



CONVICTION

SUBJUGATION 7
BY FEL (JAMES GALLOWAY)

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Chapter 1

Kaista, 11 Demaa, 4404, Faey Orthodox Calendar

Monday, 26 March 2018 Terran Standard Calendar

*Kaista, 11 Demaa, year 1329 of the 97th Generation, Karinne
Historical Reference Calendar*

Karsa Medical Annex, Karsa, Karis

Some things never got old.

With a loving smile, Jason Augustus Fox Shaddale Karinne, Grand Duke of the House of Karinne and ruler of six planets, looked down at the newest member of the family, one Terry Timothy Fox McGee Ayalle Karinne, his son. His newborn son, only five hours old, who was sleeping peacefully in his arms as Symone stirred out of a recovering nap in the bed beside the crib, in the heavily utilized post-natal recovery room in the Karsa Annex of the Karinne Medical Service. He was the last one left in the room after Symone held court with family and friends who had gathered for the birth, and while he was the last one there, with all the work he had to do today, he really should have been the first one to leave. But priorities were *priorities*, and his children *always* came first.

Sometimes, things just happened in ways that made him wonder if some things were fate. Just yesterday, Jyslin was in this very same room, recovering from the birth of their twins, Jonathon and Julia. In just two days, he'd become a new father twice, and what made things so odd, Symone had delivered the day after Jyslin. The only thing that would have made things even more suspicious would have been if they'd delivered on the same day, within hours of each other, as Kumi and Myleena had with Jysara and Siyara. But, Jysara wasn't his, where the new twins and Terry were...mostly.

He would *never* tire of looking down at a new child, a new life, and what had become the butt of quite a few jokes around the strip, Jason had a *lot* of practice at it. Little Terry here had pushed his kid count up to 22... which was a number that seemed both absolutely outrageous and just right at the same time. Jason had 22 kids by 14 different mothers. It seemed, well, sleazy thinking of it that way, but to a Faey, that just meant that he was a *man's man*, doing what men were supposed to do in Faey society, get women pregnant. Jason had more or less honored the wishes of all the strip girls to father a child by each of them, even Myri, who had been the last and had borne their son Zaen just two takirs ago. He'd fathered sets of twins with Lyn and Bryn—those girls were almost getting silly with their need to be twins that had twins—and had *finally* succumbed to Sheleese's incessant nagging over it. After he impregnated Sheleese, Myri quietly approached him about it, which had honestly surprised Jason since she'd never shown the slightest inclination to have a child with him. So, the eleven children he had with the strip girls were initially out of duty to the house, then were a duty out of friendship. The other three women that fell outside of them weren't much of a stretch, either. Myleena was his best friend, Kumi was his extremely good friend, and Aura was his girlfriend. And while it seemed like Jason was a complete manwhore of Tim levels of manwhore-ness, in reality, Jason hadn't spread his genes outside of a very small circle of women who were very intimate parts of his everyday life. The ten women who made up the original members of the House of Karinne, one of which was his wife, his *amu dozei*, his *amu dorai*, and two women who were among his closest and deepest friends.

But *this* baby, this one he *owed*. This was his child with Symone, honoring their bonds as *amu dozei*, and while he technically had no legal rights to Terry, he was still Jason's son, and a Generation. Tim was listed as the father in the birth record, the husband of the mother, but Jason was listed as the *donor*, how the Faey classified a father not the husband of the mother. In Faey society, Terry was *Tim's* son in all ways, and Jason had no say in how they raised his son outside of the fact that he was the mother's *amu dozei*, with the influence he could exert through that relationship.

Tim had reciprocated, and it was an almost surreal repeat of history. Jonathon Jason Fox Shaddale Karinne, or Jon as he was already being called, was *Tim's* son, where Julia was *his* daughter. Dahnai had already

started teasing Jyslin over copying her, having twins by two different fathers, but in Jyslin's case, it probably wasn't all that much of a shock. After all, she had sex with both Jason and Tim on a regular basis, so quite often, the semen inside her was a mixture of the two of them. That a sperm from each of them found an egg wasn't quite so surprising. It was quite surprising in Dahnai's case, since she didn't have sex with both Jason and Kellin very often at all. Unlike Dahnai's girls, however, Jon wasn't born a Generation the way Miyai was. Jon was completely Tim's son, with no *in-utero* alteration of his egg or zygote by his sister's DNA. But it did make it a little special for Jyslin to have a child by both her husband and *amu dozei* at the same time.

While Jason was obviously the most prolific father on the strip, he certainly wasn't the sole reason that the strip was absolutely *awash* with kids now. The older generation, Rann and the other kids born from the "first wave," were all around 7 or 8 years old now, with the "second wave" as Jyslin often jokingly called them anywhere from nearly three to just over a year old. There was a "third wave" of infants, as some of the women on the strip had already conceived and born children after their second, and there was even a fourth wave on the horizon, which was Maya. She had born Aran, she had born Tika by another Generation, she had just given birth to Suli just three months ago, which was her third Generation-born baby, and they'd found out three days ago that she was pregnant *again*, this time by Vell, and that was almost a shock to both Maya and Songa. Faey women were very nearly infertile for over a year, nearly two, after giving birth, but Maya had conceived just one month after giving birth. That was *very* unusual. In Faey biology, the longer after a birth, the easier it was for a woman to get pregnant, but a pregnancy so soon after childbirth was very odd in Faey medicine. It wasn't impossible, it was simply *improbable*.

He wasn't alone in his admiration of the baby. Surrounding him were four holograms, each representing the four active CBIMs operating on Karis. Cybi and Cyra hovered to each side, while the Kosiningi CBIM, Cyvanne, was in front of him, bending over a little to regard the tiny new addition to the Dukal family. Standing beside Cybi was the odd hologram out, a *male* hologram that represented the newest CBIM, the Kirgan CBIM Cylan.

Cyvanne had been in operation for about a year, and she had replaced Cybi as the disaster and recovery CBIM on Kosiningi. She now operated the Karinne Emergency Response Agency and performed all of Cybi's original, pre-Third Civil War duties. Those weren't challenging enough for a CBIM, however, so she kept herself busy as a secondary CBIM that assisted the other CBIMs with secondary processes when they were hit with spikes of work, most often assisting Cybi in her role as the science and research CBIM. Cylan had only been operational for two months, and had just completed his probationary period and had taken over all Kirga operational processes, and like any new CBIM, he hadn't quite developed his own personality quite yet. He was still more programming than personality, but he was learning and growing, and he was demonstrating his uniqueness in many ways. Cybi worked for Myleena and Myri, Cylan ran Kirga, Cyra ran Karga, Cyvanne ran KERA and assisted the other three CBIMs with extra processing power when necessary, and the CBIM that would run the Virgan continent was about four months from completion.

Jason found it intriguing that Cylan identified himself as male while the other CBIMs all identified themselves as female, even the five CBIMs that had been destroyed in the Third Civil War. But as soon as Cylan—then named Cyla—had been given the option to change his hologram to suit his personal tastes, he chose a male hologram of a soft blue color, short hair, and with a masculine version of Sora Karinne's face. As soon as he did that, Jason changed his name to Cylan to represent that choice, and since then, everyone considered him a male, including Cylan himself. It made Myleena go over his core with a fine tooth comb, but she found no anomalies. Cylan was just “born” male, he identified as male, and for all intents and purposes, he *was* a male. He was as much male as Cybi and Cyra were female. Cyvanne...well, Cyvanne was a bit of a wild card. She was much more whimsical than the other CBIMs, and didn't stick with a single holographic representation for long. She changed her hologram's appearance about once a month on the average, always trying out new appearances, even taking on holograms of other species, just for the experience of it.

Cyvanne had the soul of an artist.

[He is very tiny,] Cylan noted, making sure to commune only with the other CBIMs and Jason so as not to disturb the sleeping newborn.

[He is actually fairly large for a newborn Faey-Terran hybrid,] Cyra answered, reaching down with a golden holographic finger and touching it to Terry's forehead. *[And he follows the usual pattern.]*

That he did. He had Jason's caucasian beige skin, Symone's pointed ears, Jason's green eyes, Symone's high-cheeked features, and metallic colored hair, a kind of dark, steely gray, which was not normal for a Terran but completely normal for a Faey.

[3.9 konn, 21 tikra,] Jason declared proudly. *[And he has a strong grip. He's a future football player for sure.]*

[I think you're counting the chickens, as Terrans say,] Cybi noted.

[He's the largest son I've had as a newborn, he'd better be a football player,] Jason retorted pugnaciously. *[Rann will succeed me, Aran's gonna be a scientist, Zach shows no interest in sports outside of bachi, and the other boys are too young to see where they're going. I've gotta push one of my boys into sports, so I may as well pick on the one that showed the most promise at birth.]*

Cybi slapped him very gently on the shoulder, since he was holding Terry, which made him grin impudently at her. *[That isn't your decision, that's Symone's,]* Cybi warned.

[Like I can't make Symone do what I want her to do,] he snorted. *[Blow in her ear a little bit, stick my dick in her, and she's as compliant as a little puppy.]*

[Such a high opinion of your amu dozei,] Cyra noted slyly.

[Hey, truth is truth,] he replied shamelessly, then he carefully put his sleeping newborn down in the cradle by Symone's recovery bed. *[But, as much as I'd love to hang around here, afraid I have to get back to work,]* he added with regret twining through his communion. He stepped around Cyra and leaned down and kissed Symone on the forehead, which made her stir and open her beautiful eyes. *Hey love, afraid I have to go,* he told her gently, stroking her hair away from her face. *You gonna be okay?*

Of course I am, silly, this isn't my first walk through the garden, she replied with a beautiful smile. *Just send that goofball of a husband of mine in here to keep me company.*

He's out in the hall hitting on the nurse.

That's my Tim-Tim, she sent impishly.

You have totally ruined him, you know that?

You call it ruining, I call it perfecting, she told him with a grin. Where's Jys?

*I'm right here, silly, Jyslin replied as the door opened. She was walking a little gingerly, still recovering from her own childbirth just yesterday, but she was pushing the hovercarriage that held her twins, Jon and Julia. Jason had to look down into the stroller when she brought it up to the bed, to marvel at his daughter and his adopted son. Julia was an *exact copy* of Jason's mother in all ways except her skin color and ears. Blond hair color, blue eyes, French cheeks, narrow nose, she looked exactly like his mother's baby pictures, and the resemblance was so uncanny that Jason had changed their planned name for her on the spot and instead named her after his mother. Jon looked like Tim in the eyes and chin, but he had Jyslin's cheeks and her auburn hair, a true product of both his parents. *When are we getting you out of here, baby?**

Songa said I can leave in about an hour, I'm in observation, she sent with a dry tilt to her thought and a roll of her eyes.

You're in observation because of the heart palpitations you suffered during delivery, dear, Songa sent from the nurse's station outside, her thought stern. You're not leaving until we're absolutely sure it was because of that gigantic beast you pushed out.

Hey, that's my son you're talking about there, woman, Tim injected.

He may be your son, but it was Jason's genes that caused your wife to give birth to a giant, she sent playfully in reply. I might have to check to see if there's any Bari-Bari in his ancestry.

Ha, ha, ha, Jason shot back. At least you could have said it was Keelo.

But that's not nearly as insulting, dear, she sent sweetly, which caused Symone to stifle a laugh.

Bitch, I know where you live.

And I know where you live. Do you really want to play that game with me, dear?

Oh, I do now, he promised.

As Luke says, dear, bring it on.

With pleasure, he answered, then kissed Symone on the lips, then had to untangle himself when she got way more into it than a woman who just gave birth six hours ago should. You be good, baby, and I'll see you when I get home. You should be back by then.

I better be, she agreed with a smile.

With a commute to the CBIMs to tell them he was off, he worked his way out of the room, out of the ward, then out of the annex, heading for his hovercar. He was alone, in a tee and jeans, and it had been a hard won battle with Aya to get back to that kind of freedom for him. For nearly a year, she'd allowed him to drive himself in a hovercar and go without armor, but she'd also warned him that when the Syndicate forces were on the verge of arriving and the house shifted back to an active war footing, he'd be back in armor and back to being escorted. And he'd agreed to that if only to have window of unrestricted movement. Aya *did* keep a rapid response team one minute away from him at all times, just in case, in the form of a corvette that quietly shadowed his every move whenever he was in his hovercar, or hovered just overhead whenever he was out of his car and among the people of the house. But to get freedom from his armor, he had agreed to wear a personal hard shield, one of the newest inventions out of MRDD. It was a unit the size of a frisbee that attached to his back, like the data discs from the *Tron* movies, which he wore as part of a harness over his tee shirt, that he could activate whenever he was in danger. It created a personal Teryon soft shield that was strong enough to take several shots from an MPAC or pulse rifle before failing, and that would give the rapid response team the opportunity to react. It also reacted to kinetic energy, which would allow it to stop a rail slug. But like the shields from the *Dune* series, it didn't react to low kinetic energy, which would allow someone to punch through it. But, since Jason was highly skilled in unarmed combat, Aya deemed that a reasonable tradeoff for Jason. Jason could defend himself hand to hand, a fact he had proven several times in the past.

The Syndicate. As of that moment, they were four months, two weeks, two days from the edge of the Milky Way galaxy, and the Confederation was ready and waiting for them. They had built a truly massive fleet to deal with them, to the point where the Confederation nearly matched the sheer number of ships the Syndicate had sent, though those ships weren't nearly as large as Syndicate vessels on the average. The Confederation was starting to ramp up, to call in their forces from their member nations and start the training refresher simulations to get them ready to face the gigantic ships of their foes. They had battle plans to fight the Syndicate, drawn up based on Kimdori surveillance of the incoming fleet and Consortium data taken from their enemies, so they were not going to be taken by surprise the way the Consortium had surprised them. They would be ready.

The Confederation...it was almost a zoo now. It had gotten to the point where Jason rarely if ever attended council meetings, because of the sheer number of member nations that were part of it. The Confederation now consisted of 90 rulers representing 141 different unique empires, both active members and neutral observers. One ruler, High Chancellor Holikk of the Subrian Coalition, himself represented 51 other empires. He was the ruling executive of the P Quadrant's own version of the Confederation, an alliance of 51 different governments that owned nearly half of the territory in the P Quadrant, each empire a truly massive piece of territory numbering hundreds of star systems. Instead of all 51 governments sending their own representative to the Confederation, they allowed Holikk to represent the entire Coalition in Confederation matters. In the home quadrant, every empire in the sector cluster except the Chezaa was a member of the Confederation, as were empires from the R quadrant, the P quadrant, and the Q quadrant, making the Confederation truly a galaxy-spanning organization.

Then there was A. Observer A, neutral observer of the Ruu, which was an enigmatic, mysterious race from the Q Quadrant. Their technology was either on par with Karinne technology or *surpassed* it, but much to the chagrin of the rest of the Confederation, the Ruu were just as stingy with their secrets as the Karinnes were. Observer A was nearly as quiet as the Leader in council sessions—when he bothered to attend—and his inclusion on the Confederate Council was purely for “scientific” reasons, at least so he said. He was there because of the Academy, and *only* because of the

Academy, because the Ruu had taken great interest in it and had sent many of their people there to both be instructors and students. Observer A thought the Academy was the best thing his people had discovered in millenia, a grand endeavor by many governments and species united in the common interest of learning, and often lamented why *his* people hadn't thought of building it first.

Every quadrant had representation in the Confederation, and had for over a year. Over the last two years, the six empires in the RK sector had, one by one, joined the Confederation. The Strath-Zegra had been the first, and the Dominion had been the last. It had been the first major decision of the *new* Emperor of the Dominion, Hrathin, who had succeeded his father, immediately ended the war with the Keelo, and petitioned for entry. Hrathin had no illusions about what was coming, and he had put aside local feuds in the sector to protect his empire from a larger threat. Empress Voss of the Crai Empire was the sole active member from the Q Quadrant, since the Ruu were neutral observers. The Crai's domain was over by the border of the P Quadrant, leaving the region closer to the S Quadrant curiously devoid of advanced, spacefaring species. There were *thousands* of low-technology civilizations, but very, very few who had interstellar capability.

The Rakarri were the norm on that side of the Q Quadrant, though they couldn't be called low technology anymore. They had joined the Imperium nearly two years ago, and had very quickly adapted to Imperium technology. Rakarri were just starting to graduate from Faey primary school-level education and were starting to enter Imperium Academies. In just a few years, there would be Rakarri entering the Imperium workforce with degrees and technical training certifications that would let them work with Faey technology. There were already plenty who had tradeskill certifications. Many Rakarri blacksmiths, for example, had taken Faey metalworking training and earned tradeskill certification, and now they were doing metalwork for construction projects on Rakarr.

And those didn't count the 32,105 Rakarri who were currently in training in the House Karinne. Jason had been swift to get his people on Rakarr and recruit Rakarri into the house.

Jason landed his hovercar on his pad at the White House, where Miaari was standing, waiting for him, scratching absently at her white-furred

tummy, just above her navel. Even after so long, she still sometimes did that, scratched or patted or touched the white bar of a Handmaiden that ran down her chest and belly, almost constantly both amazed and humbled that it was there. Beside her was Kemaari, who was holding a handpanel, and a Prakarikai that was part of her office. The diminutive female was named Lessira, and she was one of Miaari's best agents. Lessira was short even for a Prakarikai, but she was absolutely *adorable*...like a china doll strong enough to shatter his thighbone with one punch if she was miffed. She was also an exceptionally powerful telepath, on par with Jyslin, with formidable telekinetic ability. "And how is the cub?" Miaari asked as he opened the door of his car and climbed out.

"Handsome and healthy, thank you," he replied, accepting Lessira's tiny yet powerful hand. "It's good to see you back on planet, Less," he told her. "How was Terra?"

"Thank you, your Grace," she said in her high, nearly squeaky voice. Lessira had shed a great deal of Prakarikai stiff formality since coming to Karis, which Jason suspected was half the reason she came here. She wasn't like most of her people, she didn't find a four hour diatribe over how pretty a flower was to be very interesting. That made her an anathema among her people, so she just went out and found other people more like *her*. "And it was cold and rainy in New York the whole time I was there."

"If Kiaari finds out you're nosing around her territory, she's gonna bite you, Mee," Jason noted, which made Miaari smile slightly.

"And who's going to tell her, Jason? You?" she challenged.

"Annoy me enough, and I just might," he replied threateningly.

"Besides, this had nothing to do with her territory."

"Tell her that."

"I'll let her figure that out herself," she replied as the four of them started for the building. "If she can't, she has no business being Terra's Gamekeeper."

"Well, what did you find out?"

"Nothing I didn't already know, but we needed confirmation," she replied as they entered the building, the armored Dukal Guard saluting as

they passed. Both of the guards flanking the doors were Faey, which was getting rare anymore. The Faey were still the most populous race in the house, with Terrans just behind them, but more and more races were starting to be represented in the Dukal Guard, the elite division of the Karinne Marines that protected the most important sites on the planet. The Dukal Guard was a reflection of the house itself. The three of them followed him all the way to the office, where he nodded to Chirk, Brall, and his newest inner office employee, Brall's assistant Verra, whom had been promoted up from the main administration office down the hall. Verra was a female Beryan—those four small breasts never failed to creep Jason out a tiny bit, but not every bipedal mammal had two pronounced breasts—who had adopted a truly radical new practice among Karinne Beryans, not dying her tail in her family's colors. Her tail was dyed in the colors of House Karinne, blue, white, gold, and red, as if to declare that she had a new family. She held down the fort for Brall while he was out of the office, doing some of his paperwork, but she also went out on her own to make sure things were being done in accordance with the Grand Duke's wishes. Brall was just one man, so he brought in Verra to be the second shin-kicker. And that she could do like a champion, both kick shins and make sure things were being done the right way. Dera and Suri were standing by the door to his office, nodding to him as he passed. Though they didn't follow him around anymore, Aya made sure that Imperial Guards were always where he was, where he was going to be, where he was *supposed* to be, or really damn close by. He still tweaked Aya's nose a bit from time to time by sneaking away or telling her he was going to be somewhere else, but she endured it with her usual stoicism...and now *Aya* had a paddle hanging behind her desk in her office in the barracks, an eternal warning that not even the Grand Duke Karinne was too important to spank like a naughty child when the situation demanded it.

Miaari tapped the control console by the door, and the window behind the desk shimmered when she put the office in secure mode. "Alright, Less, shoot," he said as he went around his desk and flopped down in his chair.

"As far as I could find out, your Grace, the hack attempt didn't have help from anyone on Terra," she began as Kemaari silently handed him the handpanel she'd been carrying, which had Lessira's full report in it. Six days ago, someone tried to hack into the Karis computer network, trying to

get in through Civnet. Cybi and Siyhhaa both had responded immediately to the attempt, crushing it, and now Miaari was on the trail of the perpetrator. “Siyhhaa traced it back to New York, but it was a proxy for the origin. Nobody in 2M had any direct knowledge. The hack came from outside and it was all by computer. It was a remote hack, and whoever did it was very, very good. That’s what we already knew, but now we have confirmation that our intel was good.”

“Kiaari’s agents have already closed the hole they used to get in,” Miaari added. “They got in through Merrane Macrotechnology’s Terra mainframe, which as you know, is corporate and outside sister Kiaari’s direct control. She sent her team in to fix their security flaw, *then* told them of the fix.”

Jason laughed. “Typical Kiaari,” he said.

“She does have her own style,” Miaari noted, Kemaari’s tail wagging a tiny bit at mention of her sister. Kemaari adored Kiaari, mainly because they were much closer in age. “I’ve sent Mahja Siyhhaa the task of hunting down our attackers, because now it falls fully into her area of expertise.”

“It won’t take her long. Nothing ever does,” Jason chuckled dryly as he put his feet up on his desk. “So, we just wait to see what Siyhhaa finds out.”

“As you said, it will not take her long,” Miaari agreed.

“Did you bring back a snow globe, Less?” he asked. Lessira had developed a liking for snow globes, and whenever she went to Terra, she always picked one up from where she visited. She had some 28 of them on a shelf behind her desk.

“Two, I was in both New York and Los Angeles,” she smiled. “I’ll send you pics of them.”

“What were you doing in L.A.?”

“I came in through the L.A. starport, so Kiaari didn’t notice me right off,” she replied with a slow smile. “And I left about two steps ahead of some of Kiaari’s agents.”

Jason laughed. “So, you field the angry call yet, Mee?”

“She’s left four messages for me,” she replied blandly, which made Jason laugh even harder.

“Sounds like you girls have everything under control,” he said. “I’ll read through your report when I have a chance, Less. Good work.”

“Thank you, your Grace,” she replied in her squeaky voice, bobbing in a bit of curtsy.

The three of them excused themselves, and Suri and Dera came in and took seats over on the far end of the office, which wasn’t all that unusual, leaving Jason to get to work. Symone’s labor had murdered his schedule today, and now he had to play catch-up. Any other day he’d have blown most everything off, but today was not one of those days, because two very important things were happening today. It was his good luck that both were happening this afternoon, so he didn’t have to miss the birth of Terry. The first was beyond his control, because Ba’mra’ei was due to arrive on Karis in about two hours, part of a state visit that had been on the schedule for nearly a month. Ba’mra’ei had fulfilled Graith’s term as the High Staff, and Alliance law said she couldn’t serve another term immediately afterward. She was bringing her successor Ethikk Gra’Krenn to meet Jason, who was a Beryan. She wouldn’t have been offended at all if he didn’t show up to greet her, but this way he didn’t have to leave her and her successor stranded at the starport.

The second big thing that was happening today was within his control, because the first—and only—Fleet Flagship was coming off the dock, and in five hours, it would be formally commissioned. It had taken them nearly three months to design it and fifteen months to build it, their answer to the Syndicate’s moon-sized ships. The new ship was so big that it *just barely* fit through the capital doors of Kosigi, and that was with the ship turning at an angle to get its stern lined up with the corners of the doors, but despite that, it had been built in an external dock enclosed in a pressurized hard shield to hold in atmosphere that was in orbit around the gas giant planet in the Karis system, planet seven. They’d built it outside Kosigi because if their math was wrong, then the ship would be stuck inside the moon, making it effectively useless until they widened the capitol door tunnel. It was an absolute monstrosity, nearly eight kathra long and three kathra wide across the beam in the stern, the widest part of the ship, built in the same

triangular, flying pie-wedge design as all KMS vessels, but it lacked the stubby stern wings that the smaller ships had. More than any other KMS ship, the fleet flagship most closely resembled a Star Destroyer from the old *Star Wars* movies. It was made of so much metal that the thing had the same mass as the moon orbiting Planet Four in the Karis system, and building it had almost completely wiped them out of Neutronium to build its carapace outer hull. It was so big that it couldn't approach too closely to Kosigi else its mass would affect the moon's orbit if the navigator wasn't careful. Special navigation protocols would have to be put in effect to get the ship to and away from a planet without it affecting the orbital tracks of moons, space stations, or satellites. Admiral Palla Karinne had been promoted from the *Aegis* to take command of the new vessel, and Kiya Karinne from the admiralty command staff had transferred out of the command center to take command of the *Aegis*.

The new ship had one real function, and that was to serve as the flag for a major task force when taking on large segments of the Syndicate fleet, and to beat the shit out of the enemy during the battle. It was built with the same mindset that went into tactical battleships, and that was the fact that the ship was there to *fight*, not to stay in the rear echelon and issue commands. It would certainly be commanding any task force it anchored, there was no doubt about that, but the ship was armed to the teeth with just about everything that would let it fight Syndicate ships both at long range and toe to toe, if necessary. It was armed with a GRAF cannon, as well as dozens and dozens of the most powerful weapons they could put on it. Particle beam projectors, rail cannons, pulse batteries, plasma torpodoes, Coalition disruptors, missile batteries, it was a one ship armada of the most devastating weapons the Karinnes could put on the field. It also carried four tactical fighter squadrons, two exomech companies, and two platoons of the new Titan exomechs to support it and its task force. The ship was a one man wrecking crew

Jason already knew that Palla was naming the ship the *Tianne*, they'd already made out the charter, and Juma had already seated the ship's crew... all 9,000 of them. A ship that big needed *thousands* of crew to keep it going.

The choice of the name *Tianne* wasn't all that surprising. She was a figure from Faey mythology whose closest comparison to Terran mythology

was the Angel of Death, the first child of Aris that wasn't Baaen, the first of Aris' many half-god "love children" with mortal men, who was brought into Trelle's domain to serve the Trinity. In some ways, Tianne was comparable to an angel, but in their mythology, the "angels" were actually the half-god offspring of Aris and mortal men...and there were *thousands* of them. Aris was one seriously fecund girl back in her wilder days. After being brought into the Faey version of heaven to serve the gods, she was particularly known for being sent out to kill the enemies of her divine mother and grandparents and bring their souls back to Trelle to face her punishment, to be the Angel of Death, and she did it using Demir's sword. Demir only went out to do battle when it was a foe so powerful, so formidable, that Tianne could not defeat the foe herself...after all, she was only half god, not a full god, and some of the beasts and monsters and enemies in Faey mythology were extremely powerful.

She was the only figure in Faey mythology allowed to touch Demir's sword aside from Demir himself. Not even Trelle and Aris were allowed to touch Demir's sword. Demir was the Swordbearer, but Tianne was known as the Swordmaster.

And that also fit into Faey mentality, Jason supposed. Demir's sword was iconic, as much a part of his identity in Faey mythology and religious lore as Trelle's hair and garland or Aris' necklace, but he was a *male*, and males in Faey society weren't allowed to fight. Jason had always found it a little, well, paradoxical that the male god in Faey mythology was the one that carried a sword, but he also almost never used it. Demir most often lent out his sword to Tianne, and *she* was the one that used it to kill things. For Demir, it was a magical artifact that allowed him to bring forth life by letting him prick his finger with it and draw his blood. And in their mythology, Demir's sword was the only thing that could hurt a god, so it was with no small measure of trust that he allowed Tianne to use it.

Barely five minutes after Miaari and the others left, Chirk warned him he had another courier, this time from Kumi's office. And in strutted Eliara Lussi, one of Kumi's best business agents. She was Sha'i-ree, and what was typical for the race, she was heart-stoppingly gorgeous and bare-ass naked, wearing only slippers on her feet. Her silky tail swished behind her as she sauntered into his office, her face and body just exuded, *oozed* sensuality and ripe, inviting promise. She put most Faey women to shame with her

sexiness, a fact that sent quite a few Faey women in the White House into jealous pique. She had perfect mocha-colored skin, perfect white-gold hair, perfect blue eyes, perfect teeth, perfect breasts, perfect hips, perfect long legs...even her *tail* was perfect, and Faey women didn't have tails. She made Faey women *want* to have tails. But make no mistake about it, Eliara was as intelligent, cunning, and ruthless as she was lovely, and she knew how to use her looks to get what she wanted, both out of men and out of business rivals. Anyone that found Sha'i-ree to be attractive was nothing but a victim awaiting her sensual trap, given Sha'i-ree extremely casual attitudes towards sexual activity. *Anyone*. Eliara was just as willing to use sex to get what she wanted out of a woman as she was a man, and she enjoyed it equally. "Your Grace," she said in that husky, sexy, seductive voice, speaking the musical Faey language as if her very words were audial sex. "The quarterly trades report," she added, holding out the panel when she reached the desk, leaning over and putting a hand on the desk as she reached it across to him, a move that made her perfectly sized, perfectly formed, and perfectly jiggly breasts do what she wanted them to do.

Jason had the sense not to fall into *that* trap, a lesson Tim had to learn over and over and over and over and over and over.

But Eliara showed that since the Confederation started expanding in earnest not long after the defeat of the first Consortium invasion, the House Karinne had been expanding much the same way as the Confederation had. Every single member race of the Confederation from every quadrant except the Coalition races from the P Quadrant were represented on Karis with three exceptions, and they weren't outlandish ones. People of the Kirri, the Jun, and the Ruu races had not joined the house, each with its own perfectly logical reasons not to do so. Kirri did not live where their microbes did not, and Karis didn't have sufficient saturation to move there on a permanent basis. The Jun did not leave the Fatherland. And the Ruu stayed separate from the other races for the same reason the Karinnes did, to protect their secrets. There were Sha'i-ree in respectable numbers on Karis, more than enough to make them a common enough sight on the street for people not to stare, and Vekk, and Ujjo, and Jhri, and Jirunji, and Udra, and the races of the RK sector, even a small complement of Hrathari, and every other race that had joined since the Consortium had been defeated. The Coalition races had only been part of the Confederation for the last six months, and since

their homes were all the way across the galaxy, they hadn't really started filtering over to the home quadrant in any real numbers yet. But even despite that, there were members of 26 of the 89 races represented by the Coalition that had passed screening and were members of the House Karinne.

"Thank you, Eliara. Where's Kumi?" he asked.

"On Terra, your Grace, with Duchess Temika and Duchess Rahne. They're finalizing a deal with Coalition Consolidated Metals for carbidium, tungsten, and adronite."

"She's off world? She didn't tell me."

"Does she ever, your Grace?" she asked with a sensual smile.

No doubt she raced right off as soon as she was off maternity leave, Dera noted slyly to him.

She better have put Jana with Maya, or I'm gonna be pissed.

She did, Suri assured him. *Rest assured, Jason, your daughter is in good hands.*

Better Maya's than Kumi's, he sent honestly. "As a matter of fact, she doesn't," he said aloud as he set the handpanel down. "And I think I'm gonna do something about that," he added in an ominous voice. "I'll check this over when I finish what I'm doing, Eliara."

"Very well, your Grace. Good afternoon to you," she said, then she made quite a show out of turning around and sashaying her tailed posterior back out the door, pausing to nod and smile at Suri and Dera before leaving.

She's certainly trying hard, isn't she? Suri sent impishly after the door closed.

Given she's a Sha'i-ree, I'm surprised she didn't just go around the desk and stick her hand in his pants, Dera replied, giving Jason an amused look.

She's not quite that aggressive. She enjoys making men come to her, which is completely opposite her cultural norms, Jason sent clinically. *She finds aggressive men to be almost intoxicating, and there's plenty of them among the Faey, Terrans, and Shio.*

So she gets off on seducing men, Dera noted.

She gets off on enticing men into making the first move, he corrected.
That's a bit different from seduction.

So, she gets off on flirting, Suri deduced.

Yup. And the hotter she gets a guy, the more she enjoys it when he takes the bait.

That's almost Faey, Dera noted lightly.

Maybe now you see why she moved to Karis. Faey women are more her style.

Jason spent time waiting for Ba'mra'ei going over several reports from the Confederation, dealing mainly with the Coalition. The Coalition had joined the Confederation—sort of, it was actually more of a merger of two quadrant-spanning cooperatives—six months ago, and the two organizations were still ironing out the small wrinkles, mainly revolving around working out chains of command and lines of communication between the Confederate agencies on Terra and the Coalition bureaus on Cappria, over in the P4EB sector. The High Chancellor Hovikk sat in on Confederate Council meetings, and the Confederation had an emissary that sat in on the Coalition Congress, which was *their* council of allied empires. Since the Confederation had no elected executive, they had selected a ruler to represent the Confederation in the Coalition Congress. Believe it or not, that job was given to Kreel. The Coalition rulers found Kreel to be both enigmatic and almost mesmerizingly entertaining, and he served Confederate interests well in his dual role representing the Grimja Union in the Confederation, and representing the Confederation in the Coalition Congress.

He did such a good job that he'd been re-elected High Councilor just last month, and was secure for another six years as the executive of the Union. The Grimja would ascend Kreel to godhood if they could figure out a way to do it, both the Grimja lay populace and the other Councilors thought so highly of him. The Union had never had such growth and prosperity before, had never had a period where some segment of their population didn't go hungry, and most of it was thanks to Kreel.

The Coalition was actually quite similar to the Confederation in some of its goals. It wasn't a military alliance, however, it was mainly an economic one. It had been created to foster trade and keep the peace between the member empires through diplomacy, and over time, it had evolved to include mutual defense treaties. Declaring war on any one member of the Coalition brought *all* of them into the war on their partner's side. They didn't have a combined military headquarters, though they did often go on military exercises with other member empires. The Confederation existed to combat the Andromedan invaders firstly, but also to foment trade and peaceful relations between its members. The Coalition existed to foster economic prosperity and peace among its member nations, but did also defend its member empires from hostile aggression through their mutual defense pacts. But unlike the Confederation, the member empires of the Coalition weren't aggressive or expansionistic. They had lived within their defined borders for centuries, even millenia, and were more than content to grow their economies rather than their territory.

