Accord, at least on a limited basis. Karis would still be a closed planet to the outside, but he would allow travel to and from Karis for citizens of the other empires in the Accords who passed Kimdori security screening, plus allow Karinnes to travel freely in their empires. Jason had to be talked into that, but the potential gains for his people from a morale standpoint outweighed the potential security risk that visitors to Karis may pose. Once he forced them to accept his provision that the Kimdori would screen visitors to Karis, he relented.

Included in the Accords were provisions to have Dahnai send Faey instructors to the other empires in large numbers to train their fledgling telepaths, as well as to have the Pai teach telekinesis to the members of their allies' militaries. Their civilians would still need to take the Academy TK course or learn locally, which was more or less necessary. There just weren't enough Pai to train everyone, it would depopulate the planet to try it.

The one part of the Accords that Jason had resisted at first, but ultimately accepted, was to give the Grimja and the Sha'i-ree access to the retrovirus to use as they saw fit within their empires. For both of them, it would mean lengthy discussions with their governments, the Supreme Council for Enva and the Union Congress for Kreel, to decide just how they were going to use the virus. Getting the Union into the Accords was important because they were actually the strongest military power in their sector, and Enva had managed to talk Dahnai into it, and Dahnai was one of the few people that could exert real pressure on Jason. It would mean the ultimate conversion of both empires to become Generations, but the truth was, he saw neither the Grimja nor the Sha'i-ree as threats to peace. Both were very peaceful species with stable governments, who only got into wars when those wars were started by someone else. In the history of both empires, they had never been the aggressor, and Jason would be depending on that moving forward to keep them under control.

He did drag one concession out of them, however, and that was that Enva and Kreel couldn't *force* their people to become Generations. If they

used the virus, they had to put in a system where those who didn't want to be changed would be protected for however long it took for the virus to die off in their empires.

After finalizing the Accords, they signed them...and Mrrshan almost couldn't finish signing his name. In a stark reminder of exactly why they were there and what it meant, Mrrshan fell into a coma during the signing ceremony as he began transition. Since he was so small and thus had far fewer cells in his body for the virus to transform than most other races, the virus had reached the transition point with him very quickly, and he would finish transition faster. Jason had Mrrshan taken to the nearest medical facility, which was on board one of the fleet flagships in orbit, where he would finish his transition in about nine hours. Mrri took her father's place in the ceremony after he was carted off on a hovergurney.

Once the ceremony was done, Krazrou addressed them. "I think we should suspend this conference until Mrrshan can return," he ventured. "And it might behoove us to also wait until Chancellor Elrin also completes his transition, so we don't have him pass out on us in the middle of talks."

Elrin chuckled. "I'm not quite as far along as Mrrshan, Moderator. The last check-up I was given revealed that I've been infected, but I won't begin transition for a while."

"That would be my fault," Mrri admitted. "I'm the one that infected Paian and Muros. I took it back with me before the quarantine went into effect. That's also why my father and the Chancellor are so far along, I was with both of them before I was isolated."

"I'm not going to be mad at you, Princess," Elrin chuckled.

"I wouldn't either," Enva said lightly. "I felt very lucky to be exposed when the virus appeared. Now that I've started to learn about my new abilities, I wouldn't trade being a Generation for anything. I love it."

"Amen," Dahnai agreed with a smile.

"That will be part of what we discuss when we resume the conference," Krazrou said. "Is there objection to resuming this conference once Mrrshan and Elrin complete transition and can return?"

"I think it's the prudent thing to do," Sk'Vrae injected.

“How long will that be, Cybi?”

“Going from the Chancellor’s medical data, perhaps 60 hours,” she replied. “He should begin transition early tomorrow local Muros time and complete transition in approximately twenty hours.”

“Then three days from today, to give Elrin a chance to rest?” Krazrou suggested.

“Sounds good. I can spend a day on Karis, I’ve missed being able to hang out,” Kreel said. “We’ll start debating how to use the virus in a couple of days, I’m gonna take one day and spend it with my best friend,” he smiled over at Jason. “My staff can do the busy work while we catch a baseball game.”

“Since I’m back in quarantine, I may as well go too,” Enva chuckled. “If you don’t mind me along, Jason.”

“Of course not, Enva.”

“You can stay in the summer palace while you’re there, En,” Dahnai told her. “Jason will have his hands full with Kreel, and besides, I know you enjoy a little luxury. I’ll warn my staff there you’ll be staying for a while as my guest.”

“That’s lovely, Dahnai, thank you,” she smiled. “I can attend council meetings on Homeworld using my bionoid.”

“It’s what I’m gonna do,” Kreel nodded.

“I wish I could go to Karis too,” Dahnai sighed. “There’s too much going on in the Imperium for me to go to the summer palace right now. We’ve got a lot of work to do organizing trainers for everyone.”

“Cynna’s already there, she can help you with that,” Jason told her.

She nodded. “Believe me, I’m gonna work that girl when I get home,” she confirmed. “I’m gonna need a CBIM to handle the logistics of sending out a few *billion* trainers.”

“I’m already working on a plan, Dahnai. I’ll show it to you when you get back,” Cynna’s voice came from a speaker in the room.

“Sounds good. Have Lorna there when you present it,” she replied

So, Jason had two unintended passengers with him on the *Defiant* when Mikano took him back to Karis. Kreel made good on his declaration, having his staff go back to Grimjar and start preparing a presentation for the Union Congress while he went back to Karis. Him being exposed to the virus again meant he was back in isolation, it reset the countdown timer for him, and he was going to attend the Congress session from Karis using a bionoid. Enva was going to spend her quarantine time at Dahnai's summer palace, which had the facilities she'd need to use a bionoid to manage her government. No doubt she'd spend most of her time on the strip, but she was right in that Kreel tended to take over Jason's house when he was there.

But while a day off hanging out with Kreel would do wonders for his mood, he had way too much on the table to ignore it. It was 25:30 at night on Karis when they got back, with the kids all in bed. Almost as soon as he was back home, he was in his office, and the first order of business was with Dellin, who was waiting in his office on Kosigi despite the late time, waiting for Jason to talk to him. Cynna had already warned him about the Accords, so when Jason got him on holo, he already had a preliminary plan to present about Kosigi. "We've drawn down in several sectors of the base that we can allow the others to use," he said, pointing at a hologram showing the interior of the moon. "I've restarted Miaari's security plan for protecting biogenic and translight components from when we had them in the base. By the time they're all ready to move back in, we'll be ready."

"Good deal, Dellin. Just remember that many or all of them will be Generations. So get with Miaari and adjust the security protocols to take that into account."

He nodded. "It's a good thing we adopted ELC and commune signature ID protocols already, so we'll be ready in that regard."

After touching base with Dellin, he had Miaari come over to his office. He told her about the Accords and let her read them. "Bottom line it, Mee. How fast can you have the security upgrades and screening system in place?"

"About a month," she said as she looked at the tablet. "I'm surprised you agreed to hand over the virus to the Grimja and Sha'i-ree."

“Enva more or less got Dahnai to talk me into it,” he grunted. “As far as the Grimja go, I can live with them being Generations. Besides, we need their firepower for the military alliance. Adding the Grimja in with the KMS, the Imperium, and the Collective’s forces creates an alliance than even the CCM will think twice about challenging.”

“Given the Prakarikai are in their sector, I understand the Union’s position on having a strong military,” Miaari said dryly. “Plus it gives them a way to keep a good portion of their massive population employed.”

He nodded. “The Grimja are almost like the Skaa like that, they can throw sheer numbers at you,” he chuckled without much humor. “Any word on what the Jirunji and Subrians are doing with the virus?”

“Yes, actually. The Jirunji are conducting an experiment to find out if the virus alters the behavior of males in its current state. They’ve deliberately infected one of Sovial’s sons and one of her military commander’s sons, who have different bloodlines, and they’re going to see how they react when in proximity to each other. The males were volunteers,” she told him. “The two males are best friends online, and they agreed to the experiment because they’d like to actually be in the same room without trying to kill each other. The experiment is slated to take a month, to see if males can stay in close proximity over a long period of time. If the experiment is a success, Sovial will expand the experiment to one hundred males. If that experiment is a success, she intends to release the virus into her empire.”

“I...I think I could live with that,” he said slowly. “The Jirunji themselves aren’t aggressive, and I can fully understand why Sovial would go to that extreme. What about Holikk?”

“They’re still in debate about it,” she answered. “A large segment of his advisors aware of it want him to release the virus, so he’s getting political pressure. But the ultimate decision is his, it’s within his power as Chancellor in their system.”

“Keep me up to date with Sovial’s experiment.”

“I will. The males are currently in transition. They intend to bring them together almost as soon as they wake up, under tightly controlled conditions,” she said soberly. “If they don’t react aggressively to each other,

the next part of the experiment is to have them train in telepathy together, to see if they can tolerate extended contact. If they can last a full month without any aggressive episodes, Sovial will expand the experiment to one hundred, bringing males together who *aren't* friends. The fact that the two males are best friends may have an effect on their ability to tolerate each other. Males who are strangers to each other may have a very different reaction when brought together.”

“Sovial certainly covers all the bases,” Jason nodded.

“The Jirunji are very intelligent, Jason. I would find them acceptable as cousins.”

“I may not have a choice but to accept them,” Jason grunted. “And a whole lot more new cousins, if Krazrou gets his way.”

“Any movement on that front?”

He shook his head. “We suspended the conference when Mrrshan started transition. He literally passed out during the signing ceremony for the Accords,” he grunted. “We’ll reconvene when both he and Elrin have finished transition and are up to it. I’m...still not sure if that’s the best idea, Mee. I can see the logic of what Kraz is saying, but I’m not nearly as practical as he is. But...but I think he might be right,” he sighed, leaning back in his chair. “I think it *is* just a matter of time before the Generation retrovirus sweeps across the galaxy. It may not be this one, and it may not be anytime soon, but it *will* eventually happen. And we do need a strategy for how we deal with that problem. The Accords were the first step, but they won’t be the last.”

“If it is inevitable, then perhaps Krazrou is right that we get it over with quickly,” she suggested. “That way there are no wars being fought over the virus or over who’s been exposed to the virus, no potential for deadly plagues sweeping across the galaxy. It will cause a major shift in Kimdori policy and make keeping our intelligence operations much harder to keep secret, but we will adapt.”

“Yeah, no more just taking the shape of another race and walking into their facilities,” he mused.

“On the contrary, cousin, if *everyone* is a Generation, then we will simply be hidden among them by our sense of presence,” she countered.

“We don’t have a different sense of presence, cousin. If you looked at me side by side with a Generation, you wouldn’t be able to tell us apart if I was in the Generation’s shape. And with a memory band, we can emulate commune, further concealing us.”

He gave her a look, then gave a sudden short, soft laugh. “That’s true,” he realized. “We’ll just need to develop a memory band that makes commune much more *organic*, and you could do it.”

“We’ve developed bands that can already do that,” she replied easily. “We can’t mimic the unique ID signature of an organic mind, but we have memory bands that perfectly mimic organic commune. And those bands are themselves unique, which we could use as our own signature ID. So all we need do is find a way to implant the ID of our memory band into a security system, and we can bypass a signature ID checkpoint.”

“It sounds like you tested that against *our* system,” he accused.

“Of course we did,” she smiled. “It was the perfect system to use as a foil to design our new infiltrator class memory bands.”

He gave her a curious look. “So how did you do it? Most memory bands don’t have the bandwidth to emulate organic commune.”

“We use RK class master processors in them. They were specifically designed to be able to commune with far more bandwidth than a Generation. They have no trouble emulating organic commune.”

His eyes widened a bit, then he nodded. “Yeah, those can do it,” he agreed. “The only trick is to dial them back so they don’t commune with too much bandwidth.”

“Which we have done,” she chuckled.

After going over a few more things with Miaari, he let her go home to get some sleep, but he didn’t feel sleepy. He wandered the house a bit, checking on the babies, checking the girls, then wandering out onto the deck and standing at the rail to watch the waves break on the shore. How did it come to this? Just a couple of months ago, he would have never agreed to allow the virus to be used. He would have fought the idea tooth and nail to his dying breath, yet it only took a couple of hours for Dahnai to talk him into it. He knew the answer to that, though. He knew that Krazrou

was right, and that the spread of a retrovirus, either this one or a new one, was inevitable. The Generations were a *disease*, like a zombie virus from a Terran zombie apocalypse movie, and now that they'd established themselves in the body that was this galaxy, it was inevitable that they were going to spread. It may not happen in Jason's lifetime, but it was going to happen. And Krazrou was also right that they had to plan for that, not just to keep the rest of the galaxy from trying to kill them, but planning for the time when there were more Generations in the galaxy than there were... *unchanged*. And the key to that was going to be protecting biogenic technology.

At first, he was almost dreading the spread of the virus, and almost felt like the world was ending. Then as he saw how his own people and the Imperium adjusted to being Generations...he wasn't quite so terrified of what might happen. He went from doom and gloom to *it could have been way worse*, then when the Kirri were infected, it became *it's bad, but not as bad as I thought*. When he found out the Terrans and Urumi were infected, his viewpoint evolved to *okay, I think we can work with this complication*. And now, he'd voluntarily allowed two empires to use the virus as they saw fit, he'd allowed two empires to use the virus to make more Generations. He was no longer reacting to the spread of the virus, he was *allowing* the spread of the virus, he was going against what he believed not two months ago. Was allowing it semantics? Was it short-sighted expediency, because the Accords *needed* the Grimja if they were attacked by the rest of the galaxy? Could he be making a dreadful mistake that might put the House of Karinne in mortal jeopardy?

Of course he could. *Any* decision he made might put the House in jeopardy, if he made a poor decision. And his decision about the virus had been hasty, made within just a couple of hours of consideration. But was it the right choice?

Only time would tell.

But one thing was for certain, and that was that Sk'Vrae was right. The safety of the house absolutely depended on turning Karis into an unassailable fortress.

And what did he do? Grant visitation rights to seven other empires and Terrans. But that was important, because it allowed his people to travel as

well, travel within the boundaries of *Generation territory*. They needed that, they needed to feel like they weren't prisoners within house territory. The original Generations accepted their imprisonment, but it wasn't really fair to demand it of everyone else. That was not what they signed up for when they joined the house. Miaari was confident she could keep those visitors out of trouble, so he wasn't too worried about it. Well, a *little* worried, but if Miaari said she could do it, then she could.

It was the resignation, that had to be it. That was what was causing his shift in attitude. Trying to fight against it seemed more and more pointless with every new planet, new empire that was infected by the virus, knowing that another one could rise up once this one finally died off. There was simply no way to stop the virus, and that stark fact had altered his point of view over the last couple of months.

God, he would *so* need a vacation after all this chaos was over.

The sound of metal boots on the wooden deck touched his ears, and he glanced to the side to see Hara come up to him and lean on the rail beside him. She had her visor off, allowing him to see her lovely pale lavender eyes, eyes that couldn't stand the brightness of the Karis sun due to her being genetically adapted to a nocturnal lifestyle. Hara and Palla were great examples of the unique attribute of the Faey among most species, the ability to genetically adapt to different environmental conditions much faster than most other species. The Faey could evolve to adapt to the conditions in which they lived, which created a lot of diversity in their race. Hara's strain of Faey evolved night vision because they lived on an arid world with multiple suns that were so bright that it made them nocturnal to avoid that bright light, sleeping through the day when it was too bright and very hot and coming out after the suns set. [*Heavy thoughts?*] she asked, glancing over at him.

[*Nothing but since all this started, but tonight's thoughts are heavier than most,*] he answered. [*Today I crossed a line I never thought I'd cross.*]

[*And what is that?*]

[*I gave permission for the Grimja and the Sha'i-ree to release the virus into their empires,*] he answered. He kept no secrets from his guards, because he knew it would go no further. [*I did it for a purely political*

reason, and now I'm wondering if I didn't just sign all of our death warrants.]

[How so?]

In a brief moment, he conveyed to her the contents and intent of the Accords. *[We need the Grimja, we need their military and their manpower for basic survival if the rest of the galaxy turns against us. I made that decision purely seeing them as an asset, and in that way, I feel ashamed. But it also showed me how my point of view has shifted over the months, because I thought about it and told myself that having the Grimja be Generations wouldn't be all that bad. The Grimja aren't inherently aggressive, and they're too busy partying to worry too much about galactic domination. The Sha'i-ree are in the same boat for another reason. They're also not inherently aggressive, and their need for extensive social contacts and connections makes them a relatively safe race to be Generations. They solve their problems with words, not guns. When I allowed it, I was thinking to myself I can live with them being cousins, so why not? I think that why not is going to haunt me,]* he told her, his thought disquieted and apprehensive.

[Not over them,] Hara assured him. *[You're right about both of them. Neither the Grimja nor the Sha'i-ree are a threat to galactic peace if they become Generations. I think you'll find them strong allies in the time to come.]*

[What time is that?]

[What you must have realized is coming. The systematic conversion of most of the spacefaring galaxy to Generations.]

He sighed and looked down at the moonlit beach. *[It's that obvious?]*

[To someone with access to the information we have,] she nodded. *[Have you set 3D to finding a way to make Karis unreachable by attackers? There will come a time when one of them will try for biogenic technology, and everyone knows that the Karinnes only make it here. Nowhere else. You need to be ready for it.]*

[Yes, but I'm not holding too much hope that they come up with something perfect. Myli's still working on the Kimdori light scrambler to turn it into a translight interdicator, and the rest of 3D is researching various

ideas that may help defend the planet. But nothing solid yet. At this rate, I think I'd settle for something barely decent, just to give me some hope.]

[Just have faith, Jason. They won't let you down.]

[No. No they won't,] he agreed, looking over at her with a smile. [As much as I know that you girls will never let me down.]

[We'd better not. Captain Aya would murder us,] she communed dryly, which made him chuckle aloud.

[Oh come now, Lieutenant Hara,] he replied a bit formally.

[I'm still not used to that. Most of the girls still call me Sergeant.]

[You deserved it way more than Dera did,] he grinned.

She gave that voiceless, wheezing laugh. [Speaking of getting murdered, you'd better be glad she's asleep and didn't hear you.]

[Oh yes I did,] Dera injected from the barracks. [We'll have a long talk about worthiness in the morning, Jason. Bring your armor.]

[You're in trouble now,] Hara winked. [Dera fights dirty.]

[So do I, that makes it a fair fight. As it were,] he answered cheekily.

Maista, 10 Oraa, 4408, Faey Orthodox Calendar

Sunday, 23 September 2022 Terran Standard Calendar

*Maista, 10 Oraa, year 1333 of the 97th Generation, Karinne
Historical Reference Calendar*

The White House, Karsa, Karis

It didn't take long at all for things to get a little crazy.

And not just on Karis. Right now, the entire Imperium was all but being set on its ear as Dahnai sent out a massive number of Faey to train telepaths, and the other empires were in a little chaos right now as they dealt with the dual logistical nightmares of managing a transitioning population and training those who had transitioned. People who finished

transition were expressing randomly, some the same day they woke up while others still hadn't expressed after over a month, so that randomness was added into the mix as citizens expressed in a pattern that was impossible to predict, who then had to be given at least basic training in closing their mind very quickly before the open thoughts of others drove them to a schism.

And schisms were definitely a problem right now, in more than one empire. One of the biggest cases that had importance to Jason was Kevin Ball. He had the report in front of him and was reading through it. He expressed a while ago according to the report, and since he was afraid of Faey, they had problems finding an instructor for him. Well, given his background and his history, it was no real shock that the inability to block out "the voices," the thoughts of those around him with open minds, drove him to a schism while he was out shopping. And *boy* did he have a schism. The responding officer that filed the report wrote that it took *five* Imperial Marines to subdue him, and it was because they were Faey that they had so much trouble. Kevin had been tortured by sadistic Trillane guards during the subjugation, and having a Faey try to lock him down had triggered all his fear and pain and rage, which fueled his power to a level that it took half a squad to contain him. He was in a medical annex right now under observation, making sure that he suffered no permanent damage from mental battle with the Marines that had to subdue him.

Though, according to the medical report from the psychologist that examined him after they brought him in, it might have not *only* been the memories and the rage. It turned out that Kevin Ball was one *hell* of a powerful telepath, as in as strong as an Imperial Marine. That put him in the top ten percentile of telepaths among the Faey, stronger than most women, and probably nearly as strong as Jason himself. Jason still held the distinction of being the most powerful male telepath who was Faey or Terran, and from this report, Kevin Ball very well may challenge his "title." All that power fueled by his fear and rage, no wonder it took five Marines to subdue him.

The important thing was, Kevin was fine, the Marines were fine, nobody suffered any permanent harm, and they had Kevin in an environment where they could prevent another schism while he learned how to close his mind and control his power so he wasn't hearing people

with open minds. Rahne had volunteered to go to Terra and teach him, and Jason condoned it. She was an original Generation, she was a hell of a lot stronger than Kevin was even without a gestalt, and she'd be even more powerful than that since she'd have her tactical gestalt with her.

Kevin had made some progress in his life since Jason last saw him. Miaari had her own report attached to the medical report, she'd been keeping an eye on him, and he'd made some changes in his life since Jason paid him the money the DFM owed him. He'd moved out of that efficiency and into a fairly nice beachside condo building on the south side of Jacksonville, had bought a hovercar and a space-capable skimmer and gotten his Class 3 to fly it—which he spent flying back and forth to Sao Paolo to see Sano mostly—and had become a professional gamer since quitting his job. Kevin was making a fairly good living by putting up viddy of his activities in Citadel Online, making tutorials and guides in how to solo and explore and raise reputation with important factions to get powerful or really fun quest rewards from them, and also did some live streaming from time to time, like how the pro gamer Youtubers and streamers used to do before the subjugation. He was making enough money doing it to not have to touch the money Jason gave him, which he had wisely invested so it was structured to allow him to live off the returns for the rest of his life. He wouldn't live in luxury the way he'd done it, but he would always have the money to pay his bills, live a comfortable lower middle class lifestyle, and have plenty enough left over to treat himself from time to time. But now he was making a surprising amount of money making CO videos and streaming... but maybe it wasn't so surprising, once Jason thought about it.

Simply put, Kevin Ball was one of *the best* CO players in the game, despite his solo playstyle. Or maybe because of it, since what he could do was so unique and so engaging, and the skills he developed taking on overworld boss monsters solo turned him into an absolute terror in other content. His unique skills made him so entertaining to watch, either on a viddy or on a live stream, that he earned a very good living doing it. Inside CO, Kevin Ball was just as formidable as Gen and Kyva were in the real world.

It was a good comparison. Kevin Ball was the Gen Lun Ba Ru or Kyva Karinne of Citadel Online. He was almost tempted to have the devs make

characters for Gen and Kyva and have the three of them duel inside the game. He could sell it on pay per view and make an absolute bloody fortune.

Cyvanne kept track of him—he was one of her favorite players—and had told him that between his skills and his natural intelligence, he was one of the most skilled and dangerous players in the game. As in *the entire game*, which had over a *billion* active players. His skills were ridiculously high thanks to Lone Wolf, and now he was fully geared in either Champion's Raiment or drops from the Citadel, and that turned him into a *fucking beast*. She'd reported that he was actually starting to get a little bored, because now he was overgearing his preferred content and it was getting almost too easy for him. That was why she was glad that the next Champion's event was about to start in the game, which would ultimately create the connection to the Elemental Plane of Fire.

The Grand Crusade wasn't the only content Cyvanne made just for the Champions. The Champions would be involved in establishing the connections to the other three elemental planes and would then help open them up to the players. And it would ultimately allow the Champions to complete the full set of Champion's Raiment. They were missing four pieces after the Grand Crusade, and they would earn those last four pieces doing the unlock quests for the other three planes and then the final quest line that would open the elemental planes to the players.

That content was already in place and ready for the players. It had passed beta testing and had been patched into the live game, but the players had no way to get to the planes right now...at least not *all* of them. Cyvanne told him that the four players on each server that had the Legendary skill that connected them to the four races of genies *could* enter their respective elemental plane early, if they got their legendary skill to 2,000. That was the threshold that permitted them to pass into their connected plane. No one on any server that had one of the skills had gotten it to 2,000 yet, but she told him that Kevin was further along than the vast majority of those lucky players that had those skills. He wasn't the closest to 2,000, but he was in 43rd place if they were ranked by how close they were. The closest player was on the Mekarok server, which served the Verutan Empire, with a rating of 1,958. Kevin's rating was 1,906, and the

50th place guy was at 1,820, so there wasn't much real estate separating the top 50.

He missed playing CO. When all this chaos was over, he was going to devote a couple of days of his vacation to playing.

But that would have to wait. He had a meeting with Myri, Meya, and Myra in a few minutes, then he'd be returning to Oasis with the other members of the Accords and hammering out more details about it. After that, they'd discuss the future, and just what they were going to do...which he still really had no idea what he was going to do. Krazrou had a point, but he couldn't see intentionally spreading the virus to the rest of the galaxy. It would create upheaval and possibly even war and would put Karis in very real danger.

That was why he was going to have a very long talk with the guys over at 3D tomorrow, to see if they'd made any progress on anything that might protect the planet from invasion. The current defenses around Karis would make taking it a very ugly proposition, but it could be done if the enemy threw enough ships at them. And it was the reason he was going to talk to Myri and the twins before the conference.

[Revered Hive-leader, they are here.]

[Thanks, Chirk. Send them in.]

The three Faey women filed in, Myra holding Chichi—Chichi adored Myra—and took seats across from his desk. *[What did you want to talk about, Jayce?]* Meya asked.

[I wanted you to hear it from me directly. I'm activating the wartime operations plan for the KES, girls,] he answered, giving them a serious look that matched the solemnity of his thought. *[There's too much potential for everything to go to hell with so many empires being affected by the virus, so I'm stepping up our military readiness. Meya, Myra, get the KES ready to shift to wartime operations. That means we're curtailing exploration for the near future, until things settle down here in the home galaxy. That's going to include bringing in all forward post Stargates back to Janja in case they're needed for military deployment. I know that it'll be a pain in the ass to drag them all back here and then put them all back out there when this is over, but right now, what's most important is what's going on in this galaxy.]* He

shifted his gaze. *[Myri, I want you to activate all Class One reservists and put all Class Two reservists on notice they may be activated. I want the fleet kept at operational readiness at all times. They don't have to all stay here at Karis, but I want every ship in the fleet, KMS or KES, to be within a one hour's jump back to Karis at all times in case they're needed.]*

[I was expecting you to do this, Jayce,] Myra nodded. [We've already got a lot of the work done, including placating all the angry scientists. We're setting up some remote operations so they can still do some of their work, mainly by sending out some bionoids to replace them on the research stations.]

[That's not going to work,] Jason warned. [With the KES fleets recalled, that means there's no ship within response range of any of the forward biogenic comm units. So I'm having those recalled as well. I'm not leaving those out there unwatched and unprotected,] he informed them bluntly. [We'll put them back out when we return to exploration, but until then, they come home.]

[It'll take us months to restore everything back to normal!] Meya protested.

[It's better than the alternative.]

[You know that the other empires are going to see us shifting to military mode. They have scientists sitting in medical quarantine up in Kosigi that will find out that their ships are shifting to military service,] Myra warned. [They'll find out we're pulling our scout ships for active duty.]

[I know, and in a way, I want them to know that I'm fortifying Karis. I want them to know we're ready for anyone that tries anything,] he communed with adamance.

[Alright then. All of our ships and crews are already here, so it won't take much to get everything ready,] Meya communed, annoyance rippling under her thought. [We can have the KES ready for hand-over to Myri in a couple of days.]

[I want one of you two in the command center while the KES is on active deployment,] Myri told them.

[I'll do it,] Myra volunteered. [Sister can handle the paperwork while I keep an eye on our assets, make sure Myri doesn't blow up our ships.]

[You're not getting out of the paperwork that easy,] Meya challenged. [You can do your part of it from a console in the command center.]

[Damn.]

Jason had to give a half-smile at that. *[Hopefully the KES won't be on active status for long. I'm hoping to have you back on regular duty in a month or two. I just want to make absolutely sure that if anything happens, we're ready for it.]*

[No need to explain, babe, we understand why you're doing it. It's just gonna be a lot of paperwork for us, and you know how much we hate paperwork.,] Meya replied.

[Yeah, you're not doing this just to piss us off, are you?] Myra challenged with a smile.

[You'll never know,] he teased, which made the three of them laugh.

[Though, this will be good practice for our ships,] Meya mused. [We've only done active duty practice drills, this is the first time we've done it for real and done it for the entire KES. It'll let us identify any problems with the system and correct them if it happens again.]

[That's a good attitude,] Jason nodded. [Now if you ladies don't mind, I have to go. The next meeting on Oasis is starting in about an hour, and I don't want to be late.]

[No problem, babe, we got a lot of our own stuff to do now, thanks to you,] Myra accused.

[I'll have Cybi and Cynna keep you up to date on our status, Jayce,] Myri communed as she stood up. The twins did the same, Myra setting Chichi a little in her arms.

[Good deal. See you girls when I get back.]

[Good luck.]

Chapter 12

Maista, 10 Oraa, 4408, Faey Orthodox Calendar

Sunday, 23 September 2022 Terran Standard Calendar

*Maista, 10 Oraa, year 1333 of the 97th Generation, Karinne
Historical Reference Calendar*

*Planetary Location Code SIS-1-4-3395.334-3428.145-0 (“the
Island”), SIS-1 (Oasis)*

He was almost tired of talking.

For two days, that was all they’d done, going through a wide range of topics that all centered around the current crisis, yet for all their talking, they’d made no decisions on anything. They’d talked about aiding each other through the transition. They’d talked about Krazrou’s different plans for dealing with the spread of the virus through the galaxy, either accidental or intentional. They’d talked about the intentional release of the virus in Sha’i-ree and Grimja territory (which Jason was definitely feeling buyer’s remorse over consenting to it). They’d talked about various scenarios where they ended up in a war with someone, either over the virus or because of the virus. They talked about how to deal with races in the Milky Way that they hadn’t yet contacted and wouldn’t be affected because the virus would be dead by then, and they even talked about how the virus would affect their dealings with the Syndicate.

That was an issue. The Board knew that something major was going on over here, mainly because Jason had Gen relay a very vague warning that the Karinnes and the Confederation would be out of communication for a while as they dealt with a viral outbreak. The Syndicate was too far away to do anything about it, so that wasn’t a worry, but he didn’t want them wondering why the Karinnes suddenly went silent. Kraal and his people

over there were running Galaxy Express just fine without him looking over their shoulders, so that wasn't a problem either.

Gen was sincerely worried about him. He'd sent a message yesterday to see if he was alright, since he hadn't merged to his bionoid over there in over a month. Gen was his friend, his very good friend, and his concern for Jason showed one of the ways that Gen was very much unlike most other Benga. Jason had sent a message back promising to come over when he could find the time and catch him up on things, which was the best he could do right now. Right now, the distraction of sitting in their favorite pub in the Wheel and just chatting very much appealed to Jason, because that conversation wouldn't feel like it had the weight of the world pressing down on his shoulders.

He didn't see this conference ending anytime soon. Thus far, they'd made about zero decisions or breakthroughs since signing the Accords, and Jason could admit that he was one of the reasons why. His feeling about giving the virus to Kreeel and Enva had made him almost contrary in the talks over the last few days, looking for ways to contain the virus whenever and wherever they could.

Until about an hour ago.

The news hit him like a sledgehammer and drove Krazrou's stance on this right through his soul.

A new virus had appeared on Makan, and it was *not* related to the two current known strains. It was a spontaneously occurring retrovirus.

It originated from a recently transitioned Makati, according to the reports, and currently could only affect Makati that shared a specific genetic marker, which made it easy to isolate. The genetic test on it showed that it was new, wasn't a mutation of the existing viruses, and was completely harmless to anyone that didn't share that genetic marker or was already a Generation. Just as they were immune to the two current strains of the virus, they were immune to this new one. And if Songa was to be believed, they'd be immune to any other Generation retrovirus, either naturally occurring or engineered. Even if the virus had a different RNA sequence, the fact that the cell it was trying to infect already carried enough of the virus' RNA sequence meant it couldn't hijack the cell's DNA to replicate itself, which

meant that the virus couldn't affect the cell. The virus couldn't attach to Generation DNA because the virus was fooled into thinking that the cell's DNA was another virus.

That was one of the quirkiest aspects of Generation biology. In a way, their cells were both cellular and *viral* in structure. Their cells were indeed cells, but their DNA confused quite a few viruses and viral structures, rendering them extremely resistant to their effects. That was no surprise given that Kimdori were viral-based organisms and had given Generations certain aspects of their viral biology when their DNA was used to create the Generations. Generations weren't only highly resistant to any radiation, they were also much more resistant to viral infections and diseases than most other forms of life. The conversion of the entire Terran species to the Generations would allow them to finally and ultimately conquer the common cold and the influenza virus.

And it was a good thing that Generations were immune to the retrovirus, else they would be eternally and endlessly affected by every single tiny mutation and variation of a retrovirus, having their DNA rewritten over and over and over until it killed them.

The Makan virus was complete validation and vindication of Krazrou's position. It was naturally occurring, proved that the large number of Generations now drastically increased the chance that a virus could appear, and made it abundantly clear that the only protection from the Generations' potential for producing retroviruses was to become a Generation or have a medical technology even more advanced than the Confederation.

Jason sat in one of the small conference rooms off the main meeting room with Zaa, where the two of them had been discussing the Makan virus and the implications. Jason hadn't told the others about it yet, and in a way, he dreaded doing it, because it meant that he couldn't hope that Krazrou was wrong and they could find some way out of this any longer. But there was no denying it now, not after this news. No holding on to the feeble hope that they could find some way to stop it, change things. This was the reality, and he had to accept it. And that meant that now more than ever, making Karis an absolute fortress was the single most important thing he could do, or ever do. They had to do it to protect his people, protect the Confederation from itself, and protect God knows how many people in the future from the

possibility that some other empire got their hands on biogenic tech and used it to try to conquer the universe.

And that was in no way an exaggeration in his mind. The combination of biogenic tech, Stargate and bridge technology, nexus technology, and translight drive technology, which that empire would acquire if they could get biogenic tech in the first place, would potentially unleash a highly aggressive empire upon the entire *universe*.

They were waiting for Myleena and Miaari to arrive. Jason had called them to Oasis on finding out about the Makan virus and finally accepting a truth he had tried with all his heart to deny, so they could discuss potential ways to protect Karis using the technology they currently had while 3D worked its ass off to develop new ones. Zaa was sitting opposite him reading a report one of her aides had delivered a moment ago, causing a pause in their conversation.

The truth he had to admit was that the spread of Generations across the galaxy couldn't be stopped. He knew it in his head, but now he knew it in his heart, and that no amount of hoping or wishing was going to change that. So now, what he had to decide was how to allow that to happen while simultaneously keeping Karis and its secrets safe and minimizing the disruptive impact of an empire's population being turned into telepaths. To prevent absolute chaos across the galaxy, the spread of the Generations had to be slow and tightly controlled, maybe even going as slowly as one planet at a time, so they weren't looking at a scenario where they'd have more students than teachers. The logistical nightmare of the current seven empires having to deal with a sudden massive number of new telepaths showed them what a complete catastrophe it would be for a large number of entire empires to be affected at the same time. But the spread of the virus itself would be a contentious issue that might start wars, so they had to be very careful. There were so many things that could go wrong, Jason felt almost helpless about it.

Zaa set the handpanel down on the table, her eyes thoughtful. "What news, cousin?" Jason asked.

"It seems that the initial meeting between the two Jirunji males was successful," she replied, referring to Sovial's experiment. "The two males have spent nearly a full day in the same room together and have yet to

become aggressive towards one another. It seems that them becoming cousins has altered or overwritten the sense they have that allows them to know when a male is not of their bloodline. The two males see each other as family, so they aren't reacting with aggression."

"In that narrow respect, I'm glad," Jason said. "It's comforting to know that at least *someone* doesn't want the virus for the power it gives them. So, they're going to start the next phase of the experiment?"

She nodded. "The two will spend the next month in close proximity to one another to see if they can handle extended contact. If that is successful, they'll expand the number of test subjects and introduce males who are strangers to one another."

"We really need to have a long talk with Sovial," Jason said. "Maybe the Karinne Medical Service can help, though not by much. Jirunji medical tech is highly advanced, almost on par with the Medical Service."

"It surpasses them in some ways," Zaa amended with a nod. "Most of the galaxy overlooks just how intelligent the Jirunji are. I wonder if it would be prudent to invite Sovial and Holikk to this conference."

"Not yet, and particularly not Holikk," he replied. "I'd like us to have some concrete plans in place before we kick the Coalition hornet's nest."

"I fear those are plans that must be made," she sighed. "The appearance of this spontaneous retrovirus makes it clear that we must face reality. I was somewhat skeptical of Krazrou's conclusion, but no more. Much as I will find having people like the Prakarikai as cousins distasteful, it will come to pass."

"Amen, cousin," Jason said grimly.

Miaari and Myleena entered the room, and along with them were Cybi, Cylan, Coma, and Coran, in their bionoids. The two CBMOMs had brought their ship bionoids down to the planet. "Cousins, friends," Zaa greeted as the door closed behind the Dreamer bionoid that Coran used.

"We were talking with Myli on the way over," Cylan said, "and there are a few suggestions we want to make to this discussion."

"So you know why we're here?"

Cylan nodded. “The most immediate solution, Jayce, is to let *us* get involved,” he declared. “I know you don’t want us to fight because you don’t ever want us to feel like we’re weapons, but this isn’t about what we feel, it’s about what the House *needs*,” he said adamantly, which made Coran and Coma nod in agreement. “We’re short on personnel to crew ships, and there’s not much we can do about that. But what I can do, and what Coma and Coran and the other CBMOMs can do, is back up what people we do have. Let us take over some of the unused tactical assets,” he proposed. “We can train alongside the manned squadrons, and if we’re needed, we can cover the manpower shortfall. With us helping, we can put every single tactical asset we have in the field if we need it.”

“I can easily control two squadrons of fighters or exomechs in addition to my usual duties on board the *Pegasus*,” Coran said strongly. “And my ship has the available bay space to carry them. I just don’t think we should be the only ones that go out. We lack the *instincts* of the fighter pilots and the riggers. We should go out with them to support them, but not replace them.”

“I can control every tactical asset on Karis that’s not being manned by a pilot,” Cylan continued. “And I’ve trained for this, Jason. Between Vanguard and my advanced tactical training, I can be effective in a real fight.”

“I can’t deny that you’d be effective,” Jason said. “But it’s the last thing I ever want to see you do, Cylan. You are not a *weapon*.”

“I am a sentient being capable of making my own choices,” Cylan said strongly. “And I *choose* to protect my home.”

“He has you there, cousin,” Zaa noted dryly.

Jason was quiet a long moment, then sighed. “Alright,” he said with a nod. “But you’ll be restricted in certain ways so the KMS doesn’t depend on you or feel like you’re replacing them, and you have to convince Myri.”

“I’ve already talked to Myri, Juma, and Sioa,” he replied. “They can work me and my external assets into the defense plan, but I’m going to need more training. Juma wants to see if I can operate a frigate, and if I can handle it, she’ll let me try with a destroyer.”

“From a merge or with bionoids?”

“Bionoids. I can remote operate a line vessel, but I still needs hands inside to do the maintenance and other tasks. That’s what the bionoids are for,” he replied.

“I’ll be doing the same,” Cybi finally said. “I have more than enough extra power to handle remote operations, since I don’t have any real duties outside of the KMS and research. But I’ll need some hands-on training. I haven’t spent the last four years training for combat the way Cylan has. I’m not ready.”

“I can help you with that, Cybi,” Cylan said. “Between the two of us, we can put more ships on the line until we can find crews for them.”

“That’s the short term. In the long term, I’m working on a new idea—well, and old idea out of the research archives that Cybi told me about,” Myleena said, sitting beside Zaa, putting her across the table from Jason. A hologram appeared over the table between them, showing an orbital shield module. Jason would recognize it anywhere. “We already have the planetary shield, but what Cybi has in the archives that I think we can adapt and use is this. This is an ionized neutrino field generator,” she told him. “Since everyone uses plasma power tech now, we can attack them through that. What this module does is create a charged neutrino saturation field so strong that it affects any plasma power systems that enter the field. Simply put, cousin, a ship enters this field and its shields come down, its IP comes down, and it overloads its entire power system and leaves it dead in space.”

“How the hell are you polarizing *neutrinos*?” Jason asked. “I thought that was impossible!”

“Not easily,” she replied with a wry smile. “Since low-energy neutrinos pass through most coherent energy fields and matter, they’ll enter the ship and wreak havoc with its power generation systems, even their batteries.”

“Wait. I’m confused. “How are they passing through matter if they’re charged? It’s the neutral charge of a neutrino that lets them do that. They’re not affected by the EM field of protons and electrons.”

“The neutrinos exist in two separate quantum states simultaneously,” Cybi answered. “To matter, they’re uncharged. But they interact with high-energy ions in a plasma state as if they *are* charged.”

He tried to wrap his head around that, and it gave him an immediate headache. What they were describing was impossible according to the laws of physics. “I’m not even going to try to figure that out,” he said, which made Myleena grin. “Bottom line it. Can you make it, and make it work?”

“Give me some time, and I will,” she promised. “The old Karinnes did some successful tests of the theory, we’ll just need to refine and upscale it, industrialize the process to put the neutrinos into the right state and keep them from straying too far, keep them inside the field volume. If the neutrino density falls too low, they won’t blow out power systems. The only downside is that when the field is up, it’ll burn out *our* power systems too. So we can’t leave it on all the time. But the upside is, the math says we can raise the field and have it at full strength within seconds of activation. So we can leave it down until it’s needed, then wham, nail invaders with it.”

“That, or we can build the field outside the orbital track of Kosigi, just outside the Stargate ring, which we can leave up at all times,” Cybi proposed. “It will take much longer, but doing it that way puts the field between the planet and any fleet that tries to jump in. The field is useful, Jason, because it will affect ships in a *translight* state, but won’t affect ships in hyperspace. We can use it against ships that try to circumvent the interdictors by using Hrathrari translight drives, while the interdictor prevents ships from jumping past the effect. But our own ships *will* be able to jump through the field.”

“Okay, that has potential,” Jason said with a nod. “How long would it take to build enough field generators to cover a sphere outside the Stargate ring?”

“Years, so it will be a long-term project,” Cybi admitted. “But we can use the near field version Myli described until it’s ready. We place the field generators just outside the planetary shield and project it forward, which protects the planet from any ship that tries to cross the field to bore through the shield.”

“The fun part is that the generators themselves will be in a singular quantum phase while they’re operational, it’s how they charge the neutrinos,” Myleena smiled. “That means that only multiphased weaponry can hit them while they’re operating. Most of the Confederation relies on rail cannons as their long-distance heavy hitter weapons, which won’t hit

the generators. The slugs will just pass through them, because they're not in the same discrete quantum phase as the generators. The field will be large enough so that if they want to destroy the generators with multiphased energy weapons, they have to come into the field effect to do it. And when they do, zappo," she said grandly.

"Cute," Jason said.

"We can have that up in a few weeks after we perfect the field generator design," Myleena finished. "We can probably crank out four or five generators a day, so it won't take us long to build enough to protect the planet."

"Can we use these offensively?" Jason asked curiously. "Carry them on a ship and throw them at opposing ships in combat?"

Myleena shook her head. "The generator can't set up a sufficiently dense field to affect ships if it's moving too fast," she replied. "We'll be pushing that limit by putting them in orbit around Karis. The trick will be to have them in the same orbital tracks, so each passing generator reinforces the field as it passes through."

"It has potential, Jason," Cybi said eagerly. "I think this is what we've been looking for."

"Alright, run with it," he nodded. "But don't stop the translight interdictor program."

"The Kimdori are going to take over that project," Zaa told him. "Our scientists know enough about translight theory to continue the work, especially since the design is based off *our* light scramblers."

"Yeah, they know way more about light scrambling tech than I do, so I'm sure they'll figure out where I've gone wrong with the program," Myleena admitted. "I'm gonna pull most of 3D for the field project, Jayce, just to warn you. We think this is our best bet, so I want some solid people on the team."

"Do what you need to do," he assured her. "If you're right about this, it *is* what we've been looking for," he added, looking at the hologram. "The only way through the field is using low tech energy, which won't be able to put out enough to power weapons that can bring down the shield."

“Exactly,” she nodded fiercely. “We stack weapon platforms *behind* the field generators to protect them, and that should make it ridiculously hard to get at them. Even if a ship using a low-tech power system could get close enough to threaten the generator, the platforms will take it out. The field doesn’t effect weapon fire that passes through it, well, everything except missiles,” she amended. “All of our standard energy weapons and rail weapons can fire through the field without being affected by it.”

“What about plasma weapons?”

“The field does reduce the range of hot plasma weapons, MPACs, and plasma torpedoes,” Cybi answered. “They lose coherency as they pass through the field, causing the plasma or MPAC blast to diffuse and the torpedo to explode prematurely. It also reduces the range of ion cannons fired through the field effect, but we don’t use ion cannons on our platforms.”

“We can work around that,” he said.

“Yeah, most of our platforms are loaded with rail cannons for long range and pulse weapons for close range,” Cylan supplied.

“The newer ones are carrying particle cannons and reflex cannons,” Coma added. “I doubt those are affected by the field.”

“Nope,” Myleena agreed. “In a weird bit of quantum interaction, the field *increases* the range of a reflex blast that goes through it,” she chuckled. “It holds integrity longer within the field, extending its range by nearly ten percent.”

“Not enough to fire through the effect, is it?”

“The big girls on Subrian command ships might be able to do it,” she admitted, “but to pull it off, they’d have to shunt every iota of power in their entire ship to the cannon, and fire from the very edge of the field. I’m not sure they’d think of that. Either way, if the Subrians attack us, the job of the KMS is to keep their command ships away from the planet.”

“So it’s not absolutely perfect, but it should be good enough,” Jason mused. “Alright then, we’ll go with the field. Any other news from the warehouse you care to pass along?”

“Actually yeah, Leamon’s almost got a new weapon ready. He found a way to super-charge an archaic laser weapon,” she told him. “I’m seriously fuckin’ impressed,” she added with a laugh. “He built a unit about the size of a destroyer rail cannon that fires a laser hot enough to vaporize Adamantium. It can even burn through Neutronium if it’s given enough time. It’s not as powerful as our other energy weapons, but it does have line of sight range, so it will definitely be useful. It gives us a line of sight energy weapon to pair with the rail cannons.”

“We could use it for planetary defense,” Cylan said. “An extreme range missile and high velocity mass killer.”

“Build a few test units, let’s see what it can do,” Jason said.

The meeting broke up, and he and Zaa went straight to another one. The others were waiting for them in the conference room, and from the looks on their faces, they already knew about the new retrovirus...which wasn’t a surprise, since Dahnai was there and it happened on Makan, one of her planets. That suspicion was confirmed when they sat down, and Dahnai turned to him. “I take it you and Zaa were discussing the Makan situation?”

He nodded grimly. “That tears it. Krazrou is right,” he declared. “We have to plan for the entire galaxy becoming Generations.”

“I take no pleasure in being right, cousin,” Krazrou said soberly. “And this development means we need to rethink our approach. Instead of creating a plan to protect us, we should consider a plan that makes the transition for the rest of the galaxy as painless as possible.”

“We need to plan for both,” Sk’Vrae injected. “There will be races, empires, that will reject becoming Generations, those who see being changed as becoming something less than what they are.”

“You mean the religious wingnuts,” Kreel said.

She nodded. “Much as I admire Quord, I am honestly not sure how the Jun will react to this news. They may close their borders once again, and keep them closed permanently, to protect themselves from the virus. It might have the potential to tear his entire civilization apart.”

“You’re underestimating the resilience of the Jun, Sk’Vrae,” Jason told her. “I don’t think they’ll have too many problems with it. I think the race

that's going to have the most problems with this are going to be the most xenophobic. The Jun aren't exactly xenophobic. They're not afraid of other races, they're just fiercely protective of their territory. I think the Moridon might have the biggest problem with the virus, but not from a personal viewpoint. If *everyone* is a telepath, they'll see it as a threat to the security of the secrets they keep on their homeworld. They may very well turn Moridon into a closed planet to protect their customers and might restrict just which Moridon are allowed to transition."

"So, we need to create two plans," Krazrou spoke up. "The first plan builds on the Accords, ensuring our protection and survival as the virus spreads through the galaxy. The second plan will entail ensuring that transition is as peaceful and smooth as possible," he announced. "Where those of us who have already transitioned assist those who have yet to transition as best we can, with training, support, even financial assistance. I think the key to an orderly transition is to not try to go too fast," he said. "A comprehensive plan that takes place over years would be best, so as not to stress our resources and prevent a feeling that things are going too fast, which might incite aggressive responses from more volatile civilizations. We've been very lucky so far in that the races affected by the virus are mature in their outlooks and have stable governments," he said with a nod to them all. "It's a further boon that the Faey are in this group, since they're already telepathic as a species. That creates a pool of experienced instructors on which we can draw as needed."

"I think you're right, Krazrou," Elrin agreed.

The discussion went the entire day, and stretched on into the next, and the next, where the ten assembled rulers and ex-rulers, the CBIMs, and several aides and advisors contributed to create two new plans upon which they all agreed. The first was an addition to the Accords that created a comprehensive plan of mutual support, helping each other along as their populations transitioned. The second was the plan they intended to present to the summit of all galactic rulers that would be held on Imbiri, which was coined the Ten Year Plan. It was a plan of intentional infection and transition of the other galactic races using Terra as the main hub of activity for the transition process, at least in the first three years of the plan. People would come to Terra, be infected, transition, and then be trained by Generations that were skilled in what they could do...mainly Karinnes and

Faey. That training would be completely transparent, done in public, to ensure that everyone knew just what they were being taught so as to avoid any accusations of the Karinnes trying to plant spies in other empires. They would then return to their home empires and train others as each civilization executed its own internal transition plan. The Ten Year Plan would ensure that those empires had competent native Generations to train the rest of their population, and would have control over the process, which would ensure that they wouldn't think that the Karinnes were somehow interfering in their internal affairs. The ten year span of the plan would, they hoped, spread out the transition time to prevent putting undue stress on any empire as it had to disrupt its economy and production to train its work force in how to control their telepathy, as well as not overwork the instructors.

To make it as transparent as possible, the training program would be attached to the Academy and its contents and the training classes would be completely open, so everyone could see exactly what was going on and exactly what was being taught. The Ten Year Plan training course would take about eight takirs, and would encompass basic telepathy, the kind that was taught to newly expressed Faey students in school, teaching the mental exercises the Pai used to unlock telekinesis, communing, merging without using a jack, and splitting. The Academy already had a telepathy program for those that wanted to advance their telepathic skills beyond their prep and primary school education, and that would be vastly expanded to take on more students, those that wanted to learn more than the basics of telepathy. Ayuma would add a new program for Generation abilities to the Academy course offerings, creating a new major that would focus on the other aspects of Generation abilities, creating an Academy-level program in "advanced Generation applications." That would be for those who wanted to know more than the basics, who wanted to learn the advanced skills, tricks, and abilities possessed by Jason and the other "original" Generations.

Jason didn't entirely like the idea of training people in things like that, but it had to be done to make sure that the abilities of the Generations were accepted into the myriad societies and cultures of the galaxy, and became not only mainstream, but *normal* to everyone. It was important to their survival that everyone think it completely natural to have those abilities. They would become the common denominator that they all possessed, which Zaa hoped would foster a new age of peace in the Milky Way.

On the evening of the third day, Cybi presented the final draft of the Ten Year Plan to them for their final vote. It passed unanimously, and Jason felt almost a little hopeful that this wasn't going to explode in their faces and become a war of such scope and horror that it rivaled the Consortium-Syndicate War. "And now we have something concrete to present to the summit," Krazrou announced. Jason wasn't entirely sure exactly when and how he'd become the leading voice in this conference, but he was certainly in charge of it now. "Any word on when that will happen, Denmother?"

"Mesaiima is still organizing it," she replied. "But so far, every empire or race she's invited has accepted. Even races like the Chezari are going to attend."

"Oh boy, that's going to be tense," Jason muttered. *Everyone* hated the Chezari, because they were a race and civilization built entirely on slavery. Just about every race in the Jirunji sector and the sectors abutting it had been victim to Chezari raiding parties, capturing their citizens to sell into slavery. The only reason they hadn't been wiped from the map was because they had a very large and powerful navy that would make war with them an expensive proposition. They were similarly lucky in that they'd never crossed an empire that *would* pay that price to wipe them out, like the Jirunji, Urumi, Skaa, or the Jun. The Chezari had been smart enough to never mess with the Jirunji despite them being within range of their slaving raiders, which was the only reason they still existed.

"I think the Chezari will crumble once the virus hits their slave populations," Kreel said with a malicious little smile. "The first slave that suffers a schism and melts a guard's brain is going to be all it takes."

"Then we'd be looking at an act of genocide as the Chezari execute the slaves to protect themselves," Jason sighed.

"Which is exactly why the Chezari will do everything in their power to keep the virus away from their territory," Zaa predicted. "Their entire society is built on the premise that their slaves can't fight back. They will forego becoming Generations to protect everything they are."

"It will put them at an eternal disadvantage against the rest of us... which I see as just fine for us," Krazrou noted in satisfaction. "And it will stop the slave raids on their neighbors, because they will know that any

Generation they pick up will be an intolerable threat to them. In about fifty years, the Chezari will be nothing but an isolated backwater clinging to a system that will inevitably destroy them. And I see that as justice for the crimes they have committed.”

“I would estimate that the summit will take place within a month,” Zaa said, getting them back on track. “That will give us more time to get our plans into motion, get more trainers where they need to be, and solidify our support infrastructure.”

“Then I think we can consider this conference successfully concluded,” Krazrou prompted. “All of us have quite a bit of work ahead of us, and we need time to prepare for the summit.”

“Yeah, I have to get with the Congress and we have to decide what to do with the virus,” Kreel said.

“You already know what you’re doing with the virus, Kreel,” Dahnai noted.

“Well, yeah, but we need a plan so things don’t go crazy,” he replied. “I might be borrowing Cynna, Jayce,” he said, looking over at him.

“I’m busy with the Imperium. Cyvanne can do it,” she answered from the speaker. *“She doesn’t do much but screw around in her game anymore anyway.”*

“Gee, thanks, sis,” Cyvanne said tartly. *“If you’ll give me access to the Congress mainframe, I’ll draw up a plan and propose it to you by the time you get back to Grimjar, Kreel.”*

“I’m gonna need Dahnai’s help anyway with some additional trainers, so I think you just earned yourself some cold shoulder, Cynna,” Kreel grinned towards a camera.

“I’ll save that for Karis,” Cyvanne said threateningly.

“You’d better change the access codes for your facility, Cynna,” Jason warned.

“My facility is on Kosigi, I’ll see her coming,” she replied cheekily.

“That sounds like a challenge, sis,” Cyvanne observed lightly.

“Game on, sister, game on,” Cynna challenged.

Jason was exhausted from the conference, so he flopped into the seat of the dropship that picked him up. He scrubbed his hand over his face as the hatch closed, Aya sitting down beside him, Dera and Ryn in the opposite seat in the row, and Shen and Suri took their seats in the cockpit. He related the entirety of the day’s events to them. *[I think it went rather well, all things considered,]* Jason summarized.

[You had three days with some of the smartest members of the council there,] Aya told him with a nod.

[Sure as hell not me you’re talking about. Zaa, Kraz, and Kreel most likely.]

[Don’t discount yourself, Jason, or Dahnai,] Aya replied seriously.

[Whatever. Take me home, Shen, I think I want to sleep about ten years.]

[I think you need a couple of days on Tir Tairngire, Jason,] she replied, glancing back at him as the dropship lifted up off the sandy beach. *[You need to rest after all the stress you’ve dealt with the last couple of months.]*

[Usually I’d say hell no, I have too much work, but not this time,] he communed, his weariness and mental exhaustion evident in his thought. *[So send it ahead to Jys and Ayama that we’re going to the vacation house for a day or two. I can do my work from there. Besides, I’d like to see the wolves and see how they’re adapting to being back home and back into their routine after their transition.]*

[I’m sure they’d love to see you, Jayce,] Dera told him. *[They really like you.]*

[I really like them,] he returned with a smile over at her and Ryn. *[But I talk to them almost every day, so it’s not like we’re not keeping in touch.]*

[They figured out how to access the house biogenic network, eh?]

[I taught them how to use it,] he corrected.

Chiira, 24 Oraa, 4408, Faey Orthodox Calendar

Sunday, 7 October 2022 Terran Standard Calendar

*Chiira, 24 Oraa, year 1333 of the 97th Generation, Karinne
Historical Reference Calendar*

Joint Base Beta, Karga, Karis

It was a return to something approaching normalcy for him, though it wasn't going to last the day.

Blowing out his breath as he lifted up out of the cockpit of his Cheetah, Jason took off his helmet and looked over at Sirri, who was parked in the spot beside him. The wind was a constant here at Joint Base Beta, which was on the flat grassy plains of northern Karga, just south of the Atali Mountains. The Parri village was on the other side of those mountains, almost due north of them, only about half an hour away by skimmer...and since he was so close, he'd paid them a visit before coming here.

Things were slowly settling back into the new normal here on Karis. Over 70% of the population had completed transition, and over half of them had already expressed. The training courses and procedures they'd put in place were doing what they hoped they would do, and things were moving at a very smooth pace. There had been no reports of a schism on Karis for over a takir, and everyone was doing what was asked of them, watching out for their neighbors and helping as they could. It was that camaraderie, that sense of community, that was making it work here on Karis, and had allowed Jason to relax enough to go back to some of his activities that took him out of his office.