But that didn't stop Coalition members from registering with the Confederation Agency of Exploration and Annexation. Like the Faey and the empires of the home sector, the only way the member empires of the Coalition could expand peacefully was through colonization of distant star systems, and they were more than happy to use the Confederation agency to help them explore open territory, find star systems, and claim them. The agency didn't have a sister bureau in the Coalition. Then again, the Coalition didn't have real-time jump engines or Stargates either.

But they would soon. Already, Academy scientists were working with the various members of the Coalition to upgrade their fleets to real-time engines, to match Confederation technology. Real-time engines were now mainstream in the Confederation, with almost all of their members having achieved that breakthrough...either on their own or with clandestine Karinne assistance. They'd managed to upgrade nearly half of the Coalition members to real-time engines, and were working with the other half, those with less advanced engine or power generation technologies.

Jason often regretted doing that, unleashing empires like the Faey, Skaa, Prakarikai, and the Verutans on the galaxy at large, but it simply *had* to be done. The Syndicate had real-time engines, and if they couldn't match that mobility, they'd be at a major disadvantage in the coming war. And every

empire's contribution to the war effort *mattered*, both with the Syndicate and with the coming second wave of the Consortium, which was *much* bigger. Jason would just have to keep a very close eye on things and make sure that they didn't abuse the gift they were given. Real-time engines gave them the ability to cross the entire galaxy in about two hours, giving Confederate empires galactic reach, which they would need against the Consortium and Syndicate. But it also opened distant, remote, technologically inferior civilizations to attack, which would make Jason rely more than ever before on the Kimdori to make sure that didn't happen.

He managed to clear out his inbox before Ba'mra'ei and Ethikk arrived, which gave him time to look in on his new son a little bit. Symone had left the hospital while he was bulldozing his inbox, and she was at home and resting in her comfy chair as Terry slept in a hovercrib beside her. Jyslin was on the couch with Tim, watching vidy and each with one of Jason's twin girls in their laps. Both Bethany and Siyae looked to be napping, and Lyra was *definitely* napping, laying on the end of the couch by her father. Tim looked almost fatherly with a little girl using each of his legs as a pillow, his hand on Siyae's back absently as he watched vidy. Rann and Shya were sitting on the floor playing a game in their interfaces. The new twins were in cribs by the couch, and Tim and Symone's maid/nanny Resli was coming in from the kitchen. They'd hired her not long after Lyra was born, when they found they could use the help around the house, and she fit in very well both in their house and in the strip in general. Then again, Miaari had found her, so there was no doubt she would.

Ayama and Surin would have been there, but they had their *own* child to look after. They were on official leave right now, because two weeks ago, Ayama had delivered her first, an adorable baby girl she named Sanjira. Jason and Jyslin would never make her care for their own kids over her newborn, so she and Surin were on leave...which really just meant that they weren't babysitting outside the house anymore. They still lived in their apartment in the house, and Ayama would be minding Jon and Julia along with her own baby. Her daughter would grow up in their house and be as much a part of the family as Ayama and Surin were. They just weren't doing any official work right now, Miaari had brought in a temporary maid to do the cooking and cleaning until Ayama and Surin were back on duty. That maid, a young Shio woman named Seido Sunsinger, was probably

going to end up becoming permanent. They were going to need another hand in the house with so many babies and toddlers running around, and Seido had already proved that she could manage the unique form of chaos that existed within Jason's house.

How quickly all those spare bedrooms in Jason's expanded house filled up. He almost had to force himself to believe that he had *seven* children in the house now; Rann and Shya, Bethany and Siyae, Sanjira, and now Jon and Julia. Rann and Shya were eight, the twins were coming up on three, Sanjira joined them two weeks ago, and now they had their newborn twins, only a day old. And that didn't even count Danelle, who had her own bedroom in the house and occupied it more often than not, and the fact that Jason's other children often stayed over with Rann, creating a constant stream of kids moving in and out of the house.

Yeah, he, Jyslin, Ayama, and Surin were *definitely* going to need help, and Seido had proven her mettle in one very important way; she had not yet slept with Tim.

So much domestic tranquility, and here he was, stuck at work, unable to be a part of it. Life sucked sometimes.

The babies made him switch over the Civnet on his hologram and look at the latest round of pictures that Dahnai had released. The scandal born of Miyai and Raisha had died down over the last couple of years, and besides, nothing stamped out the last flickering embers of a scandal like pictures of a brand new Imperial Prince. Little Kaen Merrane looked just like his father Kellin, an absolutely handsome little man who had just celebrated his one month "birthday." Dahnai was still over at her summer palace, maybe lingering more than a little bit before going back to Draconis, but then again, she'd lingered on purpose to be on Karis for the birth of the twins and the birth of Terry. She'd been right there when all three were born, since she *was* their godmother, but she'd had to go back to the summer palace to deal with some issue that had come up in the Imperium not long after Terry was born. Kaen was a very boisterous little boy, and he was already starting to frazzle Saelle a little bit. She and Evin had agreed to foster Kaen as well as the twins, extending her contract a couple of years, but that wasn't a big deal to her. She enjoyed her job, and besides, now she had a daughter of her *own* to love and cherish along with her fosters. Saelle

and Evin had celebrated the birth of Laeri Karinne on New Year's Day, which was considered the luckiest day to give birth. That meant that Laeri would supposedly have a wonderful life, being lucky enough to be born on the holiest day in the Faey year. Saelle was certainly milking it, since *Laeri* meant *blessed one* in Old Faey.

And Evin was *never* leaving Saelle. When she returned to Karis after completing her fostering duty, Evin would come with her. Their marriage was no longer simply on paper.

Kaen wasn't in the official line of succession since he was a boy, but Faey went completely ga-ga over an Imperial Prince. He probably got even more attention than his sisters did, because he was a boy, and in Faey society, a prince was by far the fairer royal compared to a princess. For Dahnai, Kaen was almost a replacement son, for the day she'd been dreading would be coming to pass in five months. Maer would be turning 15, and on his birthday, he'd be marrying in a grand state ceremony and moving out of the palace. That was the age an Imperial Prince married, and since the boy entered the house of his wife, Maer would be leaving the House Merrane and entering the House Dorrane as a High Duke, a very special rank reserved only for the male children of an Empress who married into another house. He would still have the title of Prince, would officially be known as High Duke Imperial Prince Maer Merrane Dorrane, and he would only be outranked by the Grand Duchess and her heir apparent in his new house.

Maer was on Trivis II right now, spending time with his betrothed, Delia Dorrane, and her family to get to know them a little better before the marriage. It was a common practice for a prince to spend a few months with the new family, then come back to the palace for a few months to get everything squared away and be there to prepare for the ceremony. Sirri was in the summer palace with her mother.

Technically, Shya could be called a High Duchess, but that was a *boy's* title, and Shya would punch anyone who tried to add it to her name in the nose. She was quite content with Duchess Consort, which would become Grand Duchess Consort when Rann took the house throne.

Jason had seen a lot more pics of Kaen than what was released, and for that matter, he'd held his godson quite a bit. Just like with her twins, Dahnai

had delivered on Draconis and then was on her way to Karis to spend her maternity in her summer palace almost before the doctors cut the umbilical cord. Dahnai looked for any reason to come to her summer palace, and when she ran out of flimsy excuses, she just came over anyway. She loved her summer palace that much, to the point where she spent nearly half her time on Karis and the other half on Draconis...and the fact that Jason was on Karis really had very little to do with it. Sure, he was a bonus, but she just *loved* the palace that Jason had built for her, a place that was *hers*, had been built just for her and with her in mind, and a place where she could relax, unwind, and forget about the heavy burdens that came with her crown for a little while. Karis and the summer palace was her sanctuary, her personal, *private* place, and for the Empress of the Imperium, privacy was a precious commodity that was treasured.

She wasn't the only one. The Grand Duchesses of the *Siann* loved being invited there, and often, Dahnai had to all but throw them out to make them leave. They fully understood why Dahnai was always so eager to retreat to Karis, and while they grumbled a bit over how much time she spent there, they couldn't blame her. The summer palace was gorgeous, luxurious, and outside the public eye, which meant that Dahnai and the Grand Duchesses who visited could let their hair down and truly *relax*. The summer palace had also inspired quite a bit of copycat architecture among the Grand Duchesses as they built new retreats for themselves, spending those obscene profits they were raking in thanks to the prosperity laid at their feet by the Confederation.

Yila's newest retreat on Draconis was almost *ridiculous*. She must have spent C1,100,000,000 on it, and in a blatant copy of the summer palace, she'd bought a small private island off the coast of northern Vexia and built her manor complex there. Jason knew for a fact that just buying the island had cost her a *billion* credits, and that didn't even count the cost of the complex she built there after tearing down the estate mansion and everything else that had been on the island. Yila had leveled a perfectly good 14 bedroom manor just to build her *own* manor on the site. And most likely like Dahnai, Yila had taken her maternity leave on her private tropical island. She'd had a baby boy four months ago, and he was in the care of her house nannies and she was back at work swindling pensioners and stealing candy from babies...maybe even her *own* baby.

He wouldn't put it past her, that was for *damn* sure.

So many kids, everywhere. *Sooooo* many kids.

But that was one of the primal forces of life, to procreate, so it was just nature, he supposed.

He actually found himself with about an hour of free time, which had been in short supply for the last couple of takirs, and honestly debated attending the Confederate Council meeting scheduled to begin in fifteen minutes. He wasn't the only ruler that didn't attend them religiously anymore, that was for certain. The sheer number of council members made it almost like attending a Colonist dramatic play. The council meetings nowadays were more for just disseminating information to the various rulers, since all the plans had been made and most of the work had already been done. Kim more or less ran the Confederation from Terra by managing its agencies, and the council session was mainly there for the aides and surrogates that now attended most of the council sessions to take the information presented in them to their rulers. The ruler currently holding the gavel did attend—which quickly became a hated task and also made Jason even more gleeful that neutral observers did not hold the gavel—but rarely were more than maybe six actual rulers sitting in on council. The rest of the attendees were duly sanctioned representatives.

Jason did that himself. A good 95% of the time, it was Yeri or one of the CBIMs sitting in on the council session instead of him, a chore they passed between them.

Fuck that. No way was he wasting valuable free time listening to someone drone on and on.

He didn't want to go home, because he wouldn't want to leave. He didn't even want to merge to a device at home, because he wouldn't want to leave either. He couldn't push up the commissioning ceremony, it would take too long and he'd make Ba'mra'ei and Ethikk wait. So, he had an hour to kill...what to do, what to do.

He spent that hour playing Vanguard, which was a massive multiplayer first person shooter that was the current rage with most of the younger adults. Vanguard was a simsense-capable game that more or less required a jack to play go be competitive, because the top players on the scoreboards

for every level were almost always jacked. And it was easy to tell the jacked players from the “exies,” or the external controller players, by how their avatars moved. Jacked players had full natural range of motion where people playing on vidlinks or panels moved like avatars in games, with pre-programmed motions and set run speeds and such. But, since jacks were becoming so prevalent throughout the entire Confederation, nearly half the players in a Vanguard game were jacked. It was a battlefield simulation game, much akin to the old *Teamfortress* or *Call of Duty* games Jason played back in college, where players took on roles in an army and battled another army, the conditions of the battle set by the level and by the controlling computer. Most of the large-scale missions were “army X attacks a position defended by army Y,” along with options for smaller maps with smaller numbers of players facing off against each other, all the way down to squad against squad skirmish missions, but there were also levels that were two armies racing to reach an objective first, missions where one army attacks another while on the move in open terrain where neither army has a fixed position, and just slugfest death matches on flat empty maps where the two armies just clashed in the middle and saw who killed more players before time ran out. And given it was all done by jack and was supported by a *very* beefy central computer, the game had *thousands* of players on each side. It was truly army versus army in Vanguard, where players took up roles of infantry, forward controller who called in bombardments, sniper, intelligence specialist, the “spies” on the level that gathered intel to pass on to command, mobile artillery operators, special ops who penetrated enemy lines to conduct strategic attacks on the enemy’s rear assets, exomech riggers, ground support fighter pilots, and both tactical and strategic command personnel. Players who took command slots had to have a certain amount of experience and a certain player rating to qualify, and one had to “earn rank” in lower command slots to get access to higher ones, almost like a real military command structure. In the game, players started as infantry, then earned points to undergo “training” to play the other roles, and once they had a certain number of games played and achieved a certain player rating, they could enter command and become corporals that led infantry squads. From there, they worked up to sergeant, then lieutenant, then captain, then major, then colonel, and then they made General and were allowed to command the entire army during the battle. Of course, players could ignore commands from officers, but they lost rating

points for insubordination, and local command could make battlefield command decisions that countered orders from higher up. The only guy in the entire game that didn't actively fight or execute operations was the General. His sole job was to sit in a protected rear position behind the battlefield, study camera views and the intel supplied by his intel specialists, and issue orders to his army. Even the colonels in the army were shooting at the other guy, though they usually did it from support corvettes over the battlefield executing airstrikes.

And there were some *damn* good Vanguard Generals. One guy was a total fuckin' tactical genius, he had a 78% win ratio when he commanded an army, and was so good that Jason had him tracked down...to discover that he was a 19 year old college student on Terra that majored in music and had bad grades everywhere but music.

Vanguard also had four different branches to the game. The first branch was the most popular, modern infantry combat. The second branch was naval space combat, where players controlled ships and battled each other in naval combat, which was the second most popular. The third branch was fighter combat, squadrons of fighters flying various missions, which was more players versus the scenario than players fighting other players, and the fourth was a medieval infantry game where guns were replaced by swords and exomechs by catapults. Anyone who bought Vanguard had access to all four branches of the game, but a player had to progress in each branch separately. Rating earned in infantry combat didn't carry over to naval combat, and so on. There were also mods for different eras based on basic combat modes, like the World War II mod for Terran players, and the Second or Third Civil War mod for Faey players. Mods altered in-game equipment to match the historical equivalents, and many of the mods used mission maps based on the actual battles. It was almost like re-enactments, but you shot at the other guy with "real" bullets.

There were also customizable skins in some game modes, and Jason wasn't too proud to say that the colors of the heraldry of the KMS were one such custom skin, with detail all the way down to the specific heraldry and tailfin icons of individual infantry battalions, exomech companies, and fighter squadrons, some of which only unlocked if you earned a high rating. Elite combat units had elite members, in reality and in the game. The red exomechs and sword icon of the Red Warriors, the black exomechs with the

female ghost icon of the Banshees, the black exomechs and armed Faey icon of the KBB, and the black Wolves and spectre tailfin art from the Ghost Squadron were in the game...and just like the real Red Warriors, Banshees, KBB, and Ghost Squadron, if you rated high enough to use those skins, enemy players were *very* afraid of you.

Vanguard was a product of a shell company connected to 3D and MRDD, and Eraen had done most of the coding on the game. It was also making the House Karinne an absolute bloody *fortune*. C20 for the game, C10 a year maintenance fee to offset server maintenance costs and pay for new mission map development...and 136 *million* active players. But not all the game's mission maps were done by Eraen. The Vanguard Civnet site accepted submissions of player-made mission scenario maps, and maps that were good enough were incorporated into the game and the creator earned himself a C5000 payout and his game handle on the map as credit for being the one that created it. Some of the most challenging and fun missions in the game were created by *players*.

Jason actually loved playing Vanguard. You were in the game playing within 30 seconds of queueing up, and you could play as long as you wanted or as short as you wanted. You could leave even during a battle, though if you left early you earned no rating points for that battle, but you did earn experience points based on your performance up until you left, and those experience points could be spent buying access to a new job, upgrading skills to gain bonuses and enhancements, buying equipment to be used on “free” maps with no restrictions like increased armor or weapon boosters, or buying extra command points if one's rating allowed it to enable the player to more quickly promote up the chain of command, if that was their thing. Most of the time, Jason played a good old fashioned grunt in the game. Infantry. He'd spent most of his XP boosting his infantry abilities, but he had spent some XP buying the rating to drive an exomech and getting his exomech skills up to an acceptable level. He sometimes played as a rigger for a change of pace, but he liked being just one of the anonymous grunts on the line, shooting at the bad guys, where nobody in his squad had any idea he was actually the Grand Duke Karinne. He had enough command points and a personal player rating high enough to play as a sergeant—his PPR, Personal Player Rating, was actually high enough to play as a major—but he had never done it. He made enough decisions in his

job on a daily basis, he liked playing a game where his only job was to shoot at the bad guys. It was almost therapudic in its complete lack of any responsibility.

He was heavy into it on the Battle of Diamond Citadel map when Cybi's face appeared as a window on the edge of his vision, since he was merged to his interface and playing the game in jack emulation mode. He was behind a half-collapsed wall with six of his squadmates, playing defense on the map, holding the Diamond Citadel against the enemy army. *[And how are you doing?]* she asked conversationally.

[Getting our asses handed to us at the moment,] he replied as he raked fire across a wall on the far side of the courtyard, behind which an enemy squad was taking cover. *[They broke through the front gate within six minutes, and we're holding the courtyard by our fingernails. Their general is fuckin' good, we totally bit on that decoy attack on the east wall. Right now, all I'm doing is holding out for XP before I get my head shot off.]*

[I fail to see why you don't play as the general. You could destroy these untrained kids with all your training.]

[I don't play this game to make decisions, Cybi, I play this game to blow things up.]

[You're not even doing that very well at the moment,] she teased as Jason ducked back behind the wall as the enemy countered, sending a hail of fire in his direction.

[Bite me, Cybi,] he retorted acidly as he and his squadmates dashed across a break in the wall, exposing themselves to fire for a split second.

"Grenades!" the squad sergeant's voice came over his game avatar's helmet speaker, then the lieutenant commanding their company's voice overrode it. *"A and B squads, flank the advance to the east! C and D squads, hold the line!"*

Jason was the first of the group to break for the east side of the courtyard, because it was a good idea. The enemy had left their east flank exposed in their advance towards the citadel, and flanking from the east would produce some results, might even break their advance and cut off their advance elements. Jason dashed from the end of the wall to a destroyed exomech, using it as cover, then raced over to a piece of broken

wall, kneeling down as the rest of the squad reached them. The sergeant used hand signs to direct the elements, and Jason nodded and raced across empty courtyard to another destroyed exomech. The rigger had survived, and was behind her rig with a rifle in her hands—which was well within the game’s rules. A rigger who survived the destruction of a rig could play infantry until they got back to the support area and got another rig. “Nice of you boys to join us,” she said dryly as the rest of the squad got behind the rig. They’d managed to get into position with little attention from the enemy, only a few opponents seeing them.

“I hope you know how to use that gun, mech jockey,” someone behind him said.

“We’ll find out, won’t we?” she challenged.

“Knock off the chatter,” his squad sergeant barked when he reached them. “You five, cover fire. You, rigger, cover fire. Duke, Jacker, Strongarm, point, take us in,” he said, using their in-game handles. Jason played as Duke...which wasn’t all that imaginative, he supposed. “Let’s get in there and bust some heads.”

“Let’s rock,” the player beside him declared, swinging his gun into firing position.

[Jason, you do have an appointment,] Cybi warned. [The High Staff’s ship has come through the Stargate and should make orbit in about ten minutes.]

[Then I have twenty before I have to get out to the pad, don’t I?] he answered her as he led the charge to a covered position just off the flank of the enemy advance, a great place to really disrupt their movement.

[Don’t make me pull your plug, Jason,] she warned.

[Stop mothering me and warn me when their dropship launches, I’ll have plenty of time to get out there,] he answered as he made the position, then immediately rose up over the burned-out hovercar chassis and started firing at enemy soldiers moving up towards the line. Several players dropped to the ground and vanished—the game’s version of death, they would respawn at their base and one reinforcement point would be deducted from their side. When there were no more reinforcements, players would no longer respawn and would be allowed to watch in passive, “death” mode

until the map was won by one side or the other. That allowed players to keep playing after getting killed, but made dying *matter*, just like a real battle. Dying meant you were not helping your team until you resupplied at base and got back to the front lines, and on big maps, that could take a while.

Whoever sent down the order to flank deserved a field promotion, because it *worked*. Jason's squad and Squad A caused chaos on the east flank of the enemy, stopping their advance and cutting off their front line units from reinforcement. Their advance sputtered on the east side, and they lost ground as the defenders—Jason's side—counterattacked in almost perfect coordination with the flanking maneuver. Jason knew he was playing under a time limit, so he did what he could in the time he had to give his side a chance to get off their losing footing, but he wasn't being suicidal about it. He wasn't costing his side a reinforcement, and if he died before logging out, his replacement would spawn back in the base.

But he didn't count on Cybi. To his horror, Cybi manifested her hologram *inside the game*, in full view of all the other players, standing just beside Jason and fully exposed to enemy fire. "Cybi!" Jason gasped. "You can't manifest in here, you're not playing! Our side could get blackflagged for cheating!"

"*Act like a misbehaving child, and I'll treat you like one,*" she said heartlessly as quite a few enemy shots went harmlessly through her holographic form, putting her hands on her hips and looking down at him. "*The High Staff will be on the pad in five minutes, and it takes three to get to the pad from your office! Now stop playing this game and do your job, Jason!*"

"She won't be on the pad for six minutes!" he protested. "I'm keeping track!"

"Dude, is that your mom or something?" Jacker asked him. "How is she doing that?"

"Sometimes she thinks she is," Jason snorted in reply. "Alright, alright, I'll log out now. But don't you *ever* manifest inside the game again. You could cost every player on my side their rating for the battle!"

“Next time you ignore me when you told me to remind you to log out, I’ll grab you by the ear and drag you off the battlefield,” she stated threateningly, which made quite a few people pause in mid battle and laugh. *“Or even worse, I’ll tell all these people who you really are, Jason.”*

“Oh, it is *on* now, bitch,” Jason growled, hitting his logout button. That told the game and the command staff that he had to leave before the battle was over, and when that happened, someone in the base who just died but had yet to respawn would be teleported to his position to take his place, so as not to cost his team because he had to leave. The countdown gave that player time to be ready for the port, and when they ported in, they’d inherit all of Jason’s current equipment, effectively replacing him in the battle. “You start fucking with what little free time I have, woman, and I’m gonna unplug your core.”

“Empty threats get you nowhere with me, Jason,” she replied, crossing her arms beneath her pseudo-breasts and giving him an amused look. *“Now log out and get to the pad so you can greet the High Staff without looking like you ran down there at the last second. That makes you look very rude.”*

“I’m counting down now,” he growled as the three second invulnerability shield surrounded him. His replacement would have that shield, and that would give them enough time to get to cover before they could be killed..

Jason threatened Cybi with the back of his hand after opening his eyes and standing up, but she just gave him a stern look and pointed at the door. *“Work. Now. Go,”* she ordered, which made Dera and Suri wheeze in voiceless laughter from their position by the front door.

“I am *so* gonna get you, bitch,” he threatened as he stalked past her, his guards standing up to escort him down to the pad.

He got to the pad in plenty of time before the Alliance dropship appeared over the buildings of Karsa with two Wolf fighters escorting it, then it landed gently in front of him as the fighters pulled back up and went over the building. The hatch opened, and the very different members of the Alliance Council came down the steps. Ba’mra’ei was Bari-Bari, who were a race of extremely tall, lanky, long-armed simioids. She towered over Jason—he only came up to the base of her chest—but she made the Beryan

with her look like a doll. He came up to her *knee*. Ethikk was a typical Beryan, a race of short, lithe, narrow-muzzled canoids who dyed their tails in a color pattern that denoted their family lineage. Ethikk was the Beryan member of the Alliance Council, the governing body of their government, five races joined together in a single civilization. The executive of their government was the High Staff, a position that rotated through the five members of the council on a seven year term. Ba'mra'ei had replaced Graith, who had died, and their rules said that she could only serve out the remainder of his term. When the term expired, the next council member in the rotation took the High Staff position, and that was Ethikk.

Ba'mra'ei wasn't crying about it. She was actually relieved to be relinquishing the High Staff to Ethikk.

Jason had told them to come in casual garb, that their visit wasn't going to be *official*, and they'd heeded him. Ba'mra'ei was wearing only a kilt-like wrap around her waist, and Ethikk was wearing a Beryan tunic that came down to his knees in a very appealing cream color that went well with his soft brown fur. Both of them were wearing interfaces, standard jack interfaces spreading through the Confederation like wildfire, since both of them were jacked. Jason took Ba'mra'ei's huge, hairy hand, her fingers slightly longer than Jason's entire hand was, then leaned down and took Ethikk's paw. "Ba'mra'ei, Ethikk, good to see you," he said. "Welcome to Karis."

"I'm very happy to be here, your Grace," he said with a smile. "It's long been a point of jealousy on the council that Ba'mra'ei was the only one that ever got to come here outside of the official summits."

"A necessary evil," Jason told him. "When we start making exceptions, then *everyone* expects exceptions."

"I completely understand, your Grace," he said with a fanged smile. "I understand congratulations are in order?"

He chuckled. "Thank you. Terry was born this morning, and he's absolutely adorable. Symone has probably put the pictures on Civnet by now announcing the birth."

"Then I think we should get the initial meeting done quickly, so you can go home and fawn over your new cub," he said.

“You just became my new best friend, Ethikk,” Jason said, which made both of them laugh. “Please, come in,” he gestured. “We both have a reason to get the meeting overwith, sinc Yeri has arranged a sightseeing tour for you this afternoon, which will conclude with a tour of Kosigi by Admiral Dellin.”

“That sounds quite interesting,” Ethikk said. “Will it include the famous *oye* trees?”

“She can easily add that to the itinerary if you want to see them,” he assured him. “But you should have been able to see one of them on the way down. We have one growing right in the middle of Karsa.”

“I did, and it’s gigantic, but I was told it’s a *small* one compared to the ones on the north coast.”

“That’s true,” Jason chuckled as they walked in. “It’s *only* sixty Beryan *igi* tall. The ones out on the coast are upwards of two hundred and fifty.”

“That’s why I’d love to see them. A tree as tall as a building resonates with the Beryan psyche. It’s a dog thing, your Grace.”

Jason burst out laughing, understanding the self-deprating, Terran-oriented joke for what it was.

Ethikk and Ba’mra’ei certainly made the meeting easy. They sat in his office and discussed the things Ethikk needed to know about the Confederation and the Karinnes, things that Ba’mra’ei more or less kept secret from her own council, but things that Ethikk would learn as the High Staff. One of the main reasons for the meeting, however was to introduce Ethikk to the CBIMs. All four of them were present in the meeting, and he talked with them, got to know the two CBIMs that the Confederate Council almost never saw, Cyvanne and Cylan. Cybi and Cyra were the “face” of Karis in that regard, the CBIMs that the council knew and interacted with on a regular basis. They knew that Cyvanne and Cylan were online, but those two were very much in the background, not part of visible Karinne operations. Cyvanne stayed in the background because it was her job as the disaster recovery CBIM, and Cylan had yet to gain enough experience to take on a full role quite yet. He was getting there, but he had more to learn before he was ready.

“Are you going to be joining the council on Prakarika for the summit next week, Jason?” Ethikk asked as they basically just sat around and shot the breeze after going over the meeting’s itinerary.

“I haven’t decided yet,” he replied. “You know that me and Anivan don’t get along. I’m almost afraid that she’ll try to get me alone and take out my kneecaps.”

“She’s calmed down a great deal over the last few months,” Ba’mra’ei observed, tapping her round chin. She had a face more like a chimpanzee than anything else, but had lucid blue eyes. “I think her pregnancy is mellowing her.”

“I’m more worried about the low-G members of the council being on Prakarika. It’s not a very hospitable place for about anyone but a Prakarikai or an Ogravian. The one time I was there, I had to wear two inducers, just in case the primary one malfunctioned.”

“It’s not the first time I’ve visited a planet that would kill me if my life support equipment failed,” Ethikk chuckled.

“It’s the air pressure more than the gravity I worry about,” Ba’mra’ei said.

“Yeah, I had to wear a helmet when I was there,” Jason nodded. “It’s outside the safe tolerance for my species without preparation. I’d have to pressurize first, then decompress afterward.”

“I’m sure that the Prakarikai have set up suitable enviro modules,” Cybi noted. *“It would look bad if they killed half of their allies, after all.”*

“Anivor’s department, so yeah, I’m fairly sure things will be right. I just hope you’re ready for a six hour welcoming ceremony.”

Ethikk laughed. “That’s what my interface is for, Jason. Tune out, have it warn me when it’s over.”

“The Prakarikai do put on a good show. The problem is, they don’t know when the show should end,” Ba’mra’ei noted, which made Jason chuckle.

“They said that the welcoming and farewell ceremonies would be brief,” Cylan injected.

“Brief for them is ungodly long and boring for most everyone else, Cy,” Jason told him.

“We’ll see,” Ba’mra’ei said. “One thing I have noticed over the last couple of years is that the Prakarikai *are* changing a little. Exposure to the rest of us is causing them to ease back a little on their ceremony when dealing with the outside.”

“I think Kreel does that to them more than anything else. It’s hard to be all stuffy and condescending when he’s over there ripping you to shreds with every comment,” Jason said, which made both of them burst out laughing, Cybi and Cyra smile, and the other two CBIMs look at him curiously. “I think Anivan cried into her pillow when he won re-election.”

“Barka’s pillar, he *is* witty,” Ethikk agreed with a grin.

Chirk came into the office, and Yeri was just behind her. She was wearing a very nice robe, not formal but still quite snazzy, in Karinne blue and trimmed with gold and with the right sleeve shorter than the left, which was classic Faey tailoring. “Ba’mra’ei, you’re looking quite well,” Yeri said. “And welcome to Karis, Ethikk. It’s good to see you again.”

“Ah, Yeri! You’re looking quite well,” Ethikk said happily standing up and taking her hands.

“I’ve been quite well, Ethikk. How did your sons do on their exams?”

“All three scored high enough to get into the prep school we wanted,” he said proudly. “And they’re already working on the requirements to enter the Academy when they graduate.” There was no need for him to say *which* academy...when one said the Academy, one was almost always referring to the Karinne Academy on Terra.

“I’m sure they’ll get in. After all, you do have something of an inside track when it comes to a recommendation,” she said, her eyes darting to Jason meaningfully.

“Why do you think I’m so glad I’m taking the High Staff?” he asked with a sly smile.

“Rank does have its privileges,” Yeri smiled. “Jason told you’re ready for your tour, and that you want to add a visit to the *oye* forest?”

“Most definitely.”

“We can do that, no problem. We can also visit the Parri who tend the trees. They enjoy hosting visitors.”

Jason said his goodbyes and let Yeri take over, taking the incoming High Staff on a tour of Karis and Kosigi. Jason walked out with them down to the landing pad, saw them off in a Karinne luxury dropship, then he walked with Dera and Suri into a zip ship, which then rose up and docked with the destroyer *Tikanne*, which was hovering about 50,000 shakra over Karis, over the normal sky lanes for hovercars. Captain Gai Edanne met him in the landing bay, a tall, willowy Faey with chalky blue hair not far from the shade of her skin and shimmering ruby eyes, a dark, nearly blood red. Gai had been captain of the *Tikanne* for nearly two years, which was her own doing. She had turned down two offers to captain a cruiser, and Juma had let her stay where she was rather than pull a Sevi on her. Gai wasn't attached to the ship so much as she was her crew; if Juma moved her entire crew to the cruiser with her, she'd probably go for it. “You're looking radiant, Gai,” he told her after kissing her cheek. “I thought you were still on maternity leave.”

“I just came back three days ago,” she replied. “And thank you for the birth gift, it was lovely!”

“You're welcome,” he told her, patting her on the shoulder of her duty uniform. Since she wasn't on active deployment, she and her crew were allowed to wear duty uniforms rather than armor. “Is Finn driving you crazy yet?”

She laughed. “He's certainly loud,” she grinned as they started towards the hatch. “But I don't mind. He's just telling me he loves me.”

“No, he's telling you *feed me, woman!*”

She laughed again. *He's not that bad*, she sent, which was one of her little quirks. Gai often bounced between speaking and sending in a conversation, sometimes in mid-sentence.

You just wait until he's a little older, and his lungs grow enough to add a few decibels.

That's what soundproof walls are for.

The destroyer started off as they walked to the bridge, and they were nearly out of the atmosphere by the time they got there. Jason shook several hands and kissed some cheeks when he reached the bridge, a bridge that showed the diversity the house was developing. An Urumi sat in the tactical position, the primary navigator was a male Faey, and the secondary navigator was a Shio woman. “Make for jump distance, Mister Deklin, ahead full,” Gai ordered as Jason met the Urumi tactical officer, a female with a short crest—meaning she was young—named Fre’Litt. “Plot a jump solution for planet seven.”

“Jump solution already plotted sir, we’ll be ready for jump as soon as we reach jump distance,” he answered. “We’ll reach jump distance in twenty one minutes.”

“Very good.”

“You know, we *could* use the Stargate,” Jason noted dryly.

“It’s faster to jump, your Grace,” she replied lightly as she pushed him into her chair. “The Stargate is on the far side of the planet.”

“That’s a fair point,” Jason agreed, which made her smile slightly.

Jason spent the time getting to jump distance catching up with Gai in her quarters as he changed into his formal robes, Dera and Suri helping him. It only took him about ten minutes since he was only wearing the outer robe and the vest-like garment that went under it, hiding the fact he had a tee and jeans on under it, and tucking his jean legs into his dress boots completed the deception. They returned to the bridge in plenty of time to jump. When they reached jump distance, the ship slowed down. [*Jump in thirty seconds,*] the comm officer broadcast over the ship’s internal biogenic network. And what was a major change from the days before cyberjacks, no one was getting into their jump restraints. Over the last couple of years, Myleena and Songa had further and further upgraded and refined the technology in the jacks and interfaces to deal with hyperspace. Myleena had added gyroscopic circuitry into all military interfaces and wrote a program that allowed people to keep their balance, which freed people from their jump restraints. She had also refined a sensor mesh matrix sytem that gave a Crusader armor wearer the ability to “feel” through the surface of the armor, but didn’t allow pain signals, which had applications far beyond

jumping. Being able to feel something he held in his gantleted hand made a *big* difference when he was wearing armor. The tactile sensory mesh allowed him to feel contact, feel the force he was exerting in that contact, feel texture, heat, and cold, but didn't allow those sensations to go outside the "comfort zone" and become unpleasant. Since they were in duty uniforms, the crew wouldn't have a sense of touch during jumping unless they wore sensormesh gloves and gear, which fed tactile contact data to the interface and jack. Songa and Myleena's work had freed KMS crews from having to get into jump restraints for jumping operations, something that had *not* been filtered down to the rest of the Confederation, since they currently only had those systems developed for biogenic units.