This was one he'd wanted to do for a while. Effective about one minute ago, Jason had passed the final tests and was fully combat rated on a Cheetah, which returned him to the somewhat unnecessary distinction of being fully combat rated on every fighter and exomech in the KMS. Sirri, who had had her training interrupted by the viral outbreak, was back, and the two of them had finished up the training program together. Since Karis was no longer quarantined for other members of the Accords, Sirri was back to spending more time on Karis than she did on Draconis, continuing her exomech training and doing it where she didn't have cameras following her around everywhere.

The citizens of the Imperium did finally know about her pursuits, however. She didn't keep her interests in exomechs a secret, but it had been a secret that she'd been training as a rigger, since she didn't have a jack. That secret got exposed about a month ago, with the cover story that she was training using the interface technology developed by the Karinnes that didn't require a jack. Since her secret was out, she'd admitted that she'd been in secret rigger training for nearly two years, which explained why she'd been out of the public eye for long periods of time. She'd also made it abundantly clear that she would do her conscription in the Imperial Marines as a rigger, not the usual five-year stint in the command staff inside the palace. Her professed goal was to have sufficient training and experience to command her own rigger company when she began her conscription. And not just any rigger company, either. She wanted to build a comparable organization to the KBB. She wanted the best riggers in the Imperial Marines to be assembled into an elite company, led by her, that would be the pride of the service. But to do that, she knew that she not only had to be a skilled rigger but be able to lead them in combat. Titles and nobility meant *shit* in the cockpit of a rig when shots were flying, and she was smart enough to understand that. If she wanted the loyalty of her riggers, she had to be a good leader, like Kyva or Justin Taggart were.

Jason had to admit, he had the feeling she was going to pull it off. She was a damn good rigger already, and she would only get better and better given that she was being trained by some of the best riggers in the CCM. Even Kyva was taking her out on training runs now and getting personal training from Kyva was *major*. Jason could attest to that; he wouldn't be half the rigger he was now if not for Kyva's involvement in his training. Kyva was the best rigger alive, but she was also an exceptionally good teacher, which was why the KBB was so absolutely fucking *scary*. She had trained up her girls to where they were the most feared military unit in three galaxies. Sirri's skills would earn her the respect of her future company, and the time she spent with her mother, Jason, Kyva, and other experienced leaders and commanders would teach her how to lead her company with skill.

As far as Jason was concerned, it was a good thing. Sirri would be the next Empress, so learning how to lead her company would be good

experience for her, allowing her to make her mistakes on a small scale before her decisions had the weight of the Empress behind them.

He'd had to seriously juggle his schedule to do this, because the summit was scheduled to begin in about eight hours, and he did still have tons of other stuff to do. He was still training classes of transitioned KMS ship captains and high-ranking officers, but now he was also the primary tactical applications instructor for the elite mecha companies. Jason was the most skilled rigger in Unit Alpha and belonged to one of the elite mecha companies himself as a reservist, so he was the one teaching the elite companies how to use their new abilities in a tactical situation. Jason felt it was only right that he pay back Kyva and the KBB for training him, because now it was his turn to train them, mainly in how splitting could be a powerful tool for them in combat situations. Jason's ability to split in a rig made him virtually impossible to surprise, allowed him to see everything around him at once, and made sure he was always right on top of every change in his rig and his surroundings without losing focus on the fighting around him. Jason had been doing daily training sessions with the elite mecha companies, including his own Storm Riders, every afternoon after he did his classes with KMS officers. There were four of them doing them, him, Jenn, Jezzi, and Vella, the four highest-rated riggers in Unit Alpha, which was kinda necessary given the four elite mecha companies had 200 members. Jason couldn't easily train them all, so he'd brought in the twins and Vella to help.

The grin on Sirri's face was almost infectious as she took off her helmet herself, her hair falling out of it to fan over her shoulders as the other members of the training group started exiting their mecha. The entire class passed certification, so there was quite a bit of congratulatory communique flying around the tarmac as the ground crews moved in to do post-op maintenance. Their training group was comprised of riggers from about ten different heavy companies from both the Army and the Marines, as well as several reservists like Jason. The outbreak had murdered their usual training schedules where a company trained together, so Jason and Sirri weren't training with the Storm Riders. Only five Storm Riders were in the certification class. Tara was one of them, parked in the tarmac space behind Jason, with Trika, Jake and Mol'Vek, a Terran and an Urumi. Tara had one of the most racially diverse units in the Marines.

[You owe me a Cheetah, Uncle Jayce,] Sirri communed victoriously.

[A deal's a deal,] he replied with a smile. *[The next one off the assembly line is yours, so make sure you tell them what colors you want it painted. But you can't let Imperial ground crews work on it if you take it off planet.]*

[No problem,] she answered. *[I'll have them park it at the summer palace like my other KMS rigs. You already have yours?]*

[Yeah, I'm standing on it,] he replied, tapping his foot on the metal below him. *[Just about all the others are going in for a refit to add a tactical.]*

[They've already recalled ours,] Tara injected. *[Both my Titan and my Cheetah. I'm using training units until I get them back.]*

[Ew, I hate using training units,] Sirri replied. *[Having to adjust to a new computer is always a bitch.]*

[You're standing on a training unit, girl, and I'm surprised it's not bucking you off,] Jason warned.

She laughed audibly. *[But I've used the same trainer through my entire course, Uncle Jason. Me and this computer get along. I just hope the computer in my new Cheetah is as mellow as this one. Most training computers are uptight and high strung.]*

[From dealing with newbies that crash them and break their systems,] Mol'Vek noted. *[I almost feel sorry for computers in training units.]*

[That's why training units rotate into mecha companies from time to time to give them a break, as well as let them work with an experienced rigger,] Jason mused. *[Else the lattice pathways they develop will all be centered around having to deal with greenhorns. There's a time limit on how long a unit can be a training unit, too. These mecha will be permanently transferred to active service after a year.]*

[I'm sure the last couple of months have been enough of a vacation for them,] Tara noted as they all floated down to the ground using their grav pods.

Sirri wasn't wrong about that. The computers in most dedicated training mecha were a bit stiff and uptight, and it was because they dealt almost

entirely with rookies. The nervousness of the pilots caused the computers to develop lattice pathways to deal with a partner that was both nervous and made silly mistakes. It had to be frustrating for them. The computers in Jason's rigs had been with him for years, they were almost like old friends, to the point where when Jason got a new rig, they pulled the main computer from his old rig and put it in the new one. Its lattice pathway network had developed to deal almost exclusively with Jason, to the point where he'd ruined them for any other pilot.

It was one of the most glaring differences between a biogenic computer and any other computer, the fact that biogenic computers learned, they adapted, and if they had enough time to develop a rich and complex lattice network, they could even take on aspects of personality. Units like that weren't self-aware, but they were definitely not just machines anymore either. The computers in training units were indeed a bit stiff and uptight, and riggers often needed a day or two to adjust to their training unit's quirks. That was because training units had more operational uptime than just about any other mecha. They were used hours a day every day, and the computers in them had to deal with pilots that made a whole lot of mistakes. No surprise some of them got a bit acerbic.

[If you like that computer, Sirri, you can always request for it to be transplanted to your new mecha,] Jason prompted.

[I can?]

[Sure. When a computer and a rigger have a good rapport, we like to keep them together. Even non-CB units have compatibility scores with Generations, and now that you're a Generation, it matters. They gel better with some riggers more than others, and it seems you two are very compatible.]

[Cool! I want that!] she declared. The Cheetah behind her moved, surprising her a little bit, rising off its front paws and then dropping back down.

[Seems the computer likes that idea too,] Jason noted lightly.

[Awesome! You're gonna come with me, baby girl,] she communed openly, but mainly at the control computer in the Cheetah, stepping over, then reaching over and putting her hand on its forepaw. *[You'll have to*

share time with me with my other rigs, but we'll definitely be doing stuff together.]

[It won't have issues getting a tactical?] Tara asked. *[Cause I'd rather keep the units in my rigs.]*

[Nope, they won't replace your computers when they install the tactical. The control system for it is all software, they just have to upload a new control module into your computer.]

[Awesome,] Jake called as they walked away from the Cheetahs, though Sirri was lingering a bit. She hurried after them and slowed to walk beside Jason, and he once again had to marvel at both how beautiful and how tall Sirri was now. *[I'm looking forward to tactical training. You doing it, Jayce?]*

[Yeah, for us,] he replied. *[Unit Alpha will be doing tactical training for the elite mecha units, both rig and fighter. You guys are going to be training the other companies and squadrons once you're rated, that way you keep getting experience by teaching others.]*

[That's gonna be fun,] Jake frowned, his thought sarcastic.

[You'll live, Jake,] Tara told him dryly.

[I agree with the idea,] Mol'Vek communed. *[If we have to teach it, that means we have to know it inside and out. And each training session only benefits us.]*

[Just so,] Jason nodded towards the Urumi. *[Now I hate to run, but I have to get back to the office. The summit starts tonight, and I have some stuff to go over.]*

[I'm surprised you found the time to do this,] Trika noted.

[I made the time to do this,] he communed forcefully, looking back at the rather short, young-looking Faey woman. *[There was no way in hell I was going to be the only unrated rigger in the company. Besides, I promised Sirri we'd do this training together, and I wasn't going to break that promise. We've gone through it from beginning to end.]*

[And I loved it, Uncle Jason,] she smiled, reaching over and putting her hand on his shoulder. *[Now I just need to get Aria into rigging, and I'll be*

happy.]

[Good luck with that,] Jason noted dryly.

[Doesn't she have to do rigger training as part of being, you know, who she is?] Jake asked.

[Yeah, but it's not her thing, really. She's like Dara, she wants to be a pro athlete when she finishes school. She just hasn't decided which sport she wants to pursue. She loves playing just about everything, she can't decide on just one.]

[She doesn't have to,] Trika replied. [She'll be a better all-around athlete if she doesn't specialize her skills by playing just one sport.]

[I'm surprised she's not going into batchi.]

[She loves batchi, and she's damn good at it, but she likes playing other sports too,] Jason replied.

[That reminds me, how is Zach doing in his rigger training?] Sirri asked.

[He's up to PIM exercises,] Jason answered. [Since he's been merging to toys most of his life, he's pretty good using a rig. He already has the basic skills when it comes to controlling an external body.]

[He'll never have to get a jack,] Jake mused. [I wonder if it's a dead technology now, at least for transitioned citizens.]

[For civilians, probably, but we still need jacks to do our jobs,] Tara replied. [The jacks are why we can jump hyperspace without problems, after all. That, and a hardline connection is more secure, especially in the future when we might be fighting other Generations. A remote merge might be able to be disrupted by a Generation mindstriker.]

[Not really, but Juma and Sioa already decided that physically jacking in is the best way to go about merging for PIM, and going through a merge pod using ETC is mandatory for remote operation,] Jason replied, using the acronym for Encrypted Transmitted Commune, the long-range version of ELC. [Well, a mindstriker might be able to disrupt an organic merge, but if you're merging through a merge pod or your gestalt, then a mindstriker can't really affect that. Biogenic commune systems are extremely resistant

to outside interference, because they can operate on telepathic... frequencies, to use a term, as well as at speeds that an organic mind can't. An organic Generation mindstriker simply can't affect a biogenic unit that's actively blocking them. So yeah, jacks will still be mandatory equipment for military personnel.]

[Makes me wonder why you never got a jack,] Jake looked over at him.

[Cause when Myli and Songa came up with the implants to allow me to jump hyperspace safely, I didn't really need one. Besides, since I'll never be allowed to PIM a mission, I don't have to worry about a hardline connection to my rig.]

They split up after their debrief and a little ceremony officially rating them for combat operations in a Cheetah. The riggers were dismissed for a few days of R&R after the training course, which was standard procedure. Sirri rode back to Karsa with Jason but went to go hunt down Aria so they could go pal around Karsa after they reached the White House complex. Jason went back to his office, where he read the latest reports from Zaa and Miaari about the summit that would take place in about seven hours, which put it after dark for him...but that was life for a ruler in a galaxy where everyone had different times. It wasn't the first time he'd had to have a meeting or attend a conference in the middle of the night. So far, 563 empires or independent systems had agreed to attend the meeting in one way or another, which were spread all over the Milky Way galaxy. Many of them, the Karinnes and the Confederation had met after real time jump engines became mainstream, and none of them had joined either the Confederation or the Coalition. The KMS had been bringing their agents to the conference over the last takir by towing in their ships or arranging A/V feeds for those who either didn't want to attend in person or couldn't because of environmental conditions. Jason had been in almost constant conference with the other members of the Accords to fine-tune their presentation, which Krazrou would give, so they could explain their ideas the most efficient way possible that also didn't scare the hell out of the attendees.

The Union and the Sha'i-ree had also begun their transition plans. Transitioning their populations had passed their respective governments, in record time for the Union, who had a bad habit of letting bills languish in

the Congress for months, and the plans that the CBIMs had helped form were being implemented. Cyvanne was helping the Union while Cybri was helping the Sha'i-ree, and Cyman had been drafted to oversee the transition plan for the Collective. There were *billions* of Faey in the other empires now, recently transitioned Generations who were there to teach the other races the basics of telepathy. Many of them weren't all that happy about being drafted for the operation, but they weren't arguing about the paychecks. The empire they were helping was paying them a *very* large salary for their work, one of the conditions bargained into the plan by Dahnai, and one with which Jason agreed. Those Faey were being uprooted from their jobs and careers, and they deserved to be well paid for what they were doing.

There was one more member of the Accords as of this morning, however, and one that Jason saw coming. The Moridon had gotten wind of the Accords and what they meant, probably through the Moridon that worked in the banks in the member empires, and they all but bribed the members to be added to the plan. The Overseer could see that the only way to maintain the security of Moridon was to have his entire population become telepaths, so he offered some serious monetary encouragement to the members of the Accords to be included in their plan. They were expecting that, however, so when Brayrak Kruu asked, the others accepted his proposal almost before he offered to reduce the interest rates on the loans they had through Moridon banks. Cyra was delegated to overseeing the transition plan for Moridon, which would not follow the steps of the Ten Year Plan due to the special circumstances involved.

The biggest of those circumstances was that the Moridon would have to be vaccinated against the bio-agent that still lurked on their planet, or it would kill them when they transitioned. The other was that the Moridon demanded that *only* Karinne Generations train their people, because the Moridon trusted the Karinnes to keep secret any information they may accidentally come across as the Moridon population was in training.

There was one other empire that had gotten word of what the Accords were and what they meant, and were all but beating down Jason's door, and that was the Ruu. They'd found out about it from the Ruu that lived on Karis, most of which were infected by the virus and were now or would soon be Generations. And Jason could admit, he wasn't opposed to the idea.

The Ruu were pacifists and the Karinnes had a great deal of trust in them, to the point where quite a few Ruu lived on Karis, and Observer A believed that his people being Generations would drastically increase their efficiency and their ability to conduct scientific research. They'd jumped all over the jacks when they went public, and now they were jumping all over the virus.

Jason couldn't make that decision himself, but he rather doubted any other the others would object to giving the virus to the Ruu. If there was one race he would implicitly trust with the power being a Generation entailed, it was the Ruu. And Jason would prefer to handle their transition outside of the Ten Year Plan.

He went through several meetings with both house officials and the other members of the Accords, clearing out his inbox after shirking his duties for the morning to go play in his Cheetah, then read over the final report that Krazrou sent to his office, going over their plans for the summit. He sent back his approval of it, then leaned back in his chair and sighed audibly. He was glad that Krazrou was going to be the public face for this. His experience with the end of the Syndicate war taught him that not everyone entirely trusted him—with good reason, he could admit—and the reputation of the Kirri would put a whole lot of weight behind their plan. He had the feeling that most of the empires would jump all over the Ten Year Plan no matter who was presenting it, but the fact that it was Krazrou that would be the public face of their plan would make it much more palatable. And as the other rulers read into the plan, saw that Karinne involvement in it was mainly through hosting the transition facilities and training through the Academy, it would make them even more amenable to the idea. They would see that they wouldn't be chained to the Karinnes to get access to the virus, but they would also see a powerful unified front that would protect biogenic technology from them. The combination of the Karinne, Imperium, Collective, and Grimja militaries was an exceptionally formidable force that would give just about anyone pause to try to take on.

Chichi jumped up onto his desk and padded over, and he gave her a scratch behind the ears. Jason had found out yesterday that his treacherous little tabi had gotten herself pregnant, and it was just starting to show on her. He'd already made arrangements to bring her home so she could have her kittens in a much better environment than his office, which had caused virtually no friction with Amber. She liked Chichi, and Amber always

adored having babies of just about any race or species around. She was a mother hen at heart, and Chichi would have a nearly annoying little helper hovering around her as she raised her babies.

It would be another year or two before Amber was mature enough to have her own babies. Vulpars had extremely long life spans, and they didn't reach sexual maturity until they were about ten years old. Amber was eight, nearly nine, so she had a little ways to go. But it seemed that she would be doomed to be eternally tiny. She was from a strain of "domesticated" vulpars—as in vulpars who preferred to live with people rather than in the wild—that was smaller than the wild vulpar variant. Wild vulpars were about the size of a small coyote or fox, where Amber's breed of vulpar was more the size of a small dog. But Amber was about the size of a toy poodle, and it didn't look like she was going to grow much more before she topped out. Chichi herself was rather small for a tabi, but that was just genetics, not the fact that she was a different breed of vulpar. Besides, he rather liked Chichi just the way she was.

"And what are you up to, little girl?" he asked, scratching her behind both ears with his fingers.

She gave a little chirp.

"You're always hungry anymore," he accused. "But then again, I'm hungry too. I haven't had dinner yet. But I'm not done with these reports," he sighed.

She gave him a stern look.

"Alright, alright, I'll have Chirk order us something," he mollified her, "now move a little so I can get this done before the summit."

She gave another chirp as he asked Chirk to send in some food for Chichi by commune.

"I know, but it was the most convenient time for the majority of the attendees," he answered. "It's just my bad luck this first day will stretch nearly 'til morning for me."

She looked up at him.

"Yeah, but I had too much stuff to do to sleep," he answered. "I have six hours set aside for later when I'll get in a nap. I just hope I can actually get

to sleep. Kraz keeps sending me revisions and amendments, which we all have to approve. That jackwagon doesn't realize that it's late afternoon over here, and I'm going to be up all night. I may have to go to Kirri'arr before the summit just to whack him."

She gave an amused little chirp.

"Good idea," he nodded. He looked to the side and issued some commands to the computer, and a moment later, Krazrou's face appeared on a flat hologram over his desk.

"What is it, Jason? I'm trying to get these last points ready for the summit."

"I'm about to go to sleep so I don't pass out during the summit," he said. "So stop sending me revisions."

He gave him a curious look, then chuckled. "I didn't realize the time difference. I think you're the only one of us in the Accords that will be doing this overnight."

"Exactly," Jason said firmly. "It's fine as it is, so stop it."

"I have one more revision to send you, then I promise, I'll be done. After all, we all need to get some rest before it begins."

"I'm gonna hold you to that," Jason threatened, which made a slight smile grace Krazrou's muzzle.

"Did they deliver the bionoids yet? I haven't gotten an update."

"They're on a Jirunji ship, which will jump to Imbiri just before the summit to keep the bionoids secure," Jason replied. "We'll merge to them on the ship and ride down in a shuttle." Since they were all quarantined, including all cargo being quarantined from infected planets, Jason had contracted with the Jirunji to build moleculartronic bionoids for them. The factory was owned by Yila, so there was no issue there with patent infringement, part of the major expansion she did about two years ago to meet the demand for bionoids. She had 87 bionoid production facilities in 14 different empires, which produced bionoids for sale and shipment all over the Confederation. Every factory had the specs for every style of bionoid produced, so all they needed were images and physical stats for Jason and the others to make them.

The door opened, and one of Chirk's pages brought in a platter, dinner for him and more food for Chichi. He read through the revision that Krazrou sent him as he nibbled on his dinner, then had Chichi steal nearly a quarter of it as he conferred with the Kirri over them. After that, they were basically ready for the summit. After finishing his dinner, he stood up and stretched, then leaned down and petted his tabi. "Well, little girl, think it's time to get some sleep. I'm going to have a very, very long night."

He opened eyes that were not his on a ship light years from where he was.

He didn't entirely like merging to moleculartronic bionoids. They were more, well, more *sterile* than biogenic units, they didn't have the same richness, the same sense of *welcome* that biogenic units had. Merging to a moleculartronic bionoid felt like merging to a machine, where merging to a biogenic bionoid felt like he was merging to something that enjoyed having him along for the ride.

He found himself in a well-appointed stateroom on a Jirunji command ship, which was carrying the bionoids of the rulers that were all quarantined. He was already dressed in copies of his formal robes, laying on a comfortable bed. The lights came on as he sat up, no doubt motion activated, and a soft bell chimed just before the viewscreen on the wall facing the bed activated. He found himself looking at a mature Jirunji female with an elaborate feather headdress, which told him that she had to be the captain of the ship. She was wearing a fairly elegant duty uniform, showing off the very underrated Jirunji sense of style.

The stateroom reflected that. It was richly appointed with elegant furniture, but it was the cloth buntings and tapestries that defined it as Jirunji. Jirunji liked to hang cloth buntings from the ceiling to drape along the tops of the walls. The buntings were embroidered with swirling designs. Hand woven tapestries depicting the history of the ship hung at spaced intervals along the walls, with feathers attached to their edges, the size, shape, and color of which telling the story of the victories the ship had won and the awards it had been given. He could tell from the tapestry that this ship had fought in the battle to take Atrovot and had been awarded the Jirunji equivalent of the Order of Sora because of their performance and

valor during the fight. The tapestries told a history that revealed that this was one of the ships built in Kosigi in the military buildup just before the Syndicate War, and its first battle had been fought at Q2DA-108 as part of a task force that took on two Syndicate super-ships and their escorts.

“Your Grace,” the captain said in a gravelly voice, which was normal for Jirunji. “I am Captain Venria, commander of this vessel,” she said in Jirunji.

“Captain,” he replied in Faey. “Are we there?”

“We just dropped out of hyperspace a *hikta* before you activated,” she answered. That was a measure of time about equal to 40 seconds. “We are currently cruising to the planet at sublight and should arrive in four *chukta*.” That was about 20 minutes. “We will arrive precisely on schedule.”

“Very good, Captain,” he answered, having a bit of trouble swinging his legs out of the bed while wearing his formal robes. They’d perfectly copied his robes, even down to the wooden crest of Karinne he wore around his neck, and to his bionoid body they didn’t feel heavy at all. “Are the others online?”

“Not yet, your Grace. You’re the first to arrive.”

“Well, that’s different,” he said wryly, flexing his hand. He had to admit, the third gen simsense they were running in these moleculartronic bionoids was pretty awesome. His sensory feed was almost as rich and lucid as biogenic simsense. This bionoid was built by Jirunji, and they made everything with precision and skill. But it still lacked the *feel* of a biogenic bionoid. “I guess I’ll wait here until we arrive.”

“Very good, your Grace. An officer will escort you to the landing bay so you’re in the dropship and ready to go as soon as we’re in stable orbit.”

“I’ll be waiting,” he nodded.

He only had to wait about five minutes for a Jirunji officer to arrive, a rather young female with tan fur, who was taller than most Jirunji...which put the top of her head about at his neck rather than at his collarbones. Jirunji weren’t very tall as a species, only a little over 4 shakra tall on the average, or around a meter and two thirds or around five feet tall. He was led down to a giant bay holding a variety of Jirunji mecha and transports,

including ten of their new and quite formidable Warclaw mecha. They were massive, but their design made them look sleek and agile, and he knew that they were every bit as agile as they appeared to be. They were as fast and agile as a Titan, and they were equipped with Jirunji multiphased tachyon cannons and Coalition disruptors, which gave them some major firepower.

The Karinnes weren't ready to produce their own version of the Warclaw quite yet, but they were fairly close.

He was joined by Krazrou's bionoid only a moment after he was seated inside the shuttle, the two pilots in the cockpit and preparing to launch. They'd done a fantastic job reproducing his fur and making it look realistic, thanks to advances in synthetic hair strands made by Yila's bionoid research team. "Are the others online?"

"No idea, but probably. You ready for your day in the spotlight?"

"It'll be no different from talking to Kirri Council. They're far more critical," he said with a smile. "I've already uploaded all my notes and presentation into this bionoid's memory. That way I have it local if I need it."

"Always smart," he nodded.

They were joined in rapid succession by all the others stuck behind quarantine, and then by Sovial, who was also in a bionoid. She was wearing a copy of her royal headdress, which reminded him of a Native American chief's headdress, feathers on both sides of it that trailed well down her back, the last, largest feather nearly touching the top of the base of her tail. She wasn't alone in what she was doing; nearly every ruler that had a jack and a bionoid was using the bionoid for this conference. It was easier, and it was safer. Only a few rulers would be here in person, the rest were either attending using bionoids or by galactic crypto, beamed to them in real time using Karinne biogenic comm relays. Those relays were designed to stay in hyperspace so they couldn't be captured, moving about randomly while staying in range to relay the transmission to its destination.

The mood on the shuttle was quiet and a tiny bit tense, since Sovial wasn't being chatty and the others were going over the presentation notes Krazrou sent them. Krazrou would be the face of the Accords—Jason made the mistake of being the face of something once, and it scattered the

Confederation after the war—so he would do most of the talking, but if any of them were asked questions, they wanted to all be on the same page with their answers. Most likely, Dahnai would be the one asked the most questions, since it was her people that would be doing the training for anyone that took them up on their offer.

He certainly didn't mind the venue. When the shuttle landed and they filed out of the hatch, he found himself looking, quite simply, at a paradise. Imbiri was one of the most beautiful planets he had ever seen, from its gorgeous cerulean sky to its pristine ancient forests in the distance, trees that reached hundreds of shakra in the air. The city of Imbiria, the only large city on the entire planet, was built to complement nature rather than supplant it, its buildings and structures woven in among the forest. The effect was a city that looked to be part of the forest, grown along with it as if the metal and stone buildings were plants themselves. The landing pad was built high over the city, on a platform built atop the main diplomatic building in the city, so shuttles and dropships could easily land. They would then ride down a glass elevator down into the building, down to the main conference room in the building below. Mesaiima was waiting for them on the platform, hovering with her toes just over the landing pad, her chitinous wings fanning behind her to keep her aloft. She did land when then approached her, then took Sovial's hands in greeting. "Welcome to Imbiri, my friends," she said in her soft voice, an earnest smile on her lovely face. Mesaiima was truly a very beautiful woman. "You're the last of those attending personally to arrive, and the conference will begin once you're properly seated."

"I didn't realize we were late, I'm so very sorry, Mesaiima," Sovial apologized.

"You're not, Queen Sovial, the others decided to begin as soon as everyone was here, that's all," she smiled.

"At least Sovial won't be looking for someone to blame," Kreel said playfully. "Who was last to link up? Sk'Vrae?"

"It was you, furball," Dahnai accused.

"Oh, well, that's no biggie. I'm used to being in trouble," he said grandly.

“You ready for this, Kraz?” Jason asked one last time.

“I am,” he replied.

“Ready for what?” Sovial asked curiously.

“You’ll find out, Sovial,” Krazrou replied evenly.

Mesaiima brought them into the conference room, which was their largest auditorium in the building. It had curved arc tiers holding long desks behind which the attendees sat, or a hologram either of them or a flat hologram holding their face was in the place of a live person. The attendees, either live or bionoid, were spaced apart more than the holograms, since they didn’t require personal space. A chandelier consisting of three silvery metal poles hanging from the ceiling, each one with a soft globe of light attached to the end which were at different heights. The speaker’s lectern was facing the tiers, with a long table behind it holding six of Mesaiima’s aides. Mesaiima flew over to the lectern and landed before it, and the conference officially began.

It was much different from a meeting of the council, which often was a little rough and tumble. It began with a ceremony conducted by Mesaiima, welcoming them and then going over the topics that would be discussed at the conference, which was the pandemic that was currently affecting six empires and Terra, and the fact that many empires had students at the Academy that were quarantined to prevent being infected. She, and nobody else for that matter, knew about the proposal, which Jason was sure would completely derail the conference.

It had to, since any plans they made would get upended once Krazrou stood up and started explaining it. That was why Krazrou was going to try to go first once open discussion began.

After the ceremony came the presentations. A series of experts were brought in to explain what the virus was, what it did, and why it could be potentially dangerous despite turning the victim into a Generation. It was someone from the Faey Medical Service that gave that presentation, and Jason had to keep himself from glaring at her the entire time. There was some unfinished business between the Karinnes and the Medical Service, and Jason would be concluding that business by hanging the director’s head on his wall once he had the time to tie up that little loose end. Other doctors

got up to present information about quarantine efforts, and one of Ayuma's people got up and explained the steps the Academy was taking to protect the students.

It took them nearly two hours to go through the presentations, until finally, Mesaiima opened the floor up for general debate about the situation. Krazrou immediately stood up. "If I may be recognized, Madam President, to take the lectern to discuss a matter that may take some time."

"You are recognized, Moderator," she replied with a gracious nod, lifting up and backwards to sit at the table behind her with her aides.

Krazrou stepped down, across the floor, and up to the podium, putting his hands on the sides of it. "I am Moderator Krazrou, leader of the Kirri Council," he introduced. "Our civilization is one of the ones currently under quarantine due to the outbreak. The empires currently being affected by the virus have had their own conference about the situation, and we have come to a mutual agreement about the situation that affects the entire galaxy as a whole.

"Firstly, a more detailed explanation of just how the retrovirus is created needs to be explained, which forms the foundation of this entire presentation. The current retrovirus affecting our worlds was artificially created," he announced, which caused some whispering and surprised looks across the conference room. "We don't know who made it, or for what purpose, but we know for a fact that the retrovirus was engineered by highly skilled geneticists. Its ability to evade quarantine protocols, its ability to evade medical scanners, and its nearly invulnerable resistance to any and all attempts to kill it make it abundantly clear that the virus was created in a lab and deliberately released into the Faey population. That was where the virus originated. It then infected the Karinnes, Terra, the Urumi Collective, the Kirri, the Pai Kingdom, the Muri Federation, the Grimja Union, and the Sha'i-ree. It spread through our empires due to the extensive trade deals that exist between us, carried to each empire through cargo freighters before quarantine protocols were put into place.

"But what I am here to reveal is that this pandemic would have been inevitable even without someone engineering an artificial retrovirus." He looked up, and a hologram appeared in the well between the lectern and the tiers, one of his prepared images for the presentation. "The Generations

were the product of genetic engineering that began by introducing a retrovirus into the Karinne population that rewrote their DNA to give them their abilities,” he explained. “But within that DNA is the process by which they were created in the first place. Generation DNA is highly reactive and can, under the right circumstances, hijack a compatible virus and alter it to turn it into the retrovirus that created them in the first place.”

There was complete silence in the room, and almost everyone there in person was staring right at Jason.

“The probability of this occurring is almost infinitesimal, which is why the Karinnes never shared this information. After all, there were less than three hundred of them, and they do not leave their home planet. But the release of this artificially created retrovirus has brought this information into the forefront, because it *does the same thing*,” he stressed. “Those changed into Generations by this artificial retrovirus also have this aspect of Generation DNA inside them, that their DNA might hijack a virus and transform it into a retrovirus that can infect other people, turning them into Generations. Why this matters is that, while the chance of it happening was virtually nil with only three hundred Generations, the chance of it happening spontaneously goes up significantly when there are three hundred *billion* Generations. That means that, quite simply, the Generations themselves are a potential source of future outbreaks. And each outbreak carries the same risk as the current one, that the virus may mutate into something that kills rather than alters.

“There is one final piece to the puzzle of which you should be aware, and that is that Generations themselves are immune to the retroviruses that they create, or are artificially created from them,” he finished. “The virus cannot affect them, which means that the virus will die out before it has a chance to mutate into something deadly. If it has no one to infect, it cannot reproduce, and thus doesn’t have the chance to mutate.

“It is this final aspect of the situation that brings us, those who are or who have become Generations, to this conference,” he said, as another hologram appeared holding the main points of his presentation. “We, the infected empires, have discussed the problem in detail and have come up with a proposal, a plan, to protect the rest of the galaxy from future outbreaks and not imprison us inside our own borders, as well as remove

the possibility that, in the future, other empires may attack us for fear that we may cause another retrovirus which may kill instead of alter. Simply put, we offer forth for debate by this body a plan that will introduce the virus to the other empires of the galaxy in a controlled manner that will allow your people to become Generations, with a minimum of upheaval in your societies from your population gaining telepathic capability. In effect, esteemed rulers of the galaxy, we *all* become Generations to protect ourselves from the virus,” he declared. “It means that your populations will become fully telepathic like the Faey,” he motioned towards Dahnai, “and gain telekinetic capability, which can be quite useful to your people “

There was loud calling out, even some shouting, and a few people who were attending in person stood up when Krazrou made that declaration. He waited for them to settle down, his expression calm, and then continued once it was quiet once again. “This solution solves the three major issues brought about by this pandemic. Firstly, that the original Generations have had to isolate themselves on Karis to protect themselves from others trying to gain samples of their DNA to genetically engineer their own people to become Generations. This was attempted several times by various empires over the last ten years, and we suspect that the current retrovirus is the result of one of those attempts *succeeding*.” That sent a lot of hot gazes in Dahnai’s direction, which made her fidget a tiny bit. “With us agreeing to give other empires access to the virus, it protects the Generations from such future attempts. After all, it will be a moot point. Second, it protects the galaxy as a whole from another retrovirus. If a spontaneously occurring retrovirus is created by a Generation, it will die out before it has a chance to do anything, because it cannot infect anyone. Thirdly, it removes the possibility that, in the future, the galaxy tries to exterminate the Generations due to them seeing as some kind of threat,” he finished calmly. “Either because of another retrovirus or because of the abilities that we have. We have decided that the best way to protect ourselves, and the galaxy as a whole, is to offer this gift to *everyone*, and allow you to take it in a controlled manner that minimizes any detrimental effect it may have on your society or your economy.

“We have created a detailed plan that will allow this process to carry out, which takes ten years,” he said, as a new hologram entitled [The Ten Year Plan] appeared above the well. “The crux of this plan is Terra and the

Academy. Summarized, the plan will allow each empire to rotate students through the Academy that will be transitioned to Generations and then learn about their new abilities. Those students will then return to their home empires as instructors, teaching the rest of your population how to use their newfound abilities. Each empire will be responsible for the transition of its own population using samples of the retrovirus that will be provided to you and the native instructors trained at the Academy. The plan is, of course, far more detailed, which I will elaborate upon later if this body decides to continue debate on the plan.

“This is our offer to the rest of the galaxy,” he declared. “To give you the chance to become Generations, if you so wish it, and have that happen in a controlled manner that does not disrupt your empire’s day to day operations as it has ours. We know that not every empire in this room will agree to such a thing, and that is why this plan also includes how things will work for those who don’t want to be changed. It is not our desire to force this on anyone, and that includes making detailed plans on how those who choose not to be Generations can interact safely with the Generations, without fear of them carrying a new retrovirus back to their home planets.” He took a step back from the podium. “I now yield the floor back to President Mesaiima.”

And that, naturally, created a near firestorm in the conference chamber.

Simply put, Krazrou set the entire conference on its ear, but not for the reason Jason would have expected. For the next six hours, Jason had to have members of the Karinne Medical Service testify about how Generations could spontaneously create retroviruses. Songa herself was the primary witness, testifying via hologram from Karsa, and she released redacted records about the Jaisho-T virus incident and how they learned it could happen. She didn’t reveal that it was Dahnai that was affected by the virus, but released some detailed information about how the virus was formed from the DNA of a Generation child whose mother was not a Generation to attack other members of her family. She then revealed a good amount of their research on the matter and showed how a Generation’s DNA could hijack a virus to recreate the original retrovirus that created them. “It was a design flaw in the genetic engineering that created the original Generations,” she surmised after her presentation. “Generation DNA is self-repairing, but that aspect of it causes it to be volatile when

exposed to viral structures, since their DNA is partially based on a *viral* structure. Generations are cell-based organisms, but part of their genetic code is *viral* in nature. It's a bit hard to explain, but in effect, the retrovirus that created them wrote in the entire retroviral RNA into their DNA, including how the retrovirus behaves and works. When that segment of the DNA is isolated and copied into another viral structure, it becomes a retrovirus, and under the right circumstances, rewrites the RNA of the virus to match the original retrovirus that created them. That was how whoever it was that made the new retrovirus did it. They isolated the original retroviral RNA that is part of a Generation's DNA and transferred it into a viral structure, then made modifications to that RNA to make it do what they wanted it to do."

"And what is that, Doctor?" Mesaiima asked.

"From what we've researched, the original virus was only meant to infect one species," she replied. "It was tailored so it could only attach to the DNA of that species. But the virus mutated to become *generic*, to be able to attack any species with a sufficiently evolved brain to be able to accept the new DNA segments. That's why the virus doesn't affect animals, because they don't have a sufficiently evolved brain to become telepathic."

"Didn't the virus originate in the Imperium?" someone asked.

"Yes, your Majesty, so we suspect that it was a rogue element within the Imperium. It was *not* done by Empress Dahnai," Songa replied.

"You're damn right I didn't authorize this," Dahnai said hotly. "We're in the process of hunting down whoever is responsible, and when I find them," she said, closing her fist and holding it up ominously. "This virus has shut down the Imperium, cost us *billions* in trade revenue, and wrecked our economy for at least the next three years. There's no way in hell I would do that to my empire willingly. I mean, think about it. The Faey are *already* telepathic. We don't need to genetically engineer ourselves to gain what we already have."

"The Generations are more than telepaths," Holikk called.

"Yeah, well, Jason doesn't share biogenic technology with anyone, and trying to get it would start a war with him, which would devastate the Imperium," she said, looking over at him. "And he's part of my family. He's

my *amu dorai* and our children are married to each other. So I have personal reasons to keep the peace with the Karinnes as much as I have political reasons.”

“I’m absolutely positive Dahnai didn’t do this,” Jason spoke up. “We have solid intelligence that it was done by a rogue element within the Imperium.”

“That is correct,” Zaa said from her hologram. “The Kimdori have unearthed that much from our investigation. The Empress had nothing to do with the virus.”

“So, the Karinnes will still hold back biogenic technology despite being part of this plan?” Magran asked.

He nodded. “The oaths of Karinne are still binding, Grand Master,” he replied. “We agreed to the Ten Year Plan because I could see that it was necessary for the survival of my people, and necessary for the galaxy as a whole. And in a way, I don’t mind people gaining my abilities so long as they use them for peace,” he added. “But releasing biogenic technology could lead to wars of conquest and the subjugation of as yet undiscovered civilizations, and I will not be party to that. The Karinnes will not allow our technology to be used for conquest, only for self-defense,” he said adamantly. “That has been our position since I reformed the House and became its ruler, and that will *always* be our position. The Karinnes are neutral. The Karinnes do not engage in wars of conquest, nor do we allow others to use our technology to do so, for it becomes *our* responsibility should it occur. Who we are will not change, even if the galaxy changes around us. Yes, I’m aware that making other races telepathic increases the risk of them using their telepathic abilities to attack and conquer non-telepathic species, much as my own Terran race was subjugated by the Faey,” he said simply. “And I’ll feel that I broke my vows as the Grand Duke Karinne if that happens. But the basic survival of the people of my house and the people of this galaxy trumps that oath,” he said in a powerful voice. “I can’t sit back and let people die from a mutated retrovirus created from *us*, because it violates the foundation of the morality of who I am. To protect the spacefaring galaxy from a lethal pandemic, to save as many lives as possible, and to protect the Generations from a future war against those who are not Generations, I’m willing to give you the virus and help your

empires transition to becoming Generations with a minimum of disruption. And if one of you uses your telepathy to make war, I'll know that it was my fault that happened. But I'll live with that remorse knowing that your people *are still alive*," he said intensely. "I'll live with that shame on my soul content with the fact that I didn't cause an even greater tragedy by refusing to allow the release of the virus here and now, when it's the *safest* to do so, before the virus has a chance to mutate into something deadly. If we do this in a carefully controlled manner, we can safely transition those who are willing and render them immune to future retroviruses, which will make them die out *before* they can mutate. That drastically reduces the chance that the virus can spread into a population that it can affect, mutate, and turn into a plague that threatens the entire galaxy. That is the greater good, and I must not stand in the way of the greater good, no matter what it costs me personally," he declared.

There was a very long silence after his impromptu speech.

When they did restart the discussion, the subject matter changed, which made Jason feel a little better. Nobody was going to press that point or try to badger him into making biogenics part of the deal. The assembled rulers instead went back to discussing the danger the virus posed and what could be done to prevent spontaneous mutation...which was really nothing. They discussed it for hours, to the point where Jason started splitting so he wasn't bored, until it was clear that everyone was either getting tired or needed a break. Jason left his bionoid in the conference room and delinked, then had the cafeteria send something up for him before he so much as opened his eyes. When he did so, he saw that Chichi was curled up in her bed inside his office, and the pale light from Kosigi was filtering in through the window behind his desk. It was 03:58, which was more or less the middle of the night when one lived on a 29-hour cycle. The night shift was working out in the outer office, which was a small crew of Kizzik administrators that organized information that came in over the night, which would allow Chirk, Verra, and Brall to go through it more thoroughly when they came back in the morning. Since Kizzik didn't require much sleep and abhorred *not* working, they didn't much mind working overnight. For a Kizzik, work was life and life was work. Jason knew the five Kizzik out in the outer office, but he also knew well enough not to bother them unless he needed something. If he wanted to talk, he could talk to the three Imperial Guard

that were sitting in his office, two girls from the night watch, Sila and Revi, and Lieutenant Hara. They'd replaced his usual guards while he was merged.

[How did it go? Did Krazrou reveal the plan?] Hara asked as soon as he stood up.

[Yeah, and it went about as good as you'd expect. Chaos.]

[Did they go over the plan?]

[Not yet, right now the conference is hung up on the potential lethality of the virus. We haven't gotten around to discussing the plan yet. But I can tell that more than one ruler is waiting for exactly that. The look on Holikk's face made it clear that he's very interested in it.]

[So he can conceal the fact that he has samples of the virus.]

[No doubt,] Jason agreed as the door opened, and one of the Kizzik clattered in carrying a tray. *[Thank you St'Vrk, you beautiful Kizzik you,]* he communed to her interface gratefully as she brought the tray up to the desk. It held a sandwich and sliced wafers of a root vegetable that grew on the Kouï homeworld, which was more robust than a potato, called a *dumo*. It tasted like a cross between a potato and popcorn, but also had a buttery texture, like it was grown pre-buttered. It was served either raw or toasted like bread, which made it crispy on the outside and fluffy on the inside, and made it taste more like french fries than anything else. Jason loved it, but the rest of the family didn't, so he saved eating it for work to avoid the leftovers.

Terrans loved *dumo* nearly as much as Faey loved strawberries and was a good example of how the empires of the Confederation had become nearly dependent on their extensive trade network...a network that had been disrupted by the quarantines.

[They had it waiting for you, revered Hive-leader,] she replied with a nod of her mantis-like head, setting it on the desk.

[I am not complaining,] he replied, picking up the sandwich and taking a bite. It was loaded with Terran cold cuts, lettuce, and tomato...or foods that tasted like them. Sometimes it was hard to tell, and he'd learned to not worry about what it was and only worry about how it tasted. Besides,

enough Terrans worked in the White House complex that the assorted cafeterias and food courts all had quite a bit of Terran food available.

The rest of the day's conference went much the same as the beginning. Again, the assembled rulers almost completely dominated the conference time with discussions about the virus itself, not about what they were going to do about it. Jason couldn't understand why they were so fixated on what seemed to him to be a nearly trivial part of the conference...unless, he realized, they were stalling the proceedings to give them more time to go over what Krazrou said and formulate a response to it. That was entirely possible. They may want or need time to consider Krazrou's summary and didn't want to come out and ask for it.

Which was silly. Put rulers in the same room together, and they all had to act like they were paragons of perfection, never made mistakes and never needed to research things. They didn't want to look less than perfect in front of other rulers.

The discussion dragged on for hours, as the rulers called for testimony from several doctors from various empires, none of which had any actual experience with the virus itself, until finally, mercifully, Mesaiima called the day's deliberations complete. They adjourned with plans to reconvene in 17 standard hours, which would again put the conference in the middle of the night for Jason, but there was little he could do about that.

He saved the discussion about the first day of the conference for after breakfast. The CBIMs and Miaari were tapped into the sensory feed of his bionoid so they could observe the proceedings—and no doubt he wasn't the only ruler sharing his sensory stream with others—and they all came over to his house as he ate breakfast with Jyslin and the kids. School was back in session for the kids, so they were preparing to get their school day started while the twins prepared to go to work with Jyslin today.

And again, he had to look around his very large and busy table and just feel content at where his life was right now. His kids ranged from nearly an adult in Aria's case to still energetic toddlers in the case of the twins, as well as two that he considered all but his own in Shya and Danelle, who had come over to eat breakfast with Rann and Shya so they could go to school together. Aria represented the culture clash he was feeling being a Terran father with a Faey daughter—Dreamer, but the same thing—and the

resurgence of those issues with his older kids, who were all either on the threshold of puberty or had just stepped through the door. They were the best part of him, the reason he woke up in the morning, and were the future of the House of Karinne. Aria and Jon represented the reality of the virus, for both of them were transitioned Generations, Rann represented the hope of the house for the future, and the rest of the kids represented its potential. Aria wanted to be a pro athlete. Danelle, much to Myleena's annoyance, really hadn't decided what she wanted to do when she graduated primary school. Jason rather doubted that she would go into engineering like her mother, because she had a nearly subconscious resentment of how her mother's job kept her so busy all the time. Rann and Shya would rule the house after Jason was gone. Bethany and Siyae both demonstrated inordinately high intelligence, and their parents had high hopes for them. Jon and Julia were too busy being toddlers to worry about much of anything, and the world was a grand place filled with all kinds of fascinating new things to learn and explore.

And his pride extended outside the boundaries of his house. Kyri and Siyara, both so young yet so powerful. Aran, who would definitely be one of the leading scientists in the house when he grew up. Sora, who would be the most beautiful girl in the KMS; she'd started showing earnest interest in serving in the Navy when she finished primary school, having become enamored with the idea of being captain of her own ship after spending so much time on the bridges of ships while her mother moved them around Kosigi. Zach, who would be content in whatever he did, but had shown interest in architecture and building. He'd been playing a Terran game called Minecraft while most of his siblings were playing Citadel Online, a game where the player built structures using blocks and resources harvested from the game world, and some of the things he'd built inside the game were astounding. He truly had a gift for both architecture and design. Walter was growing up into quite a little man, and Jason had the feeling he was going to express anytime now, given who his parents were. Kevin and Kaelan too were growing like weeds, and were quite mischievous, like male kid versions of Meya and Myra. They got into absolutely everything and drove Aura crazy sometimes. Darran was almost like Zach was when he was that age, gentle and polite, but incredibly smart. Jana, his daughter with Kumi, was almost comically strait-laced, and as unlike her mother as was possible, like she was rebelling against her mother by being proper and

polite. The two sets of twins he'd had with Lyn and Bryn were very different from their parents, though Reni and Revi were demonstrating the twin bond the way Lyn and Bryn were. Hera and Harae were just complete bundles of energy like Jon and Julia were. Zaen was very much unlike his mother Myri, and that was just the way Myri wanted him. She wanted a proper Faey boy, and so she pushed boy's toys on him and taught him that boys were supposed to be scholars, scientists, and teachers. Rael, unfortunately, was very much like his mother Sheleese, and would probably grow up to be a professional comedian. Vara was a complete angel, proving once again that Ilia was a very, very good parent. Little Sera was a bit of an outlier from his kids in that she was very quiet and reclusive, probably because her brothers Kevin and Kaelan annoyed her so much. And then there was Terry, his son with Symone, who was just as light-hearted and carefree as his mother even at the tender age of three.

And fortunately, or unfortunately depending on how one looked at it, he hadn't had any kids since. There were no babies in any nursery or crib on Karis that was his. The other girls on the strip no longer chased him—well, outside of Kumi anyway—Yana and Aura had boyfriends now that occupied their time, and neither Jyslin nor Symone had conceived since having the twins and Terry...though it certainly wasn't a lack of trying. He almost missed having a newborn around, since this was the first time since the baby drought caused by some chemical in the ocean that had interfered with the girls conceiving, the reason why there was nearly a five year gap between his oldest kids and the next wave. But he certainly wasn't going to go out and try to have another baby. It would come in time naturally, and either Jyslin, Symone, or Dahnai would be the one to grace him with another child to love. And if he was missing having a baby around that much, there were plenty of them on and around the strip for him to borrow for the day. Maya's youngest was only five months old, a strapping boy named Hann, and Temika and Mike had a seven-month-old boy named Andre.

Miaari arrived while they were eating breakfast, and she sat down at the only seat left at the table and nearly got her hand stabbed when she tried to filch a piece of Shio sausage off Bethany's plate. That made her laugh lightly and put her hand on Bethany's lovely hair, then nod in thanks when Surin set a plate down in front of her. "You look tired, Miaari," Aria noted.

“I am tired, youngling,” she replied. “It was a long night, and I have much more to do before I can rest.”

“About the summit?”

She nodded. “My work just begins when your father’s ends,” she said. “There was a great deal of information to go through.”

“I’m sorry I can’t make it easier on you, Mee,” Jason told her.

“I blame the other rulers, not you,” she smiled over at him. “Let’s at least save the discussion for after breakfast. I am starving.”

“We don’t want your boring politics talk messing up our breakfast anyway,” Danelle teased.

“You just wait, cub, I’m going to make your father send you to my office and work for me,” she threatened with a sly look.

They spent nearly three hours discussing the first day after eating, with Miaari, Cybi, and Cyra attending in person and the other CBIMs and CBMOMs present as holograms, which was the only way everyone would fit into his home office. It was substantially smaller than his office at work. Besides, Cybi and Cyra were the only ones with their bionoids in Karsa at the moment. What they talked about most was what each ruler was talking about in the summit, trying to figure out what their angles were before the next day began so they may better try to guide the direction of the discussions in the way they wanted them to go. They were there until Jason was nearly nodding off, so they decided to call it a day and let Jason rest a while.

He was so tired, he slept almost all day and had to be woken up so he would have time to eat before the next meeting. This time he didn’t even bother going to work, he linked to his bionoid from the merge pod just off his home office, which was what he should have done yesterday. He settled into the merge pod with Twilight insisting on laying on his lap for a while, and he spared her a scratch behind the ears before merging to the merge pod that Mesaiima had stored in an antechamber just off the conference room. All the other bionoids were also there, which told him he was the first to link. That gave him time to talk to Mesaiima before the meeting began, to get her impressions on how the first day went, then they entered the conference room and began the second day of deliberations.

And things started moving fairly quickly. It seemed that the other rulers were ready to discuss the plan now, because they had Krazrou deliver his full presentation. It took him nearly five hours to divulge the plan in intricate, nearly exhausting detail, going over everything they had planned from transitioning volunteers from other empires to training them to train others to carefully managed transition schedules for empire that opted in to how they were going to deal with empires that didn't want their population to be transitioned. Their plan for that was bionoids. People from areas where they had Generations would have to use bionoids to visit empires that rejected the plan, which would create separation to ensure that a spontaneous retrovirus wouldn't be unleashed in their populations. Cargo would be handled by viral scans at entry points before the cargo entered a quarantined empire, and any cargo that returned a suspicious result would be isolated and thoroughly tested before it was allowed through.

Krazrou's office had worked non-stop on the plan for takirs, and its thorough and exacting detail proved it as he explained their idea to the others.

Once he was done, discussion about the plan began. And right off the bat, it became abundantly clear that some empires wanted it, personified in Holikk and Shakizarr, to the point where Holikk declared loudly and adamantly that the Authority would make a private deal with the Karinnes if the summit didn't adopt the plan. His reasoning was simple and profound. "I should be dragged from my office and shot if I didn't do this," he told the others. "The advantages to the Authority of having a fully telepathic and telekinetic population are almost uncountable, from defense to tourism to industry to economics to simple quality of life. Life is much more *convenient* for telepaths, and the usefulness of telekinesis to my people can't be underestimated. The Authority would become better, stronger, and more prosperous, and I will bring that to my people. So, even if this summit rejects the plan being offered, the Authority will pursue it privately," he called, looking right at Jason as he said it.

"As will the Verutan Empire," Shakizarr agreed. "Even without biogenic technology, the advantages to my people in defending the Empire and improving the quality of life for all Verutans cannot be dismissed. For us to be the best we can be, and to compete in this modern galaxy, we will accept the offer from the Karinnes and the other empires affected by the

virus to join them. And I would ask, my friends, to have the honor of being the first Verutan to accept the gift to bring back to my people,” he finished.

“You’d be the first non-Karinne Verutan, but I think we can discuss that, Shakizarr,” Jason answered. “The Verutan population in my house has already transitioned.”

“I’d like that as well,” Holikk said. “If I allow myself to be infected, it will show the people of the Authority that there’s nothing to fear.”

“There’s still risk, Holikk,” Jason warned. “There have been some instances of organ failure and tissue rejection from the virus. But those instances are very low, most likely because the retrovirus was engineered to minimize complications. For the vast majority of those infected, the transition was painless and easy. They simply went to sleep after being infected and woke up as Generations.”

“It’s a risk I’m willing to take,” Holikk declared calmly. “Because the benefits far outweigh the risks in my mind.”

“That’s a decision that every member of your empire should also enjoy,” Krazrou reminded them. “First and foremost, we don’t want to see anyone, not a single person, forced to change against his or her will. The freedom to choose and protecting those that choose not to be transitioned are the most important parts of the plan we developed. I admit that it’s never a guarantee that they won’t be affected by a future retrovirus that appears within their empire, but their decision must be honored, and we must do everything we can to protect them from future infection should they make that choice.”

Holikk and Shakizarr weren’t the only rulers that expressed interest in the offer to the point where they would accept it on their own. They were joined by every ruler in the home sector and most of them in the sector cluster, those who had extensive contact with the Faey and the Karinnes and had seen how telepathy worked from the inside. Empires outside the sector cluster were also highly interested, from over half of the empires in the Coalition to the Crai. And it was also no surprise that several empires refused the offer outright, like the Zyagya, the Jun, and the Udra. All three were very conservative empires with firmly entrenched traditions and

would see such a massive wholesale change to their cultures and their cultural identity to be unacceptable.

And naturally, the Chezari wanted nothing to do with the virus. They could see how it would destroy their society from the inside.

They discussed and debated elements of the plan for the rest of the session, the session running very long because everyone had something to say about it, and from what Jason heard during that meeting, the general inclination of the summit as a whole was favorable to the plan. The allure of becoming telepaths had firmly gripped quite a few rulers, particularly those who already had a sizable percentage of their population with telepathic ability. Those with experience with telepathy were most enthusiastic about expanding it to the rest of their population. But several empires who had no telepaths at all among them were also highly interested in the idea, if only because it would make them competitive in the galactic dynamic to come, where there suddenly a *whole lot* more telepaths. They understood that it would put them at a major disadvantage in both the diplomatic and business venues

All in all, by the time the session ended, nearly four hours after their planned stop time, Jason was cautiously optimistic about things. While it may not become a galactic norm, enough empires were expressing open interest, and many of them were large and powerful, that it would create a large enough population of Generations to prevent the rest of the galaxy from trying to wipe them out.

And that was what the plan was meant to accomplish, guarantee the survival of the Generations, no matter what race or species they were. It was why he'd agreed to this insanity in the first place, to prevent a genocidal future war when fear or distrust caused half the galaxy to try to eradicate the other half...just like what happened in Andromeda.

It gave Jason hope, and that mattered most right now.

Chapter 13

Chiira, 34 Oraa, 4408, Faey Orthodox Calendar

Wednesday, 17 October 2022 Terran Standard Calendar

*Chiira, 34 Oraa, year 1333 of the 97th Generation, Karinne
Historical Reference Calendar*

Sevelari Memorial Complex, Imbiria, Imbiri

Sitting behind his desk in a room with four living rulers, 39 bionoids, and lots of holoscreens, Jason listened as Mesaiima read the first draft of the formal agreement that had been hammered out by the galaxy's spacefaring races. The document wasn't very long, and wasn't the entirety of the Ten Year Plan, but it was the best they were going to get.

Simply put, the Ten Year Plan had only had parts of it accepted by the galaxy at large. The parts about giving empires access to the virus and training them had certainly passed, but Krazrou's concept of what the galaxy would be after that happened was what hadn't passed muster with the others. Enough empires had rejected the idea that Generations could go anywhere they wanted and spread potentially deadly retroviruses along with them had been too much for them, and so, they'd come up with a series of rules and laws that would minimize that possibility. Krazrou and the rest of the Generation empires didn't entirely like it, but in the short term, it would work and it would keep the peace.

The plan was fairly simple; Generations would be restricted from visiting planets that were not open to them in person. They could visit using bionoids all they wanted, but only those planets that specifically allowed Generations would be open to in-person travel. Given that Generations could merge to bionoids without a jack, the members of the Accords—which now included the Moridon and the Ruu—found that an acceptable compromise, especially since they weren't permanent. Those restrictions

would be revisited in five years, after the galaxy had a chance to study the retrovirus in detail and try to come up with a universal vaccine, a vaccine that would work against *any* spontaneous or engineered retrovirus that created Generations. Since they were all based on the same RNA sequence, the medical community of the galaxy was confident that, with enough research, they could come up with a vaccine that would stop any Generation-origin retrovirus in its tracks. Every five years, that law would be revisited until a vaccine was discovered, and then the restriction would be lifted.