Jason wasn't getting into a jump restraint either, and that was also thanks to Songa and Myleena. Jason was one of only three Generations with cybernetic implants in his brain, connected to the sensory centers of his brain the same way a jack was, and those microscopic units were there to do the same thing a jack did. When in hyperspace, and *only* in hyperspace, they activated, blocking Jason's natural sensory feed in favor of sensory input from his external equipment, from something that couldn't suffer sensory ghosting. Usually that was his interface, but if he was in armor, he got sensory feed from the armor instead. Jason, Myleena, and Saelle were the only Generations with those implants, because they were the only ones that had any earthly business leaving Karis for somewhere that wasn't connected to a Stargate. The implants gave him the ability to jump without suffering ill effects, just like someone that was jacked.

That was the *only* reason a Generation might want to get a jack, but Myleena had fixed it so they didn't need a jack to get it.

When they slowed to a stop, the ship jumped, a .16 second pop through hyperspace from Karis II to Karis VII, a jump so fast Jason barely registered it. The viewscreen shimmered, and they went from a view of deep space to a view of the gas giant planet VII, named Hevalla. It was slightly smaller than Jupiter in the Terra system, it had a ring system just as extensive as Saturn's, and it had 83 moons, every single one of them an icy ball not fit for colonization. Because of the huge gravity well of the planet, they came out of hyperspace nearly 40 minutes from the closest moon...but where they were going was only 15 minutes away.

It slowly grew in the viewer, until the outline of the Fleet Flagship soon to be named *Tianne* hung in the distance like a small, pointy little moon. It was almost mind-bogglingly big, nearly as large by surface area as Jaxtra, a city-sized ship that was built to destroy ships ten times its size. It was long, sleek, and both elegant and intimidating, elegant in its lines but intimidating in its sheer size, built in the pattern KMS triangular, pie-wedge design, but the lack of the stern wings made the ship look more like an arrowhead than anything else...an arrowhead for some incomprehensibly huge giant, anyway.

“Captain, dock control just sent an approach vector,” the comm officer called. “Sending it to navigation.”

“I have it,” the male navigator, Deklin, confirmed. “Entering it into the nav computer now.”

“Very good, Mister Deklin. Reduce to dock speed once we’re at the shield border.”

“Aye, sir.”

The new ship looked to be covered by a haze as they approached, but that was because the entire ship was enclosed in an airskin bubble, pressurizing the construction zone. The temperature inside would be cold enough to liquefy the air they imported if not for heaters the size of city blocks stationed at strategic areas inside, which created a constant circulation of air within the bubble, like a constant gentle breeze as air expanded, moved away from the heaters, then cooled. Over the 16 months since the bubble had been built, the circulating air had established its own natural airflow patterns. Giant container vessels were already inside, vacuuming up the atmosphere to return it to the Karisian atmosphere. It would take them nearly two months to vacuum out the air and return the area within to the same vacuum state as the deep space beyond the shield.

“That is one big ship,” Gai noted lightly as they approached.

“Not as big as the ships it’s going to be facing, but yes, it’s big,” Jason agreed as the ship started to slow, preparing to cross the airskin shield and enter the atmosphere area.

“You did the right thing giving it to Palla. She’s the best suited for commanding it.”

“An opinion virtually the entire Karinne Navy shares, Gai,” Jason chuckled. “If Myri and Juma would have given it to anyone else, I think the whole navy would have mutinied.”

“I hear you gave her a third diamond.”

“Yup. She’s a Staff Admiral now,” he nodded. “She deserves it, given she’s commanding the flagship of the navy.”

“True.”

“Besides, Kiya is replacing her on the *Aegis*, and she has three diamonds. I couldn’t have the captain of the flagship outranked by a captain on a ship under her. That would make things...awkward,” he said, which made Gai chuckle and nod.

“Well, Palla certainly deserves it. She’ll be sitting in General Myri’s chair someday.”

“I can’t argue with that prediction,” he agreed.

Hundreds of small ships were buzzing around the ship as they approached, supply, personnel, and maintenance ships that were finishing up their task of boarding the crew and supplying it as the maintenance ships did last-minute sensor sweeps of the hull, looking for anything that might have been missed the first three times they were done. It just got bigger and bigger as they approached the docking bay on the port side amidships, where Jason would be boarding the ship on a zip ship, a docking bay large enough for a *frigate* to land inside it. And it had been specifically designed to allow a frigate to land inside the flagship through three different bays, the central port and starboard bays and the sterncastle bay. Jason could see the doors of the GRAF cannon near the bow, over and behind which were the hundreds of different weapon batteries placed along the angled hull so all of them could fire forward, with a 230 degree field of fire. Dedicated side and stern emplacements gave the giant ship additional firing arcs, including a *second* GRAF cannon that was in the stern and fired sternward, just in case the bow GRAF cannon was somehow damaged or down due to equipment failure. Both GRAF cannons couldn’t be powered up at the same time, but the stern cannon did give the flagship more flexibility.

The flagship was built to be a giant, badass version of a tactical battleship, and it looked just *menacing*. There was no doubt to anyone that

looked at it that the immense ship was meant to fight, not to sit in the back like the king on a chessboard.

Palla was standing at the forefront of a formation of nearly 1,000 crew members—the bay was more than big enough to hold them and have plenty of room to spare—in her class A uniform and with her *exo* beside her, newly promoted Fleet Admiral Samantha Kerry, brought up from her battleship, the *Yorktown*. Behind them were the division commanders of the ship, the engineering chief, the communications chief, and so on and so on, and behind them were arrayed the officer corps of the ship, some 1,137 officers ranging in rank from Captain to Master Chief Petty Officer—technically enlisted, but in the Navy, a Master Chief held more clout than most Lieutenants. And it said a lot to Jason that Palla’s *exo* was a Terran, since Palla chose her. Sammy would be called by her title rather than her rank, referred to as *exo Kerry* rather than by her rank, since she held the rank of Admiral and Palla would be called *Captain*, and it was a bit unseemly for the *exo* to be addressed with a technically higher rank than the captain. Those on the ship with the rank of Captain would similarly be addressed using their job title rather than their rank, out of respect for Palla. Only *one* person was called *Captain* on a Naval line vessel, anyone else who held that rank but not that position had to be addressed some other way. That was one of those little rules in the KMS, like how most officers were addressed by their rank and first name, since most of them shared the last name Karinne. There might be three or four *Commander Karinnes* on a bridge, so it was acceptable on a naval vessel to use first names when addressing officers. If someone didn’t have the last name Karinne, it was acceptable to address them using their last name. The zip ship they used to transfer from the *Tikanne* landed just in front of Palla and Sammy, and Jason climbed out and immediately embraced the pink-haired commander of the new flagship.

“Hey there, Palla,” he said, patting her back fondly. “You settled in yet?”

“I’ve been on the ship for two takirs, Jason,” she replied with a smile. “I was here to oversee the final refits and initial testing.”

“Hey, I’ve been busy, I can’t be expected to keep track of everything,” he protested, then he hugged Sammy and gave her a kiss on the cheek.

“And it’s good to see an Admiral’s diamond on this epaulet, Sammy. Congratulations.”

“Thanks, Jason,” she replied, then kissed his cheek. “I certainly like the pay raise. But I’ll miss the *Yorktown*.”

“We always miss our prior commands, Sammy. I miss the *Aegis*,” Palla injected. “And Rola will be a fine captain to command him in your stead.”

“I picked Rola myself, she’d *better*,” Sammy declared, which made Jason chuckle.

“Are Myri and the others here yet?”

“They’ll be arriving in about an hour, your Grace. They said go ahead and start the tour. After all, they’ve been all over this ship for the last month,” Palla replied, rolling her eyes a little bit, which made Jason chuckle. “They’ll join us for the commissioning ceremony.”

Jason inspected the officer corps, which for him meant walking around shaking hands, kissing cheeks, and chatting with the officers he knew. Many veteran officers from other ships were present in the bay, officers he knew, and there were some pretty famous units from within the KMS present as well. Palla had brought her entire engineering crew from the *Aegis*, the Shield’s Hammers, onto her new ship, which had caused something of a row since it left such a large void on the *Aegis* in their engineering department. And standing among the Shield’s Hammers was now-Lieutenant Rilari Karinne, the reason why they didn’t suffer jump shock anymore. Jason shook the hand of Commander Justin Taggart as he went down the line, for the Ghost Squadron had been transferred from the *Dreamer* to the *Tianne*. Marayi was pretty pissed about that, that Palla poached her fighter squadron, but it did make sense to put the best fucking fighter squadron in the KMS on the flagship of the navy. He kissed the cheek of Major Liira Karinne, commander of the 302nd Marine Exomech company, who was making quite a name for herself in the rigger corps. Her unit was known as the Banshees, and were considered the best exomech unit in the KMS that wasn’t the KBB or the Red Warriors; actually, the Banshees were the Karinne Marines’ version of the Red Warriors, who were Army, whom Juma had assembled in response to the growing fame of the Red Warriors. Juma formed her *own* elite exomech company from the best

riggers in the Karinne Marines, that could compete with the Red Warriors. But, since her unit wasn't Army, she had them in black exomechs like the KBB, just with the female ghost symbol representing the unit instead of the KBB's nude armed Faey symbol. But that wasn't a copy of the KBB, that was more a copy of the Ghost Squadron's black Wolf fighters with the spectre icon on the tailfins.

Juma and Sioa were sometimes almost ridiculously competitive when it came to the Army and the Marines, whom Juma commanded. There was no dedicated commander of the Marines in the KMS structure, that fell to Juma as overall commander of the Navy..

Liira intentionally chose the name Banshees for her unit to complement the Ghost Squadron, to be the "Ghost Squadron" of the Marine exomech corps, and Jason found it strangely fitting that two units named for undead spirits served on a ship named after the Faey Angel of Death.

After nearly an hour of chatting with officers, Myri and the full command staff of the KMS joined them, and Palla took them on a tour of the ship. It had an entirely different layout than a capitol ship did, but a few things were the same. Engineering was still in the stern section of the ship, the bridge was in the geographic center of the ship, to afford the bridge maximum protection, and the main engines and hyperspace jump engines took up the most volume of the ship compared to other systems. Most of the stern sections of the ship was taken up by the engines, with "thruster" engines located all through the ship to increase the ship's maneuverability in tactical combat situations. Much like the carriers, the ship utilized lateral trams to get people and materials around quickly—it would take Jason *hours* to walk from the stern to the bow of the ship—from which a spidery network of lifts extended to allow someone to get from the very bow of the ship to any other part of the ship in 12 minutes or less. As they toured, Palla told him all about everything she showed him, showing that she had done her homework and was ready to command this behemoth. Palla knew *everything* about the ship, from its acceleration curve numbers to how many shops there were in the deck 71 section 14 shopping concourse.

When they reached the computer core chamber, which wasn't far from the bridge, she proudly showed off the elegant pale blue spire of biogenic crystal that was behind a triple layer of hard shields. It was the ship's

computer core, and it was a biogenic computer just one step below a CBIM. It had taken the Shimmer Dome 8 months to grow, and that slender spire of pale blue crystal was the heart of the most sophisticated and powerful computer in the galaxy—that Jason knew of—that was *not* a CBIM. It required a brand new, more powerful class of biogenic mainframe to run a ship as complex and massive as the *Tianne*. Hovering just outside the hard shields was a holographic representation of the computer, which Palla had named Coma, a derivation of its official title, Command Biogenic Mobile Operations Mainframe. Coma didn't have the same capabilities as Cybi and the other CBIMs, but she was still *damn* impressive, and her crystal was so large and so complex that she displayed elements of personality. She was more than a biogenic mainframe, but less than a CBIM, and Jason was *very* curious to see how she grew as she learned and gained experience, as she formed new lattice pathways in her core crystal.

Coma was differentiated from the CBIMs in that her hologram wasn't an image of Sora Karinne. It was instead a holographic representation based on *Jyslin*, and it was a little odd seeing his wife's face on that hologram. But Myleena had decided that it would be a nice thing to do for Jyslin by putting her face on the new class of biogenic mainframes.

"Good afternoon, Coma," Jason said, which caused the still hologram to open its eyes.

"Good afternoon, Grand Duke Karinne," she replied. *"How are you today?"*

"I'm fine. How are you?"

"All systems are operating at peak efficiency. I am ready to begin active ship operations."

"That's good, because you'll be starting your first mission in a couple of hours," Jason told her.

"The orders for our first mission are already stored in my database. I will be ready."

"Isn't she marvelous?" Palla asked earnestly, smiling towards the hologram. "I have high hopes that Coma's presence on the ship will make him that much more formidable."

“It’s definitely going to give you an advantage,” Jason agreed. “Having a computer as powerful as Coma by itself is an advantage, but add to that the fact that she’s a computer that *learns*, and it makes her even tougher to beat.”

“It also makes this ship completely immune to computer invasion and hack attempts,” Palla added. “And she’s available for a merge if any Generations are on board. The advantage of biogenics.”

Jason nodded. “Will you be having her manifest on the bridge?”

“Oh yes, she’ll be present on the bridge at all times,” she replied. “She has her own spot on the bridge about five shakra from my chair, so I’m always within easy reach if she needs me or I need her and for some reason I can’t commune with her through my interface.”

“How are you handling the local network?”

“Coma has organized and will oversee the local biogenic network, separating it into two main domains, duty and off-duty. The duty network is for official ship business, and the off-duty network is for social and recreational use, which Coma will restrict or disable when we get into active theaters to keep the crew’s attention firmly on the task at hand. She will manage the local network’s connection back to the main biogenic network,” she answered. “This ship will have constant connection to the main biogenic network. So I will always be a commune away from you, your Grace, if you need me.”

“I like that addition, if only so the crew is in contact with their families back on Karis,” he said.

“That’s also a big benefit,” she agreed. “It’s another reason why I am so glad you installed Coma on the ship. The mainframe on the *Aegis* wasn’t capable of that.”

“That had more to do with communications than capability,” Jason told her. “We kept BG1 restricted, and that throttled the ship’s biogenic network to local only. Juma has no plans to change that, either. This ship will be the exception rather than the rule.”

“That’s right, and that’s how it’s going to stay,” Juma piped up.

“So, the perk for serving on the flagship is recreational access to the planetary biogenic network,” Palla noted with a smile.

“Being the best means you get perks, Palla,” he said, which made her smile preeningly. “The other ships have access to Civnet, but you get access to the biogenic network, so you can merge and project back home.”

After touring the core chamber, which was filled with the external support stacks, they more or less just walked about 100 shakra down the companionway and reached the bridge. Like the command ships, the bridge of the *Tianne* was a giant room which was the nerve center of the ship, and also the nerve center of the fleet that the ship would command while in a task force. It had *hundreds* of stations along the walls and in rows behind the ship operations center, which was the “conventional” bridge of most any other ship. Palla’s chair was a bit further back than on the *Aegis*, so she could both relay orders to the task force and also to her own crew. The ship had three navigator’s stations, primary and two backups, two engineering stations, 20 ship-only comm stations with a few dozen more comm stations elsewhere on the bridge, the exo’s station directly in front of and to the right of the captain’s chair, two new stations for second and third officers, working under the exo to make her job easier, and only one tactical station, which was directly forward and to the left. The door to Palla’s ready room, her “office” on the ship, was in line with her chair to starboard, and beyond that office was Palla’s quarters, which Jason had seen on the plans. It was more like a grand apartment than a crew quarter, a six room apartment that was nearly as luxurious as a hotel penthouse, with another apartment off of it for Palla’s personal maid and attendant. Palla’s quarters had two different exits as well, one to the bridge and one to the companionway on the far side from the bridge, so she didn’t have to go through the bridge to get in and out of her quarters. Her attendant’s quarters also had an exit to that companionway, which was more or less required since Palla’s maid wasn’t going to be coming onto the bridge. Her maid was a Lieutenant Commander, Linka Ordanne...and only on a ship like that would an Academy educated O4 ranking member of the KMS be cooking and cleaning like a maid. But Linka had not only applied for the job, she had to beat out 34 other applicants to get it. No doubt she saw it as a fast track for her career, since she’d have the ear of Staff Admiral Palla Karinne in intimate, private circumstances.

Palla was the highest ranking line officer in the Navy, so she damn well deserved having swanky quarters and her own personal maid.

Aft of Palla's ready room was *another* ready room, and that ready room belonged to Sammy. She had a slightly smaller apartment on the far side of that ready room, *only* four rooms instead of six and without quarters for a personal attendant, but still pretty damn nice. The doors to Palla's and Sammy's ready rooms were only about 20 shakra apart. And within their quarters, there was a door that led from Palla's living room to Sammy's, just in case the two needed to talk and both were off duty.

Usually a captain and exo's quarters were separated in the interests of the ship, and the quarters of the second and third officers were elsewhere for that very reason, but on a ship the size of the *Tianne*, the planners only saw advantage in putting their quarters side by side. After all, any attack that could penetrate *that* deeply into the ship was going to destroy it anyway, and it allowed the shipbuilders to extend the compressed Neutronium carapace box that enclosed and formed an additional layer of protection for the bridge and computer core to add the quarters of the two highest ranking officers on board.

The bridge crew, all officers and Master Chiefs, had taken their posts while Palla was giving Jason a tour, and they all gathered as Jason and Palla approached her captain's chair. She offered it to him with a smile as hoverpods recorded, and he sat down in her chair on its raised platform a moment, then stood up and stepped back down. An aide stepped forward with the charter and flag, and he took them from her with a nod. "You've already named the ship, Palla, but it's still your honor to announce it to the house," he prompted.

"I've named this ship the *Tianne*, your Grace," she replied. "So that we may carry Trelle's wrath to our enemies."

"A fitting name," Jason said. "And with that, I officially declare that the KMS *Tianne* is commissioned and ready for active service. May he serve long and well," he declared.

The bridge crew applauded enthusiastically as Jason offered the framed charter and folded flag in its glass case, pausing with both of them holding

the items for the cameras, then Palla took them and handed them to Sammy. “Place these in my ready room, exo,” she ordered.

“Yes sir,” she replied, performing what was a duty and privilege for an exo in the KMS, to hang up the charter and flag in the captain’s ready room. Sammy headed for the ready room as Jason and Palla paused for a few more pictures for the hovering cameras, and once she returned, they took several pictures of Jason, Palla, Sammy, and the second and third officers, then a portrait of Jason and the command staff with Palla and Sammy, then a portrait of the ship’s command crew, then a picture of the entire bridge crew all gathered around Palla’s chair.

Once the bridge crew photo was taken, Palla motioned, and she walked with Jason, Myri, Juma, Sioa, and Navii back to the main hangar bay, as the rest of the command staff went a different direction, returning to their transport to take them back to Karis. They discussed the shakedown cruise, where the *Tianne* would be commanding a task force of 47 other newly built ships ranging from frigates to two new tactical battleships, which would be a 20 day mission that would take them almost all over the galaxy. They’d visit all four quadrants, including a stop at the Coalition’s capitol planet to deliver a gift to Hovikk—and show off the *Tianne* maybe a little bit—and do some joint tactical exercises with the Coalition defense forces before returning home. *We should have everything shaken down by the time the fleet begins to muster at Terra for the first training wargames to prepare for the Syndicate*, she assured him. *I’ve been keeping a close eye on the initial inspections and tests, and I haven’t seen anything that concerns me. This ship is well designed, and they built him well, Jason.*

I’m sure Cybi will appreciate the praise. She did most of the design. She had to, this ship is too complex for most shipbuilders to really even know where to begin.

I’ll be sure to thank her personally next time she visits, she assured him. *I’m surprised she wasn’t at the christening ceremony.*

She didn’t want to step on Coma’s toes, he replied. *This is Coma’s ship. She didn’t want anyone to think that she was somehow telling Coma what to do.*

What a curious reason, since she’s a computer. And so is Coma.

Computers with feelings, Palla, he stressed. And you should keep that in mind. As Coma grows, she's going to develop a definitive personality and emotions. They won't get in the way of her duties, but they will be there.

She has them already, Palla told him. She's been a tiny bit nervous about our shakedown cruise. She wants everything to go perfectly, and she's been a little neurotic about the diagnostics. I think she's had the Hammers do a level two diagnostic of the jump system three times in the last five days. And I can't count how many times she's done internal diagnostics of the biogenic network. It's almost like she thinks the whole thing is going to fly apart any second if she's not keeping an eye on things.

See? You're going to see what it's like to be in my chair as you deal with Coma, hon. Sometimes the CBIMs are a pain in my ass, but despite that, I love them anyway.

Palla laughed.

I'll make sure to tell Cybi that you annoy her next time I see her, Myri noted lightly.

Pft, I tell her that myself, all the time, he replied, his mental tilt making all five of them laugh. And Coma should calm down a whole lot once you get going, when she's doing instead of preparing. As she settles into things, she should be just fine. This is all new to her too, after all. It's just pre-mission jitters.

I can tell, she sent with an amused twist to her thought. She's acting like a fresh ensign right out of OTS.

She shouldn't be for long, he sent as they entered the cavernous landing bay. The zip ship he'd used to board the ship was gone, and a KMV-12 military personnel transport dropship was waiting for them, hatch open and with none other than Aura standing by the stairs with her copilot.. Welp, I'm heading home, I've had a long day and I have new babies at home waiting for me, he sent eagerly.

Kiss them for me, Jason, Palla said, kissing him on the cheek, then smoothing his lapels. I'll keep you up to date on our progress.

Commune with me when you need to, you're important enough now for me to allow it, he winked, which made her laugh.

Oh, is that a perk of any girl with three diamonds on her epaulets?

Only the cute ones, he replied, which made her beam. I sure as hell don't let Myri do that.

Myri slapped him from behind, making Palla laugh.

Aura had him, Myri, and the other members of the chiefs of staff board the dropship, and Jason was already pulling at his robes by the time he sat down. *I think that went pretty well*, Jason declared as Aura closed the hatch.

“We’ll be on the way in a moment,” she told them, giving Jason another smile.

“I thought you were off duty, Aura,” he told her.

“I was called in for this, Jason. They like to have pilots they know and trust ferry you around, and I think I qualify on both counts,” she winked from her pilot’s chair.

“Works for me,” he said as he untied the red sash around his waist.

It did go well, Navii agreed, being helped down into her chair by Juma. The walking for the tour had really tired her out, and now she needed to sit down for a while. Navii was starting to look *old*, and he was really starting to worry about her. She came out of retirement to build the KMS, and she’d meant to retire after the KMS was fully operational and running smoothly, but the Consortium war kept her on duty, and now the Syndicate kept her on duty. She had celebrated her 100th birthday just last month, which for a Faey was like being 80, and she was starting to slow down despite her daily exercise regimen. Not even Faey lived forever, even in this modern age of super-advanced medical technology. All those years were starting to catch up with her. They hadn’t affected her mind, she was still as sharp as ever, but her body was starting to feel those years she had under her belt more and more with each day.

Navii was taking steps. She worked a reduced work week and got plenty of rest, and she merged to her home biogenic vidlink unit and manifested a hologram into the command center more often than she showed up in person anymore. But the old girl was determined to see things through until the house was safe, until the Consortium and Syndicate were defeated. *Then* she intended to retire.

Jason just hoped and prayed that she got to actually do it, that the wars didn't drag on and drag on and have her pass away before she earned the retirement she so richly deserved.

The flagship is exactly what the KMS needed for the coming war, Navii continued as Jason felt the dropship start to move, and it should be quite the nasty shock to the Syndicate the first time they engage it in battle. With our fleet at the strength we projected when we learned of the Syndicate, and with the Confederation having so many members now, I feel confident that we can rout the Syndicate and send them back to Andromeda within four months of initial contact.

If not for the need to preserve our assets to deal with the colonizing Consortium force in two years, we could rout them in a few days, Sioa grunted mentally. We could just form up the entire Confederate fleet and meet them outside the galaxy and smash them in a single battle. But that would cost us too many ships, and that will put us at a major disadvantage when the colonization force arrives.

Just so, Navii nodded towards her. We need to fight this war carefully, save every ship we can, save ever soldier we can, because we are going to need them in two years. The war plans that Lorna and the CCM's command staff drew up take the future into account. They will work well, Navii declared.

If they earn your stamp of approval, Navii, that's all I need to hear to put my support behind them, Jason told her.

Lorna and her staff drew up exactly what I would have drawn up, Jason.

And let me guess, Lorna asked you for quite a bit of advice.

No commander is an island, Jason. Of course she asked me for advice, as well as several dozen other military minds not part of her command staff. That's why we have the term advisor, she said with a smile. Something you have in numbers far greater than she does.

I'm too young and silly to know everything like you, Navii, he replied, which made her laugh.

Nobody knows everything, Jason, she replied sagely, smiling gently at him. Lorna's both smart enough and humble enough to know that. That's why she's the best possible choice to command the CCM.

Could you imagine Hezivarr as the CCM commander? Juma asked wryly. That would be a disaster. I mean, he's very good, even brilliant, but he falls into the trap Lorna avoids. He does think he knows everything.

The CCM would riot if they removed Lorna, Jason snorted mentally. Half the Confederate Council would riot along with them. Lorna's proven herself several times over.

"We're about to land on the Tikanne, please make sure you're sitting," Aura called.

That was fast, Jason noted. They must have had the Tikanne standing by just off the flagship.

The destroyer could almost land in that landing bay, Sioa noted.

It was designed so a frigate can land in that bay and still have room for other things in there, Jason reminded her. Which I think is a pretty good idea. A frigate can land there for repairs if necessary.

Destroyers aren't designed to make a ground landing, so even if it was big enough, it wouldn't do them much good, Myri added.

They slowed to a stop, and Jason felt them gently touch down back in the landing bay of the *Tikanne*. Gai escorted them to a waiting room just off the landing bay rather than take them to the bridge, and they sat on comfortable couches and watched the flagship slide by through the window in the stateroom as the destroyer started to turn, this time making for the Stargate rather than jumping. Dera wordlessly offered Navii a glass of what looked like tea, and they discussed the flagship's impending shakedown cruise as Gai had her ship make for the Stargate. The lights dimmed as they prepared to transit, and seconds later, they were back in Karis space. The Stargate they'd set was in high orbit, since they had to keep a minimum distance between the Stargates in place around the planet else they'd interfere with one another, and the destroyer turned and started the 10 minute trip from the Stargate to the planet. Gai had them board the dropship after she came down into the atmosphere to hover 40,000 shakra over the White House, and Aura put them back where they started about four hours

after they began. Jason bid farewell to the others and walked a whole 50 shakra from where Aura had landed to his hovercar, and he made his way home, driving himself and acting just like any other citizen of Karis...who had two Wolf fighters following him without looking like they were following him.

Jysin met him at the landing pad, giving him a hug and a deep kiss. *Hey baby, how did things go?*

Pretty well. The new ship is as impressive inside as outside, and the crew looks like they're ready. I have no worries at all about it, he told her as he took her hand and walked with her towards the house. *How are the twins?*

Sleeping, and so is Terry. Cyvanne is watching them, she answered. Symone's taking a nap herself.

Sounds like I got here at the wrong time, I wanted to hold my daughter, he complained. *How are you feeling? Still sore?*

A tiny bit, but this isn't my first walk down the path, baby. I should be fully recovered by tomorrow.

Yeah, you've been pushing them out at a ridiculous rate the last few years. Can't just have one at a time anymore, can you?

You'll never hear me complain, I'd be happy to have twenty babies. Besides, that's your fault. Stop being so damn virile, love.

No, that's your fault. Stop putting out more than one egg to fertilize, and you won't be a twin factory.

She laughed aloud and snuggled against his shoulder a little. *Hey, like I have any control over that,* she challenged.

Dahnai call?

She's been manifesting over here off and on all day, checking up on us, she answered. *She wants us to bring the babies over to the summer palace tomorrow.*

That sounds nice. She'll have a chance to really get to know them.

Jyslin led him into the house by the hand, and Jason almost felt himself relax as he entered the domain of his family. He came in through the deck, through the kitchen, and while it was a little weird not seeing Ayama or Surin there, knowing they were in the house was good enough for him. Instead it was Seido, chopping onions or something that looked like them as the grill outside warmed up. Seido cooked in the Shio traditions, which was everything cooked over an open flame, preferably wood fueled, so the grill out on the deck got daily use and a second grill that was wood-burning had been brought in to give her more cooking space. She wouldn't so much as boil water unless she did it over an open flame. She'd use the induction heaters in the kitchen to warm leftovers, but she wouldn't cook on them. And Seido was an *awesome* cook, had even impressed Ayama...and that was saying something. She tossed the vegetables into a pot by her chopping block and smiled as they entered. *Good afternoon, Jason*, she sent, her thought lucid and *powerful*. Seido was a top-tier telepath, and like many of her people, had come to Karis because of the accepting nature of the house to telepaths. Sometimes, telepaths weren't exactly well received in the Federation because of their ability to eavesdrop on the private thoughts of others, or they were aggravated to hell by the Federal government, who tried to recruit them for government work.

Despite being a formidable telepath, Seido was *happy* being where she was, and doing what she was doing. Seido's ultimate goal was to open her own restaurant and be a chef, and she saw working for Jason as a great opportunity to practice her cooking skills in a place where she might be cooking for a family one day, and for a government leader the next, and be well known as the personal chef of the Grand Duke when it came time to open her restaurant. The cleaning and minding the kids, she had no problems with that either, since she was even more of a neat freak than Ayama and she loved kids. She had no aspirations to train her talent and use it, she enjoyed cooking and taking care of people. In the House Karinne, she could do exactly that without weekly visits from the IBI trying to recruit her for their telepathic criminal task force, or visits from Federation Security to try to get her to come work for the Federation's intelligence agency. The Federation would never *force* her to do something, but they could annoy the living fuck out of her by never giving up on trying. After *years* of telling them no, she finally made it abundantly clear she had no interest in being anything but a chef by leaving the Federation and joining

the House Karinne. She set a few tomatoes on her chopping block and picked up her knife, then started slicing them.

That's already looking good, what is it?

It's going to be Terran chili con carne, I'm going to make a big pot of it for tomorrow for whoever wants some. Dinner's already ready, it's on the warmers in the dining room. I'll come serve it once I get everyone rounded up.

Sounds good, I am hungry, he nodded.

Jason moved into the living room, where Rann and Shya were sitting on the couch...or Rann was sitting while Shya was laying on the couch with her head on Rann's lap, looking up at him and reaching up to play with his shoulder-length red hair, and he had a hand on her bare belly. Shya was only wearing a pair of bikini bottoms, so there wasn't any clothing in the way for him to make skin contact. On the back of the couch over Shya, Amber was curled up into a ball of criminal cuteness, napping after what for her had to be a long, exhausting day herding toddlers and getting to know newborns. Shya was even more intensely attached to Rann now than she was when she first moved here, and Rann had mirrored that attachment himself. They had already pair bonded, and were just waiting to grow up. *Hey old married couple,* Jason sent lightly as he came in, which made Rann look his way. *When did you get back from the hospital?*

About two hours ago, Shya replied without looking over or looking up, twisting Rann's hair around her finger. She was the one that convinced him to let it grow out, and she had an incessant need to touch it and play with it. Jason considered that to be a bit self-serving, since she'd recently cut her hair so short that the back of her head near her neck was shaved, with the hair going up progressively longer and longer, until one got to her bangs. She parted those into a pair of bangs that reached all the way down to her chin. It had to be the newest fad hairstyle for girls though through school. *Both the new twins are sleeping, Dad.*

That was a recent affectation. Rann and Shya had seemingly decided that calling him *Daddy* was too childish, so both of them had been calling him *Dad* for the last month or so. But, what did endear him was that Shya didn't call him *Daddy Jason* or *Dad Jason*, she just called him *Dad*.

However, she still called Jyslin *Mommy Jyslin* sometimes, but had more recently started to use the title *pam* or *pamma*, which was a title that could be applied to a foster mother. In her mind, he *was* her father now...her father who was also father to her husband. It seemed creepy when he thought of it that way, but that was just part and parcel of what it meant to live in a predominantly Faey society.

Your pam told me, he nodded as they walked up close to the couch. Jason saw that Rann was watching an MLB preseason game from Terra. Rann loved baseball, and his team of choice when the Karsa league was off season and the Karsa Bombers weren't playing was the London Royals, formerly known as the Kansas City Royals. He just liked the team colors, and that had turned him into a fan since the MLB had no teams on Karis. They'd moved the team to London just last year, part of the globalization process that had slowly been transforming Terra since the subjugation. The MLB also had a team in Tokyo, the Tampa Bay Devil Rays had moved to Tokyo and changed to the Tokyo Samurai. The NFL had expanded to 40 teams starting next season, and six of the eight new teams were all outside of the United States. The new teams were in San Antonio, Birmingham in Alabama, Mexico City, Ottawa, London, Edinburgh, Frankfurt, and Barcelona, European cities that had once hosted the old World League teams. The NBA had a team in China, the Sacramento Kings had moved to Beijing, and the Chinese basketball league and Japanese baseball league now had teams in Honolulu, Hawaii.

The biggest sign of that was the upcoming World Cup, which would include teams from Draconis and Jerama. FIFA had expanded its membership into the Imperium, since soccer was so popular among Faey men as an "acceptable" team sport, along with baseball. Those sports allowed men to be highly athletic and competitive, but weren't inherently violent like other American sports like football or hockey. Baseball was still the most popular Terran sport among Faey men, but soccer had really been shooting up in popularity the last few years. The teams from Draconis and Jerama had qualified, and they'd be competing in the 2018 World Cup, being hosted by Russia, and the Imperium teams were both men and women, with the caveat that a Faey team had to have a roster that was at least 50% men to compete in the World Cup.

Faey women were, on the average, stronger and faster than Terran women because they were a heavy gravity species, so they were allowed to compete with Terran men in Terran organized sports, who were more equal to them physically. There were female Faey top-tier pro athletes in the MLB, in champion-level pro soccer, in pro basketball, in pro cricket, in pro rugby, and even in pro American football. Female Faey football players tended to play skill positions rather than linemen due to the fact that even the burliest Faey woman was going to be heavily outweighed by a Terran man, a highly image-conscious Faey woman was *not* going to fatten herself up just to put on weight to play as a center, end, guard or tackle, that was absolutely unthinkable. But any other position on the field now had Faey women playing them in the NCAA and semi-pro football leagues, women who were starting to show up in the NFL. The quarterback for the New Orleans Saints was a Faey woman, Jena Feralle, and she was just as big and strong and hard to tackle as Cam Newton, on top of being able to throw a football 70 yards down the field and land it in a garbage can. And at the Terran NFL-used measurements of 6'4" and 205 pounds, she was just as big as many other NFL quarterbacks, so size was *not* an issue.