The Academy would be the focus of that effort. A new department had been formed in the medical school that would focus on research into the Generation retrovirus, develop a vaccine, and also branch out that research to potentially using the base retrovirus as a medical treatment to correct genetic errors and conditions. Since the mutated Karis version of the retrovirus could affect any species with sufficiently developed brains, many doctors were hopeful that it could be adapted to provide highly targeted gene therapy for patients with particularly tricky or nasty genetic conditions, helping cure them of their maladies.

But people were only half of the issue. The virus had spread to the Kirri primarily through cargo shipments, so rules and regulations were part of the agreement that would beef up pathogen detection systems in cargo shipments. The concept of the entry stations used at Terra was adopted galaxy-wide, where all cargo from Generation worlds would pass through an entry station where it would be carefully scanned to ensure it carried no retroviruses. That was going to slow down trade between some empires, but it was necessary.

The Academy problem was debated for an entire day, since the campus was on a Generation world and many species that didn't want to be changed would be attending it. The solution was going to give Jason heartburn, but it was the only real option... the Karinnes were going to build a second campus that was devoted to non-Generations. To ensure it stayed on a completely neutral planet, it was decided that the new campus would be built on Terra's moon, Luna. There was currently nothing there but a few research outposts, and since it was considered part of Terra, it shared Terra's laws and strict neutrality. And this was where the heartburn came in, heartburn primarily of Jason's own making.

He had decided that if they were going to build on Luna, they were going to do it right. He could have them put up a dome of transparent titanium to enclose the campus and the city that would invariably spring up around it to support the students, but that wasn't a permanent enough solution to him. He'd gotten with Grik'zzk, his Secretary of Agriculture, whose sphere of control included terraforming, and they hammered out a plan to terraform Luna to make it life sustaining. Terraforming a barren, airless moon was more than possible using current technology, but it sure as hell was not cheap, nor would it be fast. It would require both a radiation shield that would protect the entire moon and a "planetary" airskin shield that would trap the atmosphere within 190 kathra of the surface, since Luna didn't have strong enough gravity to hold onto an atmosphere for very long, even with a radiation shield in place to protect it from the solar wind. That airskin system was going to be *expensive*, but it was the only way to keep the moon life-sustaining for more than 150 years. The shield would give the atmosphere enough depth to form some modicum of weather patterns, which were vital for moving oxygen and carbon dioxide around, but those patterns would be nothing like on a regular planet. It was a combination of the rotation of a body and the heat of its star that produced weather in an atmosphere, and Luna had a rotation so slow that it effectively removed that from the equation. Luna was a tidally locked body, which meant that its rotation speed exactly matched its orbital "year" as it orbited Terra, always showing the same face of its surface to the planet. Luna's future weather would be based almost entirely on atmospheric heating caused by the sun as it orbited Terra, and would eventually create a climate as air heated on the day side rose and cooled air from the dark side flowed in to replace it. A stable wind pattern would form from that action, which might also have rain along the equatorial belt from time to time.

The plan she proposed to him just this morning would take 13 years, but it would transform Luna into a fully life-supporting environment...just one where day and night lasted about two weeks each, which they were going to solve with a little bit of technological wizardry. Her terraforming office had pored over maps of Luna and had already selected the optimum location, in the lunar highlands not far from the Sea of Tranquility, which would become a shallow sea once the terraforming was complete. They selected a location that would put the city right on the shoreline of the future sea, which showed just how precise terraformers could be. Before they started

filling the basins with water, however, they would go over them with what was basically a heat ray to melt the dust into a glass-like substance that would lock most of the dust underneath it, preventing the seas from turning into vast seas of mud. Water would slowly seep into that dust through cracks in the surface, and the surface would eventually erode and break down, but by then the water above it would be settled enough to not churn up all that dust into mud. They wouldn't do that outside the nine basins that would become seas, using that dust as the foundation for organic infusion to produce viable soil, at least after adding in larger sized pieces of rock. Without that, the infusion process would produce a nearly liquid silt-like soil. After the basins were prepared, the large-scale terraforming units would be set down in strategic locations to start pumping out both atmosphere and water, including buying some of the carbon dioxide gas the Suralles were siphoning from Venus for their own terraforming operation to inject into the future lunar atmosphere.

The day cycle problem was going to be surprisingly simple to solve. The radiation shield they were going to install would be more like the shield at Karis. It would encompass the entire moon, not sit in a stationary position between the moon and the sun to block the solar wind the way the one at Mars did. What they were going to do was alter the shield so it blocked light to create night during the day cycle of Luna, and while it was in the night cycle, they would have what was effectively a system of gigantic mirrors orbiting the moon about 34,000 kathra out that would redirect sunlight down at the surface, in a pattern that would closely mimic the movement of the sun as viewed from the surface of Terra. It would naturally be unable to reflect light when it was on the daylight side of Luna, and it, combined with using the radiation shield to block light for the day side at regular intervals, would create a 24 hour day cycle that matched the official time cycle of the campus on Norfolk.

The radiation shield wouldn't *just* be a radiation shield. It would be a full planetary shield like the one on Karis, and would be able to be toggled from radiation blocking mode to a full defensive hard shield to protect the Academy if the unthinkable happened and it was ever attacked.

In the short term, they would build a dome and a new campus, a dome large enough to enclose New York City on Terra. It would be made of transparent titanium for strength, have a backup energy shield system for

protection, and by the time it was done, the planetary shield that would protect Luna from solar wind would be in place and ready to go. They would install city-sized gravity inducers to give the city 0.88 gravity, Terra's gravity, with individuals using personal inducers to increase or decrease that to their preferred gravity. Once the dome, shield, and campus were built, the campus would open for non-Generations, where Generation professors would teach class using bionoids. Generations would be forbidden from visiting Luna in person to protect the non-Generation population.

They were building it that big because Jason had plans to make the Luna campus a major Academy research facility and the headquarters of the engineering department. It would give them plenty of room to do some pretty awesome on-surface builds as projects for the civil engineering department, and once the moon was fully terraformed, they'd be building a complete shipyard and large-scale construction facility on the surface so the Academy could build ships and orbital station sections

He was doing it that way because the main Academy campus was truly getting a little out of hand. Right now, the Academy had taken over Norfolk and the cities that had surrounded it, like Hampton and Virginia Beach, and had even crossed over to the Del Mar peninsula and was creeping slowly but inexorably up the eastern shore of Virginia. It was even expanding into the Chesapeake Bay and Atlantic Ocean. The rest of the city expanded around it in a constant cycle of annexation, demolition of the old and construction of the new further out, making Norfolk bigger and bigger and bigger and bigger. To prevent Norfolk from basically taking over all of southeastern Virginia, they were going to build a second campus that had a *lot* more available real estate.

So, in the end, nobody was entirely happy, but they'd found something that everyone could live with. The only thing they really had left to do was decide who was going to be on which side of the line. Each empire had to publicly declare if it was going to be open to Generations or not so they knew how to arrange the infrastructure, and what was more, each empire had to publicly declare if it wanted access to the retrovirus so people knew just who was who. As of the start of the conference, 217 empires had publicly declared that they wanted the virus, which was a surprisingly small number that Jason wasn't expecting. He was expecting many more empires

to want the virus. But he also had the feeling that once a vaccine was developed, that they would profess interest. Some of them, he felt, didn't want to risk their populations if the retrovirus mutated on them and turned into a plague and they had no way to stop it.

Jason could respect that position. It was the risk of plague that motivated the empires of the Accords to make the agreement they made. Releasing the retrovirus was for the purpose of preventing such a plague from happening. And he wasn't nearly so optimistic as others that they were going to develop a vaccine anytime soon. The retrovirus that made them was adaptive and persistent, and the engineered version was damn near indestructible. Jason expected it to take *decades* for them to develop a vaccine, but he was also confident that a vaccine would ultimately be discovered. But not in enough time to prevent a potential galactic pandemic.

The empires that wanted the virus already knew the rules, because they were laid out to them in very strong and plain terms. The biggest rule was not *nobody* would be changed against their will, and any instance of an empire changing its population against their will would be considered a galactic war crime and the *entire galaxy* would take action against that empire.

In that respect, this conference had created something that Jason had wanted to see, and that was the entire galaxy meeting and agreeing to certain basic rules of conduct and decency.

Eventually, the moment of truth came, and that was every leader publicly declaring the position of their empire. Jason listened, took notes, and was both surprised and not surprised by what he heard. He was not surprised that the Jun was opting out, or that the Prakarikai were opting in—opportunistic little bastards—or that the entire Coalition and the entire Confederation was opting in. But he was surprised by the Zyagya opting in, and he was absolutely stunned that the *Chezari* opted in. Their entire society and economy was based on the slave trade, and opting in was going to destroy that. But the Queen of Chezan was publicly opting in, which meant that she must have plans to fundamentally alter the entire culture and society of her people...or she felt she had a way to cheat the system, possibly by doing everything she could to prevent the slaves from becoming Generations. After all, all she had to do was claim that the slave population

on Chezan refused to become Generations, which could only be done to the *willing*.

He would have to keep an eye on that. And if necessary, send in the Kimdori to upset her plans if he didn't like them.

It took nearly two hours for the entire spacefaring galaxy to make its position public, for each of the 581 empires, civilizations, nations, or kingdoms that were part of the galaxy's spacefaring population to state their position. 217 of them had opted in, and the rest had opted out. But after doing the math, Jason realized that the number of empires opting in would have enough military strength to protect themselves from the empires who had opted out, and that was the entire goal of the decision he made. The Generations would be protected. They would be able to protect themselves if a genocidal war broke out in the galaxy between the Generations and those who were not.

That was what he wanted, and it would let him live with the choice he made to allow this. But, in a way, it also meant freedom for the Generations. They were no longer effectively trapped on Karis; they could go out and about in the galaxy because they no longer had to protect against someone trying to kidnap them for their DNA. But, on the flip side, it meant that Karis had to become even more of a fortress to protect biogenic technology from spies and thieves, which wouldn't be quite so easy because of the free travel provision in the Accords. They were going to get a ton of thieves and spies on the planet, and it would fall to Miaari and Cybi to ensure that no biogenic crystals got out of the system.

They already had plans for that. Members of the Accords allowed on the planet would have to pass through a very special entry station, similar to how it worked on Terra, that would be on a Nexus bridge station. That would give them the chance to stop any biogenic tech from getting out, because only *people* would be coming in and out, and they'd have to pass through the entry station to do it. That would give Miaari's pack multiple opportunities to find any contraband and give Cybi plenty of time to conduct extensive sensor sweeps to find any biogenic units that anyone tried to smuggle through.

It would actually be a double station system, since the other Nexus bridge would also be an entry station, and the traveler would have to pass

through multiple security checkpoints in order to get out of the control of Karinne security. Those coming in would have to pass Kimdori screening, which would be done there on the station, and the Kimdori would be quite effective in rooting out the spies and thieves...but not *all* of them. Some they would intentionally allow to go on to Karis because they represented potential intelligence gathering opportunities, and just keep a very careful eye on them while they were here.

That was part of what Jason was going to discuss after this was done and he got some sleep, because right now, the visitors to Karis from the Accords were coming and going on Karinne transports, and the number of them allowed on Karis was tightly controlled. The entry station system would allow more visitors to be allowed on Karis at a time, since it would allow them to completely control exactly what came onto and left the planet.

And honestly, as long as Miaari could guarantee that biogenic tech wouldn't get stolen, he was warming up to the idea of having visitors. Karis was a beautiful planet, and he wouldn't mind some outsiders seeing it. Besides, it would boost the local economy with tourism credits.

When the last nation gave its position, they adjourned for the day. They would meet tomorrow for the last time to formalize the treaty now that everyone had decided where they stood, and it would become galactic law. Mesaiima's people had already drawn up the treaty and everyone had approved it, now it just came down to filling in the blanks so an empire's position was spelled out in the treaty itself.

And they were done. Jason stowed his bionoid and delinked, opening his eyes and regarding the front wall of the merge pod absently. He climbed out and stretched, looking around the bedroom attached to his office in the White House, then gave a wide yawn. [*I'm delinked,*] he announced to Sila and Revi, who were the guards attached to him while he was doing nightshift.

[*They're off duty,*] Shen answered. [*It's me and Ryn right now.*]

[*Well, call them back in. I like them more than you two,*] he teased lightly as he stretched a little more, feeling a bit stiff after so many hours not moving.

[Don't start trouble this early in the morning, Jason, I haven't had my coffee yet,] Shen replied tartly.

[No ori tea today?]

[No, and it's all your fault. You're the one that got me started on coffee.]

[I warned you, but you drank it anyway. You're a coffee addict now, woman.]

[It was the smell. I loved the smell,] she communed sourly.

[Be glad Aya doesn't bust you for having a potential addiction,] he teased. *[Door open?]*

[Yeah, you heading home?]

[Hopefully I'll get home in time for breakfast, if you two being here is any indication of what time it is. I haven't looked yet.]

[It's 07:16,] Ryn supplied.

[The kids aren't even up yet. Good, I'll get there in time.]

He got home just as the day got started for the kids, as Ayama and Surin woke them up and Seido was in the kitchen preparing breakfast. She handed him a cup of coffee almost automatically when he came in from the landing pad, which he downed almost in one gulp. *[Thank you, you wonderful woman,]* he told her gratefully, then he sat at the table. *[Please, please tell me something's ready right now. I'm starving.]*

[Nothing ready to eat, but I can dig something immediate out of the fridge while you're waiting.]

[Yes please,] he answered with a nod, which was well after the commune was finished. Commune was far faster than sending.

There was one kid up, though calling her a kid was a bit of an insult anymore. Aria came into the kitchen from the outside door wearing her workout clothes, part of her morning exercise routine. *[Hey Dad, you finish your meeting?]*

[Yeah, just one more to go and it's done,] he replied as she kissed him on the cheek. Seido set down a small bowl of leftover *soka* pudding from last night, a Shio dessert that was quite popular in the house, and he

attacked it as soon as she gave him a spoon. *[God, I'm so hungry. I didn't eat when we took a break last night, and I'm paying for it.]*

[Too busy with paperwork?]

[Yeah,] he agreed, taking another bite of the pudding. It tasted vaguely like tapioca and had bits of chopped berries and nuts in it that complemented the flavor. *[And there's going to be way more today. And tomorrow, and the day after that, repeated for a freakin' eternity.]*

[I don't think it'll be quite that bad. Things will settle down once the new normal settles in.]

[The new normal,] he mused, his thought both hopeful and resigned. *[It's settling in here on Karis. I'm getting used to hearing complete strangers communing. It only took a couple of months,]* he noted wryly. *[But I certainly can't complain about being able to commune with you, or our friends here on the strip. That seems...right. After everything we've gone through, now I'm glad that they get to share in my world.]*

[I'm glad to hear that,] Seido communed with a sly tilt to her thought. *[And I've noticed one big change since this began.]*

[What?]

[The silence. Very few people talk now in public places,] she replied. *[And you might want to send out a few releases about it. At the store yesterday, I saw a child looking quite, well, unsettled. Nobody was talking, and it was freaking him out a little bit. Kids aren't going to develop language skills if they don't hear people talking. Even if they're not going to use them much after they express, it's going to affect their development as they grow.]*

[That is a damn good point,] he agreed. *[I'll make a note to talk to Songa about it as soon as I can. If the Medical Service sends down the instructions, people will follow them.]*

[Make sure Songa specifies speech. Just using child interfaces to convert commune to audio isn't going to work that well since few people frame their commune. I've noticed that interfaces often don't correctly translate unframed commune into audio. It's too much for their processors to handle.]

[Guess that's our fault,] Jason noted. [We original Generations never really framed, and we taught the instructors. It wasn't necessary, because all but two of us were Faey, and me and Rahne are familiar enough with Faey culture to comprehend unframed commune. Plus, we were all telepaths to start with, so framing wasn't something we really thought to teach, it's considered common knowledge. I'll change the training program to add framing into the regimen.]

[It might be a good idea.]

[See, this is why I keep you around, Seido. You're smart enough to have good ideas. Not like Ayama and Surin, they're only good for cleaning,] he communed with a naughty little smile.

Seido gave him a tart look, and just pointed at the ceiling.

[He's trying to stir up trouble again, husband,] Ayama communed, her thought a dry cross between amusement and challenge.

[I think he's about ready for another episode of remedial education, wife,] Surin replied cheekily.

[We need to get the twins back to the strip so they can keep these jackwagon impulses of his under control,] Seido noted to the others, which caused audible laughter in the living room.

[I do have some good news to pass along, Seido. The Alliance opted in, so you and Merra will be able to make the appointment with the fertility specialist,] he communed privately.

[Finally,] she replied with a glowing smile.

[You decide who's carrying?]

[Merra,] she replied. [We decided that my duties here were a little more important than her running the café, so she's going to carry. But I'm carrying our next girl,] she declared with adamance in her thought.

[Good deal. I'll have a talk with Ethikk later today and have him clear out the red tape so you can get your appointment.]

[Thank you, Jason. We both truly appreciate you putting a hand in for us.]

[You can thank me by finishing my breakfast before I wither away and you have to bury me in the back yard.]

[Such a drama queen,] she accused, which made him smile.

He spent a nice breakfast with his kids, and after a very short nap to recharge, he tackled the very important work after the treaty was finalized, and that was talking to the leaders of the empires that had opted in. His first talk was with Ethikk, making sure to clear the way for Seido and Merra's appointment, but also discussing giving the Alliance access to the virus and going over the very strict rules on how they could use it, as well as going into more detail on how Generations would be trained at the Academy.

That conversation repeated itself with 15 other rulers over the day, as Jason worked his butt off to pave the way for an orderly transition in those empires that had opted in. He spent the most time with the rulers of the largest empires, like Voss and Shakizarr, but also spent quite a bit of time in discussions with Magran, who personified some of the anticipation going on in some empires over the news.

"I'm finding myself almost unable to wait," he admitted as they discussed the logistics. "In a society where half the population has some kind of psionic ability, it's not very much fun to be in the half that doesn't. The last five Grand Masters have been telepaths or empaths, and I've always had this faint suspicion that many don't take me as seriously because I'm not."

"I suppose that we can bend the rules a little bit for you, Magran," he said. "I've discussed the same idea with Holikk. He wants to transition before they start using the virus, half to show the people that it's safe and half because he wants to have a head start on the training over everyone else in the Authority. And to warn you, being a Generation is much more than just being a telepath. You'll learn telepathy mainly as a foundation for commune. You can't commune if you don't know how to use telepathy."

"I'm looking forward to that too, but I'm most interested in the telekinesis. I've been almost infatuated by it since the Pai joined the Confederation. The things they can do, it's absolutely amazing. I hope I can do even a fraction of it."

“That’ll depend on how strong of a TK you are,” Jason warned. “Pai are stronger TKs on the average than we are, so there are things they can do that we can’t. But the stronger Generation TKs are strong enough to use some of their advanced techniques. Not all of them, but some of them.”

“Then I think you should give me the best strain of the virus for TK,” he smiled.

Jason had to laugh. “That’s not how it works,” he said dryly. “How strong you’ll be depends on you, not the virus.”

“I meant to ask...are the new Generations as strong as you and the other original ones?”

“They’re about the same, on the average. The virus that created them was genetically engineered using *us*, it came from one of the living Generations, so it has all those centuries of selective breeding that increased our powers inside it. Cybi is already classifying all the new Generations as belonging to the 98th Generation, which is the newest, because the virus that created them was built using DNA from the 97th Generation and it merges with the host’s DNA to create something new...like you and the virus are the parents of a different version of yourself. Still you but changed by the virus. Our kids are the 98th Generation, so they’re being classified sorta as our kids. The abilities new Generations gain seems almost random in how strong it is set around a baseline created by the retrovirus, which Songa suspects might have something to do with the unique brain architecture of the individual. She thinks that some people have brains more naturally wired for using telepathy and TK, and those are the stronger ones. The new Generations seem to have the same average strength as we do in both telepathy and TK, which varies from person to person. After all, it’s writing in the same genetic footprint for talent into everyone, which is then being influenced by the individual’s unique brain architecture to make it stronger or weaker than that baseline. As far as Terrans go, there are some Terrans who are even stronger than most of the original Generations...but that’s not entirely a fair comparison.”

“Why so?”

“Because Terran telepaths are very strong,” he replied. “Both the original ones and the new ones. Something about Terran brain architecture

makes them naturally strong telepaths, and in Terrans, the gender gap isn't as wide. Females are still stronger than males, but not by nearly as much as Faey women are stronger than Faey men. Male Terrans are only slightly below female Faey on the average, so the stronger male Terrans are as strong as or stronger than average female Faey."

"Odd that there's a gender gap. There's no gap between male and female Colonists."

"Well, Faey and Terrans are so closely related genetically, I guess it's no surprise we share the power gap with them," he chuckled.

"Intriguing. So, the request I have, Jason, is to come to Karis and be transitioned there, as soon as it can be arranged."

"I think I can arrange that, Magran," he replied. "For you and any other ruler that wants it. If you'll trust the Karinnes enough to come here and undergo transition, then we'll honor that trust by taking good care of you, and providing you with top tier instructors to teach you how to use your new abilities."

"I have always trusted you, Jason," he said with a gentle smile.

"I truly appreciate that, Magran," he replied sincerely. "I'll talk to Songa about making the arrangements, and she'll contact your office when she has the details."

Almost as soon as he said his goodbyes to Magran, Chirk sent him the report he'd been most interested to read. The Hive leaders in Kirga had finished their study and investigation into how the virus had affected them, and they'd sent him their report on it. In short, the Kizzik had become Generations, but the virus had affected them in a very unique way. The Kizzik noble cast, like Chirk, were fully telepathic, but she couldn't send to anyone not a Kizzik because of the vast difference of her mind compared to most others. However, she could *commune* with other Generations, even ones outside her species. The change the virus made to her brain had created that loophole. Jason already knew that, she'd been communing rather than using her interface since she expressed two takirs ago. But what was in that report Jason really wanted to know did surprise him; while the noble caste of Kizzik had been fully transitioned, the drone caste had been affected very differently. The virus had not made them telepathically aware,

but it had made them sensitive to commune, able to hear it, understand it. However, their brains weren't sufficiently evolved to commune their thoughts in return. So, the drone caste, the workers and warriors, they could "hear" commune, but they couldn't "speak" using commune. And what was even more strange, they could only understand commune from the Kizzik noble caste, those that could actively commune. That was an exceptionally curious thing, and one Jason wanted the hive and Songa to investigate further when things died down.

He considered it after reading the report, leaning back in his chair and tapping his chin with a finger. Maybe it was because their brains weren't sufficiently developed to understand commune from any species except the one that shared their basic brain architecture. The nobles were intelligent enough to be able to expand their thinking to accept the radically different thought patterns of other Generations, so they could understand commune from other species. But the drone caste could not, because they weren't anywhere near as intelligent as the nobles...their brains weren't as developed. So, the virus had changed the drone's brains just enough to make them sensitive to commune from their own species, but not with those outside of it.

Becoming Generations had had one final effect on the Kizzik, and that was that despite being able to commune with other species, their minds were still so alien that virtually all attempts to attack them using telepathy were still useless against them. The Kizzik had gained the ability to understand commune but were still effectively immune to telepathic attack by other telepaths, which for them was the best of both worlds. However, Kizzik Generations could attack *each other*, because they shared the same basic brain architecture. Another Kizzik's mind was not alien to them, so they could attack it. That was a bit of a moot point, since the Kizzik were a unified species, but it was something important to know. If a Kizzik noble ever went crazy or went rogue, it would take another Kizzik to rein them in.

[Now that's really strange, Chirk. Drones can hear you commune but can't commune back,] he remarked to her after reading the report.

[We see it as a very good thing, revered Hive-leader. It will make our hives even more efficient, since we can relay instructions without having to be close enough for the drones to understand us using scent-language. The

nobles can command the hive from a central location and direct all activity in a coordinated effort.]

[Yeah, I can see that,] he agreed. [I wonder if Myli or Songa could build a translation module of sorts that would allow other Generations to talk to drones. Something that could emulate the unique structure of Kizzik commune when you commune with drones.]

[Given how clever honored Hive-noble Myleena is, most likely. But to prevent confusing the drones, we would heavily restrict who has access to such devices, mainly to those who command drones while outside the hive.]

[Yeah, can see that too,] he agreed again. [Drones are friendly and polite and I enjoy their company, but they are a bit...well, limited.]

[I take no offense to the observation, revered Hive-leader. Drones allow us to do their thinking for them. It is simple fact that they are not intelligent.]

[Glad to know you're not mad enough to charge in here and skewer me for besmirching the honor of the Kizzik.]

She returned pure amusement, proving that Kizzik did indeed have a sense of humor.

Koira, 5 Toraa, 4408, Faey Orthodox Calendar

Thursday, 18 October 2022 Terran Standard Calendar

Koira, 5 Toraa, year 1333 of the 97th Generation, Karinne Historical Reference Calendar

Karsa Medical Annex, Karsa, Karis

It was done, and the sealing of the deal had brought some change to Karis.

Jason stood on the roof of the headquarters of the Karis Medical Service with Songa and Krirara, waiting for a dropship to arrive. Four hours ago, the official summit of the assorted spacefaring galactic empires had come to an end, and it ended with the formal signing of the treaty that established

the rules for the entire galaxy concerning the Generations, as well as a few other general things that needed to be codified into galactic law. Things such as salvage rights, official territory recognition, territorial claims, and establishing universal communication protocols that every empire in the galaxy could emulate using their technology. The Academy also got pulled into the agreement, establishing it and Terra as utterly neutral and defining the Academy's role in the galaxy in writing as a place of higher learning for all empires and species, including establishing remote links to all spacefaring empires in the galaxy so they could access the Academy's archives, so they could study what was considered galactic standard technology and upgrade their own technology to that standard. The building of the secondary campus on Luna for non-Generations was part of the treaty, and construction on it officially began the moment the treaty was ratified by the summit. A Makati firm had already generated the plans for it, and they broke ground on the project five minutes after getting the go signal. The Academy would help with the construction, turning it into a project for the civil engineering school, with the firm overseeing all aspects of the project to ensure it was done right. The Moridon had also pitched in, Brayrak Kruu offering to build a second mainframe on Luna that was only slightly less powerful than the one in the Academy. The campus in Norfolk was defined in the treaty as the primary location where new Generations would be transitioned and trained, and once an empire had enough instructors, it would begin its transition plan. That was part of the Ten Year Plan that had been adopted, and in Jason's opinion, it was the most important part of it.

It wasn't everything Jason wanted out of the summit, but it was a good deal of it, and he felt that they'd struck the best bargain they could. The treaty ensured the survival of the Generations and created peace between them and the rest of the galaxy. It established basic rules every spacefaring race in the galaxy would follow and established universal procedures that would allow them to communicate with each other, which he felt was key to keeping the peace. It wasn't perfect, but it was good enough.

The immediate ramifications of the deal were about to arrive. The sleek, narrow dropship holding the Grand Master Magran appeared in the sky, slowly descending towards the annex. Jason had upheld his promise to

Magran and arranged his transition here at the annex, under the supervision of the doctors that knew the most about the process.

Magran wasn't the only ruler that was in the annex at that moment. On the floors below, Holikk, Shakizarr, Ethikk, and Grayhawk were already here, starting the first stages of their transition. Holikk had been the first to arrive, having come to Karis literally an hour after the summit ended, and Shakizarr had been right behind him. Grayhawk and Ethikk had arrived two hours ago, each of them taking advantage of Jason's offer to give them a place to transition where doctors familiar with the process would be available to deal with any complications that may arise. But it wasn't just the four leaders that had come, it was members of their government as well, the ones they considered the most important. There were 217 people down on the 63rd, 64th, and 65th floor that were in transition, from Holikk's executive office to Shakizarr's brothers and sisters and his council of advisors to Grayhawk's executive office to the entire Alliance council and their most important staffers. A ruler transitioning by himself wouldn't make him very effective, so Jason was offering the procedure to everyone of great importance to an empire's executive authority. Or in the case of the Alliance, everyone that had power within that executive authority. The High Staff led the council, but the council as a whole was the executive authority in the Alliance. Other empires that had a council system would receive the same offer.

That was why Magran wasn't alone on that dropship. The entire council of the Nine Colonies was with him, all ten of them, one representing each colony and the Speaker, who abdicated his council position representing his colony to become Speaker...or her in this case. Jason didn't know the Speaker very well, a rather young female named Sallem, who would succeed Magran as Grand Master when he died. Jason got to know Magran so well because he was doing most of the Grand Master's work when the Colonies joined the Confederation, due to the prior Grand Master's extreme age. Jason didn't interact with Sallem very much, since Magran far preferred to deal with Jason himself. They were very good friends, after all, and they often whiled away far more time just chatting after doing official business than anyone else really needed to know. Krirara was present for his arrival because they were also very good friends, and she didn't get to talk to him nearly as much now that she was no longer the Moderator.

Magran wouldn't be the last leader to arrive. Sovial was scheduled to arrive in about an hour, and Jason was planning to have a long talk with her about her little project before she settled in down in the annex.

[It'll be good to see Magran again,] Krirara mused. *[We haven't spoken face to face since I retired.]*

[I'm surprised he hasn't invited you to visit him on Exeven.]

[He did, but I was too busy with the seeding project.]

He gave her a dark look. *[Take vacations, woman, sheesh,]* he accused.

[I can't. You screw up all my hard work when I'm not here to keep an eye on you,] she replied teasingly. Songa laughed when he swatted her in irritation.

Fortunately, the arrival of the dropship forestalled any shenanigans from erupting, mainly because Jason didn't want to look like a spaz in front of the council. If it was just Magran on that dropship, however, Krirara would be begging for mercy by the time the hatch opened. When it did open, four members of Magran's honor guard marched out in their archaic armor and pikes, then they saluted when Magran himself came down the stairs. "Guards? Seriously?" Jason teased.

"They insisted, since the entire Council is on the dropship," he sighed as he took Jason's hand in greeting. "It's good to see you again, Jason. And you as well, my friend," he said, taking Krirara's hand fondly. "I didn't know you'd be here."

"I heard you were coming and gave Jason no chance to send me away," she said with a toothy smile, which made Magran chuckle.

"We have everything ready for you, the council, your pilots, and now your guards," Jason said lightly. "The moment you opened the hatch, all of you were exposed to the virus. It's completely saturating the planet, so all of you are already infected."

"It is why we're here," Magran said easily. "And we have our quarantine protocols in place for after we leave. We'll be able to continue our work while we wait for the virus to die out. We've brought in a small space station and put it in orbit around Exeven, and it will serve as the

quarantine facility for us. They've set aside enough of the station for us so we'll be in relative comfort while we wait out the quarantine."

"That sounds familiar," Jason noted. "Shakizarr and his staff intends to spend their quarantine on one of his command ships and use the time to visit the other planets and colonies in his empire so he can see them from something approaching up close," he said.

"That's an efficient use of his time," Magran nodded approvingly. "No doubt he'll move fast with his transition plan. The Veruta always move swiftly once they decide on a course of action." The rest of the council filed off the dropship behind him, and Jason both greeted council members he knew and greeted the new member of the council that he didn't. Amvin retired four months ago, and a new council member had been elected by his colony to take his place. The new council member was the youngest, an oddly attractive female named Yadrem whom Magran said was quite competent despite her youth. After greeting them, he let Songa explain what would happen over the next four days as they led them into the building. They would each have a private suite in the VIP wing on the 65th floor, with the pilots and honor guard heading down to the 63rd floor and would have a doctor observing them 29 hours a day through the transition process. Songa explained the exact mechanics of the transition, how they'd be in a coma for most of it as the virus shut down the non-autonomic sections of the brain so it could do its work without complications. "So the virus will alter our synaptic paths?" Hedran asked.

"Partially, but no patient has suffered any kind of behavioral or psychological changes from the process, Council member," Songa replied. "The rewriting of your synaptic maps applies completely and exclusively to allowing you to use talent, both telepathy and telekinesis, which for every known species we've studied are in a part of the brain that has nothing to do with behavior or sensory systems. The virus doesn't alter any other part of the brain, only what it absolutely needs to alter to complete the transition."

"Convenient."

"No, designed. This virus was engineered," Jason reminded him in a growling voice. "Whoever designed it did a damn good job, but that's not going to prevent me from dropping the mother of all hammers on them."

“Do you know who did it?” Yadrem asked.

“We heavily suspect,” he replied. “The Kimdori are hunting down the evidence I need to take action as we speak.”

“How is Karis in this, Jason?” Magran asked. “Are you ready for others to try to take biogenics?”

“We’re ready for that,” he nodded. “We haven’t showed the galaxy *everything*, Magran, and now we’re going to pull out some of the more exotic technology we’ve kept an absolute secret to use in defense of Karinne holdings. We’ll be alright. It’s the only reason I agreed to this. If I wasn’t certain that we can protect biogenics from warmongering civilizations, I would have never agreed to allowing the virus to be released.”

“That is the answer I most wanted to hear, my friend,” Magran said seriously. “That last thing I want is an aggressive empire with the capabilities we saw from the KMS during the Syndicate War.”

“It won’t be just us defending it. Several empires have entered into an agreement with us to protect Karis, and there are enough of them that it will dissuade anyone else from trying anything.”

“Ah yes, the Accords you mentioned,” Magran noted soberly. “You trust them not to use that position to try to steal it for themselves?”

“Yes,” he replied. “They’re like you, Magran. They understand that the technology is only safe in the hands of the Karinnes.”

“A viewpoint I do wholeheartedly share, Jason,” he affirmed. “The Karinnes have shown that they have the maturity and restraint to possess a technology that would allow them to conquer the galaxy, yet never use it for such a terrible purpose. I would not trust that technology in any other’s hands.”

“Your trust in us warms my heart, Magran,” Jason said seriously.

They chatted a little while longer, then Jason left them to greet Sovial, Krirara staying behind to talk more with Magran. Like the others, he met her on the roof of the annex as she landed in a surprisingly nondescript Jirunji shuttle, then took her hand when the hatch opened and she stepped down. She wasn’t wearing her elaborate headdress, wearing only a rather

loose belt around her black-furred waist, hanging down to a hip. Jason had always admired Sovial's black coloring, she was one of the relatively rare "panther" Jirunji, whose black fur hid the spots that all Jirunji had. She looked up at him with a calm smile. "I'm happy to be here, Jason," she intoned in her surprisingly deep voice for someone that only came up to his collarbones...and that included her ears.

"We're happy to have you, Sovial," he replied as her advisors disembarked behind her. "We have everything arranged for your stay. Songa will be up to see you as soon as she settles in Magran and the Colonial Council."

"Just how many of us are here?"

"Right now, five others and their upper staffs," he replied with a smile. "Holikk, Shakizarr, Ethikk and the Alliance Council, Grayhawk, and Magran with the Colonial Council, as well as their important executive assistants. And two others are scheduled to arrive after you, your Majesty. High King Shevatt and High Archon Gau are on their way now."

"Surprising that the Haumda would move so swiftly over anything," she mused.

"These are strange times, your Majesty," he said simply.

They engaged in smalltalk as Jason escorted them down into the hospital, and he lingered as Songa greeted her and explained the next four days to her. He waited until her advisors and guards were split off from her and entered what would be her private hospital room until the transition was complete. He didn't really have to convince her of the need for privacy. They sat at the small table in her room that sat by the window, which had a commanding view of Karsa Bay, one panoramic enough to be able to see the strip. But once they were settled in, they got down to business. "It was brought to my attention that you've been experimenting with the virus on your own," he told her.

"I'm not surprised you found out," she said evenly. "If you know about it, you know why we did it."

He nodded. "Which is why I didn't try to stop you. I happen to agree with you that you *need* this. I was going to ask if you wanted Songa's research into the virus to help your scientists along," he said.

“Actually, yes, that would be helpful, Jason,” she replied in relief. “And I’m glad you’re not angry.”

“Not a bit. How has it been so far? Successful?”

“It looks very promising,” she answered. “My son and his friend have shown no hostility towards each other since they were infected and introduced, and they’ve been isolated together in the same room. Right now, we’re keeping them together to see if any hostility develops over time. If it’s a success, we’re going to expand the experiment to one hundred males and see how it turns out. If it’s a success, then we’ll open the treatment up for any male who wants it...which will probably be all of them,” she noted evenly. “The males make the best lives for themselves that they can, but I know it’s a hard life, having to isolate themselves in their villages. The bionoids have given them a great deal of freedom, and I suppose that taste of it made them want more. Besides, if the Jirunji are going to compete in the future to come, we must free ourselves of our need to keep the males separated by family. It has crippled the Stevak, who have to return to their homeworld for the Budding. There is going to come a time when Jirunji females will be too far away from homeworld to reasonably return when they come in season...and if you know about our species, you know that females can get vicious if they’re denied the chance to mate while in season. To prevent general warfare in our distant holdings, a solution must be found.”

“I’ve heard the stories,” he said dryly, which made her chuckle and smile. The drive to reproduce in Jirunji females completely took over their personalities when they were “in heat,” when they became fertile, and they could get violent with anyone or anything they perceived as standing in their way. While they were in heat, they were as single-minded as Faey women and very short-tempered, which was another reason why females isolated themselves with their chosen male while they were in that state. Only a male soothed a Jirunji female’s temper when she was in heat, because he was the only one that could satisfy her primal urges. The good part of that was that the fertility cycle of a female was very predictable, each cycle beginning a little over three years after their last birth, so she knew when it was coming and had the time to research males and choose the best sire she could find for her future children, then make all the necessary arrangements.

They had a long talk about the Jirunji experiment, then Jason left her to settle in and moved on to greet the final two visitors. He didn't spend as much time with them as he had with Magran and Sovial, because by then he was running short on time, and he had another appointment. He'd promised the *shaman* that he would visit the village around lunchtime—as exacting as Parri got when it came to time—because she wanted to talk to him about something...just not something so important that he needed to come right away.

He arrived almost exactly at noon, stepping down off his new skimmer not wearing armor, in a tee and jeans, with Dera and Ryn lingering in the skimmer. The *shaman* padded up to him on all fours and then rose up onto her back legs to greet him, her head going from at the level of his chest to well over his own, reminding him once again that the Parri were actually a rather large species. “It is good to see you again, Jason Karinne,” she said warmly, taking his hand between her large hand-paws.

“You too, *shaman*,” he replied with equal warmth, looking up at her. “I hope I didn't keep you waiting.”

“You come at a proper time,” she told him. “On such a lovely day, I would prefer sitting in the meadow to enjoy our tea, if it pleases you.”

“I think that would be nice.”

The meadow was a small flat area not far from the village, which sat almost perfectly between three of the largest of the *oye* trees. It had a very small pond in the center and was a place where many of the Parri cubs played. They sat by the small pond, barely ten shakra across, and drank tea brought by one of the apprentices, a very, very young Parri male whom Jason had never seen before. They talked of nothing important at first, which was her way, mainly just catching her up on the strip gossip which for some reason she enjoyed and showing her some holos of the most recent babies born on and around the strip. But eventually, she got around to what she wanted to talk about. “There is a coming bloom, Jason Karinne,” he told him, looking up at the trees. “Very soon, most of the trees are going to flower and produce fruit.”

“Really?” he asked in sudden interest. “How many?”

“Most of them,” she replied. “The love shining with the recent changes has bathed the trees in its gentle illumination and incited a bloom. With the soul of this world is well on its way to healing, that means that many more trees will be capable of producing fruit with this bloom, Jason Karinne. The trees will soon flower, and soon after that will bear fruit. And from this first fruiting onward, they will continue to bear fruit in the usual cycle for *oye* trees.”

That was surprising and welcome news. A tree here and a tree there had produced fruit over the last couple of years, but if they were all going to start bearing fruit, then that meant that something had changed...and it also meant that they could enter the *oye* market, at least locally. “Then I assume that I need to discuss things with Kumi so we can scale up the harvesting operation?”

She nodded. “As usual, Jason Karinne, we must carefully inspect those that might harvest the fruit so we ensure they will not be harmful to our trees,” she reminded him. “Only a hand bathed in the light of love may pick the fruit from the branches.”

“Of course. I can have her start bringing over prospective workers in a couple of days for you to interview them.” He stood up and walked around the pond a little, looking up at the trees, looking for any sign that they were about to bud. “I’m glad to hear that they’ll soon be producing consistent fruit. That means that Karis has healed more, doesn’t it?”

“Yes,” she replied, then took another sip of her tea. “The soul of this world grows stronger and stronger with each day, Jason Karinne, healing faster than we anticipated. This illness that has swept across the planet has brought your people together, has brought love for strangers to many hearts. Has it caused any problems for your people?”

“Not really,” he replied, not seeing any buds up there...but then again, these three trees were the biggest, so their lowest branches were a good 400 shakra off the ground. He’d need binoculars to get a good look at them. Their canopies interwove over the meadow, since each one had a canopy that was a good four kathra across and their trunks were only about half a kathra apart. It produced a combined canopy that was nearly 7 kathra in diameter at its widest point, a canopy rising up over the other tree canopies because of the size of the trees. “I wonder if that means I’ll be able to hear

Karis soon. I've been so curious about it since I heard Tir Tairngire and E Chaio."

"There is no telling but to try, Jason Karinne," she said with a gentle smile when he looked over at her. "I have taught you how to listen. If you wish to hear Karis, you need only do so."

"Easier said than done," he replied evenly, looking up again as he walked further around the pond. "The last few months I haven't had time to do much of anything but worry," he said ruefully. "But I'm hoping that we're past the worst of it. The spacefaring worlds agreed to the proposal, *shaman*, which secures the safety of the Generations in the galaxy. Between that and the Accords, things are finally starting to look optimistic for us. We Generations won't have to barricade ourselves on Karis anymore, and the rest of the galaxy is going to accept us. Some more reluctantly than others, but at least we'll be able to travel." He chuckled. "Believe me, when this is all over, I'm going to spend at least a takir just sitting under my tree and listening to him. It always relaxes me."

"He misses speaking to you," the *shaman* told him. "But he understands the dire events that have kept you away."

"I'm going to have to make it up to him, but I'm not all that sure what kind of apology gift I can get for a tree," he said dryly. "Maybe he'd like it if I spruced up the garden around his trunk a little bit."

"He would be content with your attention, Jason Karinne," she assured him.

He looked over at her and was about to respond, but he was stopped short. Standing on the far side of the pond, he was seeing both her and the pond, and it struck him almost immediately that something was...off. He looked at her, then around her, then down at the pond—

She wasn't in the pond. There was no reflection of her in the pond.

He looked carefully at the gently rippling surface and could see the *oye* trees in the reflection, a peek of a cloud through the canopy overhead, but she was not there. And at that angle, where she was sitting, he should have seen it. He stepped up to the edge of the pond and looked down and saw his own reflection, then looked to the other side and saw only the trees in the reflection of the water.

“Are you well, Jason Karinne?” she asked as he came around the pond, then he stood just beside her and leaned over the bank and down into the pond. She gave him an amused look when he took her hand and pulled her arm out over the water, but all he saw was himself and his own hands holding empty air.

“I’m either dreaming or I’m drunk,” he said seriously. “*Shaman*, I don’t see your reflection in the water.”

“Of course you do not,” she said simply. “I am not fooled by the reflection it presents.”

“What do you mean?”

“It delves into the realm of those things that you find highly suspicious, Jason Karinne,” she said almost playfully. “Those things your science cannot explain.”

“Well, my science tells me that it should be physically impossible for you to *not* have a reflection,” he said. “And yet I can’t see a thing. So now I’m very curious, *shaman*. What can change the laws of physics like this?”

“What you see as law, those who understand truth see as merely suggestions,” she said cryptically. “The laws of science and nature you perceive are only there to give your mind something to understand as you seek a greater truth. They are, in a way, only laws for those who believe they are.” She closed her hand around his and pulled her arm back gently, then used that grip on him to urge him to sit beside her. She scooted around so she was facing the pond, and he did the same. She leaned over to look into it, and when he mimicked her, he only saw himself in the water’s surface. “I have told you many times that the world is much more than you believe it to be, Jason Karinne. Your image in the water is a symbol that you have never seen the truth within yourself with unclouded eyes.”

“So what is that truth, *shaman*?”

She looked over at him. “A pool of water, or a mirror, they reflect what is, but those who understand the nature of them can see past what is expected and see the truth of themselves,” she answered. “A reflection of the physical form hides the fact that looking into one’s self allows one to see one’s thoughts, dreams, and innermost desires. When you look into the water, you see yourself. When I look into the water, I see within my own

mind. I can walk the pathways of my memory to recall past events that have dimmed over time, see images of what I have seen before, and observe my dreams and wishes from the outside, which grants me the ability to see more than from within. The reflection in the water is not a reflection of self, it is a window into a realm where our thoughts exist as energy, and that energy can be harnessed by those who understand its true nature.”

“I have no idea what that means, but what I’m seeing now tells me that I’d better listen,” he said seriously, looking down and seeing only himself. “My question is, if it’s something that you’ve learned to do, why can’t I see your reflection? Shouldn’t I still see your reflection?”

“Learning the truth of a reflection leaves a mark on someone, Jason Karinne,” she explained patiently. “When one is no longer fooled by their own image, then they no longer cast one. That effect reaches into the physical world so that others also cannot see the reflection, because it no longer exists. I would teach you the secret of it, if you like. It would add to your *jaingi*. But mind that learning such a truth carries a permanent mark upon you, for you will no longer cast a reflection, for you or another.”

“Does that mean I wouldn’t show up in vidy either?”

“That is not a reflection, Jason Karinne,” she smiled over at him. “But your captured images would show no reflection should they capture you in front of a mirror.”

“So even technology can’t see my reflection.”

“How would you know if it can or not, since you cannot see the reflection yourself to prove it one way or the other?” she asked with amusement in her voice. “Is that your science trying to understand that which goes beyond it?”

“Yes it is,” he replied honestly and strongly. “So, what you’re saying is that the mind can change the laws of physics.”

She looked over at him, her eyes shimmering. “That is *exactly* what it means, Jason Karinne,” she told him, respect in her voice. “The world you see is a construction of your own beliefs. When you can learn to see beyond what your eyes show you, you will begin to see the truth of the world that lies within. And one of the first steps you can take towards the truth lies here,” she said, motioning towards the pond with her huge paw. “Those

who learn to see within take their first step down a path that leads to the truth. It is a long path, Jason Karinne, and a hard one, but it is a worthy one to follow.”

“I’m intrigued, *shaman*,” he told her. “I’m not sure I could ever find this truth you’re talking about, but I’m quite curious about this now. I think I’d like to learn what you mean by this,” he said, pointing at his reflection.

“I must warn you now, Jason Karinne, that such a thing carries risk,” she said firmly. “To look into the water and see the truth means you see your true self, not what your mind believes you to be. Some who see the truth of themselves in the water are driven to madness by what they see. But that is a fate I believe you will not suffer. You are illumined by the light of love and have a kind heart, so you do not delude yourself into believing you are something other than what you are.”

“How can you not know what you are?”

She looked at him. “The loveless ones, Jason Karinne. Do you think they *believe* that they are empty inside? Do you think they believe themselves to be evil?”

“I...I think I see what you mean,” he said. “The most dangerous person is someone who does wrong while believing they are right, because they truly believe they’re doing what’s best.”

“Yes,” she agreed. “If you wish to learn, Jason Karinne, then attend, and listen. I will explain what you must do to see past the illusion of your own reflection and see the truth within.”

And that completely derailed the rest of his day. He was honestly fascinated by this, that the *shaman* was demonstrating something tangible that proved to him that she and the Parri are far more than they appeared... and he wondered why it had taken nearly fifteen years for him to finally see it. But then again, the Parri had no mirrors, had nothing metal in their village that might be shiny enough to have a reflection, and he’d never seen her in such a way before, where a still body of water was between them and gave him the chance to see that she had no reflection.

Not that he hadn’t seen her do amazing things before, but this one was both simple and direct. There was no episode of doubting what he’d seen

once it was over, because all he had to do was look at her through the pond and see the evidence of it.

They spent the entire afternoon and most of the evening sitting by the pond talking about a whole range of things, all of which she assured him mattered when looking past a reflection. They discussed the nature of life, they debated the truth of the soul, they even discussed altered states of being. She described an upper state of existence where all coherent thought dwelled, a place she called *the Astral*, a place connected to the physical world but not part of it. She described that place as a realm of pure thought influenced by the thoughts, dreams, fears, and desires of living beings, that their spirits projected their thoughts into that upper dimension and shaped it into a reflection of the physical world influenced by their thoughts. She told him that it was through this *Astral* that her spirit traveled when she visited Imbria to speak to the other *shaman*, confessing quite candidly that she was capable of an old psionic power called Astral Projection, when the soul of a being left the body and traveled to another place, then returned to its body when it was done.

What he learned during that long talk was that the world that the *shaman* believed in was so radically different from his own that they may as well be from different universes. They'd had many talks about the nature of the Parri's abilities, but never quite so direct, so honest, as if she had been dancing around the truth for years, waiting for the day when he would be receptive to hearing the truth from her. But her instruction on how to do it made no sense. Her advice was to look into the water and *know himself*... shouldn't he know who he was after everything that had happened? He was 36 years old, for God's sake, and he ruled a small but exceptionally powerful nation that spanned multiple galaxies. But he swallowed his annoyance and frustration and kept trying, to the point where he was getting eye strain trying to physically look past his own reflection.

It was just past sunset when he finished without success, if only because the darkness robbed him of the ability to see his reflection. He pinched the bridge of his nose between two fingers and gave a sighing growl of relief and frustration as the Shaman, who had left to attend to other duties, returned and leaned over him, putting her paws on his shoulders. "It is a simple thing, Jason Karinne, which means that it will not be easy," she told him reassuringly patting his shoulders.

“I just don’t understand. I know who I am, so why can’t I see past it?”

“You see who you believe yourself to be, not who you truly are,” she told him in an even voice. “The hardest person for one to know is one’s self. When you come to understand who you are in here,” she said, reaching down and patting him on the chest, “then you will see the illusion of self that the water reflects and know it to be a lie. Only then will you be able to look past the image of self you have built in your mind and see the true soul within.”

He looked up at her as she leaned over him and looked down, and saw the gentle smile gracing her muzzle. “You don’t ask for much, do you?” he accused, which made her laugh softly.

“I ask for nothing, Jason Karinne,” she replied with a slight smile. “I suggest you go home and rest, and not devote yourself to this task. Practice when you have the time, and with patience, you will find your way.”

“Alright. Is this something that all *shaman* do?”

“Only those who wish to understand truth. Not all *shaman* are quite so curious, or can comprehend such things,” she replied easily, stepping back and allowing him to stand. “This has nothing to do with the ten lessons. This is an advanced teaching that only *shaman* long in their *jaingi* attempt, if they attempt it at all.”

“Then why are you tormenting me like this, *shaman*?” he nearly whined. “I haven’t had my *jaingi* long at all!”

“Because you asked it of me, Jason Karinne,” she replied playfully. “You should know not to ask a question when you are not ready for the answer. The fault is yours, not mine.”

He snorted, which made her grin toothily at him.

“But I would not have explained it to you if I did not think you capable of it,” she added with a pat on his shoulder. “I have told you many times, Jason Karinne, that you would be a fine *shaman*. Your heart is strong, and the love within it illumines all around you. And you have already mastered the other things I have taught you,” she reminded him.

“Maybe I should have asked you to teach me something cool, like that time you stuck your hand into the tree,” he grunted.

“That was not me. That was the tree,” she confessed as they started back for the village. “If the trees ever have something to give you, the next time, they may bid you to claim it yourself.”

“Are the *oye* trees real trees, *shaman*?” he asked impulsively.

“Of course they are, Jason Karinne,” she replied easily. “But that does not mean that they have no sentience, no soul. Even a tree can think. Indeed, most trees are capable of far more than you realize, even those that are not *oye*. In time, mayhap you will learn to speak to them, or the bushes, or maybe even the grass, as you have learned to speak with the animals.”

“Seriously? Talk to grass?”

“Grass is quite the entertaining conversationalist,” she said lightly. “Always full of humor and tall tales. Never believe a thing the grass tells you, but you will certainly enjoy what it says.”

“Maybe I could talk the grass in my lawn into not growing,” he mused jokingly.

“Grass is willful, Jason Karinne. And in a strange way, it enjoys being groomed by the cutting machines, for it is vain and laps up the attention it receives when it is admired.”

He gave her a long look as they walked, her on all fours. “Are you messing with me, *shaman*?”

“Some day, you may find out,” she teased, then laughed when he pushed her shoulder in annoyance.

“I wonder if that means that we’re committing murder when we cut down a tree.”

“Death is part of life, Jason Karinne, part of a natural cycle that has existed since this universe came into being,” she said simply. “No being can live without bringing death to others. It is a fundamental aspect of basic survival. Even we Parri cause death in order to sustain ourselves in the foods we eat not provided by the *oye*, which is sadly unavoidable. We even eat meat, if you do not recall, though not nearly in the quantities that you do. But the key to a harmonious soul is to minimize the death one must visit upon others to survive and grow.”

“Huh,” he sounded, looking down at her, and then up into the night sky as the village came into view around a very low, gentle hill, one of the hills that formed the wide, flat, shallow valley in which the village was built.

“Something tells me there’s a much deeper lesson in that, *shaman*.”

“There is a lesson in everything, Jason Karinne, if you have the desire to learn what experience has to teach you,” she replied evenly.

“That’s the truth.”

Raista, 28 Toraa, 4408, Faey Orthodox Calendar

Wednesday, 10 November 2022 Terran Standard Calendar

Raista, 28 Toraa, year 1333 of the 97th Generation, Karinne Historical Reference Calendar

The Promenade, Shopping District, Karsa, Karis

This was the new normal, and it was becoming *normal* to him.

He’d adjusted to the idea of strangers being Generations a few takirs ago, while he was training KMS officers in how to use their new abilities, overhearing casual communc on the bases where he was working. It had taken him and the other original Generations a while to get used to it, but they had...though they still had their private places on the network, places only the original Generations and Jyslin could access—who was now more or less considered an “original” Generation by the others. As were Miyai, Sirri, Shya, Dahnai, and Kellin, for that matter, those who were changed before the virus.

But this was what Jason was still not entirely used to seeing, and that was tourists in Karsa. He was walking along the Promenade, one of the upscale shopping areas not far from the White House, on the border between the relatively small Shopping District and the Merchant District, where most of the megacorps had their planetary headquarter offices. Over the last hour, he had passed six Faey, a Shio, two Kirri, an Urumi, two Grimja, two Colonists, four Ruu, a Moridon, and three Sha’i-ree who were here visiting. All of them were taking advantage of the vast array of goods

sold on Karsa thanks to the Karinnes' extensive trade network, which made Karsa one of the best destinations in the entire galaxy when it came to a vast variety of goods for sale. He knew they were tourists because their interfaces identified them as such, both because they were moleculartronic and because their interfaces were broadcasting a visitor ID code on a gravband channel, part of Miaari's security protocols.

There would be more visitors, because the Accords had expanded yet again. The Colonists and the Ruu had joined the pact, each for their own reasons. Magran believed in the ideal behind the Accords to protect the Generations and keep the peace in the galaxy, and the Ruu joined to further the cause of science, which was their driving goal in all things. It did create a bit of an interesting dynamic, since the Ruu were complete pacifists and wouldn't enter the military alliance, nor would they enter into trade agreements with anyone except the Karinnes. The other members of the Accords were willing to let that slide, because the Ruu had promised to contribute to the Accords with their science, and in a way, the Ruu needed the Accords for further protection, *because* they were pacifists. Dahnai and the others were willing to allow the Ruu to be very passive members of the Accords in some ways if only to protect them and their society from external threat.

Personally, Jason was rather glad that the Ruu had joined. He wanted them to engage more with the outside world, see that it wasn't only the Karinnes that were worthy of their trust. They were missing out on a hell of a lot of trade and scientific advancement due to their isolationist policies. And he very much liked the Ruu as a people, so he would be quite happy to see them visiting Karis. The Ruu were one of the Karinnes' closest allies, at least when it came to non-military matters. Financially and scientifically, the Karinnes and the Ruu were heavily intertwined, because the Ruu saw the Karinnes as kindred spirits when it came to science, and the Karinnes were the Ruu's only real connection to the rest of the galaxy when it came to acquiring trade goods and raw materials. The Ruu did a hell of a lot of business with the Karinnes, using them as a middleman to get access to other markets.

Things were moving along much more smoothly than Jason expected, both within the Accords and in the galaxy in general. The rules the summit set up were holding, and things were moving smoothly and without very

many snags. The rules were in place, the galaxy had more or less segregated itself between future Generations and those who didn't want to be changed, and there was good will on both sides of that line. Quite a few new trade deals had been made by empires that attended the summit, some in the course of the summit and some private side deals made by rulers who took advantage of the gathering, so trade was starting to really boom both for the House and for the galaxy in general. It was getting so busy that new trade routes were being formed and there was a sudden massive demand for hyperspace catapults, as well as a major influx of new orders for hyperspace bridges within the Confederation. Those orders were going to keep KHC swimming in credits for the next ten years; KHC, the Karinne Hyperspace Corporation, was the fairly new corporation formed by the House that dealt with commercial catapults and bridges. It had taken over all catapult and bridge construction from KPC, which allowed them to focus purely on building Stargates and Nexus stations.