NFL players balked at the idea of a Faey player, at least until the first ones showed up in the NCAA four years ago and started dominating in the skill positions, particularly wide receiver, running back, and cornerback, since Faey women were naturally very, very fast runners. And when Jena Feralle finished her rookie season last year with a winning 9-7 record and with 23 touchdowns and only 8 interceptions, the balkers shut up in a hurry. Jena Feralle was the *real deal*, and NFL owners were well known to overlook quite a few “negatives” about a player if that player would help their team win. The owner of the Saints didn't *care* that his quarterback was a Faey woman, he cared that she was a damn good quarterback that was hard to tackle as Cam Newton, could scramble like Russel Wilson, had an arm just as strong as Andrew Luck's, and could manage the game as efficiently as the man she replaced, Drew Brees. She was a complete quarterback, a Hall of Fame-level quarterback, and the Saints had cashed in big time by taking a chance when they drafted her to eventually replace Drew Brees two years ago. She was the first Faey woman—or *any* woman—taken in the NFL draft.

It did add a new dimension to an NFL locker room, since the Faey women refused to shower separately, but Terrans had had years to get used to those particular quirks when it came to Faey society.

Who's winning? Jason asked, looking at the hologram being projected out from the vidlink

Royals, two to nothing, Rann answered. *The MLB season starts in five days, thank Trelle. A whole month without baseball, that sucked.*

You'll live, son, Jason chuckled. *Seido said that dinner's ready.*

Yeah, we were waiting for you, Dad, Shya sent as she sat up.

One of you go get Ayama and Surin, and we'll eat.

They gathered in the dining room, rousting Ayama and Surin from their apartment and going and fetching the twins from Maya. Bethany and Siyae were very energetic toddlers, happy and bubbly and exceedingly curious, which meant that they got into *absolutely everything*. Ayama had had to baby-proof the house to a degree she never had with Rann, since neither of them saw a vertical surface as a barrier to finding out what was on top of it. After about the third time Siyae fell trying to climb the kitchen counter, the last time resulting in a dislocated ankle, one of the guards quietly shadowed the twins no matter where they went. They didn't interfere unless the toddler was about to get herself into more trouble than she could handle, then they swooped in and put a stop to it before it got out of control. That mirrored Aya's policy with Jason, which was *I don't get you out of trouble you make for yourself*. The guards let the twins learn that doing something was *bad*, and only intervened if doing it was potentially dangerous or would result in an injury beyond just a bump or a scrape. The two little girls were absolutely dorable, a bit charmingly clumsy since they'd only been walking for about six months, and promised to be as beautiful as Sora when they got to be her age. Kaera and Jyslin were herding the rambunctious girls into the dining room, letting them walk themselves.

Babies still asleep? Jason asked.

Jyslin nodded as she picked up a laughing Bethany and swooped her down into her high chair, which made her giggle. Amber jumped up onto the table and sat down expectantly at her food dish, her two tails wagging in that hypnotizing pattern as Seido came into the room. "A-ber," Bethany

burbled, reaching out to the little vulpar. Amber nipped playfully at her fingers, which made her bubble with giggles and pull her hand back.

They've been asleep a while, it's about time for one of them to wake up, she answered as she clicked Bethany's safety strap, while Kaera did the same for Siyae on the far side from Amber.

Mai is in the nursery, Jason, she'll warn us if the babies stir, Kaera told him.

Poor girl, I should give her a vacation for pulling day after duty.

The day after's a walk through Trelle's garden, Jason. It's the week after that sucks, Kaera winked.

Ah yes, the crying phase, he nodded in agreement. *I take it you wear a helmet and mute the sound?*

Stop revealing our secrets, Jason, Kaera protested, which made Jyslin laugh.

Reveal the fact that you're a bunch of obnoxious nits? I'll take that to my grave, he sent with dry amusement twined into his thought, which just made Kaera grin rogueishly at him.

Tim and Symone coming?

Symone's asleep, Tim's sitting with her, Jyslin answered.

After Siyae was settled, Seido served dinner. She'd been dabbling in Terran fare lately, since Jason was Terran, so she set out chicken parmesan, buttered asparagus, scalloped potatoes, steamed broccoli with cheese sauce on the side, spinach, stewed beets mixed in with *ruga* roots—the only non-Terran food on the table—and simmered green beans with bacon strips still mixed in with it. And for desert, they had a red velvet cake. And she did it all on the grills out on the deck. She could even *bake* on a grill, that was how she utilized the upper rack on the big wood-burning grill she'd had brought in. And Jason could admit, she was *damn* good, so good that she and Ayama had been trading recipes for the last week.

How's Sanjira today? Jason asked Surin as Seido set the cake on the table, and they started eating.

A little cranky, but otherwise fine, he answered. Ayama just put her down for a nap before we came out, so hopefully we can get all the way through dinner without having to run back.

Jason laughed. *You'd think that you wouldn't act like first time parents.*

It's different now that the crying baby is mine, Jason, Ayama sent mildly as she scooped spinach onto her plate.

First time mother paranoia, Jyslin grinned at her, then switched to speaking for the benefit of the toddlers. "And what do you want first, girls?"

"Chicken!" Siyae called.

"That yellow stuff," she said, pointing in the general direction of the potatoes, which had a layer of cheese on top.

Jyslin fixed plates for them as Jason started eating, at least after he pointed imperiously at the chair and glared at Seido until she obeyed and took a seat. "Did you even go to school today, Rann?" Jason asked.

"No, Dad, we went from the annex to TK practice with Miss Ayuma," he answered.

"I finally mastered a new trick today!" Shya declared. "Watch!" Shya put her hands on the table and concentrated hard, from the look of intensity in her eyes, and Jason watched the water in her glass funnel up out of the glass in a narrow column. It twisted and turned around itself, almost tying a knot, then Shya slapped her palms on the table. When she did so, the twisted bundle of water shuddered and then seemed to explode, but what she actually did was scatter the molecules to turn the water into vapor, which became a miniature cloud that expanded over the dining room table. That was *not* an easy trick, and it impressed Jason mightily.

Shya never failed to surprise. Ayuma had urged out her latent telekinetic ability last year, found that she had considerable potential—though nowhere near Rann since he was a Generation—and had been training her along with Rann. And it almost made him feel sorry for Dahnai, that she gave up the daughter she had that was both a TK *and* a listener. Shya was in the top 10% when it came to Faey with telekinetic ability, able to lift about 20 konn. That didn't sound like much compared to her husband, since Rann

could lift nearly 40 konn with his ability un-boosted by a gestalt...and who was absolutely dwarfed by Kyri and Zachary. For a non-Generation Faey telekinetic, however, Shya had *impressive* ability, nearly as strong as Dahnai's. Shya was gifted, she was intelligent, and she was utterly loyal to the pair bond she had formed with Rann. Shya *was* a Karinne now, and she never wanted to go back to being an Imperial Princess.

"That's fantastic, hon!" Jason said earnestly. "That's not an easy thing to do!"

"Tell me about it, it took me nearly a month to figure out," she grinned, her bangs swaying a little

"Show-off," Rann accused lightly as he used his own ability to contain the misty cloud, condensed it back into a liquid, then drained it back into her glass. "And don't do that over the table, silly, you'll get our food wet."

Shya elbowed Rann playfully. "Eat your chicken," she ordered.

The conversation around the table was surprisingly mundane given Jyslin had just given birth the day before, but then again, about the only thing anyone had been talking about for the last couple of months was babies. Symone represented the tail end of the "wave" of births that had taken place on the strip, and now only Maya was pregnant among the strip women, and just barely pregnant at that. Even the lone Terran woman on the strip, Temika, was following that cycle, at least this time. She and Mike had three kids now, 4 year old Latoiya, 3 year old Mike Junior, and two month old Christina. It almost seemed like every week, someone was having a baby, a cycle that went on for what seemed like a year. It got to the point where Jason jokingly told Songa to stop with the potassium supplements, so the girls would be less fertile.

They *almost* made it through dinner. Mai called down that Jon was awake, then they heard his cries through the baby monitor. That woke up Julia, who joined in. Jyslin laughed and put her fork down, then stood up. "Well, that was the closest I ever made it to the end of dinner when the girls were babies," he declared.

"I'll help you, love. I shouldn't be eating that cake anyway. I swear, Seido is trying to fatten me up for slaughter," Jason teased.

“It sounds like Jason wants no desserts at all for a year, Seido,” Ayama noted dryly.

“It does,” she agreed with a conspiratorial smile. “Besides, I don’t think the Terran meat market is lucrative enough for me to harvest you, Jason. Yet.”

Jason laughed as he stood up. “I’ll keep a close eye on the markets,” he grinned as he and Jyslin headed for the stairs.

Jason played soother in chief, comforting his irritated daughter while Jyslin checked Jon...though Jason saw no difference between them. It didn’t *matter* to him that Tim had fathered Jon. In a way, it actually felt right, right that his best friend and *amu* would honor the bonds he had with Jyslin and with Jason by giving a part of himself to become a permanent part of Jason’s family, a sentiment that Tim and Symone mirrored with Terry. Jon was *his* son despite who fathered him, and would find no want for love and attention from his father, at least no more than any of his other children. Sometimes they had to compete a bit to get time with him, but Jason did his best to spend time with all his children, even Raisha, because they were *his children*, and he loved them. He loved all of them, no matter who their mothers were, no matter if he was the biological father or not, even if he wasn’t actually supposed to be their father. Danelle was as good as his daughter, as far as he was concerned, he’d helped raise that girl from infancy, he loved her like a daughter, and that *made* her his daughter. Shya was *definitely* his daughter, so much a part of the house now that Jason honestly couldn’t remember what it was like before she came to live with them. And Jon would be his son, and always be his son.

Love was love, not genetics.

“He must be hungry,” she declared, sitting down and untying the lone cord on her post-natal blouse, which made it fall open to expose her milk-swollen breasts. Sure enough, as soon as he was pressed to her breast, he started to nurse, and Jason watched as Jyslin looked down at him with soft, gentle eyes, the eyes of a mother holding her newborn infant, a look that could not be duplicated by any actress that had never experienced it herself. He managed to soothe Julia to the point where she yawned sleepily but did not go back to sleep, looking up at him with those lucid eyes of hers. His

mother's eyes, just looking into them almost made him hear a piano playing at the edge of his consciousness....

He blinked. *Mother, I think you're looking at me right now*, he sent to no one in particular, his thought both vibrant with love and poignant with the old wound of loss.

She's always looking after you, Jason, Jyslin sent tenderly from her nursing chair, giving him a gentle smile.

Maybe, but Julia looks so much like my mother, it's almost scary.

That's why I named her after your mother, Jyslin winked.

Well, you're going to have another customer once Jon's done, he warned.

She gave him an impish smile. *That's why I have two breasts, dink.*

I thought one was for business, and the other was for pleasure.

They're multifunctional units capable of different operational modes, she replied in a brisk mental tone that made him nearly hurt his throat stifling a laugh, so as not to upset the babies.

Jason got to hold Jon as Julia took her turn nursing, lulling the newborn to sleep and keeping him well after he should have put him back in his crib. He got another visitor just as Julia was finishing, when Amber padded into the nursery and jumped up onto the little table by the rocking chair, looking at the baby in his arms. "He's asleep, Amber," he told her, "see?"

She leaned forward enough to bring her tiny little nose just a tikra away from his cheek, sniffed, then leaned back and settled with a yawn. "I know, you've just run yourself ragged today, haven't you?" he asked with a soft chuckle, patting her on the head. "The girls running around getting into trouble and new babies in the nursery, I bet you wore a path out on the carpet on the stairs. You'll just have to learn how to manage your time, girl," he warned. "That or trust that you don't have to mother these two the way you did the girls. They'll be fine if you're not here."

Amber sniffed in displeasure, making it clear that she *was*, in fact, going to mother these two just as much as she did Bethany and Siyae. And she

was a nervous nelly when the girls were infants, running in at the slightest sound coming from the nursery to check on the babies.

“I swear, she has new mother syndrome worse than Ayama,” Jyslin declared, standing up as Julia yawned. “I almost feel sorry for her future kits, she might not *ever* let them out of her sight. Let’s do a diaper check and let them get some rest. This is hard work for a one day old, after all.”

After getting the newborns settled in and sleeping, they went back downstairs and just relaxed in the living room. Jason was banished to the far side of the couch because Shya was laying across half of it, back to laying with her head in Rann’s lap, daring to put her feet on Jason’s legs. Jason was having none of that, grabbing her ankle and tickling her foot, making her laugh and squirm and literally fall off the couch trying to get free of him, which made Rann burst into laughter. That was something he *knew* he shouldn’t do, because Shya grabbed his leg and yanked him off the couch, and it was just seconds before the two of them were wrestling around on the floor. Jason just moved over to the choice spot on the couch and ignored them, even turned up the viddy coming from the vidlink, enjoying an evening of domestic bliss. Jyslin made it even more so when she sat down beside him and snuggled up to him, put her head on his shoulder, which made him put an arm around her.

Rann noticed the invasion. He pushed Shya away enough to protest, holding her at arm’s length over him as he gave his parents and accusing look. “Hey, that’s our seat!”

“Not when you get out of it,” Jyslin replied immediately.

“It’s hard enough to get any couch time with Miss Horizontal seeing how much space she can take up on it,” Jason agreed, which made Shya gasp, then laugh.

“I was giving you the space under my legs,” she retorted, sitting heavily on Rann’s stomach, enough to make him wheeze a bit. “So, tickling my foot was all part of the plan, wasn’t it?”

“I refuse to answer that question, on account of it might in fact possibly be true,” he replied loftily, which made Jyslin laugh.

“Payback hurts, Dad,” she warned.

“Girl, you *know* how mean I am, and don’t for a second think I’ll go easy on you just because you’re my daughter,” he warned. “Do you *really* want to go there?”

Jyslin burst out laughing when Shya shrunk back a tiny bit, and Rann took advantage of it to push her backwards off of him. He sat up and rolled through with her, and then she was the one on her back fighting for her proverbial life.

She’s young. She’ll learn, Jyslin sent impishly to him.

I heard that! Shya declared as she managed to push Rann up off of her, mainly with a hand up under his chin. It was a bit dirty, but there were no rules in this particular type of warfare.

You were supposed to, it only helps Rann if you’re too busy fighting with me to fight with him, Jyslin replied shamelessly. And to prove the point, Rann wrested her hand away, got hold of her other wrist, then pushed them down to the carpet over her head. Shya tried to retaliate with her telekinetic ability, but Rann smothered it with his own, yet another trick that Ayuma had taught him.

The only defense against telekinesis was another telekinetic, at least in this narrow instance where the two contending TKs happened to be husband and wife, where the skin to skin contact gave Rann a window into Shya’s mind to see what she was trying to do, and countering her on that level.

But even in losing, Shya turned it into a victory. When Rann relented, she yanked him down and gave him a kiss right on the lips, and it wasn’t a very chaste one. Even at the young age of 8, Shya was flirting with Rann, even though she had no idea what she was doing and wouldn’t know what to do with him if Rann realized it. Their relationship wasn’t a cutesy 8 year old “going steady,” their relationship was as intimate, it was tactile, and it was a reflection of the very adult impulses they’d have in just a few years.

Rann’s hair wasn’t the only thing that Shya almost involuntarily touched, though they’d broken her of doing that outside of their bedroom. And Rann was certainly not passive in that department, either, he was just as active in touching Shya as she was in touching him. Jason had absolutely no doubt that Rann and Shya would lose their virginity the first time Rann had an erection, because like any children in Faey society, they already

knew exactly what sex was, what an erection meant, and Shya would start to mature sexually before Rann, so she'd be *more* than willing to consummate their marriage. So there would be no innocent misunderstandings about just what that meant. In the meantime, until they matured enough to be able to do what both of them were instinctively playing at at eight, they'd have to stay with the heavy petting and extended makeout sessions that would do any Terran teenage couple proud. They weren't kissing for the same reasons that teenagers were, but that didn't mean that they were just playing around or mimicking the adults. Kissing was one way Rann and Shya demonstrated their intense pair bond, because it created close intimacy and expressed the deep love they already had for one another, and that was something that they very much could experience and enjoy, even at eight. Their pair bond would tie them together mind, body, and soul for their entire lives, and give them a deep love and happiness that Jason almost felt sorry that others would never experience.

Rann and Shya were *married*, and how they acted in private drove that point home very starkly. It would get Jason and Jyslin thrown in prison back on Terra, what they let those two do in their bedroom. But they were married, and they weren't playing at doing anything now that they wouldn't be doing for real in about five years.

And strangely enough, despite being raised Terran, Jason had no problem with the fact that his 8 year old son and adopted daughter were touching each other in places that would get them arrested on Terra in their bedroom. He understood the pair bond, so he understood that what they were doing was entirely *natural*. It was just "let's play doctor" taken to the extreme of playing with one's life partner, one with whom there was no fear, no hesitation, no secrets, no shame, with someone so much a part of one's self that it was hard to separate things.

What Rann and Shya had really had no place in Terran culture and society, no equivalent, so it was a good thing that they were in a culture that *did* understand.

As usual, one kiss led to another, then another, until Shya had Rann in her clutches and was snuggling with him on the living room floor. That got them off the couch, though, so Jason was quite content to snuggle with *his* pair bonded wife while his son did the same.

Sometimes those two are almost silly, Jyslin told him with amusement, using their touch to send in a way that not even Shya could hear. *Sometimes I'm almost afraid of it. They're so bonded, if anything ever happened—*

I know, I don't like to think about that, Jason agreed, cutting her off before she thought the unthinkable, that something happened to one of them. Neither of them had to think about what would happen. The death of one would kill the other, kill them through grief, of that there was no doubt. That was the dark side of a pair bond, the punishment that came with the reward to balance things out. It was a life of indescribable love, contentment, and companionship, until there was only one. Then it was a hell from which there was no escape, a dark pit of utter despair that consumed all who fell into it. Losing half of himself, Jason could not survive such a thing, and Jyslin was truly the other half of him.

That was a place he had to admit that he was at with Jyslin. If she died...he wouldn't last long. And he knew she wouldn't if something happened to him. There would be no recovery, the way Songa had managed to recover from the loss of her husband, for whom Rann was named. If Jyslin died, Jason would stop eating, stop drinking, stop feeling anything but the *loss*, be trapped in that moment he felt himself lose her, feel that intense pain every second, every moment, for the rest of his life. He would waste away and die, probably just a few days after she passed away. And there was nothing that Songa could do to stop it. Other doctors had tried in the past, with IVs supplying nutrients to a grieving widow, but it did no good. They simply...*died*. Slowly, every moment an absolute hell of unfathomable grief and loss, to the point where death was a welcome release from the pain for both the widow and the widow's family. It happened no matter what the doctor did...and when a couple were bonded that deeply, it was actually a mercy to let the widow pass away. Even if the widow somehow survived, they would be *empty* inside, nothing but a shell of who they once were. The grieving would never stop, it would never ease, until the day the widow died. That was a living hell that no doctor really wanted to inflict upon a widow. It even had an official name in Faey medicine, *Widow Sickness*, one of the few maladies in Faey medicine whose treatment regimen was to do sedate the patient to keep them calm and let nature run its course...to let the patient die.

That was the price he would eventually pay for the heaven he had now. That was the coin he'd be handing to the ferryman eventually, his purgatory, spending the last moments of his life in hell to pay in pain for the heaven he had now. But even knowing what would eventually befall him, he would not trade what he had with Jyslin for the entire galaxy.

Prose often held truth: *"It is better to have loved and lost, than to have never loved at all."*

We can only do what we can to make sure that never happens. I think putting them in a force field until they're 50 would do the trick, Jyslin sent playfully, which made him nearly laugh.

Make them wear armor their entire lives?

Only in public. If we tried to keep them in armor in private, Shya would tear it apart with her bare hands to get at Rann.

He did laugh then, low and thoroughly amused at the truth behind her joke. He could almost see that happening, in either direction. To not be able to *touch*, to be that close and not be able to make skin to skin contact, that would drive almost any pair-bonded couple insane. The month Jason had spent in a sterilization field had driven Jyslin nearly crazy, because she could not touch him. Jason took Jyslin's hand, threaded his fingers through hers, and patted the back of it. *So would I.*

Tear Rann's armor apart to get at him? Jason, you diseased lech, she teased, which made him laugh for true.

You'll pay for that, my dear, as soon as you're recovered enough for me to punish you properly, he threatened with a smile.

A couple more days, and I'll be primed and ready for your punishment, master, she replied cheekily.

Such a masochist.

Hey, your punishments come with orgasms. Lots and lots of orgasms, she returned with a daring smile. *I fully expect to be punished for several hours when I feel up to it. I've pulled even with Maya now thanks to having two sets of twins, and I'd better not be a kid down for long once she has her next baby. So you'd better man up and prove that you're just as good at*

knocking me up as Maya was getting knocked up by Vell so soon after delivering.

So competitive, you are ridiculous sometimes, you know that? Competing over who has more babies, sheesh..

You love it and you know it, baby, she replied, patting his cheek. If anything, it means I get to wear you out in the bedroom. You always love that. Your 22 kids proves it, she grinned. 25 if we count Danelle, Shya, and Jon, but they're not biological.

No, it proves I live completely surrounded by a bunch of depraved perverts, he retorted.

You're the one that has to get it up, baby, so that makes you as much a depraved pervert as the girls you're mounting, she countered. It takes a wet pussy and a hard cock to fuck, so that means there's equal blame on both sides

I was honoring a promise to the girls.

That accounts for 17 of them, if you want to include Rann in that, which got us to our target number of fifteen with two to spare. So, what about the other five that aren't squadmates that made the deal with you or, amu?

Duty, he replied honestly.

That was you getting hard enough to get it in a wet pussy, and that's certainly not a duty fuck.

Myli and Kumi were definitely out of duty...or more out of giving them what they wanted or they'd beat me up, in Kumi's case, he protested, which made her giggle.

So, where in this equation of twisted ethics does Aura fit in?

He was militantly silent.

So, that makes you a pervert by your own definition.

I'm the Grand Duke, I'm a paragon of cultural purity, moral fiber, and steely restraint. Grand Dukes are not perverts, he retorted airily.

She gave him a long look that didn't require sending whatsoever.

I honored my friendship with the other five squad girls. They asked, I accepted, and if you don't recall, I wasn't all that enthusiastic about the idea of it at first. But it was only fair that I give that gift to Min and Sheleese and the twins and Myri, who didn't get that chance the first time around. If you want to make fun of numbers, blame Lyn and Bryn, and blame yourself, woman. I had no control over the fact that they'd both have twins, and you're starting to be as bad as they are. First the girls, now Jon and Julia. And what, I was supposed to stop having kids with you just because we had Rann? Think again, woman. You once told me you wanted as many kids as I can give you. I'm holding you to that. You account for a quarter of my kids.

I'd better, she sent lightly. And having twins is catching me up with Maya, she added shamelessly, and she had a head start with Yuri and Sami.

Semantics will not support your argument, he teased.

So, the fact that you knocked up Aura again and she had Sera doesn't seem the least bit hypocritical to you, mister I'm not a pervert?

Not a bit. She's my girlfriend, I have your blessing. I'm allowed to knock her up.

It's how I keep my husband happy when I'm not there to give him what he needs.

Pervert.

You married me. That makes you depraved. Besides, baby, in my society, I'm allowed to be depraved, she grinned at him.

Sometimes I wonder why the hell I ever married you. Sometimes it makes me think maybe I was a closet homosexual.

Excuse me? she sent dangerously, which made him grin.

I mean, I married a woman who thinks she's in charge, he teased.

I am in charge, buster, she retorted. I'm the woman around here.

And thus my point. Women in Terran society aren't dominant, yet who do I marry? A woman raised as the dominant gender in her society, a complete reversal from my cultural norms. You act more like a Terran man than a woman, so maybe I was secretly gay all this time.

Bisexual, maybe, or maybe you're just a submissive that likes being dominated by hot, horny women, she winked. *The fact that you get rock hard when you're looking at my pussy tells me there's no way you're even close to gay,* she declared with a grin.

I'd get turned on by you if you were a Morbod, woman, he scoffed mentally. *I may have been attracted by your body, but it's your mind I'm in love with. But the cute butt helps,* he added, which made her laugh aloud.

I'll make sure to show it off for you tonight, at least after I make sure it didn't get wider because of the pregnancy. I have way more weight to work off this time, she frowned. *I'll have to hit the gym as soon as I'm not sore anymore.*

Oh please, you're still skinny. I don't know where you think this weight came from.

The scale tells me it's there, and I'm gonna get rid of it. Fast, she declared adamantly, showing off that Faey vanity. Faey women took their appearance as seriously as a pastor takes God, and always made sure they were slim, toned, and immaculately groomed, even if Faey women rarely wore more makeup than maybe eye shadow. Faey women saw makeup as *hiding* natural beauty, not enhancing it; the Faey considered nothing more attractive than a nude, *unaltered* body, perfect in its natural state. It was why Faey hid their jackports behind their hair, since it was *unnatural*, and therefore ugly. Makeup had a similar view to many Faey, who would use it sparingly for accents, but not try to use it to cover up or artificially enhance. Eye liner and eye shadow were used the most to accent the eyes, clear lip gloss to make the lips shiny was used fairly common, *maybe* lipstick as long as it wasn't gaudy, on rare occasions mascara, if the woman had naturally black hair to begin with—Palla would look almost silly with her pink eyelashes covered in black mascara—and tasteful earrings were as far as most Faey women would go. Piercing her ears was the *only* way a woman would alter the natural state of her body, at least until cyberjacks came along.

Though, Jason could admit, *jaingi* was starting to establish a foothold in Faey society, especially since it was reversible. The white skin created by the *jaingi* could be repaired by a visit to a doctor, so a Faey could always get rid of it quickly and easily. Saelle's huge mey on her back was almost

apostacy in proper Faey society, a huge and drastic alteration of the natural into *unnatural*, but it wasn't quite so fringe as it was a few years ago. And Yila was the cause of that, he supposed. Her two *little secrets* had been revealed to the Imperium over *Courtwatch*, and Dahnai had publicly commented that she actually thought Yila's *jaingi* looked good. So, if Yila Trefani had *jaingi* and the Empress liked them, then it was alright for other women to have them too. So, *jaingi* were starting to appear in mainstream Faey society, which meant viddy. And like Yila's *jaingi*, they were always small, elegant, and easily hidden, meant to draw attention, to *accent* what was there...which was why many Faey women wore eye shadow. It had almost become a game in viddy lately for a *jaingi* to peek out from under an item of clothing for a brief second, a deliberate tease.

Well, to soothe your ego, I see nothing wrong with you and think you're drop dead sexy, he told her.

That's sweet of you, love, but I know it's there, and I won't be happy til I'm back at my proper weight.

Impossible. These throw that off, he sent, poking one of her breasts, which were swollen with her childbirth.

I'll take that into account, she replied curtly, giving him a slight look.

Okay, as long as you don't look like a malnourished waif with big boobs, I can work with that.

She laughed and smacked him on the arm.

Rann and Shya lost the couch, so once they finished their snuggling, they went up to their apartment to snuggle some more on their own couch. Jason enjoyed a little extended snuggling with Jyslin, then she got up to go through some free agent scouting reports for the Paladins before bed, and Jason went up to his office and checked the last reports that Chirk had forwarded to him before she left the office. He got a report from MRDD saying that the last of the uptime inspections had been completed on their newest piece of ground-based military hardware, and that the green light was given for production. Sioa had sent the same thing to him, telling him that the Titan mecha was a go, and requesting official permission to add it to the inventory and get them into production *fucking now*.

The English word *Titan* was a perfect description of the new mecha. About a year ago, the Kimdori had managed to acquire intelligence from the Consortium thanks to the approaching scouting fleet going to Andromeda—it was intercepting all Consortium communications—that got an idea of the ground forces included with the Syndicate invasion fleet, and it included their version of mecha, which came in two varieties. They had bipedal robotic mecha that were about 40 shakra tall—approaching 50 feet, or about 17 meters—and also had quadrupedal walker-style mecha, like walking tanks, that were primarily heavy weapon platforms and support units for forward infantry. Their walkers most closely resembled AT-ATs from *Star Wars*, but weren't nearly as large and weren't meant to carry infantry. They were built mainly to be tanks, just tanks with legs instead of treads or hover pods. The Benga were already big, so putting a 15 shakra tall person into a mecha meant that the mecha was *fucking huge*.

The Karinne Army's answer to these Benga mecha were the Titans. Titans were just that, they were *huge* robotic mecha, some 38 shakra tall—46 feet, or about 15 meters tall—and outfitted with some pretty hardcore machinery to make them fast and surprisingly agile for such a massive mecha. They were also heavily armed and armored, armed with heavy pulse autocannons, heavy rail cannons, and recently imported and converted for Karinne use Coalition Disruptors, which were some *nasty* guns. Like any Karinne mecha, they utilized spinners, carried two drones, and had mountpoints for pods. They were capable of zero-g operations by adding flight pods, but most often they carried missile pods, combo pods that carried both offensive and defensive missiles. Benga robotic mecha were bigger, but they probably wouldn't be as fast as Titans, nor as heavily armed, and that made a big difference. An even bigger difference was that the Titan was *only* capable of being driven by a jack. Not even a one-way interface was good enough to drive a Titan, due to the sheer amount of data the pilot had to absorb. The jack also made the Titan move as if it were the rigger's body, and that was something that they doubted the Syndicate's riggers could match.

Moving something that big and keeping it balanced, stable, and under complete control while also making it agile and quick was a lot more difficult from an engineering standpoint than it was for a Gladiator or a Juggernaut, to the point where it had required them to advance artificial

muscle strand technology to give a humanoid robot that size the ability to move with speed and precision. The joints of a humanoid body were actually the most inefficient kind of joint there was, putting the force between the fulcrum and the load, so they'd had to do some research and some upgrading to develop a way to give a Titan "muscles" to move its body around with enough strength, speed, and control required to make the mecha agile enough to operate in a combat theater.

The biggest sign that Titans were viable? Kyva had already ordered 40 for the KBB, 20 primary and 20 backup mecha, with an array of standard and custom-designed pod units to increase the mecha's versatility. The KBB had been the ones to field test the Titans, and she must have been impressed to already put in her order for them to add to the KBB's arsenal of Gladiators and Juggernauts.

Trenirk already had production plans in place, awaiting only Jason's official orders, and Sioa and Juma had incorporation plans in place to place those mecha as soon as they were off the production line. And Jason gave it, sending Trenirk the go to start production, to build a production run of 1,000 Titans that would primarily be used by the Army, with a few scattered among the Marines...only a battleship had the bay space to carry Titans without dispossessing the fighter squadrons of their bay space, so not every ship was going to have them. But there would be full platoons of Titans on board all five command ships and the *Tianne*.

Jason had had the chance to pilot a Titan during its trial period, and *wow*. It had been the most challenging thing he'd done in quite a while, both in how sophisticated the mecha was, and in how much harder it was to pilot because of that sophistication. It would be the equivalent in old Terran terms of piloting a 747 jumbo jet without the benefit of a copilot, with tons of settings and controls and systems that the pilot had to manage. Only veteran riggers could handle a Titan, that was for sure. It was no mecha for a sergeant right out of rigger school. Hell, it was no mecha for a journeyman rigger. Only the most experienced riggers would be piloting a Titan.

Symone had rated on it, and she'd be teaching it. But that actually wasn't a surprise, Symone was actually a *damn* good rigger. She had a natural talent for it.

For that matter, she'd be *fighting* in one in a few months, when the Syndicate arrived. Titans could be remotely piloted, and Symone was too good a rigger to be put on the back lines. She could pilot a Titan from a merge pod at Joint Base Alpha, which was a joint Army/Marine base for training and the headquarters of the KMS Rigger Corps, and had also been outfitted to do remote rig operations. They already had a merge center with thousands of merge pods, which could be used to merge to nearly any merge-capable mecha, mechloader, transport dropship or Wolf fighter. Symone could sit in a merge pod at the base and pilot a Titan half a galaxy away, with a mindstriker in the Titan's cockpit to do the up close telepathic fighting while Symone concentrated on stomping on enemy infantry and blowing things up.

Sioa didn't depend on that, though. A rigger always had the highest performance scores when she was *in* the mecha, but she also saw the value in having merge pods for remote operation, particularly for very dangerous missions.

That made him check another of their merge assets, the ROCAs, or the Rockers as they were now being called. They were combat robots—androids acutally—Remotely Operated Combat Android, built to resemble Faey wearing Crusader armor so they were not easy to discern from standard Faey infantry, with full range of motion of a Faey and all the grace and agility, but with the strength and resilience of a machine. They were not primary AI units, those androids would be remotely piloted by infantry specialists in merge pods. Not even Karinne AI was good enough to program infantry robots that could actually operate independently, but using a merged pilot solved that problem. The units could operate by themselves, without being merged to a pilot, but when they were in that mode, they were not used in front line combat. They were used as support units, and had the AI to man a piece of combat support equipment, like rear fixed gun position.

The idea for them came from Rook, of all places. He had built a combat variant body for himself in his spare time, which he operated by *remote*, by communing with the biogenics in the combat chassis. Myleena had seen his idea and ran with it, building the ROCAs, which would be used as unkillable shock troopers or infantry in conditions lethal to Faey without extensive life support systems. They were heavily armored to make them

really tough, were about twenty times stronger than a Faey, and had as much dexterity and agility as a Faey. They were also *very* expensive, so they weren't going to be cranking out millions of them *Clone Wars* battle droids style. But for what Sioa envisioned using them, they would do very, very well. They had 36,400 finished, and were going to do a full production run of 50,000. That was five divisions of robotic fighting infantry remotely piloted by merge to give those robots what an AI never could, the ability to react to the *illogical*.

It was a fatal flaw in almost all combat AI systems. They had fantastic aim and insanely fast reflexes, and could be programmed to recognize known combat formations and tactics, but the moment they were exposed to something their combat algorithms could not process, they became sitting ducks. And in a battle, be it on a planet or in space, those kinds of situations arose more than often enough to make autonomous fighting robots running on AI unfit for combat operations. Even the KMS' own drones were not autonomous AI, suffered the same limitations as most other AI systems. Biogenic drones had a very sophisticated AI capable of limited autonomy, but it was still being managed and supervised by a wizzo or other living thing. What made biogenic drones much different from other drones was their survivability. Their AI was much better at processing potential threats and avoiding them, so biogenic drones had a much higher survivability rate than moleculartronic drones.

To call the Rockers androids or robots was almost an insult. Myleena called them *bionoids*, a mixture of cybernetics and biogenics built into a robotic chassis to create a biogenic android that was far more than its programming. They were a new class of robotic unit, a combination of a robot's processing speed and brute strength and a living thing's ability to think abstractly. Biogenics were capable of abstract thought, but only biogenic units like Rook, Coma, and the CBIMs...and they weren't putting one of them on a drone and letting them have at it.