It was almost obscene, how much money the House was making now. Between their usual trade products and the bionoid partnership, they were making tons, but now they were raking in credits on moleculartronic interface production, simsense games and viddys, and consultation services to help other empires upgrade their computer networks to merge-capable systems. Kumi was almost sick of making money, but she sure wasn't sick of looking at the account balances in their accounts. But that money didn't stay in their accounts for long, because their expenses had increased nearly as much as their revenue. Most of that profit was being put back into the house through infrastructure improvements, fleet maintenance costs, and big increases to the budgets of several important divisions, primarily research and security. Miaari's budget had nearly been quintupled so she could deal with tourists on the planet, they'd nearly tripled their contribution to Kiaari's budget—the Karinnes and Kimdori shared the costs of Kiaari's gamekeeping operation in Terra—and the budgets of both 3D and MRDD had been more than doubled so they could continue their work to protect the house and biogenics from being stolen. Every other research division budget had also been increased, but not by as much as 3D and MRDD. And most importantly, the Academy's budget had been quadrupled to pay for building the new Luna campus, building new satellite campuses on other planets (whose costs were split between the Academy and the empire that requested the campus), and some major upgrades and

improvements to the Norfolk campus in the short term, and in the long term to increase their enrollment by nearly ten times over to accommodate even more students from empires that up to now had not sent students to the Academy.

Since the Academy was now couched in galactic treaty as the galaxy's utterly neutral center of higher learning, and open to all empires and species, they anticipated a massive increase in students. Because of that, they were preparing for it with major expansion of the Academy system and building new infrastructure to handle the increased student load. They were going to nearly triple the size of the Norfolk campus, making it stretch from nearly Williamsburg all the way to the coast and halfway up the Del Mar Peninsula, extending up into Maryland, and extend down into North Carolina to the south. The Academy's main campus would stretch across three states when the expansion was completed. They were building everything, new academic buildings, new housing, new support infrastructure, and new things like bionoid storage and maintenance facilities for those attending via bionoid—they were expecting a massive surge of bionoid use now that people didn't need a jack to use them. Even that wasn't going to be enough, however. Jason and Kim had gotten together and decided to build three more major Academy campuses in the United States, putting one in each cardinal direction to spread them across America and give each one room to expand. These four new campuses would be placed in San Antonio, Texas, Wichita, Kansas, San Francisco, California, and Minneapolis, Minnesota. That put a major Academy campus on the four "sides" of America and one smack in the middle. Each campus would be the size that the Norfolk campus would be when the expansion was over, and combined, the five campuses would be able to handle *twenty million* students.

And that wasn't even a fraction of the number of new students they expected, which was why the second half of that plan was to build satellite campuses in the empires of those who intended to send a lot of students to the Academy. Each empire was going to have an allowed quota of students they could send to the Academy in person, and the rest would take classes on a satellite campus or over CivNet. They were going to do it much the way they did it with the Jirunji males, where the empire sending students developed a system to select which students they would send to the

Academy in person, no doubt their best and brightest, where those who couldn't attend in person would attend via satellite campus or over CivNet from their home empires. There were going to be *tens of thousands* of new satellite campuses, offering on-site classes and classes via remote, which would serve as the hub for Academy activity over an empire's version of CivNet. The Jirunji had the best, most comprehensive system for that on their homeworld, to accommodate the males, so that would be the model for building on-planet satellite campuses and remote systems. Sovial had already devoted some of her infrastructure experts that helped build the system to expand it galaxy-wide.

That was their plan for their new students, but there were even more plans in place for those who would be seeking graduate-level education. They were going to build 37 new campuses elsewhere on the planet that would serve as specialist graduate schools, following the plan Jason had for turning the Luna campus into a dedicated school for engineering. These campuses would be post-grad facilities for those who had their certificate and were pursuing even higher education, much akin to Masters or Doctorate degrees in the old Terran college system. New York City would host the Academy School of Business and Economics, for example. They were building new campuses all over the world, at least four on every continent—including Antarctica—and they'd mostly be located in major cities like London, Moscow, Beijing, Tokyo, Cape Town, and Sydney. Even the Antarctica campuses would be built in population centers, since Antarctica had held a considerable population of cold-loving species since Terra opened up to immigration for Confederation species.

There were six major cities on Antarctica, populated by species like the Jobodi, Ubutu, Birkons, Sevandi, and the Kriv, and four of them would host a campus devoted mainly to a science that would benefit from being on Antarctica. The oceanography, astronomy, criology (a specialist physics discipline that studied the effects of extreme cold on matter), and paleoclimatology graduate campuses would be on Antarctica. The Birkon city was domed so they could live there comfortably without having to rely on breathers, and unfortunately, that fact removed it from consideration for a campus.

The Academy was spreading all across Terra, which was becoming synonymous with the Academy that it hosted.

And in a sign of the times, Ayuma had returned to Terra to oversee the expansion, reorganize the administrative structure to include the new campuses, and return to the life she led before Jason recalled her to Karis. She was back in her house, back among her friends on Terra, and she was overjoyed to be back at what she considered to be her home. She had never really liked working using her bionoid all that much.

The department budget increases included pay raises for the workers in those departments. A 3D scientist or machinist was now pulling down C100,000 a year minimum...and they were worth every bloody fucking credit. Tim and the entire top-tier analyst team had their salaries increased by 50% by Miaari, a fact that annoyed Tim just a little bit that he was now earning less than Mike and Luke.

But that was just adolescent semantics. Tim and Symone had around C23,000,000 in the bank because of their salaries and the dividend stipend they earned as a Duke and Duchess in the House of Karinne, which paid them a percentage of all House profits. And over the last five years, those dividends had been *massive*. Combined with Symone's stipend, they were making nearly C1,500,000 a year, tax free. The stipend was paid out to all nobles of Baron rank or higher aged 25 or older the day after New Year's Day, on the first day of the new calendar year, so it had been distributed at the beginning of this month. However, the dividend was weighted so higher noble ranks received a larger percentage of the dividend profit. For the lower noble ranks like Barons and Sakaras, the dividend stipend was a very nice annual bonus, for the middle ranks like the Javiras and the Vikiras the stipend was a considerable part of their annual income, but for the top two ranks of Counts and Dukes, it was a pretty hefty sum given how much money the House had been making the last five years or so. Given there were only 441 people with Count or higher rank in the House, though, they didn't leech too much of the dividend pool from the lower ranks. Last year, a Baron in the house earned C83,285 from the stipend, a Count earned C390,122, and a Duke earned C733,200.

By restricting it to Baron and above, it created incentive for the large number of Zarinas and Harinas in the house to work their butts off and perform admirably enough to get Jason's attention and receive a rank promotion.

Most of the Counts and Countesses in the house were the original Generations, members of his cabinet, the squad girls, and KMS officers of flag rank, General or Admiral. The only Duchess that didn't live on the strip was Ayuma. Jyslin, Tim, Symone, Songa, Meya, Myra, Kumi, Myleena, and Rahne all held the Duke or Duchess title. All of Jason's children also held the Duke or Duchess title, including Aria, since all of them were technically in line for the house throne, but their dividend payment would be reduced by virtue of the fact that they got those titles by birth, not by hard work. Rann held the unique title Duke Heir Apparent, but since he wasn't an adult, he couldn't receive the dividend. And Jason had set it up that Rann wouldn't receive a stipend anyway. The Grand Duke didn't *need* the stipend, since he had access to the House's infrastructure and treasury, and it was best for Rann to get used to not having it before he succeeded Jason.

The Margrave rank also received the stipend, but Jason had never bestowed that rank on anyone before because it was a special case. In the Imperium, a Margrave was a rank roughly equal to a Count but had duties that put them outside the usual noble hierarchy. It was a title awarded to very shady individuals, like spies, criminals, and freebooters associated with that House. Technically it was a noble rank that held no lands or assets and only answered to the Grand Duchess of the house, existing outside the usual chain of command.

Needless to say, there were a *lot* of Margraves in House Trefani.

To be technical about it, Jason was the poorest resident of the strip. He didn't take the stipend and he didn't take his salary for working at 3D. He made only the salary that came with the position of Grand Duke, which was C200,000 a year. But, since he *was* the Grand Duke, he had access to the entire treasury if he really wanted it. He kept his feet on the ground by making much less money than he considered his and not the House's. Jyslin was the one that got the profits from the Paladins, and she also received her 3D salary, so she was much richer than he was. It was why it took him months to save up for his new skimmer, because he paid for that out of his salary as the Grand Duke and didn't just have them build it for him as he did with his mecha. And the fact that he had to save for that skimmer made him appreciate it that much more, because he felt he *earned* it.

Not that their money wasn't shared between them, but Jason kept a very firm line in his mind about money, to keep from turning into a rich snob.

It said a lot about the strip residents that all of them were multi-millionaires—multi-*billionaire* in Kumi's case, and Myleena, well, Myleena was the richest woman in both the House and the Imperium by a country mile with a net worth that made some galactic rulers jealous—yet all of them lived in very modest houses given their wealth and they all worked... though when it came to work, they had little choice in the matter. By law, every noble in the House of Karinne had to have a real job and wasn't allowed to retire until the age of 55 or after 30 years of service to the house, whichever came first. Nobles could own their own businesses, but those had to be on the side, they were still required to work a job unless they got an exemption from Jason that he gave out when he felt that the noble's business was of direct benefit to the house, and the noble was actually *working* and not just playing golf all day as she had her workers do everything. But what made it different was that they worked willingly, and they worked hard. Every single one of them worked an official job except Maya, but she worked her ass off caring for the kids while their mothers were working, which earned her a work exemption from Jason. And not everyone worked a glamorous job. Symone, Min, Shelese, Lyn, Bryn, Ilia, and Zora were active duty KMS, doing a variety of jobs from administration to navigation. Ilia was a reservist in the KMS and worked a day job for KPM, much like Jenn. They worked those jobs despite being rich and they didn't complain about it because they understood that in the House of Karinne, *everyone* pulled their weight. It didn't matter how much money you had or how high your rank was, if you held a noble title in the House, you worked hard to improve the House and the lives of its people. There was no such thing as an idle noble in the House of Karinne. If you had a title, you worked, and you worked your ass off.

That was a fact that everyone in the House knew, and many joked that it was a much easier life being a commoner than being a noble. It was also why the commoners of the House had such respect for the nobles, because they knew just how hard they worked to provide the citizens of the House with a high quality of life.

So, with everything going on, it was a little strange to be among tourists in a city that had always been closed to the outside. Jason wasn't in armor,

but he did have his usual retinue of Dera, Shen, Suri, and Ryn with him as he shopped the stores of the Promenade looking for good birthday presents for Meya and Myra. The twins were turning 50 tomorrow, and he wanted to find something really nice for them...though in human years, that was more like 30 than 50. It was easy to forget that Meya and Myra were older than the strip girls, who were mostly around 41 or so. They'd been out of conscription and had been Kumi's bodyguards for years when Jason met them. Myri was the oldest of the original squad and the oldest strip resident at 52, because she'd been a career Marine before Jason met her. Myri wasn't even considered middle aged yet, though she was starting to get close to that line.

He checked out several stores and shops, and eventually found a nice pair of outfits that would do as a present for the twins, and he experienced the new normal here on Karis. The sudden silence had been rectified with a policy that had taken hold over the last month; they'd suggested that you talk to strangers when possible, when you shared a common language, always speak when in the presence of children, send to neighbors and strangers with whom you didn't share a common language, and commune with friends and family. New telepaths did need to practice standard telepathy, and those who had been telepaths before still needed to use it so they didn't get rusty. So, Songa and her psiology department had come up with the new system so everyone got the practice they needed, kids heard spoken language so it further developed their language skills and vocabulary—and calmed them down quite a bit, the sudden silence on the planet had been very disconcerting for them—and it established some protocol on when someone should use what mode of communication. Since commune was much more intimate, and Jason and the other original Generations didn't entirely like the idea of communing with strangers, they'd convinced Songa to set the policy.

If Songa did it, it would stick. The non-Faey members of the House were starting to develop the same attitude towards the Medical Service that the Faey had.

So, Jason heard quite a bit of talking as he moved in and out of shops, returning things to something approaching normalcy since the pandemic began, but that wouldn't last long. Jason was expecting sending to become as prevalent as speech once the guidelines were relaxed, following the

standards of Faey culture and society. How much a Faey spoke or sent was personal preference, but it was considered acceptable to send to strangers in Faey society, and those Faey would change the culture of the new telepaths outside the guidelines Songa set. But Jason was certain that enough spoken word would be used to keep things from getting eerie and give children the chance to hear and learn.

That didn't change how Jason talked to the guards, though. *[This is nice,]* Dera noted, communing privately with Jason and the other guards as she held up a stylish Faey fashion shirt, which only had one sleeve. It looked to be made of silk and had ties on the left side that ran down the front of the shirt, almost like a Chinese tunic. The ties were just cosmetic, however. *[It's definitely something Myra would wear.]*

[It is,] Jason agreed as Dera held it up against her armored chest so he could get a look at it. Shen was appraising some pants on mannequins on the other end of the aisle, as Ryn and Suri kept an eye on things. *[I think that might be our horse, Dera. Now we just need to find something for Meya.]*

[MeYa prefers much less covering clothes,] Shen supplied. *[Sometimes I'm surprised that twins have such different taste in clothes.]*

[MeYa and Myra only look alike, Shen. They're very different people once you get past the identical faces.]

[I know. It's a little unusual for twins that still live together, though.]

[They're best friends on top of being sisters, that's why,] Jason answered. *[Besides, they don't want to leave the strip and now there's no room for them to build completely separate houses.]*

[You've been in their house, Shen,] Dera added. *[Each of them have their own wing, they only share the common areas like the living room and kitchen. I'd bet they don't spend nearly as much time together as you think.]*

[Well, they do spend time together, just not all of it,] Jason noted. *[Their taste in clothes is different, but they share a lot of the same hobbies and they like the same viddy shows. Jenn has thrown a bit of a wrench into that since he married Meya, but they still hang out quite a bit.]*

[I think tormenting Kumi is their favorite hobby,] Dera communed impishly.

Jason had to laugh aloud. *[No doubt,]* he agreed. *[You'd think that after nearly fifteen years the war between those three would have cooled down by now.]*

[It would have if you wouldn't keep stoking the fire, Jason,] Shen accused with a sly smile.

[Their shenanigans amuse me, and it's one of my favorite hobbies to watch them claw at one another,] he replied shamelessly. *[Besides, all three of them need it. It keeps them grounded.]*

[So says someone with a vested interest in it continuing,] Dera observed.

[It's also more self-preservation. The twins are genetically incapable of being anything but rampant trolls. Keeping their attention affixed firmly on Kumi saves the rest of us from them.]

Both of them gave voiceless, wheezing laughs. *[True enough,]* Dera agreed.

[Jason, I need to talk to you,] Dahnai called over the biogenic network. She'd done so from Dracora, and it revealed some of the expansion that had gone on over the last couple of months. They'd talked Jason into putting the biogenic nodes back at the capitol systems of the Accords members, but in the case of the Imperium, Jason had been installing something of a barebones biogenic network in and around Dracora...and *only* Dracora. He was doing the same in the capitol city of each of his Accords allies, building a small, dedicated, and well-protected biogenic network within the capitol city to increase government efficiency and provide a bit of a perk for Accords members. Those remote networks could connect to the Karis network, with security levels that only allowed certain individuals to do so. Myleena and Siyhaa had built the networks, and Siyhaa's Moridon worked with Cyvanne to ride jockey over the system security, which made it virtually impregnable. It gave Cyvanne another item on her task list to keep her busy, since she was the least-burdened CBIM on Karis. To be honest, she was usually begging for projects to keep her occupied, so letting her manage security with the remote networks gave her something to do.

He could understand. She didn't have very many duties at all as the emergency response CBIM, and it could be terribly boring to just sit around and wait for something to happen. It was probably why she was so invested in Citadel Online.

[About what?] he answered.

[Zaa is about ready to go after the Medical Service, so we need to talk about it.]

[Alright. Why don't you come to the summer palace? We can discuss it there. I'll get Zaa to come over so we can do it in person.]

[Zaa already arranged that. I'm packing up and preparing to come over right now. I'm gonna spend a few days there to rest after all the chaos of the last few months,] she declared, her thought exhausted and frazzled. *[Now that we have all the training schedules worked out and I've got my people out there doing their jobs, I think I can afford to take a few days to rest.]*

That was true enough. The CBIMs had done a fantastic job creating massive and complex training plans through the Academy, and the Faey in the Imperium had really stepped up to carry it out. There were nearly two *billion* Faey in other empires right now, training new Generations in the basics of telepathy and commune while they took remote Academy courses in the basics of telekinesis and splitting. The training regimen that Songa, Ayuma, and the CBIMs had worked up was simple yet comprehensive, allowing Faey with little to no experience in teaching to become effective instructors, for they were following a very detailed training regimen that allowed new Generations that had just expressed to quickly learn the bare necessities; closing their minds and the basics of sending, then the basics of commune once they gained sufficient competence with conventional telepathy. Thanks to them, every ruler of the empires that had opted in were quite satisfied with the progress, and the other members of the Accords, whose populations had transitioned so quickly, were seeing real results and a major decrease in telepathy-involved incidents like schisms. There was an uptick in telepathy-based crimes, however, as new Generations that quickly grasped telepathy were using it against their neighbors for theft and settling old grudges, but Dahnai was helping with that too.

On every planet in Accords-allied empires, there was a new office of law enforcement staffed by the Imperial Marines, who were working with the local governments to investigate telepathy-based crimes and capture the perpetrators...and there was no organization better suited for it than the Marines. When a new telepath abused his fledgling power against those who had yet to express or had less skill, the Marines sallied forth and hunted down the offender, using methods that the Marines had established thousands of years ago and using skills developed over the 28,000 years of the Faey race's recorded history. The Imperial Marines were some of the most powerful and best trained telepaths in the galaxy, and since they were all Generations who had been trained by the *original* Generations, and had more than enough experience using their new abilities, they were more than capable of keeping the peace on planets that were dealing with a sudden influx and boom of telepathic individuals.

They weren't just hunting down criminals, either. The Marines were training their allies in some of their techniques for solving telepathy-based crimes and methods of capturing telepathic individuals with minimal risk to the investigators, teaching other members of the Accords how to do the job themselves. As they trained up local replacements, the Marines would slowly phase out of the office, until they left behind a competent unit dedicated to dealing with telepathic crimes and criminals.

Every ruler in the Accords had been impressed by the Imperial Marines before, but now they were virtually in awe of them...a fact that made Dahnai almost insufferable.

[Alright then, I'll arrange to have the kids come over to the summer palace after school and send over the twins and the girls.]

[Sure, I'm bringing the girls and Kaen, and I'm sure they'd love to see each other.] That was true enough. Bethany and Siyae had established a strong friendship with Raisha and Miyai, since they weren't very far apart in ages. It just continued the trend of Dahnai's children and Jason's children being all but inseparable, like Aria and Sirri.

Jason finished his shopping and headed over to the island holding Dahnai's summer palace, beating her there by about an hour. Zaa arrived just after he did, so they sat on the pool deck and discussed the Medical Service as they waited for her, during which time the place populated with

kids from the strip, Saelle and Evin bringing Dahnai's girls and Kaen, and Merra brought some food from the restaurant after Dahnai called her and asked her to cater the palace for the evening. Dahnai loved the food from Seido and Merra's restaurant, and she never passed up the chance to partake of it when she was on Karis.

Dahnai arrived almost right after Aria and Sirri, Sirri having already been on Karis for the last couple of days doing some official work with the KMS. She'd been offered the chance to test a prototype of the Karinne version of the Warclaw mecha, and she jumped all over it. She was doing the test trials with the KBB, so it was her chance to learn some tricks from Kyva herself.

Sirri was definitely born into the wrong family. She should have been Kyva's daughter instead of Dahnai's, Sirri was born to be a rigger.

Not many girls Sirri's age could claim that they had a garage holding ten different fully armed and operational mecha, and even fewer still could pilot all of them. And once she mastered a Warclaw, she'd add another one to the stable.

[Hey Sirri, how was testing today?] Jason asked.

[Hey Uncle Jason, it went pretty well. Had a breakdown in my arm, but the techs got it fixed fast enough for me not to miss out on the next sortie.]

[Operational or design?]

[Op,] she replied. *[The servo had a microfracture in its main spar that got past QA. Techs had it replaced in like ten minutes.]* "Hello Denmother, I didn't know you were here," she said aloud as she approached the table with Aria.

"Hello Sirri," she smiled, reaching up and putting her hand on the Imperial Princess' neck. "I'm here to speak with your mother about a few things. How have you been?"

"Great now that the quarantine restrictions are removed for both Draconis and Karis," she laughed. "I'm getting back to some semblance of my normal life, and I'm enjoying it."

"That's one of the things I'm here to talk to your mother about," Zaa smiled. "Aria," she greeted as the Dreamer reached the table, putting her

hand on her neck.

“Denmother,” she said lovingly. Aria *adored* Zaa. “How are the cubs? Did you bring them?”

“They’re with Denfather right now, receiving instruction,” she replied. “I’m afraid I’m here on business, and the cubs are too much of a distraction for me.”

“Aww, you have to bring them next time.”

“I’ll bring them tomorrow to visit the strip,” she promised.

“Awesome! Is that *raka* roast I smell?” she asked hopefully.

“Merra brought some dishes from the restaurant for Dahnai,” Jason told her.

“Oh hell yes! Let’s get to it before Dahnai does, cousin!” Aria said to Sirri.

“I’m all for that! I love their food!” she agreed, and the two of them rushed towards the open doorway leading into the manor.

“So easily distracted,” Zaa noted to Jason, which made him chuckle.

“They’re young,” he replied mildly.

Jason, Zaa, and Dahnai retired to her office after she got settled in, and she showed off her newest skill, Kimdori, when Zaa brought up the security protocols. Her Kimdori had installed Kimdori protocols in Dahnai’s office, and she had to be implanted with the Kimdori language so they could use it. “We’ve waited long enough,” Zaa began after she sat back down, sitting beside Jason with the two of them facing Dahnai’s desk. “The plan has settled things down within the Imperium enough to move against the Medical Service.”

“No doubt you have a plan for that, Denmother?” Dahnai asked.

She nodded. “My children have studied the issue, and it is their suggestion that we do this quietly,” she said, touching her memory band. That caused a holo to appear over Dahnai’s desk, which was nothing but a list of names. “Right now, there is a critical need for the populace of the Imperium to fully trust the Medical Service,” she began. “Due to the fact

that we may need them if a new retrovirus appears that may be dangerous to the population. Because of that, it's my recommendation that we take down Ward Six and everyone that was involved in it quietly, under the table. The populace need not know what they have done, that the Generation retrovirus was a product of the Medical Service. We arrest all the scientists and workers within Ward Six, we remove from post all executives within the Medical Service that had knowledge of the project. Once we have them all in custody, it is my suggestion that we completely remove all knowledge of Ward Six and the retrovirus from all of them. The last thing we need is for another empire to find out who made that virus and then try to abduct the scientists."

"How do we do that?" Jason asked.

"I know how we do that," Dahnai said grimly. "Denmother is suggesting we use talent to alter the memories of everyone involved with the project, purge it out of them so they can never use that knowledge again."

"Exactly so," Zaa nodded. "There are any number of mindbenders in your employ capable of it."

"No, not mindbenders," she said. "After what the IBI did with the cloning, I don't want their mindbenders to have that kind of knowledge. Because they're all jacked, they can dump the memories they purge from the Medical Service scientists into the IBI's mainframe."

"That's true," Jason realized with a nod.

"For something like this, the only Faey we can trust to do it are the Imperial Guard," Dahnai declared. "Many of them have training far beyond even the mindbenders. I can call up my telepathic specialists like Ryn and have them do the job, and it guarantees that the knowledge of how to build that virus never gets out again." *Ryn, come to my office, and wait outside until we call you in. We'll need your input on something,* she called across the compound.

I'll be there in a moment, your Majesty, Ryn replied.

"I called Ryn to the office, Denmother," Dahnai warned. "Right now, she's the only specialist on the island, so we may need to consult with her."

“I was about to ask you to do so,” Zaa told her with a nod. “Because I believe you are right, cousin. In this, the only ones we can trust are the Imperial Guard. The Kimdori respect their discipline. They know how to keep a secret.”

“I’d have to agree,” Jason injected. “The Imperial Guard are the only ones we can really trust with that kind of information. And since they can transfer that information to a computer, I think we should have them download it into one of the CBIMs for preservation and study. If the virus ever turns malignant, we may need the Medical Service data to come up with a vaccine.”

“We give it to the Karinne Medical Service, and they bury it so the Imperium Medical Service never gets their hands on it,” Dahnai declared. “They already have some studies about it from when I was transitioned. I think we can trust them with that data.”

“That’ll be easy if a CBIM is involved,” Jason said. “I can have one of them store it in their core memory, and *nobody* is getting it unless we allow them to have it. I think I’ll have Cyvanne do it,” he mused. “She works more with the Medical Service than any other CBIM because they’re involved in her FERA planning. You’ll have to grant Cyvanne access to the office, Dahnai. She can’t manifest a hologram in here with your security protocols up.”

“Well, I’m glad you take my security seriously,” she said lightly. “Done. Cyvanne, can you join us please?” she called aloud. In response, a hologram wavered into existence beside Dahnai’s desk.

“What do you need, Dahnai?” she asked.

“What we’re about to say doesn’t leave this office, Cyvanne,” Zaa told her. “I debate keeping it secret even from the other CBIMs, but that may not be possible since you cross-archive your data.”

“They may know what data I archive, but not its contents,” she answered.

“Yeah, each CBIM has a personal archive datastore for personal information,” Jason said. “The other CBIMs can’t access that archive. It allows each CBIM to keep private and personal information to themselves.”

Remember, Denmother, the CBIMs may be computers, but they're still people, and people have a right to privacy."

"Then that is what we should do," she said. "Since this is information we never intend to let out unless there is a need, then only one CBIM need keep it archived."

"Two, actually. Cyvanne and Cybi," Jason amended. "That way we have a backup if one of them has a problem. Cyvanne needs to hold it because she's the emergency response CBIM, and Cybi should also carry a backup because she's Cybi."

Zaa was quiet a moment. "Agreed. Dahnai, if you would please."

Seconds later, Cybi also manifested a hologram in the room. "*What did you need of me, Dahnai?*"

"The two of you are going to archive some very, very sensitive data," Jason explained. "We're about to go after the Medical Service, and all the information we pull from their systems about the virus is going into your archive memory. And *only* you two. The other CBIMs don't need to archive this data. Once you archive those data, it's going to stay there, locked away from everyone, unless there's a need for you to release it."

"*I understand,*" Cybi said as Cyvanne nodded in agreement.

"Getting the information out of the Medical Service mainframe should not be overly difficult," Zaa said. "My children already have their claws deep into their mainframe, so they know where the data is. We know for a fact the data only exist in a cold storage mainframe within Ward Six. We only need ensure that they have no archived backup data stored elsewhere when we go in."

"The two of you are going to be working with Ryn and the other telepathic specialists in the Imperial Guard," Jason further explained, and as if summoned by magic, Ryn entered the room. "The only ones we can trust to pull that information out of the scientists are the Imperial Guard. They'll extract it from the scientists, purge it from them, then upload it directly to you two. You'll then add that information to the data the Kimdori pull from that mainframe and then encrypt and archive it," he told them. "You only reveal it if there's a substantial need, like, say, the retrovirus mutates into

something deadly and the Medical Service needs that data to try to create a vaccine.”

“*We can do that, Jason,*” Cyvanne assured them.

[I think I know why I’m here, then,] Ryn noted, communing once she saw that Zaa was wearing a memory band.

“Yes, Ryn,” Zaa confirmed. “The only ones with the skill to perform the task that we can trust with that kind of information is the Imperial Guard. You and your sisters with skills on par with yours will extract the information from the scientists that created the virus, purge it from their memory to ensure such work is never done again, then upload their memories to the CBIMs for archival.”

[We can do that, Denmother, if the Empress concurs.]

“I do, Ryn,” Dahnai declared. “We don’t let that information out, and it’ll be safest stored in a CBIM’s memory.”

[Then we are at your service, Denmother,] Ryn stated. *[Might I know more about this operation?]*

“We’re about to plan it right now, and your input will be invaluable,” Zaa told her.

[With your indulgence, I think Captain Aya should also be present. I have no doubt that the Imperial Guard will be the ones invading the Medical Service to arrest the scientists and secure the mainframe holding their research.]

“She’s right,” Jason agreed. “We have to keep this quiet, and if we send in the Imperial Marines, rumor of the operation will get out. The Imperial Guard, on the other hand, isn’t about to gossip about this.”

“Yeah. But we can’t send Aya or the Karis detachment, outside of Ryn. That may give the appearance that the Karinnes had something to do with this. Aya can help us plan it, but I’ll have main Imperial Guard in the palace execute the plan. The only guard dispatched to Karis that will be part of the operation will be Ryn, for obvious reasons. She’s one of my guards with the training and skills to do the job.”