Jason had piloted a Rocker as well, and *damn* was it fun. It was just like a mecha, but one that was Terran sized, as fast as an Olympic sprinter, as agile as a gymnast, and as strong as a bull ox. After piloting a Rocker, he almost felt like a bloated whale getting out of the merge pod, weak and slow and clumsy. Rook. He checked the network, and saw that Rook was at home. He had a home now, not a little apartment in the 3D warehouse. He

actually lived just four blocks from the fence, in a really nice house with an immaculate lawn and garden that Rook maintained as a hobby. Rook was no longer an *experiment*, he was a fully recognized citizen of the House Karinne, with all the same rights as any other member. They had proven that Rook was indeed self-aware, and with that conclusion, he was granted the same rights as any other member of the house. His work at 3D was now an official job, for which he was paid, and he was no longer just a machinist. He was on the tech staff now, and had sufficient training to do some of the most delicate and important work in 3D. He engaged in several hobbies when not working, since he didn't sleep he had plenty of free time, and was a frequent enough visitor on the strip that everyone knew him, and everyone liked him.

He certainly looked different now. He was still using an android body, but the work with the ROCAs had advanced their robotics to where Rook had built a new body for himself that looked so realistic that he resembled a Faey in a skin-tight metal suit. He was even anatomically correct, and wore clothes to cover his simulated genitalia. His external skin was a layer of pliable iso-aluminum mesh with the thickness of paper, the flexibility of cloth, but the strength of natural titanium, that was threaded through with tactile units to give him a sense of feeling, and under that was the same kind of gel backing used in armor to create the illusion of the soft give of flesh, as well as provide shock absorption for his endoskeleton and internal systems. Rook and Myleena had designed the new body with just about everything, fingernails, eyelashes, "pores" on the surface of the iso-aluminum, and the male genitalia...genitalia capable of erection. Why Rook wanted that feature, Jason wasn't sure he *wanted* to know. He even had hair, real Faey hair made for him by a wig shop which had been incorporated into his outer skin, both on his head and over his fake penis. The new body was obviously not flesh and blood, but looked so much like a Faey that he was easily confused for a Faey by anyone who was color blind.

There were a few differences from a living Faey, but they were subtle ones. He had a working jaw, but Rook didn't speak through articulation. He simply opened his mouth slightly, and a speaker at the back of his oral cavity spoke for him. He could move his jaw to simulate speech, but he didn't bother all that often. He didn't breathe, he didn't even have internal lungs to take in air, had no "stomach" or any way to simulate eating or

drinking. He did have a tongue, however, which was there almost purely for aesthetics. He had also built his body so that it was 5.3 shakra tall, which was a little taller than Jason, and that was *very* tall for a Faey male.

Rook had come a *long* way from his days of being a master processor in one of Cybi's I/O controller boards. He had his own support equipment now, external biogenics built around his chip that provided him the same kinds of boons that a CBIM got from their equipment, increasing and enhancing his core abilities. Rook's essence was his chip, but his external equipment made him *functional*. His external units were his brain and body, and his core chip was his "soul," the core of him that made him alive and made him what he was.

It did also remind him of something. *[Rook,]* he sent through the biogenic network.

[Yes, Jason?]

[Swing by my office first thing in the morning, I have some stuff I want you to look at.]

[Certainly. I'll be there at ten. That work for you?]

[That's perfect. See you then.]

[Until tomorrow. Good night.]

He switched a little, leaning back in his chair and putting his feet up on his home office desk. *[Dahnai, you awake?]*

[Of course I'm awake, babes, it's not even twenty-one hundred.]

[What, Kaen hasn't exhausted you yet?]

[That's what Saelle is for,] she replied lightly.

[I'll be able to make it tomorrow,] he informed her. *[So, we'll be over around eighteen hundred. Sound good?]*

[Why can't you be here earlier? Like all day?]

[Because the kids have school, Jyslin has a lot of work to do over at the office, and unlike certain lazy Empresses, I work for a living,] he taunted in reply.

[I'll show you work when I get you over here, buster,] she retorted.

[Game on, love. Any Grand Duchesses going to be there to ruin things?]

[Anya will be here, that's not ruining.]

[Not at all,] he agreed.

[I'll also have the Emperor over, but she might be gone before you get here.]

[Enva? I'm not sure I want to be within reach of her,] Jason noted. Enva Shi'Ren was the ruler of the Sha'i-ree, known as the Emperor. It was once a dictatorial government ruled by an emperor, but was now a Republic. Their executive still held the title of the ruler from their Imperial days, however, so Enva was known as the Emperor. [She thinks I'm cute. That's a big danger sign when it comes to a Sha'i-ree.]

[She's right, you are cute. A pain in the ass, but cute despite that.]

[What's Enva doing visiting you in person at the summer palace?]

[Business that has nothing to do with you,] she replied archly. [You have your secrets, I have mine.]

[No, I have my secrets, and you have what you think are your secrets, until I get curious enough to find out,] he corrected lightly.

[You keep thinking that, babes,] she told him.

[What I do think is that I didn't hear anything about Enva coming, and you are supposed to keep my people informed. They won't tell you not to invite anyone, but they do have the right to know who's on the planet.]

[Keep your underwear on, babes, I just arranged it about an hour ago, and I told your Marine liaison as soon as I had a timetable. The report probably hasn't filtered down to you yet.]

[Most likely,] he agreed.

[Besides, how is she gonna get here without Karinne authorization to get through the Stargate, dink?]

Jason had to laugh. *[True,] he admitted.*

[If you're gonna be obnoxious, I have better things to do than deal with you, babes,] she communed playfully.

[Yeah, yeah, I have a few things to tie up myself before I can really say I'm done for the day,] he replied. [Talk to you tomorrow, love.]

[Okay. Have a good night, babes.]

That taken care of, Jason finished up the last of the items in his inbox, so he was about to go back downstairs and play with his daughters before they went to bed, at least until a news article popped up on the panel he kept on his desk, something of his rest and relaxation panel. He used it to surf Civnet when he didn't feel like merging, did non-work related things on it.

He frowned when he read the headline: [Confirmed! Grand Duke Jason Karinne plays Vanguard!] He switched to the article, and his frown grew even deeper as he read. [Can you believe it, fellow Soldiers? An honest to god *ruler* plays Vanguard! A game streamer caught the living computer Cybi hacking her way into a Vanguard battle to remind a player of an appointment...and a little digging reveals that it was none other than the Grand Duke of the House of Karinne, Jason Karinne!] There was a vid of Cybi manifesting into the game taken from another player in the squad, but thank *god* that player had deleted his game handle from the clip. The author of the article did the same, and said so straight up. [We've redacted the Grand Duke's game handle and game ID so he doesn't quit on us, but what we CAN tell you after looking up his game ID is that he's a pretty damn solid player with a high PR, and get this, he's specced almost completely into being infantry. You'd think he'd spec for command and lead, but I guess even a galactic ruler likes to take a vacation from ruling from time to time!

[So next time you're on the battlefield, fellow Soldiers, you may have the Grand Duke Jason Karinne fighting at your side!]

Jason almost slapped the panel off his desk in disgust, but he held himself back. "Cybi, I'm gonna whip your ass!" he threatened, shaking his fist towards the ceiling. It wasn't a *total* loss, he reasoned, at least after calming down after a moment. The author of the article had protected his privacy, so people wouldn't know who he was. But still, just people *knowing* that he played might cause problems. It might even motivate some groups out there to hack the game's servers to try to find out who he was, and maybe try to get at him through the game.

Either way, he wasn't playing again until he had a long talk with Miaari...and that pissed him off, because he *enjoyed* playing the game.

He checked the last thing on his list, which was the *civilian* merge center that had been opened in Karsa about four months ago, the Logistical Asset Allocation Center, or the Lake as the workers called it, since it was right on the banks of Lake Relai in western Karsa. It was a gigantic complex of some six buildings which were filled with large chambers holding thousands and thousands of merge pods. Each merge cluster had a control room that directed merge connections, linking the right driver to the right equipment, and the center had revolutionized industry on the planet. A single mechloader driver could operate multiple mechloaders, the controller switching him from unit to unit as needed, allowing him to be productive when he'd otherwise just be standing around waiting for the next pallet to be ready. By mixing on-site operators with remote units that could be activated from Karsa to help with additional work, it increased factory efficiency by nearly 31% in the factories where they were testing the system. It allowed them to focus their efforts exactly where they needed to be quickly and efficiently. It also had applications for transportation and logistics, allowing a Stick pilot to fly another Stick while the one she'd been piloting was being loaded. Even something as simple as a Stick pilot moving a few Sticks to another loading dock to prep them for loading while waiting for her primary Stick to be loaded increased overall efficiency, because the pilot didn't have to leave her merge pod to do it. That saved time, and saved time was increased efficiency. But, in the interests of public safety, passenger transportation operators would always be in the skimmer, transport, or dropship they were flying. But those transports were also capable of remote operation, in case the pilot had a medical emergency. A merge pilot could take over for the indisposed captain and get the skimmer or transport safely on the ground.

Trenirk and Jrz'kii nearly killed Myleena in jubilation when she designed the system and had Bunvar build it. Jrz'kii managed the facility, as it fell under her jurisdiction as the Secretary of Transportation and Logistics. She had a large complement of Kizzik, Makati, and Beryans there to keep everything organized and running smoothly, and they kept the merge pod workers busy without pissing them off by making them work every second of every shift.

They'd just opened the last building and got the complex up to 100% operational capacity, and Jason checked the reports about the expanded operations. Jrz'kii sent him an exhaustive report with detailed analysis of efficiency increase percentages, when all he cared about was *is it working?* The ultimate answer was yes, it was in fact working, and working well... and that was all he needed to know. Jrz'kii was the logistical expert, not him. He didn't understand a good 80% of her report anyway.

It said a lot about how things were changing when Jason could sit in his office and operate a mechloader on Janja, pilot a Juggernaut on PR-371, then fly a KV-30 dropship from Karis to Draconis, and do it all inside an hour.

That was the power of biogenics. That was the power of cyberjacks, which expanded the ability to merge to the entire population. It may not have been the original vision of the Karinnes that started the Program, but some of the most important discoveries in the history of the galaxy had been entirely *accidental*.

A shimmer made him glance up, and Cybi manifested in his office. She elected to create a hologram without feet, her legs trailing down to faded nothingness, floating over to look at him across his desk. *[What, Cybi?]*

[I thought to save you the trouble of tracking me down to whip my ass, as you put it,] she communed, her expression slightly amused.

[I'm over it,] he answered dryly as he put his feet up on the desk and interlacing his fingers over his stomach. *[I won't be able to play again until Miaari clears it, but that won't take her more than an hour or so. Just don't do it again.]*

[Your interest in the game has made Cylan make an account,] she told him, putting a finger on his cheek. *[He even installed limiters to restrict his reactions to within biological norms and added a randomizer algorithm so his aim isn't always perfect. He seeks to see why you enjoy the game, and he decided that playing it under the same limitations a flesh and blood person has was the best way to experiment.]*

Jason laughed softly. *[That was fairly forward-thinking of him,]* he replied. *[I'll have to keep track of it and see what he does.]*

[A silly way to pass the time, but he's only recently come online. He hasn't learned yet.]

[Listen to you, Miss Old Lady,] Jason teased.

[I do have something to pass along. Myleena changed the meeting tomorrow morning to 13:30.]

[That shouldn't mess mine up,] he nodded. *[If anything, it'll make my morning less rushed. She announcing any movement on Project F?]*

Cybi shook her head. *[She's still stuck on the power problem,]* she answered.

For over a year, Myleena's Translight Engine Project team had been stuck. She'd managed to develop an algorithm for the engines and a prototype was built and installed in a newly built destroyer they'd assigned for testing that Myleena had named *Trailblazer*, but they couldn't power the damn thing. Their double metaphased had the raw energy to power the engine, the problem was that when the engines shifted into translight mode while in hyperspace, it caused a quantum anomaly to form in the metaphased power stream, which knocked it out of its phased state...and tended to blow up the conduit carrying the plasma. The engines would operate in translight mode in normal space just fine—and were *fucking fast*, capable of speeds upwards of 54 light years per hour, by far the fastest FTL technology ever produced by any known civilization—and the jump engines operated just fine in hyperspace, it was just when both were used together, it introduced that fatal quantum anomaly back into the power system. For over a year, Myleena had been trying to engineer a fix, but she had had no luck. And that was half of what made it so *fucking maddening*...she had the engine built. The engine *worked*. They just couldn't get their power system to hold it in translight mode for more than a picosecond before the power fed back and killed the conduit all the way back to the exchanger.

But this was groundbreaking technology, and often something brand new had new problems that they had to work through and solve. Myleena's team had worked through trying to create a filter or isolation unit that prevented the engines from feeding back into the power stream, but she'd had no luck. So lately, she'd been working with the power itself, seeing if

she could find some metaphased state that would harmonize with the engine. Until she figured it out, the *Trailblazer* was sitting in the TEP dock up in Kosigi under heavy guard, waiting for them to devise a solution.

If Myleena had nothing new about that, then the meeting would have two subjects. The first would be the scheduled CBIM installation in Kosigi in two days. It had taken them *much* longer to design and build the facility than they first expected, because of the nature of Kosigi itself. It took them nearly two months to decide where to build it, and when they did—the center of the core of Kosigi—they had to do a lot of custom designing due to the fact that the core chamber would be the gravimetric center of Kosigi's gravity well. Once they had the site picked and designed, it had taken some pretty complex engineering to hollow out the core chamber without creating geological instability in the core, more or less requiring them to reinforce the small core so it wasn't torn apart. The core crystal would be ready in two days, and they'd install it almost as soon as it was core crystal was tempered. They did *not* leave CBIM core crystals just sitting in storage, it was actually bad for them to not be in use as soon as they were ready. It wasn't the first crystal they'd intended to install there. The initial crystal's growth tank had suffered a fatal equipment failure during its growth cycle that had corrupted the crystal beyond any hope of salvage, which had forced them to destroy it and start over...which had cost them nearly five months of growth time. Dellin had been almost jumping at them installing a CBIM in Kosigi, as his job became more and more complicated by the day, and the repeated delays that had pushed back the installation nearly six months had honestly angered him more than a little bit. But his wait was almost over. In two days, the CBIM would be installed, and it would be assisting Dellin within a takir once it got through its initial orientation, learned its duties, and started performing them.

The other reason for the meeting was the standard monthly progress meeting, which they'd spend mostly discussing the diffuser project. That too was somewhat stalled. They'd achieved 75%, and they had the same problem that the TEP project did...the *power problem*. They still hadn't figured out a way to prevent the diffusers from diffusing the singularity plants, which had to be done because they'd learned over the last 18 months that it was impossible to make the diffusion effect directional. So, since they couldn't direct the effect, they had to come up with some way to

protect the parts of the ship that were affected by it without defeating the protection it offered from Torsion weapons. Most of 3D had been working on the problem for the last six months, and because of that, there hadn't been much innovation coming out of the 3D warehouse lately.

And there were a lot more people in 3D now than just six months ago. Myleena had expanded the team by nearly three times over, to the point where 3D now had 187 members. They hailed from all over the galaxy, identified through the Academy, screened for trustworthiness, then offered a job in *the most* advanced technological research outfit in the galaxy. They had 39 different races or species represented in 3D now, some of the most brilliant engineers, scientists, and researchers in the known galaxy, who were working on tech that the rest of the galaxy wouldn't see for a few more decades...except maybe the Ruu.

And there were a few old faces in new positions in 3D. Siyhaa had sold her computer company to her lieutenant and moved to 3D permanently nine months ago, and now she was the foremost authority on cutting edge computer technology, a status that fed her ego a little bit...but she was a Moridon, so she wasn't insufferable about it. Moridon were big on decorum, they did their gloating in private. She and Myleena were the two main women that researched biogenic computer technology and sought to improve it, and with Myleena working on the engines, Siyhaa was the one that was mainly responsible for the CBIMs and other biogenic projects. Siyhaa would be the tech in charge of the CBIM installation in two days, not Myleena, her first solo installation project since joining 3D. And they were damn lucky to have her, Siyhaa was, quite simply, one of the most brilliant computer engineers and computer experts on this side of the galaxy. It took everyone a while to stop calling her *Mahja*—that was a title, not her name—but the Mob of Moridon had bestowed a new title on her, Hadhja, due to her contributions in the advancement of computer technology as a whole, the Moridon version of the Nobel Prize for science. The Mob had no idea what Siyhaa did on Karis, but the very fact that they knew she was now a member of the mysterious 3D was reason enough to give her that award.

That was something of a standard through the known galaxy now. Everyone knew *of* 3D, but didn't know exactly what they did. They just knew that they were an arm of the Karinnes that dealt with new technology,

mainly by applying it to warfare in unconventional ways. 3D operations had been visible to the Confederate Combined Military in several combat theaters, who spread rumors down into their respective civilizations, until 3D achieved something of an infamy through the Confederation as the “Area 51” of the galaxy.

Quite a long way the Legion had come, Jason often mused.

[I'll let you get things done so you can spend the rest of the evening with the family, Jason,] Cybi told him, drifting backwards a tiny bit.

[I am done, just waiting for the baby monitor to go off,] he replied with a faint smile. *[But in the meantime, I think I'll drag Rann away from Shya and spend some time with him.]*

[Good luck,] Cybi noted dryly, which made him laugh.

It was going to be a day of meetings...yay.

At least it started fun. Jason and Rook went over some ideas for improving the design of android endoskeletons in the morning just after he got to the office, with Rook sitting in the outside office waiting for him when he arrived...typical Rook. Jason was the ruler of the house, but he did still love engineering, and did his best to keep tinkering either in his basement workshop or in 3D when he had the time. He wasn't one of the lead thinkers in 3D anymore due to his other commitments—just like Jyslin—but that didn't mean that he wasn't going to tinker as a hobby. Rook was currently looking to improve android body design both for the war effort and for his own personal use, but where Jason was more interested in the hard mechanics, Rook was more interested in enhancing the sensory capabilities of the androids his chip inhabited, to be able to feel and hear and see and smell with the same richness as organic beings. His sensory receptors could tell him what was hot, what was cold, what was rough and what was smooth, but they had trouble with concepts like *soft*, *velvety*, *supple*, to feel the tiny variances in the textures that allowed organic beings with skin and all those nerve receptors to feel the difference between petting a vulpar's fur and sliding one's hand down a wall of Betrium, which was a very soft, giving metal that also held its shape, almost like metal elastic, and was used in many shock absorption systems. It was all part of Rook's core

mission of *living*, and he had decided that in order to have the same quality of life as the organics, he needed comparable sensory capability so he could *experience* the world. He wanted to develop sensors capable of giving such detailed information that it provoked an emotional response without being *too* detailed, which would detract from that emotional response, which was a very esoteric goal.

It was the classical conflict of man and machine, but in this case it was a difference between *what a lovely sunset* and *the sunset has a higher than normal variance of color patterns this evening*.

All in all, Jason *liked* Rook. He had come a long way since Bo had discovered that his chip was thinking, was child-like in some ways while quite savvy in others, and he had settled into *living* in a way that made Bo quite proud of him.

They were at it so long that Jason forgot that there was a Confederate Council meeting that morning, and that he had agreed to attend. He didn't notice when Cybi and Cyra manifested in the office, as he and Rook quibbled over rigidity ratios for endostructure support spars—the metal “bones” of an android body—and also didn't notice when the holograms of the various rulers started to appear. This was a *real* meeting today, where most of the rulers were going to attend so they could discuss the summit on Prakarika next takir, or more to the point, listen to Anivor as he went over the itinerary and preparations for the lower-gravity members of the council that would die exposed to Prakarika's native gravity. Since the summit was a domestic affair, it fell to Anivor to prepare it and host it, which relieved a great many on the council. Anivor was far more pragmatic than Anivan and more willing to ease back on Prakarikai ceremonial silliness. Anivor's ceremonies would merely be tedious, where Anivan's would have been absolutely insufferable.

“What in Barka's pillar are you talking about?” Kreel's voice called from the side. Jason and Rook looked away from the desk and saw six holograms already up, and Kreel's was among them. “What on Grimjar is a resistance coefficient?”

“Something a little past your education, Kreel,” Jason teased in reply, which made him laugh.

“I didn’t realize we were discussing this for so long, Jason,” Rook said. “We can continue later.”

“Probably for the best,” Jason said. “I have no doubt that we’ll melt Kreel’s brain if we expose him to science.”

“Hey, I took introductory chemistry in finishing school, you know!” he protested.

“I’m honestly surprised to see you in Jason’s office, Rook,” Dahnai said after her hologram winked on. From the view behind her, she was in her work office over in the summer palace. “I thought he kept you hidden from the Confederation.”

“Why would he?” Rook asked simply.

“Because of the ramifications you represent,” Kreel answered in a slightly serious voice. “You’re a biogenic chip that became self aware. It’s a big debate over in my science ministry just how many more biogenic chips might do that, and what they might do.”

“A concern not based in fact, since I am the only chip to have done so that is not a CBIM, in all of Karinne’s recorded history. So I am a fluke, not a harbinger of future events.”

“That damn logic, it makes it clear you’re a computer,” Kreel grinned.

“We could all do with a little logic from time to time, High Councilor,” Rook replied mildly, which made Dahnai chuckle. *“We can continue after the meeting today,”* he offered to Jason.

“Sounds good,” he nodded. Rook wasn’t a secret, though he was almost unknown outside of the higher circles of the Confederation. Jason didn’t hide him or what he was, because he wanted Rook to have full acceptance if he ever went offworld. Rook was a living thing, he had Karinne citizenship, and that gave him the *right* to travel if he so wished it. He had to do so with the same conditions as a Generation, which did put some heavy restrictions on his freedom, but Rook could and had taken several trips to Draconis and Terra for educational assignments to the Academy, work through his job in 3D, and personal vacations, and he had deployed with other 3D operatives on several occasions, which brought him into contact with the military and political echelons of other Confederation members. At first, they thought he

was simply a highly sophisticated robot, but after talking to him and seeing how the other 3D operatives treated him, they realized that the robot was *alive*.

“So, are we going to see a sudden influx of robot servants, Jason?” Kreel asked.

“Not that we’re selling,” Jason replied. “We were discussing possible upgrades to the Rockers. Rook was the primary engineer that developed them, because he had a lot of experience building robot bodies with full sensory capability.”

“Those things are almost scary,” Kreel chuckled. “I’m almost looking forward to seeing them used.”

“They’re specialized equipment, Kreel. You’re not going to see them in every theater, only where they’re needed. If anything, because you’d have a heart attack if you saw how much it costs just to build *one* of them,” he grunted. “I think Kumi’s contemplating murdering me just for the number that we ordered built. They’re way too expensive to just throw around and throw away. But where they are needed, I’m sure they’ll perform well.”

They settled down and got down to the business of the meeting, which had Anivor attending today. Jason sat behind his desk looking at an array of three tiers of holograms, showing just how much the Confederation had grown over the last several months. As the Syndicate got closer, close enough for undecided civilizations to *see* their monstrous fleet using their own hyperspace telescopes and other sensors, they realized just what was going on, that the Kimdori weren’t just crying wolf, and they started joining the Confederation at a rate of nearly an empire a takir. There were faces of many different colors, from green to blue to purple to brown to red to ghostly white. There was fur. There were scales. There were snouts, there were faces with two eyes, three eyes, four eyes, one with six eyes, there was one face that had no eyes—the Horg, they “saw” using ultrasonic waves emitted from organs to each side of their nose that produce echo location similar to bats or dolphins—and every major genus of commonly evolved life was represented; insectoid, mammalian, reptilian, ichthyan, avian, geomorphic—stone-like, such as the Stevak—and ranging from bipeds to octopeds. A galaxy’s worth of diversity was represented in those three tiers of holograms, so many faces that Jason barely knew most of them and only

knew names thanks to his gestalt's memory. Because of that, Jason rarely attended council anymore, and when he did, he was nearly as quiet as the Leader. The council had become highly political—that was inevitable—and Jason steered well clear of the politics of other nations.

Ojia Ro of the Aridai was the one holding the gavel, so he got them started and yielded the floor to the king of the Prakarikai, and he surprised Jason by getting to the point within ten minutes. Anivor went over the itinerary for the three day summit on his home planet, both official business and entertainment opportunities for the visiting delegations. Jason spent most of that time not really paying attention, bantering with Kreel and Krirara over biogenic comm, using the Karis biogenic network to access their empires' versions of Civnet and talk to them via commune. The three of them were even more a clique now than they had been when Krirara joined the Confederation. Outside of Dahnai, for obvious reasons, Kreel and Krirara were his best friends on the council, and the two of them were among Jason's closest friends *period*, not just on the council. Both of them visited Karis far more than other members, and most of those visits weren't on the public record. Kreel in particular managed to come over at least twice a month, and drove Aya absolutely crazy by dragging Jason off to the club district in Karsa for some therapudic partying. The other members of the council, both new and old, were aware of how much access Dahnai, Kreel, and Krirara had to Jason, and worked very hard to get them to use that access for their own benefit.

Anivor was pretty brisk for a Prakarikai, getting his presentation done in only two hours, and most of that time was used discussing actual important matters. After he was done, a good half of the rulers left the council in place of an aide, and Jason was one of them, letting Cybi and Cyra sit in for him while he headed down the hall to his conference room, where his cabinet was assembled and waiting for him. "You're on time," Yeri said in mock astonishment as Jason strode into the room.

"Push off, Yeri," he snorted as he flopped down into his chair. "Let's get going, I have a meeting at 3D in two hours."

After going through some old business, they moved on to new business, and Trenirk spoke up. "I increased hyperspace bridge production up to the

new levels, Jason,” he declared. “We should have the target number built and shipped out by the end of the month.”

“We’re not putting them at every Coalition system, are we? That’s *thousands*,” Lirren observed.

“Eventually yes, but right now we’re just focusing on creating hub systems where their ships can go to get to them,” Jason answered before Jrz’kii. “We don’t think they’ll get all their ships upgraded to real-time engines by the time the Syndicate arrives, so we’ll be using mobile catapults to get their slower ships where they need to be. They have to do a *lot* of refitting to get their ships up to real-time capability, mainly in their power systems.”

“I already have a system prepared for moving the ships incapable of jumping in real time with the rest of the fleet once combat operations begin,” Jrz’kii said through her interface. *“Our allies will be able to participate in the battles, and also share in the burden instead of sitting in the reserve lines and sharing no risk while reaping the rewards.”*

“And that’s the other good reason,” Jason said dryly. “How is the Virgan facility coming along, Bunvar?”

“We’ll be done with it in about a month, and we’ll just seal it until the CBIM crystal is ready to be installed,” she answered, brushing her long, shaggy white bangs away from her face. Bunvar was pregnant, and in Makati females, it made their hair grow at an accelerated rate for some weird biological reason.

Kumi ran into the room and took her seat. “Sorry, I was having a bit of an argument with Merchant R,” she declared.

“You’re doing business with the Ruu?” Rund asked in surprise.

“Yeah, it’s a shock to me too,” she chuckled. “But he wants to make a deal trading laminated titanium, food, and heavy gases we’re mining out of the gas giants at RJ-44 for Gorvite ore. Given how rare it is outside the Q quadrant, I think it’s a good deal. I just wish they’d trade in credits, or even in Coalition *sipp*, but they don’t recognize our money systems,” she frowned. “Everything with them is bartering, goods for goods. They don’t take cash.”

“I thought the Ruu didn’t make any sort of deals outside of the Academy,” Jerrim mused.

“Just bartering, and they’re pretty picky who they barter with. They won’t barter with lower-technology empires at all, even if they have something the Ruu want. I think because we’re so close to them technologically, they don’t see trading with us as some way we might try to blackmail them or steal their secrets,” she shrugged. “I swear, they’re more paranoid than the Kimdori and the Moridon combined. Polite, urbane, and friendly, but freakin’ paranoid.”

“That’s weird, since they have so many teachers at the Academy now, teaching their technology.”

“Teaching what they’re willing to share, while they learn everything we have that they haven’t,” Jason elaborated. “They keep most of their technology to themselves, just like we do. They actually have the same outlook we do when it comes to releasing advanced technology. They don’t mind teaching others things they’re ready to know, things that won’t unbalance things or start wars. The Ruu’s entire society is based on science and education and knowledge, and they’re pacifists like the Imbiri. From what Miaari dug up, they don’t even have a military, just self-defense systems set up around their planets. Their philosophical outlook is that happy people are not people starting wars, and technology can make people happy by increasing their quality of life. But if people aren’t ready for it, they don’t release it.”

“I take it you’ve had a few long talks with Observer A?” Bunvar asked lightly, looking at him.

“A few,” he nodded. “The fact that we and them have some common outlooks is half the reason why they’re so involved in the Academy and joined the Confederation as neutral observers.”

After about an hour and a half of discussing upcoming projects, Jason headed for 3D, opting to take his skimmer instead of a hovercar because he had an appointment up in Kosigi later today. He landed at the warehouse after getting through the hard shield, which looked completely different now than it did just five days ago. They’d done a major expansion and renovation to the original warehouse because people were stepping on each

other's toes, nearly tripling the available floor space and adding a second automated mini-factory for machining custom parts, taking the strain off the old one.

"Alright, I don't have all day," Jason called loudly as he walked up into the central area where everyone had their desks, with their working areas ringing the outer areas of the facility, which already looked like a disaster area of parts and equipment and hard-printed schematics and diagrams laying all over the place, despite only being in use for five days. They were some messy people in 3D, so it was a good thing nobody ever saw the inside of their headquarters. "Someone drag Myli out of her office and let's get this started."

"I'm right here, dickbrain," Myleena declared, rising up from where she was hunched over a hard-printed schematic with several other techs.

They gathered together in the middle area of the shop, and Myleena got them started by handing the floor over to Siyhaa. The Moridon gave them a detailed briefing about the CBIM installation tomorrow, from what time to be at the shop to what to bring, and she handed out duty sheets to the techs that would be part of the installation team. Jason got his own sheet, since he was part of the team, and he rather amusedly read it, sort of liking how he wasn't the boss in 3D when it came to a project. Siyhaa was project leader, she was the boss, and she wasn't afraid to give the Grand Duke his marching orders in front of the entire team.

"Most of our problems with this project are behind us now," Siyhaa declared after handing out the duty sheets. "I expect the installation of the core to be without problem or incident, as this is no longer a new procedure for us. We have done this before, we know what to do. The growth facility reports the core will be tempered and ready at precisely 09:00 tomorrow morning. And we will be there to pick it up the moment it is ready. We should have the CBIM core online and undergoing initial testing by 17:00. Nobody be late," she warned, then she sat back down and let Myleena take the floor again.

They transitioned over to the monthly progress meeting, where project leaders talked about where they were in their current project, what advances they'd made, and problems they were having. It was an open forum where the entire team tossed around ideas to help project leaders try to solve those

problems. Jason already knew where everyone was at with their projects thanks to the updates they sent him, but he still attended the progress meetings because he liked to hear the ideas thrown around as they discussed problems and how to solve them. Engineering was half technical skill and half throwing spaghetti against the wall to see what sticks, and the brainstorming to solve problems was said flying spaghetti. Good ideas could come from anywhere, and were often so *simple* it left the entire team smacking their foreheads wondering why they hadn't thought of it. But one thing Jason had learned over the years was that often, the simplest problem was the hardest to solve, because the answer was so obvious than an engineer would discount it in favor of the convoluted.

That was what made Myleena such an engineering savant, because she *could* see the simple in the complex, or boil the complex down to simple terms and attack problems on that level. Jason could only wish he could someday be half the engineer Myleena was.

While they didn't make any significant progress, Jason did feel that they did move a few steps in the right direction on a few projects. After the meeting was over, he gave Myleena a lift over to her *other* project on Skeyai Island, the ultra-top secret "Project F," and they discussed the *other* project that was going on, Jason getting his other progress report as they flew over. *[I've never been this stumped for this long.]* Myleena fumed a bit, leaning back in the copilot's chair. *[Usually I'd have made a little progress after nearly eight months, but this power problem just has me stumped.]*

[Time for you to take the advice you love dishing out, Myli. Take a break,] he told her. *[Just step back for a few days and take a short vacation, and I mean a vacation. Don't show up at the shop tomorrow to hang around for the CBIM installation. Siyhaa can handle it, so let her get it done. For that matter, give the entire staff at Project F a couple of days off to recharge, relax a little bit, then come back and get back to work on the problem.]*

[You know, babes, that's actually a pretty good idea. I do feel a little burned out,] she admitted, sliding her long-fingered hand down her face wearily. *[I don't think I've had a day off in nearly a month. I think a couple of days of just parking my ass on a lounge on the beach with a few of those*

cheesy Terran romance novels Symone loves and thinking about nothing important for a while is exactly what I need. I can spend my days in a lounge and my nights with my legs spread,] she communed with a lustful, dirty texture to her thought. *[Nothing makes a girl more relaxed and energized like some good sex.]*

[Just keep the decibel level down to merely obnoxious,] he replied, which made her laugh. *[I'm just glad we're finally getting the Kosigi CBIM up and running. One more delay, and I think Dellin would be standing at my front door with an axe handle and a murderous smile.]*

Myleena burst out laughing. *[No doubt. I think he's starting to think we're doing it to him on purpose or something.]*

[I've been keeping him informed. He understands that the Kosigi CBIM wasn't as easy to design and build as the others, because of Kosigi itself. Between the base topography, all that armor, and the disconnected, open nature of the place, it wasn't as easy as just throwing up a new building and installing a new biogenic node. So, tomorrow night, I fully expect Dellin to shut the fuck up.]

Myleena laughed again, giving him a wolfish smile. *[He's a man, baby, he's never going to shut up. It's not in his DNA.]*

[Watch it missy,] he threatened, which made her grin at him as Skeyai Island came into view on the horizon. The facility came into view as they approached, a trio of pre-fab warehouse buildings set up in a loose triangular formation on the small, untterraformed island. Myleena had done a little personal terraforming in the form of grass lawns surrounding the buildings and a couple of trees she'd had transplanted from Karga, just so they had someplace nice to sit if they wanted to sit outside in the sun and work. The island had no beaches, and that was one of the features that made it defensible. It was almost a column of rock with a flat top that jutted up out of the water, with low cliffs on all sides that would make it very hard for a casual civilian boater to try to get up to the top. The fact that six Wolf fighters were lazily circling the island, and four Gladiators and two Juggernauts were patrolling the cliff tops would dissuade anyone curious anyway. Jason landed on the pad in the center of the three buildings and opened the hatch. *[Here you go, Myli. Wrap everything up and give the team a couple of days off, you guys need it.]*

[I'm gonna do just that, babes,] she agreed with a nod as she stood up. [We're taking two days off, and we'll come back and tackle this on Koira. And I promise I won't come lurk tomorrow. I will take the day off.]

[Good, cause I'm giving Siyhaa some orders about what to do to you if you show up uninvited.]

She grinned, then patted him on the shoulder. *[If it wasn't for the fact that I've seen what's between your legs, baby, I'd almost think you were a woman, the way you talk,]* she teased, then she hurried out of the skimmer before he could smack her.

Jason left Skeyai behind and ascended up into space, then put the moon of Kosigi squarely in front of him as he caught up on some reports Chirk sent to his gestalt. This was his last scheduled meeting today, a meeting with Dellin to go over tomorrow's CBIM installation, which was going to disrupt Kosigi's daily operations more than a little bit. They were clearing entire swaths of the moon's interior as a security measure when they brought in the core, tying up the smaller doors for nearly two hours, then they'd be jerking around the existing computer network once they had the CBIM up and started transferring data from the mainframe in the moon into the CBIM's core. The mainframe already there was going to remain, it was designed into the architecture to serve as a remote subprocessing unit for the CBIM. Its operational parameters would have to be updated, and that required taking the mainframe offline as it underwent upgrades. Kosigi's computer system would be down for about thirty minutes as they upgraded the mainframe, and when it came back up, the CBIM would be online and operational, and the current mainframe would be the largest and most powerful of the CBIM's remote subsystems.

Dellin, Miaari, and Siyhaa were in the landing by waiting for him when his skimmer landed, and he shook Dellin's hand warmly when he came down the steps. "Dellin," he said.

"You're late, your Grace," Dellin complained, which made him laugh.

"I'm two minutes late," he protested.

"Late is late, your Grace," Siyhaa sniffed unapprovingly. "Now our entire schedule is off."

"We can just walk a little faster to make up for it," Jason told them.

They retreated to Dellin's office, then they got down to business. Siyhaa gave Dellin a detailed briefing about exactly what would happen tomorrow, going step by step through the entire plan, which included when and what parts of the base would have to be cleared of foreign workers as they brought in the core and other top-secret equipment, the routes that equipment would take, and detailed installation times that told Dellin exactly where they should be in the installation process at what time. Miaari was there to coordinate the security, as that was her job, stationing Kimdori through Kosigi to make sure none of the spies they all knew were in the moon would get close enough to get a look at the equipment used in a CBIM core facility, while Dellin's uniformed security, Military Police, Marines, and Tarks, would be providing the obvious visible security. She then went over the installation procedure in how it would affect base operations, including a scheduled hour of the base computer being down. The upgrades would only take thirty minutes, but Siyhaa was being wise in budgeting extra time in case they had problems. "When the mainframe comes back up, Admiral, the CBIM will be operational and already in the process of taking over base operations," she concluded. "That process will take approximately four hours, during which you might notice a slight reduction in computer processing speed and process execution. Once the CBIM is in full operational control of Kosigi, it will begin its forty day observation period. During that time, there will be an observation team inside the core facility, and a 3D technician will be present in the operations center at all times to monitor the CBIM's performance. The 3D technician schedule has already been sent to your office. During the observation period, we will also be conducting compatibility tests with the new CBIM and the Generations, to find the ideal match should the CBIM ever be called upon to be used to defend the base. When the observation period is complete, the CBIM core facility will be unstaffed and sealed most of the time, and its security will be added to your list of secure site responsibilities for your Tarks and intelligence operatives."

"Miaari already went over that part of it with me, Hadhja," Dellin told her. "I already have site coverage for the core chamber added to the security duty list."

"It sounds like we have everything organized, so it'll just be a matter of doing it," Jason said.

Siyhaa nodded. “The operation has been fully planned, and should go smoothly. After the repeated delays this project has suffered, it is only fair that the installation and initial activation have no problems.”

Jason had to laugh. “Too true, Hadhja,” he agreed. “And none of them were really anyone’s fault. It was just engineering being engineering,” he added. “Or it was karma biting Dellin in the butt for being so impatient.”

“I’ve been far *too* patient, your Grace,” Dellin countered, which made him laugh. “Seriously. The mainframe has been running at 85% capacity for nearly two months now. If we put any more stress on it, it might crash.”

“Tomorrow that’s not going to be an issue anymore, Dellin,” Jason told him. “You can’t push the CBIM we’re installing past 50%, no matter how hard you try. It’ll be running at 20% most of the time, and lending extra processing power to Cybi for scientific and research applications.”

“And I’ll sleep much better knowing that, your Grace. Now, so I know before I meet it, what is the CBIM’s name?”

Jason laughed. “I’ve decided to name her Cynna,” he replied. “If she’s a girl, anyway. If it turns out he’s a boy, I guess we can change it to Cynnen.”

“Cylan did throw a wrench into the naming conventions,” Siyhaa said seriously.

Jason chuckled. “Yeah, we have to plan for that eventuality now.”

“I rather like that name,” Dellin decided.

“Good, because you’re the one that’s going to be talking to her more than anyone else, Dellin,” Jason told him. “Cynna will more or less be *your* CBIM, and running Kosigi will be her primary responsibility.”

“Believe me, Jason, we desperately need her, and need her *now*,” Dellin said emphatically.

“You’ll have her starting tomorrow,” Jason assured him. “Provided the installation goes smoothly, anyway.”

“It will. It had *better*,” Siyhaa said threateningly, which made Jason laugh despite knowing she was being deadly serious.

Koira, 13 Demaa, 4404, Faey Orthodox Calendar

Wednesday, 28 March 2018 Terran Standard Calendar

*Koira, 13 Demaa, year 1329 of the 97th Generation, Karinne
Historical Reference Calendar*

Kosigi Lunar Station, Karis

Hefting a box of tools, Jason stepped down onto the central core of Kosigi, the original core of the rocky moon that the Karinnes had hollowed out, not far from one of the kathra-wide metal spars that ran from the core to the outer shell, from which supports and frames and docks had been built. In the air over them was a KSV-190 heavy cargo dropship, and over it were two frigates, a destroyer, and a cruiser, staying very close to that dropship and the precious cargo it was carrying. Kyva and the KBB were standing around the entry to the core chamber in their Gladiators for additional security, and anyone that would recognize those black Gladiators for who they were would think *really* hard before they tried anything. The air around the core was almost always warm compared the open void areas, so Jason was in a tee and jeans. Siyhaa almost pushed him from behind as she stepped out of the dropship, which was easy for her to do since she was a good three shakra taller than him; Jason could stand with the top of his head just under the swell of Siyhaa's breasts. "We are fifteen minutes behind schedule!" Siyhaa boomed as she exited the dropship, the last one out. She was carrying two heavy cases full of tools. "Have the dropship unload the core on the crawler, then get the crawler ready to move onto the lift! Team A, team B, you should be on your way into the facility right now! Have those Gladiators move back fifteen shakra from the work area! Power team, why do I not see you locking in the breakers for the core chamber? Move, people, move! We must get back on schedule!"

Jason was just one of about twenty 3D techs that rode the lift down to the entry tunnel, which was about 100 shakra long and filled with blast doors and hard shields to protect the core chamber. Jenny and Bo jostled him a little bit from behind as he pushed Emia and Eraen along in front of him. "I'm gonna smack you for putting her in charge, Jason," Jenny threatened as they walked.

“She’ll calm down once we’re back on her schedule,” Jason chuckled. “You know how Moridons are about a schedule.”

“Yes, a schedule is a schedule, and the only way you should be off your schedule is if you are *ahead* of schedule,” one of Siyhaa’s Moridon workers agreed from behind them. He was one of six Moridon computer experts that Siyhaa had brought with her from her computer company and to 3D.

“She’d have a nervous breakdown if she lived on Terra,” Bo noted, which made Jason laugh.

“It’d be worse if she was on Grimjar,” Jason added, which made Bo laugh in return.

Once they were inside the core chamber, they broke into teams and got started. They’d done this five times already, one for each CBIM and the CBMOM on the *Tianne*, so they had a system for getting the stacks up and running in advance of the core arriving, when they’d shift to getting the core installed. Siyhaa had also organized them well, getting the techs with the skills suited for the task doing what they were good at. Siyhaa barely had to talk at all once she entered the chamber, since everyone was already hard at work. She just started unpacking tools and listening as the team above was unloading the core from the dropship and getting it on the crawler. By the time the core arrived on the crawler, already seated in its mounting socket, they had everything ready to begin installing it.

That process took about six hours, since it wasn’t something they could streamline. They had to do everything in a specific order when it came to seating the core in its base, then connecting the core to its power and data trunks. Each team worked on its assigned task, be it the power team, the dataline team, the stacks team, or the remote connections team. But, while they couldn’t streamline the process, they had enough practice that getting the core seated, annealed, and then connected was a smooth operation that encountered no major issues, just a few small problems that never failed to rise up during a major installation like this one.

Right on Siyhaa’s schedule, the team completed the last of the checklist double-checking their work, and they reached that seminal moment of truth. Jason called Dellin to the core chamber so he could be there for the CBIM’s power up, and once he arrived, it was Siyhaa that did the honors of hitting

the physical switches that brought the core up. Exactly four seconds after she hit those switches and then locked them in place, a silvery pseudo-nude hologram carrying the face of Sora Karinne shimmered into view in front of the core, behind the circular rail that marked the edge of the hard shield that protected the core. *“CBIM designation C-10 initialization,”* came the audio message that all of them both hoped and expected to hear, and then a sweeping commune swept through the chamber, emanating from the core, which told Jason that that part of the core was also operational. *“Communal core systems operational. External equipment detected. Generations detected. Core systems initialized. Core room sensors initialized. Data inflow nominal, sensory encoders and decoders operational.”* The hologram opened its eyes, and blinked a couple of times...which Jason noticed. The other CBIMs had not done that, and he made an immediate note of it to Cybi, who manifested a hologram into the core chamber. *“Visual acuity analyzers nominal. Auditory acuity analyzers nominal. Atmospheric chemical composition sensors nominal. External tactile sensory analyzers nominal. CBIM C-10 sensory systems initialization complete. Generation, identify,”* she said, looking at Jason.

“I am the Grand Duke Jason Karinne, ruler of the House of Karinne, but you may call me Jason,” he answered. “You can suspend identifying other entities within the core chamber. Their identities will become known to you once you access your personnel database.”

“Processed. Identification protocols temporarily suspended,” the CBIM acknowledged. *“CBIM C-10 designation?”*

“Your designation will be Cynna,” he replied.

“Designation stored. CBIM C-10 designation changed to Cynna. Initialization process commencing.”

That too could not be streamlined, so for nearly two hours, Jason and Siyhhaa carefully went down the checklist as the new CBIM, Cynna, detected, initialized, and configured each of her external support stacks and systems. When they went through the last subsystem, the hologram moved out from behind the hard shield and floated to stop directly in front of him. *“CBIM external systems initialization complete, all systems nominal. Command, Grand Duke Karinne?”*

“Your first command is to answer a question. Why did you blink after your sensory processors initialized?” he asked.

She regarded him. *“I saw you blink. I thought that was the proper thing to do,”* she answered in that monotone common for a new CBIM, relying completely on its personality template. That was an intriguing answer, Jason decided, but within the operational capability of a newly born CBIM. She had imitated him, part of her personality template to try to seem *personable*.

Jason glanced up at Siyhaa, who looked down at him, then she gave a slight shrug. “Alright. Your first task is to receive download from Cybi, another CBIM,” he told her, pointing at Cybi. “You will store that data in your core and mark it as read-only critical data, and you will encrypt it.”

“Processed. Communal query detected, origination CBIM C-06, designation Cybi. Data transfer commencing.” Jason only had to wait about twenty seconds. *“Data transfer complete, data stored in my core memory lattice. All data flagged as critical read-only data and encrypted. Command, Jason Karinne?”*

“Locate the operational database of the Command Biogenic Mainframe connected to your external system, stack 1-1A-1, and download its database directly into your core. Your mission is stored in that data.”

“Processed. Database located, origination Command Biogenic Mainframe CM-174B, designation Kosigi Control Mainframe. Data accessed Processing.” She lifted her holographic head slightly. *“Data stored. Mission command parameters located. My primary objective is to operate and manage Lunar Base Kosigi under the command of Staff Admiral Dellin Karinne. Staff Admiral Dellin Karinne’s biometrics identified and stored.”* She looked at Dellin. *“Greetings, Admiral. How are you today?”*

Dellin grinned so hugely that Jason was surprised he didn’t sprain a muscle. “Greetings Cynna. I’m feeling just fine. In fact, I’m both very relieved and quite happy that you’re operational. You are sorely needed.”

“Logs indicate the prior control mainframe was running close to maximum capacity. I am needed,” she reasoned. *“I will endeavor to operate satisfactorily, Admiral.”*

“Yes you are, Cynna,” Jason agreed. “For the moment, all of us have to wait. In order for you to begin taking over the operational processes from the current control computer, it has to be taken offline and upgraded. We have a timeline scheduled for that operation. Until we can perform those upgrades, there’s little you can do but wait.”

“The command center should be on schedule, Jason. With Cynna up and running, I really need to get back there and oversee the shutdown,” Dellin declared.

“All of us that are going to do that need to head there,” Jason added.

“There is much I can do while waiting, Jason,” Cynna stated. “There is much for me to learn, so my time should not be wasted by waiting idly.”

Jason glanced at the hologram, then over at Cybi. He was honestly surprised, this CBIM was showing a whole lot more *personality* than the others had just after coming online.

“I like this CBIM,” Siyhaa said approvingly, which made Jason roll his eyes a little bit. “The CBIM installation is complete! Teams, pack up your tools! Observation team, take your posts! Upgrade team, report to the operations center!”

“An observation team of technicians will remain in your core chamber to make sure everything is operating normally,” Jason told the CBIM. “If you have any questions or any problems arise, notify them, or you can tell Cybi or Cyra, or commune directly with me. Another observer will be in the operations center whose primary role will be to monitor the interaction between you and the old command mainframe, which will be reconfigured to be one of your external support systems. That is why we have to take it offline.”

“It needs manual updating to change its operational parameters,” she nodded in understanding. “And its physical primary data trunks have to be rerouted to me, so I suffer no delay in my datastreams.”

“Exactly,” he agreed. “The upgrades and connections should only take about a half an hour, but they’re not scheduled to begin for another forty minutes.”

“The operation timetable is in the database. I will monitor the operation via communal link.”

“Very good. You should introduce yourself to the other CBIMs while we’re waiting. I’m sure they’re waiting to hear from you.”

“I have already made contact with all operational CBIMs, as well as the CBMOM, the command mainframes on the command ships, and the operations mainframe on Kimdori Prime” she told him.

“We have already updated our protocols to add Cynna into the archival system,” Cybi added. *“And Cynna is introducing herself to Jyslin over at the Paladins office as we speak, and to Myleena, who was anxiously waiting for news of Cynna’s activation..”*

“Yeah, you just saved yourself a whole lot of cold shoulder, Cynna,” Jason said dryly, which made Cybi laugh. “Once we have Kosigi’s systems back up, Cybi, we can go ahead and update all the planetary systems to add Cynna.”

“I have the updates ready to be sent out,” she assured him.

“Then it sounds like we’re done here, after we take care of one more small thing,” Jason declared. “Hadhja, get the observation team set up. I’m going to go up to Dellin’s office so we can have a conference with Cynna. Cynna, manifest a hologram in Dellin’s office and wait for us to arrive.”

“I am there and waiting, Jason,” she nodded in reply. *“I also have a hologram manifested in Operations. I am meeting Admiral Dellin’s command staff as we speak.”*

Again, interesting. Cynna was demonstrating *initiative*, taking the initiative herself to put a hologram in Ops, no doubt knowing—*anticipating*—that she would be told to do it. That was much different from the other CBIMs, who took days, even weeks, to start demonstrating initiative, as they learned more about their roles and started understanding how things worked. Cynna hadn’t done anything wrong, but Jason found it intriguing that she would so quickly start to anticipate what needed to be done and take action, after just minutes being online and having just received her operational protocols.

Jason rather thought that it was a *good* sign, not a foreboding one.

“Alright then, Cynna, I want you to alter your hologram from the default appearance to differentiate yourself from the other CBIMs,” Jason told her. “How you do that is up to you.”

“*Processed,*” she answered, and immediately, the hairstyle of her hologram was very short, a pixie style, and the color of her hologram shifted from silvery-white to metallic chrome, almost reflective. She had also altered the shape of her eyes, making them more almond-shaped, and made her pupils electric blue. Once again, *interesting*. She hadn’t asked for parameters, and she had made quite a few cosmetic changes to her hologram. “*Appearance updated. Is this an acceptable appearance for Operations, Admiral Dellin?*”

“It’s quite handsome, Cynna,” he replied. “I like it.”

“*Appearance saved and set to default,*” she reported.

“We are done here, and ahead of schedule,” Siyhhaa boomed, her voice quite pleased. “Bo, you will command the first shift of the observation team,” she ordered.

“Already getting things set up, Hadhja,” Bo called from a console, where he was sitting with a finger on his interface.

“Then let us remove ourselves to the mainframe core room to prepare it for maintenance,” she called.

Jason left Siyhhaa and the crew to get things done, as he and Dellin went back up to Operations, and they oversaw as the base effectively shut down to free up the command mainframe so it could be taken offline. They shut down the last operation just minutes before the upgrade was to begin, and Siyhhaa decided not to waste time, and began the operation immediately after confirmation that the mainframe was unloaded. They watched holograms of Siyhhaa and her team doing the work in the mainframe core chamber, moving around dataline trunks as Siyhhaa opened the mainframe and replaced two master processor chips in the core operations system board, which upgraded the operational parameters of the mainframe, effectively giving it a patch so it would operate as a client unit to Cynna rather than being the computer in charge. The old processor chips would be returned to the Shimmer Dome for reprogramming, something that could only be done there; chips of that size and power were too valuable to just

trash when they were replaced, they would be reprogrammed and used again. While the upgrade team worked, Jason found it a bit, well, eerie to see Operations so quiet. The base was at a near-complete halt of all operations, with only a few things going on that didn't rely on the computer to get done. Dock workers were still doing a little work on ships, but just about everything else stopped, from cargo container deliveries to the concourse shops in the worker entertainment sector. Dellin's system kept track of everything, all the way down to the nuts and bolts, and without a computer, any material or equipment moving would become lost when the computer system came back online. Because of that, absolutely anything that required computer interaction was halted while Siyhaa and her team executed the mainframe upgrades to convert it into a subprocessor for the CBIM. A damn powerful subprocessor that would be doing a hell of a lot of work, but a slave unit under Cynna's control nonetheless.

It only took them about fifteen minutes to get the dataline trunks switched around and the new operational chips installed, and Siyhaa reset the command mainframe a moment later, causing it to update with its new programming.

"Mainframe is back online, I am accessing," Cynna reported.
"Mainframe reboot complete, no problems detected. The updates to its operational parameters are successful, the mainframe is now completely integrated into my main operations subprocessor stack. Resuming all operations within the base, and all production and logistical activities are returning to normal. We are back up, Admiral, Jason, and should return to normal operations in sixteen minutes."

There was a bit of cheering in Operations, and Dellin gave an approving nod. "Alright, let's get back on schedule, people!" he called. "Every station do a flash-update and send it to the board! Logistics, get the supply lines back on schedule! Inform all dock masters and foremen that they can resume operations!"

And just like that, Dellin's ops center was back to its usual bustling normal.

Jason had Dellin come back to his office, which had an awesome view of a dock building a new KMS capitol ship, and after the other CBIMs manifested holograms there, they had a long talk with Cynna. It was there

that Jason and Dellin described her new duties in detail and what Dellin expected from her as her commanding officer, elaborating on the operations protocols she'd downloaded from the mainframe, teaching her *why* she was doing what she was doing so she could better perform her job. They also got to know Cynna a little bit, particularly Dellin, who would be working very closely with her until he retired from the KMS and handed command of Kosigi to someone else...because Dellin would *never* leave Kosigi. This was his command, this was his dream job, and this was what he did best. He would never leave just as much as Myri would never be stupid enough to transfer him out.

After about a half an hour, Siyhhaa knocked politely on the door, and after Dellin opened it, she ducked down and spoke without coming in...to save snagging her horns on the doorframe if nothing else. "Your Grace, Admiral, all inspections are complete, and the CBIM and the mainframe are fully operational and operating within expected parametes. Our work here is complete, and the installation team is preparing to depart."

"Then that's it, we're done here. Thank you, Hadhja Siyhhaa. Get everyone back home, I'm gonna go back to the White House to get some work done."

"Yes, Jason. I'll send you my final report as soon I have it prepared."

"Good work, Hadhja, you exceeded expectations," he told her proudly, which made her bob her horned head in humble acceptance of his praise before closing the door. "Anything extra you want to go over while I'm here, Dellin?"

"Not really, Jason, and I'm going to be too busy to worry about it for the rest of the day," he chuckled. "Me and Cynna have a lot to go over, and we have to get her job training started. She has a lot to learn, and not much time to learn it."

"So, you're saying I'm under your feet and you want me out of your hair so you can get back to work," Jason proposed.

"Precisely, Jason," he nodded, which made Jason laugh.

"I can take a hint," he grinned, standing up. "Send me regular status reports. You too, Cynna. I want hourly updates on your operational status."

“I will send them to your gestalt at the top of each hour,” she answered.

“Works for me. I’m heading back to my office.”

“We should get back to work as well,” Cybi said.

“Like it strains you in the slightest to put holograms in here,” Jason told them, which made Cybi and Cyra smile.

It took Jason about an hour to get back to the office, where he tackled the inbox that had built up a little bit while he was tending to the day’s work. Once he got that out of the way, he called Cynna to manifest a hologram in his office, then he had a meeting with her with the other CBIMs in attendance. It was the same thing he did with the others, just chatting with her a little bit, getting to know her in private surroundings, and telling her what she was allowed to do in regards to working with Jason, such as telling her she was allowed to manifest a hologram in his office and at his house at her own behest, that she didn’t need permission. He also invited her to the house for dinner, as it were, to introduce her to Rann and the kids. Even if Cynna was in Kosigi and her job was to run Kosigi, she would still be interacting a whole lot with the Dukal family, in purely social circumstances if nothing else. The CBIMs were part of the Dukal *family*, after all. For that reason, they all needed to get to know her the way they had Cyra, Cyvanne, and Cylan.

After the meeting, there was only one thing left to do, which Jason timed efficiently with the scheduled Confederate Council meeting. Again, Jason attended in person, but very few of the other rulers were in attendance. Ojia Ro had to be since he had the gavel—a fact that made the rulers hate their takir of council leadership—but few other rulers were there, which made it a gathering of aides, underlings, and more than a few sycophants and lackeys. It was fairly rare for the council to meet two days in a row, but this was a scheduled normal meeting where yesterday was a special session dealing with the upcoming summit.

Jason’s need to attend was just to make a formal announcement, which he got in just after Ojia Ro gaveled them to order. “I have a new person to add to the list of acceptable aides that can stand in for me during council meetings,” Jason said after getting the floor from Ojia Ro. “Cynna,” he prompted. Immediately, Cynna’s hologram flickered into view in front of

his desk, visible to the assembled aides and delegates. “This is Cynna, the fifth CBIM. She came online just a few hours ago, and is still settling into her new duties. Like the other CBIMs, she will have authorization to sit in for me during council meetings. Introduce yourself, Cynna,” he told her.

“Greetings, assembled delegates and rulers. I am Cynna.”

That announcement caused quite a few holograms to shift from lackeys to rulers, and the quickest of them was Gau. Gau’s face replaced his aide in a heartbeat, and he gave a toothy, broad smile. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Cynna,” he answered. I am High Archon Gau, ruler of the Haumda.”

“It is a pleasure to meet you, High Archon,” Cynna answered, putting her hands on her legs in a demure pose and bowing gracefully.

“As you might expect, Jason, I would like permission to dispatch a small number of priests to Karis to investigate the possible fulfillment of omens,” Gau said.

“I was waiting for you to ask, Gau,” Jason said, which made him chuckle. “Get in touch with Yeri and she’ll arrange it.”

“I’ll get in touch with her right now,” he said, and his hologram disappeared, replaced by his aide.

“That’s all I had to say. Cynna won’t be attending today’s council, and since we’re still getting her settled in, and I’m afraid I won’t either. Cylan will be representing the House of Karinne for the rest of council. Good day to you all,” he said, then he cut his connection, which would make his hologram disappear from the feeds of the others.

[You were almost rude, Jason,] Cyra noted.

[Like I care if I offend a bunch of bootlickers,] Jason snorted, which made Cybi smile. *[You’re benefitting from experience here, Cynna, you’re the baby in the family, and we’ve gone through getting a CBIM oriented and capable of interacting with the house members on a social level three times now. Trust me, Cynna, that’s going to be the hardest part of this for you, as you get used to the quirks and idiosyncracies of the people of the house, who are from many different cultures and often have very different personalities. If you have any questions about things, you have four other*

CBIMS you can talk to, and you can always come to me if you're not satisfied with their answers.]

[I have already begun studying social interaction and receiving mentoring from the others in the art of dealing with biologicals, Jason,] she answered.

[We're getting her ready, Jason,] Cybi nodded. *[And you're right, dealing with you illogical meat people is the most stressful part about being a CBIM.]*

[Well, your first test will be tonight, when you meet Dahnai in a completely informal setting over at her summer palace,] he told them. *[Dahnai is part of my family on more than one level, but she's also quite different from anyone you'll meet on Karis because she's the Empress of the Imperium.]*

[I hope to be ready,] Cynna nodded.

[Works for me. You guys take Cynna out and give her the welcome tour, show her all the important places and explain the rules the CBIMs operate under both within the biogenic network and when dealing with house members,] Jason ordered. *[She's got a lot to learn about what goes on down here on the planet in addition to what she'll be doing up on the moon.]*

[We're already doing so, Jason,] Cybi nodded.

[Sounds good. I'll leave you guys to it, I have to get home and get the kids ready for the overnight trip to the summer palace.]

[That is a dismissal, Cynna. He's telling us to go away, just politely,] Cyvanne explained.

[You want blunt? Fine. Out, you pains in my ass, I have more important things to do than deal with you,] he retorted playfully, which made them all give him ominous smiles, and Cybi flicked him lightly on the ear.

[And that is playful banter. You will hear a lot of it from him,] Cyra added in a public commune as the five holograms representing the CBIMs shimmered and vanished in quick succession.

Jason chuckled and shook his head, as he had this weird feeling that Cynna was going to make things very interesting around here. Things

usually were pretty interesting when a new CBIM came online, as they learned their way around and matured into distinct personalities, but Cynna seemed quite different from her brother and sisters. She *already* had a great deal of personality, and she was showing more and more with every passing hour. That too wasn't completely unusual, Cylan had started showing a ton of personality within two days of coming online, but it was unusual that within *seconds* of coming online, she was demonstrating more personality than her default programmed template, and was already building on it. That made Cynna different from the other CBIMs.

Different in a good way.

He'd keep an eye on her. He was curious to see how Cynna developed and grew, when she showed so much potential so early to act like the living thing she was, something that had taken Cyra, Cyvanne, and Cylan a while to demonstrate. All CBIMs were self-aware, were *alive*, but they'd showed with the first three they'd built since establishing the house that it took them a while to show that uniqueness to the world. There was a moment, Jason called it the *magic moment*, when a CBIM realized that its personality template was not *who* it really was, and started changing that personality to reflect its true personality, its true self. That was the moment that Jason felt a CBIM "owned" its self-aware state, came to fully comprehend and appreciate the fact that it was a living thing, not just a collection of biogenic crystal, lattice pathways, and programming. Cyra had taken nearly a month to get there. Cylan had taken 19 days to reach that state. Cyvanne, on the other hand, got there in just 9 days.

He'd have to keep an eye on Cynna and see how long it took her to reach her magic moment. If he was right, she'd come to her epiphany of being *alive* very quickly.

Chapter 2

Koira, 18 Kedaa, 4404, Faey Orthodox Calendar

Tuesday, 8 May 2018 Terran Standard Calendar

*Koira, 18 Kedaa, year 1329 of the 97th Generation, Karinne
Historical Reference Calendar*

Kosigi Lunar Station

With a bit of a bittersweet sigh, Jason opened the heavily armored cockpit doors and dropped down from the cockpit of the Juggernaut he'd been piloting, landing lightly in front of the mecha with his armor absorbing almost all of the force from the near nine shakra drop. The mecha behind him was *his* Juggernaut, which sat on the pad behind his house almost all the time. Jason had his own personal mecha of every model in the KMS, from a Wolf to a Gladiator and everything in between, making him one of the very few galactic rulers that knew what it was like from personal experience to operate his military's war machines. Like Saelle's Gladiator, it had a tactical gestalt installed in it—every one of his conveyances did, even his civilian hovercar—and was outfitted with its external flight pods, which was how he got it from home to Kosigi. His guards had been escorting him in their Wolf fighters, and the Marine Corvette *Ranger* had been bringing up the rear just in case his flight pods malfunctioned during the trip. The heavy-shouldered brute of an exomech's lights powered down after Jason was on the ground, going into standby mode to await his return.

It was all Symone's fault. She'd been stomping her Titan around Karsa for nearly a takir, engaging in that time-honored Faey tradition of showing off her toys. In reality, she'd been field testing operating a Titan in a cityscape, how something that big might have issues navigating a city landscape with lots of buildings and many things on the ground that might get underfoot, which was also something of a PR tour for both the Karinne Army and the Titans at the same time. Sioa had organized the field tests in a

real city, and the citizens got to see the newest piece of KMS hardware strut around Karsa from very close up.

Fuck, did the Titan look like a man among boys during those test exercises. It had been escorted by Gladiators and Juggernauts, which barely came up to the mecha's waist...and Juggernauts were *huge*. The Gladiators only came up to the mecha's upper thigh. The test concluded that in a modern city like Karsa, a Titan would have very few issues with overhead or suspended obstacles like walkway bridges, but it would have some major problems navigating the ground with so many objects placed, like trees, bushes, flower planters, guardrails, and the like. Unlike a Terran city, there were no power lines or traffic lights for it to deal with. In a city like New York, it would have done major damage to power lines and traffic lights just trying to move around.

Symone's extended playing around in her Titan—and it was *her* Titan—had made Jason realize that he hadn't played around in his mecha for a while, and he'd used his Gladiator and Juggernaut a few times over the last couple of days, logging hours in it and reminding it that he did in fact still love it. He'd even taken his Titan out for a spin, though he had to have it recalled from Joint Base Alpha; it was way too big to park on a pad near the house. It *could*, however, be equipped with flight pods to make it fly, which looked a bit scary from the ground to see a mecha *that big* overhead.

Just one of the boons of being the Grand Duke, he got to play with *all* the cool toys.

Though, *play* may not be a proper term. Over the last year, Jason had undergone formal combat training in all current mecha and Wolf fighters, he'd trained with both Army and Marine combat infantry battalions, and he'd trained with the best his military had to offer. The KBB had trained Symone, and for the last year, they'd also been training him. He had trained with Justin and the Ghost Squadron, and the 2nd Army's 7th Special Operations Battalion, which were akin to the Army Rangers, as well as the Marine 14th Special Tactics Battalion, which was the Karinne Marine's special operations battalion. The reasoning for it in Jason's mind was very simple; the more he understood what it was *really like* to be on the front lines, then he would make better decisions when Myri brought things that only he could approve. Jason was fully combat rated on all KMS military

mecha, and what was particularly pleasing to him, both Kyva and Justin said that he *wasn't bad*. Given just how good those two were at what they did, if they didn't think he was a complete embarrassment, then that put him above the average for the rest of the KMS.

There was a reason for all his training, something that Myri didn't entirely know about, and it involved the special merge pod Jason had in his sub-basement. When the time came to fight, that merge pod would let him do more than just sit in an office and watch telemetry feeds. He'd made his backroom deals with a couple of rigger platoon commanders and a Navy squadron, so he'd be ready. When he told his people that *every person mattered* in the coming conflict, he *meant* it. And he'd be standing on the line shooting at the enemy right along with his people in the only way that Aya would allow him. He was of no use to his people sitting in an office when it was Myri and the command staff that made the decisions, so he'd found a way to *make* himself useful...just a way that he had to keep a secret. If Myri found out what he was planning, she'd have a complete apoplectic meltdown and would probably lock him in his room for the entire war with no biogenic access.

Fighting from a merge was not *completely* without risk, they'd learned as they expanded on the technology. Being shot down while in a merged mecha induced a comatose state in the pilot, what Songa called *dump shock*, a coma incited by the sudden destruction of the biogenic system with which the pilot was merged. After all, the pilot had been merged to a biogenic unit that just "died," and that fed back through the merge and affected the pilot directly. It was purely psychosomatic, it did no real injury to the pilot, but it still put them in a coma from anywhere between 24 to 96 hours, until the pilot's brain sorted through the experience and got back to normal. And there was nothing Songa could do medically to get the pilot out of the coma, they just had to work through it on their own. Pilots also exhibited psychosomatic reactions to damage to their mecha, though Songa had made some real advances to minimize it. At first, people were having motor control issues in their real body when that part of their mechanical body was damaged. A pilot whose Gladiator had its arm damaged in testing couldn't move his real arm for a brief time after the merge was over, even though he felt no pain from the damage. It too was a temporary effect, and Songa had refined the sensory filters that significantly reduced the

phenomenon, but it did still occasionally happen. It now mostly happened when a pilot's mecha suffered massive damage, like said mecha's arm being completely blown off rather than just being damaged. Some pilots were more sensitive to psychosomatic reactions than others, they'd come to learn, which could affect who got assigned to what mission, and also completely disqualified the most sensitive pilots from merged combat operations. Those would be doing their fighting in their mecha, not in a merge pod.

Songa found it almost maddeningly mysterious that a pilot merged to the mecha from a merge pod could suffer dump shock, while a pilot merged to the mecha and was in the cockpit did *not*. Jason himself found that very strange, since the merge wasn't really different whether the pilot was in the mecha or in a pod a kathra away, but it was there. Songa's doctors and MRDD both currently had research teams trying to solve the mystery of the phenomenon. Riggers and pilots in their mecha could suffer psychosomatic reactions to damage like a merge pilot, but not a single in-unit pilot had suffered from dump shock since jacks enabled full merges with the units.

Behind him, a KV-30 personnel transport dropship landed, and Myleena and Siyhhaa came down the steps once the hatch opened, with Bo, Tom, and Rook behind them. The team was there to finalize Cynna's probationary period and certify her as fully operational. It was mainly ceremonial, since she'd passed her 40 day observation period with flying colors, but it was still important enough to rate a personal visit from Jason and some of the top dogs at 3D. Behind Rook, two black-painted Rocker bionoids exited the dropship gracefully, each of them holding an external pulse rifle, which was just a dummy unit with the same size and weight as a standard pulse rifle. They were testing some AI upgrades to the bionoids while in non-merged independent mode, and Bo being Bo, he was doing it in real-world conditions. The two robotic units were in "guard" mode, acting as escorts for their commander, almost like guards. Sioa was of a mind to attach non-merged Rockers to field Colonels and Majors as additional personal protection, and they had to test the upgrades to the AI to allow them to act similarly to Rover or Spot drones utilized by exomechs.