Ryn nodded graciously at the complement.

When Aya arrived, they got down to business, and that business didn't take very long. Since the operation would be small and had a very narrow objective within the Medical Service HQ, as well as the fact that Ward Six's fearsome security could be used against those inside to trap them within when they moved, that part of the operation wasn't hard to plan at all. Since secrecy was mandatory for the mission, Aya decided that they had to move at night, and go after the scientists and doctors involved with Ward Six, which Zaa's Kimdori had already identified, at night. They would arrest them at their homes, and at the same time, a Guard strike team would hit Ward Six, to prevent anyone they arrested at home from warning the annex what was going on. The arrest teams would go after everyone in Ward Six but would also arrest Banlia and the upper management organization of the Medical Service to interrogate them.

But to maintain absolute secrecy, everyone arrested and interrogated would have the memory of it purged. They wouldn't even remember that they'd been arrested, that was how complete Zaa's plan was to excise Ward Six and what it did from Faey memory and history. If it was done right, nobody except the Imperial Guard, the Karinne Medical Service, and the rulers involved would ever know what the Medical Service did or what happened afterward. Anyone with knowledge of Ward Six would be purged of it, while the others would be released. To cover the slightly obvious issue that there was a high-security ward within the annex, those who worked in Ward Six would have absolutely no memory of it, but the executives in the Medical Service would be inserted with false memories that Ward Six was a somewhat new area of the annex set up for top secret research, but had yet to be used.

The team hitting the annex would arrest everyone within Ward Six, and then they would capture the cold storage mainframe holding all the information about the virus. Once the mainframe's memory was copied and purged, the mainframe itself would have all its storage drives replaced with an alternative set of data that would make it look like Ward Six had just been set up. The annex mainframe would also be altered so its archives stated that Ward Six had been set up as a top-secret research division within the Medical Service just a few months ago, but had yet to be given a research project to pursue.

To create that kind of layered, detailed, intricate false memory, it would take the most skilled telepaths in the Imperium to pull off...and those telepaths could be found in the Imperial Guard.

In all, Jason felt that Zaa's idea and Dahnai's embellishment of it was absolute genius, and it also showed just how incredibly powerful telepathy could be. If they did it right, not a single soul in the Medical Service would ever know what happened in Ward Six, and the ward itself would appear to be nothing more than a relatively newly created security ward within the annex that had yet to be used for anything serious. Nobody that had worked there or had knowledge of what was done there would remember any of it, those memories replaced with false ones implanted by the best telepaths in the business, whose work would be so subtle and so masterful that not even a highly experienced psychologist or psychic surgeon would be able to detect the fact that the patient's memories had been altered.

Once the plan was fully fleshed out and finalized, Jason prevented them from acting on it, at least for a bit. "We need to get everything ready, but there's one more thing we have to do before we move," Jason said when they agreed on the plan.

"What is that, babes?" Dahnai asked.

"We get confirmation that this plan won't cause any additional problems."

"Aria," Zaa blurted.

Jason nodded. "We see if our decision here today alters Aria's dream. If it does, then we know what the omen was warning us about. If it doesn't... then I think we were wrong that her dream was about the Medical Service, and we'd better start looking around to see what it might be."

"That's a good idea," Dahnai agreed. "How long will we have to wait?"

"I'm honestly not sure," he replied. "She doesn't have the dream every night anymore, so really all we can do is sit on this until Aria has the dream again. It may be tonight, it may be in a takir, it may be in a month."

[That will give us time to get everything ready,] Aya told them. [For an operation like this, I think whoever the Colonel puts in charge of it would like time to drill so we're ready when the time comes.]

[I know I'd like a couple of days to prepare,] Ryn agreed. [What we'll have to do is extremely delicate. I think I'd like a couple of days to practice a few techniques I haven't used in a long, long time.]

“We’re not moving until the Guard is ready,” Dahnai said. “So when you talk to the Colonel, Aya, tell her that we move when both Aria has the dream and when the Guard is ready, and not a moment before.”

She nodded. *[I'll need to return to Draconis for this. This kind of information has to be relayed personally.]*

“Agreed,” Zaa said. “If no one has anything additional to add, then I would suggest you leave immediately, Captain.”

“I can't think of anything else,” Cyvanne said. *“I think we're good to go.”*

“I agree with that,” Cybi nodded.

“Alright then. Aya, go get it done,” Dahnai ordered. “Ryn, go with her, you’ll need to be there with the other specialists so you can prepare for the operation.”

The two women stood up, bowed to Dahnai, and hurried out of the room.

“And now we wait,” Dahnai said with a grunt. “After the last few months, I’ve developed a hatred of waiting. It just means more bad news has time to pile up on you before what you’re waiting for happens.”

“I know that feeling,” Jason had to agree darkly. “But I think we can spend *some* of that time waiting spending time with the family rather than sitting up here worrying about it.”

“Too right,” Dahnai agreed. “I’m hungry again, I hope Merra has some food left over.”

There was nothing more for them to discuss, so they returned to the pool deck, Dahnai’s favorite place in the summer palace, and joined their families. There was indeed a little food left from the restaurant, which Jason enjoyed as he sat with Aria and told her about their decision without going into specifics. *[We're not moving until you have the dream, so we can see if*

our decision has changed it,] he told her. [So I want you to keep an eye on your dreams tonight. If we're lucky, you'll have the dream again.]

[I haven't had it in over a month, Dad.]

[I know, but I'm hoping that this decision changed something and incites you to have the dream again,] he replied. [Have you had any new dreams?]

[Just one, but I don't remember much from it,] she answered. [I'm not even sure it was a dream dream. I have fewer and fewer of them anymore. And in a way, I'm glad. Sometimes I feel like the entire world is on my shoulders because I can dream.]

[Believe me, my little treasure, I know exactly how that feels,] he told her with a smile, putting a hand on her shoulder.

Sirri crashed into Aria from behind, leaning down over the shoulder of her sitting friend and draping her arms over her shoulders. *[Too much sitting around, not enough doing stuff, Ari!]* she complained with a grin. *[Wanna go to Sarga tonight and party in a few clubs? It's only midday over there, we have more than enough time to get there before things start to get fun.]*

[Go ahead,] Jason told her. [You know she's not going to let you not go.]

Sirri laughed and gave him a wicked little smile. *[She knows what happens when she says no to me.]*

[I still can't believe you did that!] Aria flared. Last takir, Sirri more or less kidnapped Aria using her Valkyrie, including carrying her away from the strip in her mecha's hand. Sirri wanted to go to a planetary batchi match over on Kirga, but Aria didn't want to go so she could study for a test at school...so Sirri made sure that Aria didn't really have much of a choice.

[It got you there, didn't it?] she replied shamelessly. *[Now let's go up to my room and get dressed!]*

Jason had to smile as he watched Sirri drag Aria out of her chair and towards the house. Sirri was certainly going to be the most unusual Empress to ever sit on the throne, because she was very much *not* being raised in the Imperial tradition. Well, she had, but the freedom she enjoyed on Karis made her much more like a normal teenage girl—in Faey society—than if

she spent all her time in the palace the way about every other Empress before her for the last thousand years did. That, on top of the fact that Sirri was going to be the first Empress in millennia that was a bona fide warrior. Sirri was going to be a combat rated rigger until the day she was coroneted and would probably continue to lead her company in the Imperial Marines from the throne. But Jason felt that was a good thing. Sirri getting the chance to experience some normal life would be good for her when she took over the throne from her mother.

[What are you smiling about, love?] Jyslin asked as she sat down beside him.

[Just amused at the impetuosity of youth,] he answered, his eyes on the two girls as they disappeared into the house.

[Sirri dragging Aria off on another adventure?]

[Yup. I'm sure they'll drag themselves back home at sunrise tomorrow, and no doubt I'll get several reports from local constables over some shenanigans they got into overnight.]

[That's what girls do,] Jyslin grinned. *[If they weren't a bit wild, they'd be no daughters of ours.]*

[My other daughters better not think they're getting away with half the stuff Aria does,] he warned. *[I can blame all that on Sirri. My other girls better know better.]*

[Listen to you,] she teased with an audible laugh. *[All you have to do is say no, you know.]*

[And get Dahnai breathing fire? No thanks. I'm more or less stuck with it,] he lamented.

[Love, you're gonna be in for a bit of a shock when Sora, Kyri, and Danelle get a little older,] she winked. *[When they're heavy into puberty, all those behavioral traits you pretend to hate about Faey women are gonna assert themselves.]*

[I have Red Horn coming tomorrow to install new prison cells on the strip. I'll keep them in line, even if I have to lock them up,] he declared, which made her laugh brightly.

[I'm gonna enjoy watching you get all flustered,] she grinned maliciously.

[One of those cells is yours. I know you encourage them to act like that.]

[Good luck with that,] was all she communed in reply, her thought amused.

Chiira, 4 Suraa, 4408, Faey Orthodox Calendar

Tuesday, 16 November 2022 Terran Standard Calendar

Chiira, 4 Suraa, year 1333 of the 97th Generation, Karinne Historical Reference Calendar

The White House, Karsa, Karis

It was time.

Jason settled behind his desk, Chichi jumping up into his lap and demanding ear skritches as a hologram of Zaa appeared in front of his desk. Last night, after five days, Aria had finally had the dream again, and much to his relief and delight, the dream had changed. It had reverted back to what it had been, with Dahnai not getting knocked out of the sky, and that told him that they had made the proper choice.

That was what they'd been waiting for. The Guard was ready for the operation, and Zaa had all her people in place and ready to assist in the invasion of the annex. They'd only been waiting for Aria to have the dream, and they'd had to wait for three days after the Guard informed Dahnai they were ready.

Sirri could have been the reason she hadn't, because she'd kept Aria so busy the last five days that the poor girl could barely sit down. Every day, after Aria finished school and Sirri finished her work with the Warclaw development team, she was dragging Aria off somewhere, both on the planet and off of it, taking advantage of the free passage rules of Accords nations to go do some anonymous sight-seeing in other empires. They'd spent most of yesterday on Exeven, learning more about the Colonists and

taking in their incredible architecture and their many statues and monuments. The Colonists had a statue, monument, or marker for every significant event in their history, and given they had records going back 47,000 years, there were a *lot* of events in their history. The day before that, they'd been on Grimjar, and there they got into more than a little trouble because they both came home drunk. There were no minimum drinking age laws on Grimjar, and the two of them had abused that little loophole to try out some of the kinds of beverages they couldn't get at home. Not even Sirri could, and she was the Crown Princess. The Imperial Guard, who quietly shadowed Sirri's every move from a discreet distance so she could have fun without someone looking over her shoulder, hadn't intervened, which made both Jason and Dahnai a little put out. But then again, it fit in with their mentality of only saving their charges from trouble they themselves didn't create. So, the two of them came home absolutely smashed, having to have the autopilot in Aria's skimmer get them home. And that little adventure had convinced them to go somewhere much more tame yesterday when Aria's school was out for the day, mainly because both of them were still a tiny bit hung over.

But they'd gotten what they'd been waiting for, so Jason had sent text messages to Zaa and Dahnai to warn them before coming to work. That was why Zaa's hologram was waiting for him when he got to the office. Dahnai's image winked on beside hers, an image of her in her home office over at the Summer Palace. She was scheduled to be there for three more days, then would return to Draconis. "What word, cousin?" Zaa asked.

"Aria's dream changed," he announced. "It reverted back to the original version."

"Then we are doing the right thing," Zaa declared, to which Dahnai nodded. "Dahnai, it's up to your Imperial Guard now. You can let them go in."

"Colonel Mari heard you, and she's already issuing the orders," she replied.

"Then the matter is as good as handled," Zaa stated simply.

And it was. Jason sat in conference with Dahnai and Zaa, discussing other matters, as they kept themselves up to speed on the operation on other

hologram windows. They watched as the Imperial Guard entered the annex and quickly took the executives into custody, as another team invaded Ward Six using the Kimdori infiltrators to bypass the first layer of security. As that was going on, Cyvanne and Cybi invaded the annex mainframe and disabled the building's security features to prevent them from knowing what was coming.

It took them about six hours, and it was nearly anticlimactic. The contingent of nearly 400 Imperial Guard swept through the annex, arrested everyone involved in the virus, put them in a room where the Imperial Guard telepathic specialists went about altering their memories, and took custody of the cold storage mainframe holding all of the research data. That they connected directly to Cyvanne by connecting it to a portable biogenic comm node, and she wiped the mainframe clean of data, even going so far as to realign the moleculartronic storage of the mainframe and every terminal, handpanel, and even interface of the ward workers throughout the ward connected to it to purge all stored data from its memory. Done that way, there was absolutely no way to recover the data it once held. She had to leave the mainframe operational so the cover story the Guard telepaths would implant in the scientists and workers would hold, that Ward Six was only just formed to study the retrovirus that altered the Faey race, that everything was newly installed, and they'd literally just started their work there the day they were released. The memories of the research they extracted from the scientists were also uploaded to Cyvanne, who organized all of it, stored it in her core, and then gave a copy of it to Cybi for her to store also. The executives would have a slightly different memory, but it would line up with the memories that would be implanted in the scientists and workers.

There were other teams of Imperial Guard, who swept the private residences of everyone whose memories were set to be altered to ensure no information that would contradict the implanted memory existed, as well as alter the memories of family member that may have memories that would contradict the implanted memories.

When the Imperial Guard left the annex six hours after entering, everything was done. Every single scientist and worker had no idea that Ward Six had created the virus, and that the Guard had been in the annex conducting a security exercise with the blessing of the Director. The workers in Ward Six

believed that they were only just starting in the division to study the virus, and the executives believed that they'd ordered Ward Six created to study it. All their computer records seamlessly matched with the memories they had, giving them no reason to question them.

It was a stark example of just how powerful telepathy was. It reminded Jason of the time Jyslin altered the memories of all the squatters in Charleston to remove all memory of the rebels from their minds, to protect both them and the rebels in case they were captured, or the time she created the psychic clone of Jack Brewer in Luke's head to hide the fact that Jason owned VulTech, which fooled the Trillane investigators that had repeatedly searched the company. They wouldn't have managed to beat the Trillanes if not for Jyslin, if not for the fact that she was an extremely powerful and well-trained telepath, even back in those days. A force of 37 of the strongest and most skilled telepaths in the Imperium had all but altered the perceived course of history for the women and men whose memories they had changed using their power.

Science, schmiense. Telepathy and the other psionic powers were the *real* most powerful forces in the universe.

With the operation complete, their conference ended without much more discussion. Both Dahnai and Zaa had some loose ends to tie up concerning the operation, and Jason had a lot of other work to do. But before he tackled the in-box that had piled up on him as he was in conference with the others, he turned his chair to look out the window, which afforded him a view of Cybi's facility across the courtyard and her *oye* tree, which dominated the left side of his view. Cyra's tree was visible in the distance, the two trees an integral part of the city's skyline since they grew to full size. The city was back to normal now, though it was a new normal that included a large influx of tourists from the other Accords empires, as well as some new permanent residents from megacorps in Accords empires that were opening offices here in Karsa. Karsa was still a closed planet to most, but within the Accords, it had dropped some of its safeguards, and it was reflected in a steady stream of new arrivals, both temporary and permanent, primarily in Karsa. The new megacorp offices were restricted to Karsa, field offices and planetary HQs of megacorps and smaller corps that had new trade agreements with the house and house-

sponsored companies. It was making Karsa even more of a financial hub than it already was.

He was glad to see it. He hated having to keep Karis locked behind walls, and in that respect, he was almost glad the virus happened. It allowed his people to be more open, to have options, to have more freedom. They didn't feel like they were trapped behind a wall of paperwork they had to fill out to leave House territory, and it also meant that the other original Generations no longer felt like they were prisoners of their own House. Jenn and Meya had gone on a weekend getaway to one of the Sha'i-ree planets a few days ago, and they came back almost ecstatically happy.

The others never begrudged Jason his decision to keep them isolated on Karis, because they understood why. What happened with Saelle and the IBI was all the example they needed as to why they had to be kept safely away from those who would use them for nefarious purposes. But he had never liked doing that to them. Now, more of the galaxy was open to them. Not all of it, but a very big piece of it. They were free to travel to any empire in the Accords freely, and with some preparation and paperwork, they could travel within the empires that were part of the Ten Year Plan. They had to have a reason to go to those places, they couldn't just go there on vacation, but the option was there.

In that respect, he was glad for what happened. But it didn't take away his feeling of lingering dread that this could all fall apart and lead to a galactic war on par with what happened in Andromeda.

Chichi must have sensed his growing disquiet, because she came into the office and jumped up onto his lap. He stroked her sinfully soft fur absently as he looked out the window, going over the training schedules for the next few takirs. He wasn't doing training classes anymore, mainly because everyone was already trained, but there were new KMS classes teaching those with the proper clearance how to use active gestalts. There were going to be a slough of new Primaries and Secondaries to train in the coming months, getting the Generations ready for when they upgraded every line vessel in the inventory with a gestalt, including frigates. Naval Engineering was still trying to figure out exactly how in the hell they were going to find space for it in a frigate, but they'd figure it out. They may have to pull another system to get it in there, though. There was one

training session that he would be doing himself, however, and that was Yana's. Yana had beaten out Eldren in compatibility scores as the Secondary for Cybri, so she would be undergoing CBIM merge training. Eldren would become the Reservist, a new position giving each CB unit three Generations, which would be the backup for the backup as it were. If for some reason the Primary or Secondary couldn't get to the facility, then the Reservist would take her place. For Cybi, that would put a Generation named Semri in the third chair, who at 26 was the maybe too young to be in the CB Merge program. Semri was one of the original Generations, but that was no guarantee she'd keep her spot. It only meant that for now, she was the third ranked Generation...but that would change as more Karinnes were tested for CB compatibility to find the strongest merges for the eight CBIMs and five CBMOMs.

Sad that they were doing that, were militarizing the Generations, putting a 26-year-old in a military training program...but it had to be done.

He leaned back in his chair and saw a ghostly image of his own face in the transparent titanium, and that made his mind drift back to what the *shaman* told him. That some people did not cast a reflection because they weren't fooled by the false image that the reflection presented. He'd done a little reading into that and found that the concept had appeared in more than one civilization's history or folklore. It appeared in Terran folklore in the form of vampires, who legend said cast no reflection in a mirror. But there were other instances of the phenomenon showing up in dozens of other societies. The Colonists had a legend about such a man that they called the Enlightened One. There were stories in Verutan folklore of a sect of magicians whose name loosely translated to the Druids who were known for not casting a reflection. Those were just two examples out of the 39 different legends, stories, or folk tales surrounding the subject.

It was just like him to approach something that smacked of magic like it was another engineering problem to solve, but that was who he was at his core. He was an eternal tinker, a problem solver, someone who—

Or was he? He picked up a slightly annoyed Chichi and looked into her eyes, as she gave him a slightly dirty look for interrupting her doze. Was he really just a scientist? He could talk to animals, a very un-scientific thing to be able to do. His science couldn't explain it, yet he accepted it for what it

was. He accepted the abilities of the Parri as mystical arts beyond rational science that nevertheless existed despite that defiance of logic. He was a man with a foot in two different worlds, one the logical and the other the fantastic, and he straddled the line between them without falling into the pit on either side.

He knew what she'd told him to do. To look into a mirror, to see his reflection and *know himself*. He'd tried doing it here and there since the day the *shaman* explained it to him, but he'd still gotten nowhere with it. He'd figure it out, but not today. Not when he had so much other work to do, work that people were depending on him to get done so they could continue to have peaceful, happy lives.

"Sorry," he told Chichi, putting her back in her lap. "I was trying something."

She gave a bit of a huffy chirp.

"No, not that. I was thinking about what the *shaman* told me," he told her. "But I still don't understand it. How can you not know who you are?"

She jumped up onto the desk, sat down, and stared him right in the eyes. She gave a single sound, a cross between a *rowr* and a chirp, one of the sounds that was uniquely tabi. "Really?" he asked. "It's that simple?"

She gave a single nod, a trick she'd picked up from him over the years.

"She did say that the simplest things were the hardest to understand," he mused, leaning on an elbow and looking down at her. "So, who do you think I am?"

She was quiet a moment, looking up at him.

"True. It doesn't matter what other people, think it's what I think," he said evenly, leaning back in his chair. He blew out his breath and turned back around to face the window, then looked at his transparent reflection in the transparent titanium. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, then centered himself using the meditative techniques that the *shaman* had taught him. He stayed in that state for a long moment, emptying his mind of all stray thoughts, his mind focused on a single, simple question.

Who am I?

He opened his eyes and looked at his ghostly reflection in the window. Behind him, Chichi gave a single chirp, asking the question audibly that was echoing through his mind. “*Who are you?*”

The answer came without thought, without consideration. It didn’t come from his brain, or his mind, it came from his heart, it came from the part of him that Chichi could understand, that gave him the ability to speak with animals.

“I am Jason Augustus Fox Shaddale Karinne. I am a *father*.”

He didn’t register what he was seeing at first. His reflection seemed to flinch, then it stared back at him in a way that was distinctly unsettling. Then, to his shock, it *stood up and stepped aside*, vanishing through the side of the windowpane. The city beyond took on a ghostly image, hard to see due to the transparent reflection off the titanium, an image of himself, of Jason Karinne, his hair gray, his face weathered and wrinkled, sitting in a Terran recliner with two toddlers sitting at his feet, playing with a toy. The look on his face was one of complete love and fulfillment, and behind him, an image of Rann as a grown man joined him, putting a hand on his shoulder and looking down at the two toddlers. Another figure appeared, a tall, beautiful young woman who shared elements of Rann’s features but had Shya’s hair. She knelt down and put her hands on the shoulders of the two toddlers, and one of them turned and hugged her around the middle.

The woman was Rann’s daughter. The toddlers were Rann’s grandchildren. They were his great-grandchildren.

What he saw, it moved him in a way he didn’t entirely understand. He wiped a single tear from his eye as he looked at his adult son, as he looked at his granddaughter and great-grandchildren, and he felt...he felt...he felt *complete*.

It did define him. Being the Grand Duke, being a warrior, being a politician and an engineer, they were all ephemeral pursuits. They were hobbies. What he was, what he was at the very core of his being, was a *father*.

The image faded, leaving him with a view of the city beyond.

He had to find out if she was right. He got up and went to the bathroom, and he stepped in front of the mirror. And what he saw nearly made his

heart skip a beat.

He saw *nothing*. Not even his clothes were in the mirror. He was not casting a reflection. He could even see the part of the bathroom directly behind him, as if he did not exist.

How? *How*? That meant that the light was passing through his body in order for it to reflect in the mirror, yet he could see himself, meaning that the light was reflecting off his body. He looked down at his hands, and back into the mirror, and his brain quite literally felt broken as he tried to comprehend what was a physical impossibility. The light was bouncing off of him, but it was also passing through him to show him what was behind him when he looked in the mirror.

It hit him then, hit him much more than before. He *no longer cast a reflection*. He would never be able to look at himself in the mirror again, if the *shaman* was right. This was a permanent change, a change that he couldn't undo or just give back. He had changed, something fundamental within him had changed.

He had become something *different* from everyone else. Not better, hopefully not worse...just *different*.

God, Jyslin was *not* going to react well to this. And he'd best switch to a powered razor, that or either grow a beard or have someone else shave him.

Still, the engineer in him was already pondering this change. He wanted to run some tests, do some experiments, see if science could explain this. He rather doubted that it could, but a part of him wanted to try, if only for the fun of it. To try to tackle something as mysterious as this, even if he couldn't solve it, he'd enjoy trying.

He came out of the bathroom and sat back down at his desk, a little scattered, and very, very intrigued. It had intrigued him when he first saw this in the *shaman*, and he was even more intrigued now that he'd completed her challenge. Just what did the Parri know? What did they *really* know? What other secrets did they have that would rock his scientist's mind to the foundations of his beliefs? Just what else could she teach him? What else could he learn?

It was like another entire world was opening up before him, and he wanted to explore it. Not for what power it may give him—God, he had

enough power as it is as a Generation, he didn't need more—but for the knowledge he could gain from it. What if he could learn how to do that trick the *shaman* did where her spirit left her body? What was it called... Astral Projection? What if he could learn that? What was it like, what could it do?

Well, one thing he knew it could do was talk to people. He knew that the *shaman* kept in communication with the Parri back on Imbria, and he heavily suspected that she did it by projecting across 870 light years, transcending the need for science and technology to visit another planet. What other tricks had the Parri learned that divorced them from the need for technology? What other ways had they learned to bend the laws of physics, or outright break them?

What truth had they learned? And what kind of truth could they teach him?

He wanted to know. He wanted to know everything that the *shaman* could teach him. He wanted to discover the truth, no matter what that truth may be, just to *know it*.

“Chirk,” he called audibly. A hologram of her appeared in front of him. “Clear my calendar for tomorrow. I’ll be spending the day at the Parri village.”

[Yes, revered Hive-leader,] she answered, giving him a slight nod of her insectoid head. *[Will you be attending the Accords meeting from the village?]*

“Yes,” he answered. “I’ll just merge to the node we keep there and attend that way.”

[Very good. I’ll reschedule your appointments.]

“Thanks,” he said, and the hologram winked out. Chichi got back in his lap, and he stroked her soft fur as he leaned back in his chair, put his feet up on the desk. “Well, you were right, little girl,” he told her. “It really was that easy. Now I’ll spend the rest of my life living with the consequences of my success.”

She gave a chirp.

“No, I’m not. But it’s going to be a bit hard to shave in the morning, and when I’m wearing my formal robes, I’ll have to rely on someone else making sure I have them on right. It’s just the idea of it that makes it so weird. But you know something? I think I’m going to enjoy trying to solve the mystery of it,” he told her, scratching her behind the ear. “Even if I fail, it’ll be fun to try.”

She gave a bit of a sound, which made him laugh. It was the tabi equivalent of audibly rolling her eyes, almost dripping with sarcasm.

“I think I’ve ruined you, Chichi,” he lamented. “You have gotten so mean in your old age. Just like me.”

She gave a purr and closed her eyes and leaned more into his hand.

“I love you too, little girl.”

The night was calm, warm, and pleasant on the northern marches of the continent of Karga, with a slight breeze blowing from the east that rustled the golden leaves of the *oye* trees high overhead. Those trees formed an interlocking canopy that stretched for kathra in every direction, and at their center was a small, crescent-shaped village of simple huts that wrapped around a gentle hill.

Sitting at the center of the village, her expression serene, the Parri *shaman* sat motionless before a fire. Her eyes were closed, and she seemed oblivious to the movements of three much younger Parri that were around her, tending to the last of the day’s chores before they retired for the evening. They knew better than to bother her, to allow her her meditations as they tidied up and set down the wood for the morning campfire, as the voices of the other Parri in the village drifted across the small courtyard in front of her hut.

Eventually, it was only her. She sat in the dimming light as the fire burned down to coals, casting her face and *jaingi*-marked body in ruddy red light, until even that vanished, leaving her in darkness until the moon would rise over the horizon.

She opened her eyes without moving, her eyes almost luminous in the starlight that managed to peek through the canopy above. “He has solved

the riddle of the mirror,” she said aloud. “He has taken his first step down the path of truth.”

There was no reply to her announcement, at least not one that could be heard.

“He will be ready,” she said further, taking her hands off her knees, her short tail shifting behind her. “Is there no other way?”

Silence was her answer. But it seemed an answer she did not want to hear.

“I understand.”

She sat a moment more, then stood up with fluid grace that belied her lanky, short-legged body. She looked up at the canopy overhead, through the gaps in the leaves and to the stars above. It was her only disquiet living with the trees, that she could not easily see the night sky. Sometimes, she missed gazing up at the stars.

There was much to do. Tomorrow, he would come. Curiosity would drive him, a curiosity that defined much of his personality. He would want to know more. He would want to understand the step he had taken that night and learn all there was to know about it. He would want to learn about the path of truth and prepare to take his next step.

When the time came, he would be ready.

Soon, the Dreamers would begin to sense what was coming. Soon, the Haumda would begin to piece together the omens to one of their oldest prophecies and realize that it was coming to fruition. Soon, it would be more than the Parri preparing for what was coming, and that was a good thing. For when the time came, all beings who walked with the light of love in their hearts would have to stand together to face the coming darkness.

The loveless ones were only an omen of what was to come.

But she was confident that the light of love would banish the coming darkness, and the key of it would be the pure, brilliant light that shone from the heart of Jason Karinne. It was his light, it was his love, that would prevail, because it was the purest that she had ever seen. Despite all the travails that the universe had laid upon him, it had not tainted the purity of

his light. Each challenge he faced only made the light of his love that much brighter.

Even though the outcome was uncertain, she had faith in Jason Karinne.

Thus ends the story of Revolution

*In the next story, Revelation, Jason
Karinne explores the mystical
powers of the Parri,
as the entire galactic
cluster faces a new
threat from beyond
its borders.*

*And there will be other
stories to tell.*