They wouldn't be god-mode, that was for sure. Like any AI system, their usefulness in actual combat was limited by their ability to make sense out of the chaos of ground-based combat. The officer they were escorting

would have to supervise them, tell them what to do, because most AI ran into major issues when the time came to start shooting at the enemy if there wasn't someone there to guide them.

The old drones the Legion built in one of their first operations was a perfect example of the limitations of AI in combat. The drones had performed admirably in shooting down Trillane sensor pods in orbit, but they hadn't been programmed to see Trillane line vessels as a threat, so they completely ignored them...which allowed those ships to blow up the drones without them even trying to evade their fire. The drones didn't recognize the incoming fire as a threat, and so they didn't even try to dodge. The drones had done well with what they were programmed to do, but the instant they were confronted with something outside their programming... game over.

But, that was also why Karinne drones did so much better than other drones, because of biogenics. The chips in those drones *learned*, and that made their AI evolve as they gained experience...and it had nothing to do with programming. When a master control chip in a drone, the heart of its biogenic system, encountered something new, it caused it to build new lattice pathways in its chip, learning about the new situation or scenario, and that learning was permanent. Even if the drone's standard memory was wiped and it was reset back to factory default, those lattice pathways were still there, that learning was still there, and it would affect how the chip operated forever after. That ability to learn, to learn from past battles and learn to recognize threats, was why biogenic AI systems had a much higher survivability rate than other drone types. Biogenic AI systems did not utterly rely on databases of combat tactics, equipment, and strategies which often caused them to be sitting ducks when confronted with a situation their AI combat algorithms and logic could not analyze, biogenic AI systems instead referred to that database as a resource and learned as they executed the commands they were given, adding both to their shared database and to their internal lattice pathways. That could alter the basic operational parameters of the chip, if its programming told it something its internal memory, its own experience, told it was not a good idea. A drone that encountered a new threat and survived it remembered it the next time it faced that threat, even if that mission log was removed from its database.

The two Rockers with Bo would learn with each mission they performed even if they weren't operating independently, seeing how its driver worked, *learning* from its driver, which would expand its basic AI programming as the Rocker gained experience. With enough experience being controlled by a driver and with some future advances in AI combat algorithms, someday a Rocker's AI system just might be able to operate independently and be effective. While that wouldn't be any time soon, Jason had a project team in MRDD and an entirely different one in the Department of Science working on it.

That was one of the most fundamental differences between biogenics and all other types of computer architecture, because biogenic computers and chips *learned*, and that learning could allow the chip to alter its own programming if its past experience told it that its programming was not the best way to achieve its objective. It did occasionally make Jason worry that a *I, Robot* or *2001: A Space Odyssey* scenario might break out if a biogenic computer went rogue, but both Myleena and Cybi thought he was being paranoid.

"And did you have fun flying up here in your toy, Jayce?" Bo teased as they walked over to him.

"You bet your ass I did," he replied shamelessly as he took off his helmet, which made Myleena laugh. "How's the Rocker experiment going?"

"*So far so good, as the Terrans say,*" Rook answered. He was wearing a standard KMS maintenance coverall over his metallic-skinned body, his name embroidered just over the top left pocket on his chest, and had on a Karsa Bombers baseball cap. "*The units have been operating with expected satisfaction so far.*"

"Well, just walking around following someone isn't all that hard," Jason chuckled as Dellin came into the corvette bay, a hologram of Cynna floating beside him. "Have you done any combat sims with them yet?"

"*Three. I sent you a report on their performance.*"

"It must be pretty deep at the bottom of my inbox," Jason chuckled. "I've let my work back up a little bit lately. I've had better things to do, like

play with my toys,” he grinned at Bo, which made him, Tom, and Myleena laugh again.

“Big toys are the best toys,” Myleena told them.

Dellin reached them, and since Jason was wearing official armor, was “in uniform” of a sort, Dellin saluted him as if he were a KMS officer. Jason laughed and waved him off dismissively. “Don’t do that, Dellin,” he chided. “Sorry we’re late. Blame Myli.”

“I was busy,” she said without much repentance in her voice.

“She made us sit on the tarmac for nearly half an hour waiting for her,” Tom accused. “But, at least it let me *see* Project F.”

“The outside of it,” Myleena teased a little. “I can’t show you the inside, Tom. Even 3D doesn’t get to see *everything*.”

“No sweat, boss, we can live with the rejection,” Bo said in a barbed voice.

“That’s what it was, Bo, complete rejection,” Myleena dug. “You weren’t *good enough* for Project F.”

“You can be a real bitch when you wanna be, you know that, Myli?” Jason accused, which made her laugh brightly.

“I see that witty banter is something of a constant with Jason, no matter whom he addresses,” Cynna noted to Dellin.

“It’s a quirk,” he agreed mildly, which made Jason laugh.

“Watch it, missy, your final certification requires my signature,” he warned the CBIM, which made her smile ominously.

“Dellin,” she said promptly.

“You take Cynna offline, Jayce, and I’ll point every GRAF cannon on the surface at your house,” he threatened, which made all of them laugh, well, except for Siyhaa. But Siyhaa *did* smile slightly.

“Now that all the witty banter is out of the way, let’s get this bachi match going,” Myleena prompted. “I’ve got a lot of work to do back on the island.”

There wasn't really all that much for them to do, since Cynna had already passed all of her inspections and tests, and her performance logs made it abundantly clear that she was operating exactly as she should. And on the other side of it, Cynna had settled into her job in Kosigi extremely well. She had made many friends among the base personnel, and had learned a great deal about the other races and governments of the Confederation by interacting with the workers they had in the moon to build their battleships. Cynna probably had more experience dealing with outside cultures than any CBIM other than Cybi, because her job put her into extensive contact with them, as well as with many rulers. Cynna had even started briefing the Confederate Council about Kosigi's operations when Dellin was too busy to do it.

As Jason had suspected, Cynna had developed personality far faster than the other CBIMs had. She wasn't as quirky as Cyvanne, but she did have a few idiosyncrasies that were hers and hers alone. She had developed into a wise, acerbic, slightly salty personality with a subtle sense of humor that could gab with dock workers in a pub after their shift as easily and effortlessly as she could stare down a council ruler demanding more space, resources, or privileges for his workers in Kosigi. Cynna had become the most *cosmopolitan* of the new CBIMs, even more so than Cyra, because her job had exposed her to so many different cultures and to many different subsets of those cultures. All in all, Jason was quite pleased with the newest CBIM, and had definite and genuine affection for her. He had affection for all the CBIMs, but Cynna was benefiting from being the baby in her very small, very unique little family.

The other baby in the family was also working out very well. Coma had developed as Jason thought she would, and was as much a fixture on the *Tianne* as Cynna was in Kosigi. A ship that big and complex *needed* a computer like Coma just to operate, but Coma had developed some real personality as she settled into her duties, striking up sincere friendships with Palla, Sammy, and many of the crew she both helped and supervised. Palla not only had no complaints, she made sure to crow about Coma every chance she got, and being a typical Faey, rubbed Coma in the faces of the other ship captains more than a little bit. She had something that didn't exist on any other ship, a near CBIM-level computer, and she made sure they were fully aware that their ships didn't have a Coma.

Faey...sometimes he wondered why he put up with them.

But, there was some real work to do to certify Cynna, and they got started on it after getting to the core chamber. Jason, Myleena, and Siyhhaa did a pretty in-depth inspection, to the point where they opened cases and visually inspected boards and stacks and datafiber trunks, and checked video feeds from spiders that could see where they could not. Cynna's equipment stacks were absolutely crawling with spiders, with exactly 500,000 of the microscopic nanomachines roaming around the interior of her equipment, who were under her command to conduct inspections and effect preventive maintenance and low-priority simple repairs. Since Cynna was new, they had very little to do but conduct scheduled inspections and periodic preventive maintenance, where the nanites in Cybi's core had a much more exciting life. Given that some of her equipment was over 1,400 years old, her spiders were doing a lot more work.

When they got the Virgan CBIM installed, they had plans on the board to do some major work to Cybi's core systems, the original equipment moved with her in her core chamber when they moved it to Karsa, to effectively replace that equipment with new, more powerful systems. Cybi was having more and more failures in that equipment over the last few months, as those systems finally succumbed after over a millennium of constant operations, and while she used her new equipment far more than her old, that equipment *was* fairly important. They'd have to take Cybi offline from the biogenic network for a few days to do the work, and even though she wasn't intertwined into the entire planet anymore, that would still take a lot of preparation. Cybi was still a critically important component of the biogenic network and to the planet as a whole.

After nearly two hours of meticulous inspections, both Siyhhaa and Myleena gave Cynna a clean bill of computer health, finding her operating at peak efficiency with no hardware or software problems. They then moved from the core room to the operations center, where they got the final reports from the 3D teams that had been observing Cynna since she came online. All of the team supervisors concurred that Cynna was ready to be certified, that she had no technical or operational issues, and they further stated that Cynna had meshed exceptionally well with the people that worked in Kosigi, both Karinnes and foreign workers. Everyone that knew Cynna *liked* Cynna, even beings from radically different cultures. Cynna

was the CBIM version of Symone, with her own charisma and charm, but with a computer's steel when she made decisions that people didn't like. She was affable but firm, friendly but rigid when it came to a schedule, and she wasn't afraid to get in the face of a dock foreman that was letting his crew slack off. Dellin ran Kosigi with an iron fist, and Cynna had her own spiked gauntlet that she put on when it was time to get things back on schedule.

Dellin, of course, couldn't say enough good things about Cynna when it came time for his personal recommendation. Cynna was exactly what Kosigi needed, and on a personal level, Cynna was now one of his best friends. She helped keep his base running with the efficiency and excellence he demanded, and the fact that he really liked her as a person was just an added bonus.

Once that was done, it was as simple as Jason, Myleena, and Siyhoo concurring that Cynna was good to go. Jason signed the final form, and that was that. Without any fanfare or ceremony, Cynna's status changed from *probationary* to *operational*, and she was "promoted" to a fully operational CBIM. The 3D team in her core chamber started preparing the chamber for normal operations, which would make it unmanned, and the ops center observers packed up their toys at the station Dellin had given them. They weren't needed on Kosigi anymore, and space in the ops center was a precious commodity.

After they finished up, Jason walked with Bo, Rook, and Myleena back to the corvette bay holding their transportation, as Siyhoo oversaw the cleaning out and securing of Cynna's core chamber. The two Rockers clacked along several paces in front of them, escorting them to their destination. "I see they upgraded the Rockers with the new pod mounts ahead of schedule," Jason noted as he looked at the backs of the two units, who now had sockets on their upper shoulders to hold external mount pods.

"Those are the prototypes, the refit schedule hasn't changed. When will the pod mount upgrades for the armor systems be introduced?"

"Next takir," he replied, referring to their new version of Crusader armor with their own mount points. The armor would be mainly used by Army, Marine, and Tark units, since Naval line crews didn't really need mount pods to do their jobs, and didn't require a complete replacement of

the whole armor suit, just the backplate and breastplate. They'd worked so well for the exomechs that MRDD had designed external mount equipment for infantry in Crusader armor, mounting directly to the back of the armor, which included external flight pods like the ones used in exo-pack ejection systems for Wolf pilots. Those were external grav engines to give an ejected pilot the ability to get out of the theater quickly, to get to a rescue ship, and MRDD had redesigned the exo-packs to create flight-capable pods that were designed for use by infantry, giving them much more speed, stability, and maneuverability than the grav engines in the armor provided. They also had some external weapon pods for infantry use, but they couldn't build anything exceedingly exotic or powerful, because the person *in* the armor might not be able to survive the stresses that using that weapon would put on him. After all, a big cannon mounted on the shoulder was going to fling the shooter backwards if he fired it, even if it was an energy weapon. Newton's law of equal and opposite reaction was as merciless as it was indiscriminate. Rockers, on the other hand, had the internal reinforcement to use some of the heavier weapon pods that they'd designed.

And to make things as versatile as possible, personal mount pods were interchangeable between infantry in Crusader armor and Rockers. They used the same mountpoint configuration, with the only caveat being that pod units that weren't safe for infantry had software lockouts that kept them from being used. They could still mount them and carry them, they just couldn't use them. Which, if used wisely, could be quite a ploy for a crafty infantry officer.

The three main pods they'd designed for infantry use were flight pods, very small personal missile launcher packs which were more or less shoulder-mounted rocket launchers, and an external weapon called a "Hellgun" which was patterned after a Vindicator minigun, a gatling gun that used a multiple barrels that fired a disruptor beam. Because of the way disruptors worked, autofire variants had to utilize multiple barrels to fire in bursts rather than a single barrel firing in rapid succession, which was the main reason the Coalition didn't use disruptors as their primary infantry weapon. A single barrel disruptor had a very slow cycle time, which wasn't ideal in infantry combat, but multibarrel disruptors got a little large and bulky for infantry to lug around. They used a very ingenious weapon called a Quantum Blaster for their infantry instead, which still packed a pretty

impressive punch. The Coalition used disruptors on mecha and as fixed weapon guns, but their infantry carried those quantum weapons.

It was as true for old Terran machine guns as it was for modern ground combat; firepower *mattered*, and the ability to spray a heavy volume of fire in a short amount of time was just as important to the Confederation as it had been to the men who built the machine guns used in World War One. Infantry disruptors had too slow of a cycle time between shots to be effective weapons in infantry combat, and disruptors capable of autofire the way MPACs and pulse weapons were tended to be too big and bulky for infantry to carry.

The very term MPAC described that functionality; Metaphased Plasma Auto Cannon. Though, the term “MPAC” had become a catch-all name for all metaphased plasma weaponry, even those that didn’t fire in automatic mode, that weren’t true auto cannons. Just like Aspirin had once started as a brand name rather than a name for a medicine, the term MPAC had come to describe any weapon that fired metaphased plasma, when it was originally the name of a specific weapon, the MPAC batteries on Faey battle cruisers.

Having access to an arsenal of different weaponry expanded the ability of the troops to react to different situations, so Sioa had wanted infantry disruptors on the field in case they found themselves in a situation where they were the best option for her troops. The addition of disruptors to the arsenal meant that his Army had access to pulse weapons, MPACs, railguns, rockets and other infantry-used explosives (extremely effective against unshielded and soft-shielded mecha, fixed positions, and unarmored enemy infantry), Jhri multiphasic ion weaponry (excellent for frying power systems in enemy mecha and fixed positions), Colonial iso-neutron weapons, Korgg tetryon wave weaponry, and now Coalition disruptors and Quantum Blasters.

Quantum Blasters were another rather nifty and unique idea out of the Coalition. They utilized the Quantum Uncertainty Principle as a weapon, firing plasma streams at insane speeds by exploiting a law of quantum physics known as the Uncertainty Principle. The Uncertainty Principle was a law of quantum physics that stated that location and velocity were two separate values that could not *both* be exactly defined in a single particle. The more one knows the location of a particle, the less certain the value of

its velocity, and vice versa. By using an on-weapon computer to define the *location* of the plasma fired by the weapon to such a point that its velocity went into quantum flux, then amplifying that effect using old fashioned plasma magnets, it combined the two forces to propel the plasma particles at extreme speed. It didn't have the same velocity or range as a railgun, but the plasma stream emitted by a quantum blaster had so much velocity behind it that it had quadruple the range of any other non-phased plasma weapon, and allowed the plasma stream to penetrate shields and armor that would normally stop it were it moving slower. It was one of the most ingenious uses of the Uncertainty Principle that Jason had ever seen, and he'd seen quite a few. Those Coalition engineers were not only damn smart, they were damn *creative*.

The Karinnes had adopted disruptor technology for their own use to complement pulse and railgun technology for the KMS, and Coalition shield technology was so advanced, so impressive, that their ideas had been incorporated into their own Teryon shields to increase their power by nearly 37%, made them rugged enough to stand up to MPACs for more than just one or two shots. MRDD was also working on a version of the Coalition's Quantum Blaster that used metaphased plasma rather than standard plasma, which would turn the weapon into an absolute *beast*.

That was one of the core reasons they had the Academy in the first place, and why the Ruu had all but moved into it. The Academy allowed them to disseminate their knowledge to the galaxy, but also returned knowledge back to them. The ideas of the Coalition were advanced and they were highly creative, and the Karinnes benefited from that knowledge because of the Academy.

"When is the upgrade and refit for the Crusader armor taking place?"

"We already have nearly ten thousand new backplate and chestplate assemblies built, and the rest will be ready as the Army and Marines rotate through the upgrade schedule and finish their rating training to learn how to use them," Jason continued. "Their old ones will be stored and used for Naval personnel. The armor factory's worked out a viable means to resize the old backplates and chestplates for new wearers so we don't have to completely trash them. Backplates particularly are easier to resize because of the power pack and other units built into it. The chestplates are a bit

trickier, but the armor factory came up with a way to do it that doesn't trash the chestplate or damage its power conduits and datafibers."

"They found a way to *bend* a compressed carapace?" Bo asked in surprise.

"Believe it or not, they did," he answered. "It's pretty damn ingenious, but it takes a hell of a lot of power. They had to install new power feeds directly off the industrial trunk *just* for the resizing equipment. It was sapping power off the line at the factory."

"I gotta go over there and take a look at that," Bo laughed.

"Sure, you have clearance, knock yourself out," Jason replied. "They can't expand or reduce the armor, can only change its shape, so they can only resize it for someone that's already close to fitting it. But, that's no real biggie," Jason shrugged. "Given how many people are in the Navy, *someone* is gonna be close enough of a fit for it to work."

"What pod units are they producing for the armor? Anything different from Rocker pods?" Rook asked.

"Flight pods, several external shoulder-mounted weapons, external personal shield generators, external sensor pods, and drone racks," he replied. "The racks can carry a Spot drone. There are also some generic sling frame units, like a frame for holstering a railgun or a Korgg tetryon wave rifle or disruptor minigun. Most infantry not carrying a mount pod will be equipped with a sling frame so they can carry external weapons."

"Moving away from using the nested pulse weapons as the primary weapon?"

"More like giving my girls more options on the battlefield," he replied. "They're always there if a soldier needs them, but now they'll have an easy way to carry around an external weapon, and that gives them more options. Options are always good for infantry. Pulse weapons, MPACs, and railguns are still the primary weapons of the Army, but now my girls will have access to a larger arsenal. You know how Army girls love guns, Rook. The more the better, and the harder they hit, the more they love them."

Rook gave a sound of amusement, nearly a laugh. *"I've seen Meya and Myra's gun collection. It's almost silly."*

“And when were you in their houses, Rook?” Bo challenged.

“I don’t tell you everything, Bo,” he replied in a tone that made Jason burst out laughing.

They reached the corvette bay, where a skimmer was sitting with the hatch open to pick up Bo and Rook and take them back to Karis. Shen and Suri were waiting by their Wolf fighters, and the corvette that escorted him up was closing its hatch, preparing to take off. *You done, Jason?* Suri asked as he put on his helmet and caused his mecha to open its cockpit doors.

Done here, anyway. On to the next appointment.

I’d really rather you get in a ship for this, Jason, Shen sent in concern. *You’ve never traversed a gate in a mecha before.*

I know how to do it, woman, sheesh, he replied. *I’ve done it nearly 80 times in the simulator. It’s time to do it for real. Besides, Jax is going to be following us in the corvette, if I forget something, she’ll be there to tow my Juggernaut to the planet.*

I’ve already got the towing beam warmed up, your Grace, Jax sent teasingly.

Your confidence in me is overwhelming, Jax, he sent blandly.

I have enough experience to know what’s gonna happen, she replied cheekily.

That smells like a wager, woman, he challenged.

Oh no, that will give you extra incentive to do it right, she retorted.

Bitch, you can forget about getting your General’s diamond now.

If only that was your decision, she sent teasingly in reply.

I’ll make it my decision, he threatened as he floated up to the open doors of his Juggernaut’s cockpit. He turned around and backed into it, pushed his heels into the molded form, then settled back into the gel backing. He felt his armor lock in as the heavily armored doors closed, then the crest lowered on the outside to further protect the doors from damage. Jason took a breath, exhaled, then closed his eyes and merged up into his mecha, when its cameras and sensory units took over for his eyes, ears, nose, and skin.

Data flowed through his mind, the important data was put in his field of vision as part of his HUD as an additional reminder, and he felt himself completely sync with the mecha's motor control system. He raised the massive mecha's armored arm and then closed its hand into a fist, flexed the fingers, then took a slight step to the side to look back at the corvette. *All systems online and green*, he reported almost automatically. *I'm ready, as soon as a couple of slackers get in their fighters*, he prompted, the mecha's head fixing its chilling gaze on Shen and Suri. Everything about the Juggernaut just oozed intimidation, including its sleek-lined yet slightly scary faceplate.

My, he's so brave when he's inside one of his toys, Suri sent impishly as she rose up into the belly of her fighter.

I'll leave you two behind, I don't need you for this.

You leave us behind, you answer to Aya, Shen told him. *You really want to press that button, Jason?*

I've pressed it many times in the past, and I still have all my fingers and toes, he replied flippantly as Shen picked her Wolf up off the deck, then Suri did the same. *You ready, Jax?*

We're good to go, your Grace, she answered.

[Kosigi Control, Karinne One. Ready to depart.]

[Permission to depart granted. There are no restrictions to the lanes from your current bay.]

[Copy that,] he acknowledged as he brought up the flight pod engines attached to the shoulders of his armor. *We're good to go, ladies, let's get moving. If I'm late, Grik'zzk's gonna skewer me with one of her blade arms.*

Their destination was the newest planet in the house, 3QA-119, named Arkayis. It was closer to the P quadrant than the S quadrant, and like most of the planets owned by the house, it had qualities that made it worth going out to claim it. The planet was so much like Terra that it made Jason do a double-take the first time he saw the report on it. The planet was nearly the exact same size as Terra, had similar atmospheric composition, and was almost at the same distance from its star as Terra was, just a little further out. It orbited its star faster than Terra did, however, which combined to

give 3QA-119-4 a 363 day year, just two days off Terra's year. And if that wasn't similar enough, the planet had a 23.95 hour day, very nearly 24 hours. It too was primarily a water planet, with the surface covered by 71% water. But, that was where the similarities ended. The planet was hotter than Terra by 7 shuki average temperature, which widened the tropical belt and narrowed the polar regions; the planet did not have permanent ice packs at the poles, just seasonal ice. The planet had 1.36 pressure and 1.19 gravity, the heavier gravity caused by the fact that the planet had almost shocking amounts of heavy metal deposits, which was extremely rare given the planet's size. The planet's core wasn't made of iron or nickel like many rocky planets with a magnetic field, it was comprised almost entirely of Ardantium 291, which was one of the metals used to create the alloy Neutronium. All the extra mass from those heavy metals made the planet heavy gravity, but unlike most heavy metal planets, this one was also arable. It was *very* rare for a planet so rich in heavy metals to have a life-sustaining climate and ecosystem. Most were like Bellar, where they had some life-sustaining qualities, but the presence of the metals caused all kinds of issues that actually made trying to survive there without biodomes or support equipment anywhere from difficult to impossible. Radiation was the most common issue with a heavy metal planet, many of the metals were unstable isotopes, but radiation certainly wasn't the only one.

For that matter, all six of the rocky planets in the system were laden with heavy metal deposits, which made the system a real find. But planet two was the only one capable of supporting life. It was also the only one that wasn't all but glowing in the dark from all the radiation. The entire system was hot, but the planet's liquid Ardantium core gave it a strong enough magnetic field to protect the life on the planet from the radiation in the system.

There was one other thing that made Arkayis different from any other Karinne holding, and that was the fact that there was a sentient species already there. They were called the Arkai, a Stone age-level society similar to the *gruug* on Exile, but not quite as ugly. In fact, they looked remarkably Faey-like, almost a cross between a Faey and a Prakarikai, with pointed ears, very beautiful bone structure, elegance and grace...and only about 3.8 shakra tall on the average, which made them a little taller than the Beryans on the height scale. They were truly elf-like in Jason's mind, since the elves

of folklore and legend from Terra were supposed to be short, but weren't obnoxious like the Prakarikai were, so Jason considered them more *elf* like than the Prakarikai. It was no surprise they were short, since heavy gravity planets produced short races on the average. Tall or large heavy gravity species like the Faey or the Ogravians were actually the exception, not the norm.

Jason had made a very rare exception to his usual rules because the Arkai dwelled entirely on one continent, leaving the rest of the planet available. And, it was also something of an experiment to see if the Karinnes could operate on a planet without disturbing the residents. They would leave the Arkai's continent alone and do their farming and mining elsewhere, and when the Arkai started expanding from their continent, the Karinnes would leave the planet. So, Arkayis wasn't intended to be a *permanent* holding of the house, and Jason had driven that fact home by forbidding the construction of permanent cities on the planet. They could put up prefab buildings, but there would be no colonies there like New Karsa on Exile. Anything they put up on the planet, they had to be able to take down within 20 days of receiving the order to leave.

But they had to get there first. Jason lifted his mecha off the deck and straight up, passing through the airskin shield, then ascended up over the surface of Kosigi.

Jason reached cruising speed in his mecha, his destination the newest Stargate in the ever-expanding ring of them in distant orbit around Karis. There were 29 of those gates now, each one leading to a different holding of the house. 18 of those holdings were farming planets, and the other 11 were mining operations. That made House Karinne one of the biggest food producers and exporters in the quadrant, they produced nearly 14,000 times more food than the house consumed, and they exported it all over the galaxy. He chatted with Jax and her corvette crew as they headed for the gate, an 18 minute trip from Kosigi, catching up with one of his favorite Army Colonels and corvette commanders. Jax had expanded her shop in Karsa and had opened two new ones in Teria City and Henira City, and she was making quite a lot of money. As the Stargate loomed ahead and they entered traffic, Sticks and dropships heading to the new planet carrying equipment, he slowed down and allowed the corvette to take the lead, riding the coattails of the bigger ship, which would have the right of way under

Karinne flight rules. The cargo jockeys around them gave the corvette a wide berth, at least until Jax approached one of the big freighters that was carrying heavy equipment. The freighter was bigger than the corvette, so it had the right of way, and they were too close to the Stargate to pass it.

[We're one minute out, let's go ahead and secure for gate passage,] Jax called over STG, since the sending was always really thick in a freight lane as the pilots gabbed at each other. *[You hear that, your Grace? Put that beast in gate passage mode.]*

[Push off, bitch,] he retorted as he did just that, setting his final velocity vector and shutting down the engines, which would allow the mecha to drift through the gate on its own momentum, then powering down the vast majority of the mecha. *[Gate passage mode enabled.]*

The freighter in front of them vanished into the Stargate, which caused its blue swirl of energy to dominate his forward cameras. *I'm impressed, Jason, you even got your velocity vector right,* Jax teased just before the corvette vanished into the blue swirl, catapulting it halfway across the galaxy in the blink of an eye. Jason saved his retort, since he hit the border of the Stargate, and felt the mecha shudder a tiny bit as it transited the stable wormhole the Stargate created and controlled. In a fraction of a second, he was halfway across the galaxy, with the blue and green jewel of Arkayis in his forward view, just to the port and below the freighter and corvette in front of him.

Secure from gate passage mode, set course for the planet, Jax sent openly, directing it at her pilot. *And let's pass that freighter, I'd rather not pitter behind that whale the whole way there.*

It took them nearly half an hour to reach the edge of the atmosphere, then Jason took the lead again as they executed a controlled descent to the site where they were building their temporary hub facility, which would act as a transport hub for the many satellite farms and mining operations they were planning. They were going to use a decentralized system here where all their operations were small and had a small footprint on the land and its environment, which would make it easy for them to withdraw and leave no trace for the Arkai to find, which might interfere with their natural development. All their farming operations would be smaller than on most other planets, almost like homestead farms where no farm could be larger

than one square katha, those multitudes of small farms spread across the natural grasslands of the planet. Mining operations would literally be a hole in the ground, the shaft the only visible mark of the operation from the surface, and that shaft would be collapsed or filled in when they were done. Waste rock produced by the mine would be stored in orbital containers, and when the mine was exhausted, the mineshaft would be filled in with the same rock that was removed from it in the first place and replicated carbon and silicon to make up the ore removed from the mineshaft. To prevent a scenario where they overmined one part of the planet and caused it to wobble on its axis due to imbalance, their mines would be spread evenly across the entire planet, everywhere *but* the Arkai's home continent. And Jason had decreed that they could take no surface deposits or mine more than 50% of the available buried ore. They were *only* allowed to mine a minimum of 2,500 shakra under the surface, all the way down to border of the outer core, far deeper than future Arkai technology could reach for maybe a couple of thousand years. They were *not* stripping the planet of its resources and leaving the Arkai with nothing, once they developed enough to start utilizing those ores.

The whole planet and the operation here was a field test of their “no footprint” operation, where they left a planet with barely any trace they were ever there.

Grik'zzk was waiting on the landing pad, one of their prefab ones, as he landed his mecha, the Wolves and corvette landing lightly behind him. The huge earth-toned Kizzik scrabbled forward as he opened the doors and dropped down to the plascrete. “Grik'zzk, sorry we're late,” he apologized as he took off his helmet after his armor pressurized him to the native atmosphere, then nearly hit Suri in the face with it as he handed it back without looking. He shaded his eyes from the brightness of the sun here, brighter than Terra's star but not as bright as Karis' blue sun, and admitted that it was pretty nice here. The air was thick from the pressure, but the air was warm, the sweet smell of earth and plants and trees heavy in the thick air, and the deep blue sky was cloudless and lovely. The blue here was a deeper shade than Terra and Karis, almost a sapphire blue like Palla's skin, and he found it to be quite pleasing. The darker blue was due to the very slight difference in the proportion of gases in the atmosphere compared to Karis. He was of a mind to look it up in the astro-chemistry datastores when

he got home to see just which gas added to the nitrogen in what proportions produced that sapphire blue sky.

“It worked out, revered Hive-leader, I had a couple of issues arise that made me late as well,” she admitted through her interface’s speaker. *“I have a flying platform waiting to take out to the first of the farms,”* she added, motioning with one of her blade arms at a nearby platform.

“Awesome. You girls wait here, I don’t *need* you,” he told his guards, which earned him a couple of steely looks.

Keep digging that grave, Jason, Shen warned.

It keeps life exciting, he replied with aplomb as he and the large insectoid stepped onto the platform. It rose up from the pad by Grik’zzk’s communal command, and whisked them to the west as Jason would consider it, towards the direction of the setting sun.

With her usual exacting attention to detail, Grik’zzk showed him several of the new farms and described the methods they were using. Most of the satellite farms would be unmanned, automated, with roaming drones stopping by at regular intervals to survey plant growth, check for crop damage from local wildlife, and analyze soil chemistry to keep it fertile. Farm workers would respond to a farm when they were needed, and would stay at their central facility supervising the drones and other automated systems when not out in the field. Hands gripping the extended rail of the platform, he looked down on the farm and asked quite a few questions about how the operation might make things harder for Grik’zzk, since a decentralized system wouldn’t be as efficient as how they did it on other planets.

“As long as you allow us to build warehouses for crop storage, we should have little trouble operating under this system,” she told him. *“It would be too inefficient to try to package harvests for shipment at each farm. Jrz’kii would have very harsh words for you if you forced her Stick pilots to fly all over the planet to pick up cargo.”*

“You should have authorization to build more than enough warehouses to handle your projections, Grik, unless the mining operation tried to hijack them from you.”

“The mining supervisor is a Makati out of Trenirk’s office, and he’s a little afraid of me. I assure you, revered Hive-leader, he’ll take none of my warehouses,” she informed him, which made him laugh.

“I’ll take stock of him when it’s his turn to show me around. In, oh, about two hours,” he noted after checking the time in his gestalt. “And you *are* a little intimidating to someone that short,” he added slyly.

“There are many ways to motivate lazy workers, revered Hive-leader,” she told him as she rasped the blades at the ends of her outside arms against each other in a motion that reminded Jason of a man sharpening a knife, which made him laugh again.

“You’re so mean, Grik. It’s why I like you so much,” he told her.

She showed him three more farms before taking him back, and he spent the time waiting for the mining operator to arrive talking with the xeno-sociologist sent by the Academy to study the Arkai. She was a Farguut, and would be observing the Arkai using hovercamera pods equipped with Urumi stealth shields tuned to counter Arkai visual acuity, which would make them invisible. To Jason, however, they looked like the camo used by the alien from the *Predator* movies, apparent whenever the camera pod moved. But Hailar assured him that the Arkai would not be able to see the pod, even when it was moving. Jason did his best not to look at the Farguut woman’s extra pair of eyes, which creeped out many Terrans a little bit; she was actually a very pretty young lady, but those extra eyes near her temples, they just killed the whole thing.

“From what I’ve observed so far, your Grace, the Arkai are quite remarkable,” she told him as they looked at holos of an Arkai hunting party, moving with graceful stealth through the forest. Arkai were a gender segregated species, where only males hunted while only women practiced skills such as weaving. The tufted tip of Hailar’s tail swished around her leg before vanishing again. “They score a 9.3 on the Meldrik-Evanton scale, which is one of the highest scores I’ve seen.”

“And that means?” he prompted.

She smiled at him. “The Meldrik-Evanton scale is a means of measuring the base intellectual capability of a primitive civilization based on its use of available resources, skills in manufacturing, and efficiency in providing for

the needs of the social group. The score is weighted based on the observed social customs of the group, with groups that show violent tendencies towards each other scoring lower than those that do not. The Arkai score a 9.3 out of 10, your Grace, and that is *very* impressive. Like I said, it's the highest score I've ever seen. It might be the highest we've ever recorded, but I'm not sure about that."

"So, they're very smart, they're resourceful, they're creative, and they're not aggressive towards each other," he reasoned.

"Precisely," she nodded. "They're not aggressive with other social groups of Arkai either, but that might be a reflection of the bounty of their environment. Those groups don't have to compete with each other for food and other resources. But we haven't had the chance to observe any social group in a stress situation yet, so the score isn't finalized. How they deal with a stress situation also weights the score."

"Where do the *gruug* score on that scale?"

"If I remember right, your Grace, they score a 6.3," she answered.

"What about the Silissta of RG-118?"

She touched her interface, no doubt accessing that data all the way back at the Academy. "They score a 4.9," she answered.

"Okay, that gives me an idea of what that number actually means," he said lightly, which made her chuckle.

Jason gave a slight double-take when another female approached, a Keelo. She was really tall, even for a Keelo, a good head taller than him—his eyes fell almost right in line with her nipples—and like all Keelo, she was tattooed and wore nothing above the waist. Those tattoos and the red sash she wore, he'd learned, were religious in nature, and the designs on her denoted the god she worshipped and the sect within the religion. But unlike most civilizations with multiple religions, they hadn't fought one another as they developed. The six gods of the Keelo pantheon were friends, and forbade their worshippers from fighting one another. Her tattoos marked her as a Bailari Traditionalist, a religious sect devoted to science, knowledge, and learning. It made her presence here make sense, since most Bailari Traditionalists were scientists, teachers, tutors, and workers in highly technical fields.

The sects of the Keelo had created a caste society, where worshippers of a sect pushed their children into the professions that their sects considered “proper.” As a Bailari Traditionalist, this Keelo would be forbidden by her sect to shed the blood of another, so she wouldn’t be found in any military occupation. She was also forbidden to touch the blood of another, so she would be in no medical profession. If she wasn’t smart enough to be in the sciences, she would find work acceptable to her sect, perhaps as a cargo pilot, or a small business owner, or maybe a factory worker. Jobs like that were where the Keelo from different sects intermingled in a work environment, for they were the Keelo that couldn’t make it in their sect’s preferred occupations. So they made due in lower skill occupations, and formed the backbone of Keelo production and service economies.

“Your Grace, my primary assistant and doctorate candidate, Jol Morann,” she introduced. Jason touched his outer forearm to hers in the ritual Keelo greeting—just being gentle since he was armored—and that caused her to smile brightly, showing one of the more chilling aspects of a Keelo, the fangs. Keelo had fangs, and they weren’t vestigial. When she closed her mouth, the tips of her fangs were just below the gumline for her lower teeth. And if that wasn’t enough, those fangs were heavily reinforced and damn near unbreakable, giving her an exceptionally powerful and dangerous bite, and they were *venomous*. She couldn’t spit venom the way an Urumi could, but Keelo venom was lethal to most other forms of life. Their venom was a neurotoxin that paralyzed muscles, and if the venom reached the heart or lungs, they paralyzed those as well, causing death. Keelo were immune to their own venom, and were immune to all other neurotoxins as well. Their biology had evolved a natural immunity to all classes of neurotoxins.

To Jason’s knowledge, the Keelo were the only mammalian humanoid species known to the Karinnes that had neurotoxin. Lots of them had fangs, but they didn’t have *venomous* fangs. There were quite a few mammal species out there that had venom, but all of them were unevolved, all of them except the Keelo...at least known. The universe was too big for there *not* to be another humanoid race out there somewhere with venomous fangs, they just hadn’t discovered them yet.

The Karinnes had known about the fangs right after the first meeting at RJ-44, but they hadn’t known about the venom until after they started

trading information and technology with them.

“Nice to meet you, Jol,” Jason said, looking up at the very slender, willowy Keelo. Keelo never failed to make Jason think they were malnourished, but that was just how they were. There was no such thing as a *fat* Keelo. “You doing your dissertation work on the Arkai?”

She nodded. “Yes, your Grace. They’ve never been studied before, so this is a perfect opportunity,” she told him in her husky, not quite feminine voice. Keelo were bigger than Terrans and Faey, so their voices were naturally deeper. To the Keelo, she had a feminine voice, but among the Faey, she’d be singing low alto or baritone in the choir. “Nobody can gainsay my conclusions unless they’re here studying them as well.”

Jason barked out a laugh. “Clever,” he said with a sly smile.

“I’ll be reviewing your dissertative work, Jol,” Hailar warned, her tail slashing a little bit behind her.

“Then as long as my conclusions match yours, you won’t argue too much about them,” she replied calmly, which made Jason laugh even harder.

“She’s got you there, Hailar,” he declared.

“Keelo,” Hailar sighed forlornly, putting her hands on her hips.

“Farguut,” Jol mimicked her, which made Jason laugh again.

“If you show up in the infirmary with a bite wound, Hailar, I’d say you brought that on yourself,” Jason teased.

“She’s safe right now, your Grace. Those doctors from your Medical service milked my fangs dry this morning. They want to study Keelo venom,” she informed him.

“Oh, so this is your chance to be sassy, Hailar,” Jason noted, giving her a sidelong look.

“I’m the boss around here, your Grace,” she replied tartly. “It’s not sass when the boss does it.”

“Trust me, it is,” Jason countered.

After talking about the Arkai with the two scientists, Jason continued his tour with Gorvin Frul from Trenirk's office. He was a Master Builder with twenty years holding his hammer, and he was a mining specialist, a master of "building" underground in the form of mineshafts and mining infrastructure. He was the Makati that would be overseeing all mining operations on the planet. Gorvin took Jason to their first mine site in a skimmer, then explained to him in more detail than Jason really understood how they were going to drill the shaft, expand out to get at the ore veins, then fill the whole thing back in when they were done. And Jason was impressed by how little they'd impacted the surrounding forest in the low hills. They'd cut some trees down to make room around the proposed mineshaft to make room for equipment and personnel support buildings. "We're going to use harmonic wave cutters to core out the shaft, then remove the core in kathra-long sections and put them in orbit to keep them," he explained. "We plotted out this shaft to it avoids all deep faults in the rock under us, so we should have no seismic issues from the core removal. We estimate that this one shaft will gain us access to nearly 151,000 benkonn of usable Andorite ore for making Adamantium, as well as 98,500 benkonn of Ardantium 291. We'll even pull out about 62,400 benkonn of copper, gold, silver, and platinum, it's laced in with the Andorite ore," he said with a chuckle. "The house jewelers will be happy to hear that."

"Damn, all from one shaft?" Jason asked, to which the Makati nodded.

"You have no idea how mineral rich this planet is, your Grace. There are substantial deposits all through the planet's mantle, all the way down to the liquid outer core. This core shaft will eventually reach almost to the outer core before we finish operations and fill it back in. We chose this shaft first because of the access to both Andorite and Ardantium. There's a site on the northern continent that we estimate will produce close to three million benkonn of Carbidium ore."

"We don't really need Carbidium."

"And that's why it's low priority," he nodded. "We'll mine it eventually just to sell it to others, since *they* use Carbidium. But you said the priority is alloy ores for Neutronium, so we're focusing our initial efforts on them."

"Sounds good. What about the other planets in the system?"

“I already have mining outfits dispatched, as well as some asteroid wranglers. We found an asteroid out there that’s solid Telvastium 407. And I already have a gas mining rig setting up at planet nine to mine the heavy core gases from it.”

“Sounds like Trenirk sent the right man out here to get this operation on its feet, Gorvin,” Jason said with an approving nod, which made the Makati preen a tiny bit.

“This is what I do for a living, your Grace. I’d hope that after sixty years, I’d know what I’m doing.”

[Jason,] Cybi called. [Jason, answer!]

[What is it, Cybi? You sound a bit excited.]

[Come to 3D as quickly as you can! There’s been a breakthrough!] she told him with elation threaded through her commune.

A breakthrough, and something so important that they’d call him to the shop? It had to be *big*. “Change of plans, Gorvin, get me back to the landing pad,” he said quickly.

“What’s the matter?”

“I’ve been recalled to Karis, something happened.”

“Uh oh.”

“It’s the *good* kind of uh oh, Gorvin,” he grinned as the Makati turned the skimmer around. *[Jax, get the Ranger ready for departure as soon as I get there. Shen, Suri, you too. We’re going back to Karis immediately.]*

[I haven’t received any alerts from the KMS,] Jaxira replied.

[I just got recalled by my office, so it’s not something you’d hear through the KMS,] he told her. *[Now stop piddling and get your corvette ready to take off.]*

[My crew is already here, your Grace,] she assured him. *[I’ll take off now and clear the lanes to the Stargate. I’ll also send it up so the KMS clears the lanes on the other side,]* she added, referring to her ability to use her authority to take command of space. She’d order all civilian traffic out

of the shortest path between the Stargate and the planet, and the controllers at Karis would do the same.

[Good thinking. Do it,] he agreed as Gorvin opened the throttle of the skimmer, getting them back to the staging area as quickly as he could.

Thanks to Jax going first to clear the way, when Jason got his mecha back into space, there was nothing in his way. That let him put his flight pods at max acceleration, and while he was heading back for the Stargate, he pondered what they'd managed to discover at 3D. For it to be so important they'd recall him immediately, it had to be the diffusers or Project F. Cybi hadn't told him what it was about, and she wouldn't due to security concerns—not even he felt using the biogenic comm network was entirely secure—but given how excited she sounded, it reinforced his belief that it had be one of those two projects.

Because of Jax, Jason landed his mecha on the pad outside the 3D warehouse 56 minutes after taking off. Jenny literally ran out of the secured entry towards it as he opened the doors, and grabbed his armored hand as soon as he was on the tarmac. “Come on come on come on come on!” she chanted, pulling on his hand urgently.

“Good grief, woman, calm down,” he chided as he let her drag him towards the secured entry doors. Shen and Suri landed their fighters as he headed for the warehouse, but they didn't get out. Not even *they* were allowed in 3D.

The entire shop was in a tizzy when Jason entered, and many of them cheered when they saw him. “Alright, I'm here and the door's closed. So what you got, Jenny?”

“We got the diffuser working!” she erupted, which caused an explosion of cheers from everyone in the shop. “Full power, and it's not jacking the power system! We cracked it, Jayce! We finally cracked it!”

“Holy shit, that's awesome!” he said elatedly. “Show me!”

“Look!” she said, pulling him to the center table and using her interface to bring up a diagram. “We've tried everything to protect the power system from the diffusion effect. Directional, phasing, changing the power outputs, you name it. We found out that if we introduce a gravimetric flux at the opposite resonance composite the diffuser uses *into* the plasma stream, it

generates a flux field that disrupts the diffusion effect, but *only* in a localized area!”

“A flux field? The units filter that out!”

“I know! We just tuned the exchangers, converters, and relays to allow *just enough* gravimetric flux to counter the diffusion field! It causes a 6% power loss across the entire system, but we can compensate for that! Jayce, we don’t have to install any extra equipment to fix this, we just change the settings of our power distribution equipment!”

“We took what we discovered experimenting with the plasma distribution system and created an algorithm that creates an inverse flux field that surrounds the plasma generation bubble in our power generation units,” Eraen answered as Jenny looked to resist jumping up and down. “That flux field *can* be generated in a specific direction, so we set it so it projects it outward, away from the Torsion field that produces power, and that neutralized the diffusion effect. We still don’t have a fix yet for the diffusers messing with artificial gravity, but we can account for that by increasing the gravity field while the diffuser’s in operation. There will still be a partial loss of gravity, but since everyone will be in armor, they can just use their armor’s inducers to compensate.”

Jason looked over the specs she had on the hologram, and saw that they weren’t kidding. Plasma power equipment filtered out gravimetric flux caused by flowing plasma because it created resistance in the conduits to plasma flow, but their fix, it was *simple*. The flux field, if it was specifically tuned to invert the diffusion field, canceled out the diffusion effect *only* in the direct space occupied by the affected plasma and extending out in a flux field that was only about 1.5 tikra. And while it did introduce a 6.2% power loss due to resistance of plasma flow caused by gravimetric flux, they could *easily* account for that, change a few settings in the power systems, and get it back without causing excessive heat buildup in the plasma conduits or molecular decay in the silicon that made up the conduit. And the fix for the generators was even easier, just an update to the software that governed how they operated, based on what they’d discovered experimenting with the plasma power distribution system, most likely trying to fix the diffuser’s effect on artificial gravity.

It was a *simple* solution, so simple that they'd overlooked it because of how it degraded the ship's power system...and it *worked*.

"You tried this out on the test equipment?" he asked.

"We're running it on the test ship right now, at full power," Eraen answered. "They're going to see if keeping the diffusion effect up for long periods causes any issues with our fix, then we'll test the fixes against rapidly raising and lowering the diffusers, simulating a combat situation where it might have to alternate between diffusion and shockwave generators."

Jason looked at the data for a moment, then looked to them. "Work up changes that the others in the CCM have to make to run a diffuser without it jacking their power plants. Cybi, yank that data out of the KMS mainframes and send it over here."

"We already have it here, Jason," Cybi answered from a speaker without manifesting a hologram. "But the fixes for them will be easier than for us. The diffusion effect was particularly damaging to our singularity plants and double-metaphased power systems. Single metaphased, hyperphased, striated, phase linked, and more primitive forms of plasma power and power generators aren't affected as severely."

"Then it won't take long for us to work up a fix for everyone," he declared. "Did you have to alter the diffuser in any way, Jenny? Can they start building them with the current specs?"

"Yes!" she answered excitedly. "We already have the templates ready to go, Jayce! We can start building the diffusers right now, and we can have the fixes ready by the time we start distributing them!"

"Well, fuck me," Jason mused, then he burst out laughing. "Great job, Jenny, Eraen! You have no idea how many lives you just saved!" He gave her a rough hug, then a kiss on the cheek. "Once the test ship has ten hours of uptime on the diffuser, we'll give it a field test to see just how effective it is against Torsion weapons," he declared.

"We already did that, Jason," Eraen told him. "We did all that *before* we called you, we wanted to make absolutely sure it works. The diffuser reduces the power of a standard heavy-mount Consortium Torsion bolt by 77%, which effectively neutralizes it because of natural Torsion decay in

the beam as it travels after entering the diffusion effect. As we projected, the Torsion beam completely diffuses about thirty shakra from the hull. It diffuses out any Torsion weapon weaker than that before it gets fifty shakra past the field border. It still diffuses *all* Torsion effects, including a Torsion shockwave, but that's a small price to pay for taking away our enemy's longest-reaching and one of their most powerful weapons."

"Outstanding," Jason declared. "Run these figures against a CMS and see if the changes screw that up. Cybi, bundle up all the templates and blueprints and send them to Trenirk's office, I'm going over there right now to get him started on building them. Get a team on designing a version of the diffuser we can release to the others, that doesn't use biogenic tech, so they can build their own."

"Already did that, since we didn't change the diffuser," Jenny said. "We have a generic diffuser unit that anyone in the Confederation can build and install on their ships, using standard shared CCM technology."

"Outstanding. Cybi, warn Myri to assemble the command staff for a meeting," he said. "Guys, I want the whole shop working on fixes for CCM ships so they can install a diffuser," he told the shop loudly. "Jenny, Eraen, organize it. Nobody works on *anything* but this until we have an installation process worked out for every ship in the CCM and a fix so they can run it without it disrupting their power. I can't stress that enough, guys. This tech might be what wins us the war against the Syndicate, and it will *definitely* give us a major advantage against the colonizing force the Consortium is sending. You guys can't even imagine how many lives you'll be saving."

"You heard Jayce, guys, I'm the boss now!" Jenny shouted, then she ducked when she was showered with small parts and pieces of equipment, which made Jason laugh.

"Jenny, you handle the final testing and sims for our own ships. Eraen, organize the shop into teams to work on adapting this for the CCM," he ordered. "Give priority to ships that have more vulnerability to diffusion. So start with the Imperium and work your way down to the Graguth, that way we get the hard ones out of the way first and ramp up as we work down through the list."

“I’ll take care of it, Jayce,” Eraen nodded. “We should have installation procedures ready for the INS in three days max.”

“Good job, guys. Fuckin’ good job,” he declared, patting both of them on the shoulders, which caused another riotous cheer.

Jason surprised his guards by taking off in his Juggernaut before they so much as got into the cockpit, him rushing right out of the warehouse and straight into his mecha. He nearly smashed it against the hard shield protecting the warehouse and the Shimmer Dome facility, security just *barely* managed to turn it soft to let him through. *Why the hurry, Jason?* Suri asked.

They cracked the diffuser, he declared. *It works, and we only have about four months to get them built and on as many ships as possible. Every second counts now, girls. Every ship we get installed with a diffuser are lives saved.*

That’s the kind of news worth going fast, Shen agreed eagerly. *So they work completely?*

Oh yes, and the fix to get them to work is easy, he replied. *The diffuser team just earned one hell of a bonus.*

I know this may be a bit facetious, but if the fix is so easy, why did it take them so long? Suri asked.

Because while the fix is easy, the methodology behind it isn’t something that even I’d think of trying until I exhausted a bunch of other options, he answered. *The fix is a simple adjustment to our power systems, but the reason it works is something that they overlooked, because the fix is adjusting the power systems to make them inefficient. That’s not something I’d think of if I were on the team, since I’m there to make the diffuser work without impacting ship performance.*

Yeah...yeah, I can see what you mean, she replied. *So, we’re racing back to the White House?*

That’s where we’re going, he confirmed.

And here I thought that Jyslin had told you she was off work. Or maybe Aura, Shen sent lightly.

Watch it, woman, or I'll have Cybi shut down your Wolf and you can walk home after it crashes.

Cybi had spread the word ahead of him for certain people to be made available *immediately* when he got there, so Trenirk was in his office finishing his lunch when Jason arrived. He'd carried his tray up from the cafeteria. "Tren," he called strongly as he marched into his office, his helmet off and in Shen's hands behind him. "I need factory space, and I need it *now*."

"It wouldn't have anything to do with the templates Cybi sent to my office a little bit ago?" he asked.

"That's exactly what it is," he nodded. "3D solved the diffuser problem, and the diffusers don't need to be altered to make them work. So I need you to start building them *right now*, and build enough to fit onto every unit in the KMS, from mobile diffusion field units for infantry support all the way up to the *Tianne*."

"I *do* remember that they haven't designed a diffuser unit for the *Tianne* yet," Trenirk reminded him, "but from the look of these templates, they have units ready for everything else." He turned and looked at his factory production board, putting his hands on his hips. "What kind of priority do they have?"

"If the planet won't explode because you shifted production, you shift production," Jason replied. "The only thing you don't take off the board are exomechs and Rockers, Sioa would strangle me if I had you cut production on them."

"Hmm," he sounded, then he stepped closer to the board, running his finger along a line of factory ID numbers on the right side. "I can do it. I'll just do an across the board cut in production for everything else and shunt that production capacity to the diffusers. I can have one built for every ship in the Navy in three months, with some extras, and still get enough mobile infantry units and small unit diffusers built to field protected armies. But I can't build enough to cover every Wolf fighter in the inventory in four months," he warned. "So we'll have to prioritize which Wolf fighters get them. But that's not my department, Juma and Sioa will have to fight over which Wolves get upgraded," he chuckled. "That should give the Navy

more than enough time to get them installed on the ships before the Syndicate arrives, and gives us spares for every ship class for new ships and replacements. Does Naval Engineering and Army Special Maintenance have the installation procedures worked up for them?"

"Yup, Cybi's been keeping those in reserve, and she changed it every time they made a change to the diffusers, so that's ready to go. They'll be going from the factory straight to the ships and exomechs."

"If that's the case, I'll get with Dellin and coordinate, so my production schedule mirrors the refit schedule he'll set up," he murmured. "Sioa's army units won't be quite so complicated for us, so I'll just send everything I build to Joint Base Alpha and let them sort it out."

"That would be a good idea," Jason agreed. "I'll tell Dellin to get in touch with you when I brief him, which'll be as soon as I leave here. So, you can do it?"

"I guarantee it," he replied. "If every ship in the Navy isn't equipped with a diffuser by the time the Syndicate arrives, it'll be *Dellin's* fault, not mine."

Jason laughed. "That's a fight you don't wanna pick, Tren," he warned lightly. "I'll let you get to juggling things around."

"It's gonna take some juggling, that's for sure. Give me three days to get everything set up, and I'll start on diffuser production."

"Sounds good. Get it done, Tren."

"That's a promise, Jason."

Jason marched quickly from Trenirk's office to the command center, where the entire command staff, Dellin, and all five CBIMs and Coma were assembled and waiting for him, some there in person and some as holograms. "Good, I don't have to chase anyone down," he declared as he hurried in with his guards. "I'm not sure if Cybi briefed you—"

"She did," Myri interrupted. "So the diffusers are a go?"

"They're a go," he replied, with caused some big grins to bloom in the room. "3D is working up a power system change for our ships and mecha to run them without them interfering with our equipment, and Tren is

reorganizing production to start cranking them out. Dellin, he's going to coordinate with you so you always have a diffuser built and ready for each refit in the rotation," he told the short Faey man, who was represented by a hologram. "Get with him after this so you can arrange things."

Dellin nodded without speaking.

"So what's the fix, Jason?" Myri asked.

"Something surprisingly easy, a change in the power generation system to introduce an inverse flux field around the Torsion bubble holding the fusion reaction, and for the plasma systems, introducing an inverse flux anomaly into the plasma flow, effectively canceling the diffusion effect *only* immediately around flowing plasma and powered equipment," he replied. "Like the inverse phase emitter I once built to hide the Legion from Faey sensors. The only thing it doesn't fix is the artificial gravity issue, but that's a nitpick at this point. Eraen came up with the good idea of just using the inducers in armor to mitigate the partial gravity loss while a diffuser's operating, since the inducers are inside the armor and the effect they have is very localized."

"I'll take reduced gravity to completely remove one of our enemy's most dangerous weapons from the theater," Navii said sagely. "Dellin, it's going to fall on you to arrange a complete refit of the entire Navy, and get it done in three months," she told him. "We absolutely *must* have our ships equipped with the diffusers before we confront the Syndicate. They have no idea their Torsion weapons will be useless, so we have to maximize that surprise on the first encounter, do as much damage as we can."

"I can do it, Navii," he assured her. "It's going to require me to suspend almost all other operations, but I don't think anyone in this room is going to complain about that."

"Not even a little bit," Jason agreed. "Getting our ships refitted takes precedence over building new ones."

"What about the ground diffuser units for infantry defense?" Sioa asked. "And the diffusers for exomechs and Wolf fighters?"

"Tren is going to get those built as well. He said he can cover every exomech in the Army and Marines, but he won't be able to produce enough diffusers for Wolf fighters to refit the entire inventory in time. You and

Juma are going to have to get together and figure out which Navy, Marine, and Army squadrons are going to get refits, and which won't."

"That won't be very hard, Jason, we can work that in out just a few hours," Juma assured him.

"What about the others in the CCM?" Myri asked.

"3D is working up fixes for them so they can install diffusers and not have them dick around with their power systems, and they already have plans for them to build their own versions of the diffuser that don't use our tech," he replied. "The only real drawback for our allies is that CCM diffusers can't be miniaturized enough to install them in a fighter or exomech, getting them that small requires Karinne tech. So our fighters and exomechs will have defense against Torsion weapons, but nobody else will. Cybi, put those plans on the mainframe at the Academy and send out a notice to all Confederate members about it. That way they can get a head start before I formally announce it to the Confederate Council," he told her. "They need to get started on building them and installing them as quickly as they can."

"It will be done in just a moment."

"I can send out a priority message to all foreign dock masters up here about the diffusers," Dellin added.

"Do it," Jason ordered. "We've been stringing them along about the diffusers for over a year, I'm sure a few of them will think we're just trolling them. What kind of numbers are we looking at, Dellin?"

Dellin turned around, no doubt looking at his status board, then the hologram shimmered and faced them again as a new camera took over transmitting his image. "It's going to take me about four days to get the docks cleared for the refits," he replied. "We can just park the ships they're currently building near the dock, out of the way but right there when they can get back to working on them. I'll have to prioritize ships to get the largest ones refitted first, that way we can get other ships into those docks. Destroyers and the old Mark I cruisers won't need a dock at all to do the refit, because of the way they're designed, so that will take a whole lot of stress off of dock space, but we still need those big docks cleared for the frigates. I can refit twenty frigates at a time in a battleship dock. The

frigates will be the trickiest ones,” he said, tapping his chin. “They’ll have to all but completely take the engines apart to get the diffusers installed, then do a whole lot of refitting to work the other systems around the new equipment. If not for that, we could refit the frigates out in the open space like the destroyers.”

“I’m surprised they found a way to install a diffuser in the frigates in the first place,” Juma mused.

“The diffusers for the frigates are actually very small, only about the size of a class VIII power plant,” Jason told her. “But even with them only being the size of a hovercar, they’ll still have to do a hell of a lot of work getting them in there. There’s like *no* empty space in a frigate.”

“So, the *Tianne* and the capitol ships are first?” Myri asked.

“We haven’t got a diffuser designed for the *Tianne* yet,” Jason warned. “They’re working on it right now.”

“We can’t put it in a dock anyway, so that’s a moot point,” Dellin assured him. “As soon as you have the diffuser unit for it, the Shield’s Hammers can get it installed wherever the ship is.”

“Given how big it is, I doubt just one diffuser unit’s going to cover the whole ship,” Myri noted.

“Eraen will crunch the numbers to figure it out,” Jason said confidently. “If one diffuser can’t do it, we’ll go with multiple synced units to generate an aggregate field, like how they do it with the shields. No one shield generator could hope to cover the entire *Tianne*,” he stated. “So, four days, Dellin?”

“Four days,” he nodded. “If Trenirk can have diffusers built and waiting, we can start refitting ships in four days.”

“Tren said he’d only need three to get the factories reassigned and retooled, so it’ll depend on how fast the factories can crank them out once they’re producing,” Jason told him. “You and him will have to work that out, Dellin.”

“We’ll set up a system,” he nodded. “That way a diffuser goes straight from a factory to a dock and they start installing it.”

“Then I’m not going to hold you guys up here talking about it. Dellin, get it going. Juma, get the fleet ready to cycle through Kosigi. Myri, organize it with the CCM so we can pull our assigned ships out of the duty rotations and wargames without Lorna getting pissed at us. The rest of you, try not to get under their feet,” he declared, which caused some laughter. “There’s a Confederate Council meeting in five hours, so I’ll get the word out officially then. But no doubt I’ll be getting some calls five minutes after Cybi gets the data up at the Academy.”

“We’ll keep you up to date if anything changes, Jayce,” Myri told him.

Jason went up to his office, changed out of his armor, and he barely even managed to sit down at his desk before Chirk called him on the office intercom. “*Revered Hive-leader, the revered Hive-leader Kreel wishes to confer.*”

“Why am I not surprised,” he chuckled, and he accepted the call. A flat hologram of Kreel appeared just past his desk, showing Kreel sitting at his own desk with the city of Grimjaka visible in the window behind him. Kreel had a great view from his office, one of the perks of being High Councilor. “Hey Kreel, what’s up?”

“Two things. First, seriously? The diffusers work?”

Jason laughed. “As of about four hours ago,” he replied. “We don’t have a fix yet for *everyone*, but I have 3D working on it as we speak. They should have a fix ready for Grimja ships in a couple of takirs.”

“Well, that news just brightens my whole day,” he said with a buck-toothed grin. “I already have my industrial secretary arranging to have our factories build them. It was nice of you guys to release the blueprints for them.”

“We want you to be able to install them as fast as possible, Kreel, then once 3D has a fix to deal with the power problem, you can just make the changes and turn them on.”

“Awesome. Now, second. You busy tomorrow?”

“As a matter of fact, I am, but it’s not *busy* busy,” he replied. “Krirara invited me and the family to Kirri’arr tomorrow for dinner. She wants to get a *live* look at the twins. She says holograms just don’t do it justice.”

“She *smells* them, that’s what she’s doing,” Kreel laughed. “Well, lemme see if I can nag Krirara into extending that invitation to her *other* best friend in the whole universe.”

Jason chuckled lightly. “Good luck,” he said with a grin. “You don’t have babies for her to fawn over.”

“Pft, I’ll just borrow my sister’s, she has enough of ‘em,” he retorted, which made Jason laugh.

Without warning, another hologram popped up, which showed Dahnai’s lovely face. She was in her formal robes and wearing her crown, and from the look of it, was in her office just off the throne room. “Jayce, the diffusers work?” she asked immediately and without greeting, which made Kreel laugh. “Is that Kreel?”

“Yes, it’s Kreel,” the Grimja called lightly. “And I guess I won the race to ask that question. Do I get a trophy?”

“Yes, the diffusers work, and I have 3D working right now to solve the power problem for the INS,” Jason answered. “We solved the problem for *us*, now they’re working on everyone else. I told them to start with the INS and work their way down in order of difficulty. The INS will be one of the hardest Navies to fix, so they’re working on them first.”

“Why is that?” Kreel asked.

“Because of the type of power the INS uses,” Jason answered. “And that’s as far as I can go into it, Kreel. Confidentiality,” he warned.

“Soooo, where does the Union Navy fit into the schedule?”

“I don’t want to embarrass you in front of Dahnai like that, Kreel,” Jason said with a straight face, which made Dahnai burst out laughing. “When we get to the Union, I’ll let you know. Until then, just get the diffusers built and installed, so you only have to do the upgrades 3D sends down to activate them.”

“I’ve already got my people working on it,” he repeated.

“I’ll be doing the same as soon as I get off the comm,” Dahnai agreed. “We *need* those diffusers. We can be much more aggressive against the Syndicate with them working, and I think the last thing any of us want is a

protracted war against them with the Consortium's colonizing force coming up behind them."

"Don't swing your tits around yet, woman, the Syndicate uses more than just Torsion weaponry," Jason said. "Leave the military shit to the professionals, which you are not. I don't tell Myri how to run the KMS, so you should stay out of Lorna's hair."

Dahnai gave him a dirty look as Kreel took his turn laughing.

"Watch it, furball, I know where you live," Dahnai threatened.

"Is she doing that scrunchy face thing, Jayce?" Kreel asked, which made Jason burst out laughing.

"As a matter of fact, she was," he replied, which made Dahnai glare at him.

"Faey have such pliable faces," Kreel grinned, showing his recently filed teeth. "Makes me a bit jealous. All I have is this muzzle and some whiskers."

"And the ears," Jason pointed out.

"Oh yeah, the ears," he said, wiggling his round ears ostentatiously. "Well, since you're busy tomorrow, how about I come over after the council meeting? We can get drunk and make fun of Dahnai when she's not around," he offered.

"I'm gonna be there *now*, buster," Dahnai retorted. "You forget just which of us has free right of passage to Karis. I don't have to *ask* permission."

"I'll clear it for your ship, Kreel," Jason chuckled. "If you time it right, you can get here for dinner. Seido's making three cheese lasagna tonight, I'm sure she can throw in an extra one without any meat in it for you."

"Awesome, I've been itching to try out this Seido's cooking. You rave about it every time we talk."

"I'm sure Ayama will be very interested to hear that," Dahnai said threateningly.

"Ayama raves about her cooking more than I do," Jason snorted.

“Revered Hive-leader, the Imperial Hive-leader Shakizarr wishes to confer,” Chirk interrupted over the intercom.

Kreel laughed. “You were expecting this, weren’t you Jayce?”

“I should have put a bet on it with the Laro,” he replied, which made Kreel grin. “You can send it in, Chirk,” he called.

Shakizarr’s green and black furred face appeared between Kreel and Dahnai’s, his hair recently cut. “Jason, I just got word that the diffuser specs were put on the Academy mainframe. Is that intentional? Are they working?”

“We’ll have them working by the time you get them built and installed on your ships, Shakizarr,” he replied. “We released them now so everyone can get a head start building them. We’ve solved the power problem, now we’re going back and working out exactly how every navy in the CCM needs to refit their power system so the diffuser doesn’t interfere with them.”

“Excellent! So the diffuser specs are viable?”

“They’re viable,” he nodded. “The unit itself didn’t need to be changed, and as soon as my team works up a refit for your Navy’s power system, they’ll work for you.”

“This is the best news I’ve received all lunar cycle,” Shakizarr said brightly. “If there was one thing I was hoping for, it was for these diffuser units to be in operation before the Syndicate arrives. They rob both of our enemies of one of their most dangerous weapons.”

“It took us a while, but we figured it out,” Jason chuckled dryly.

“I’ll summon my domestic advisors and get them started on producing the units,” Shakizarr declared. “And I’m fairly sure I’m not the only one that had the impulse to call you for confirmation, so I’ll clear your comm for the next one,” he added slyly.

“I believe we’ve been busted, Dahnai,” Kreel called cheekily, which made Shakizarr smile.

“I’m on my way over, Jason,” Dahnai said before Shakizarr ended his comm. “We need to talk about this face to face.”

“I think we all will be,” Shakizarr said. “This news is so important that I think it warrants a full meeting of the Confederate Council, on Karis rather than Terra. I’m going to put it forth in the meeting today.”

“Why are you doing that to me, Shakizarr?” Jason complained. “You know I hate pomp and circumstance!”

“Because it keeps you honest,” he replied, which made Jason start in surprise even as both Dahnai and Kreel erupted into startled laughter. Shakizarr wasn’t one known for comedy, though he did have a subtle wit. “If we don’t come over there and nose around once in a while to make sure of things, there’s no telling what impetuous ideas you might start entertaining.”

“Revenge is a dish best served cold, Shakizarr,” Jason threatened, which made him laugh lightly.

“Game on, as Dahnai often tells you, Jason,” he smiled. “I’ll see you at council.” Then his hologram vanished.

Jason leaned back in his chair as both Dahnai and Kreel gave him smug looks. “I think he has a good idea, actually,” Dahnai proposed. “Given how important the diffusers are, it *does* warrant a full meeting of the council, and they love it when they get to go to Karis. They all can’t be me,” she said preeningly, and both of them laughed at Jason’s ugly look at her.

“Push off, bitch,” he said without much vindiction, which made her laugh again.

“I’m on my way over,” she said, and her hologram vanished.

“Let me go kick some tails, and I’ll be on my way as well, Jayce,” Kreel smiled. “See you in a bit.”

Cybi manifested her hologram just as Kreel’s hologram winked out, and Cyra and Cylan followed suit quickly. *[I take it we should start preparing for a full summit?]* Cybi asked.

[You know it’s coming,] he sighed. *[They’ll vote for it for sure, and we can’t really say no. Cylan, that’s a good project for you, you and Cynna. Get with Yeri and get everything organized for their visit, and you two handle coordinating with the others. It’ll be a good learning experience for both of you.]*

[We'll take care of it, Jason,] he assured with a nod as Cynna's hologram manifested.

[You're giving me a task, Jason?]

[You and Cylan are going to help Yeri coordinate and set up the upcoming Confederate Council meeting,] he told her. *[You'll handle everything, from accommodations for the rulers and their retinues to menus, with Yeri there to advise you in the performance of your duties. Get with Aya about security, that's the only thing you don't arrange.]*

[I take it the subject of the meeting is the diffuser project?]

[Yup, so you know how to schedule the meetings,] he affirmed. *[Myli's probably gonna murder all of us for dragging her out of Project F for the conference, but she's the face of 3D, so she's the one that's going to do the presentation.]*

[Come now, Jason, it's her chance to rub the fact that she's smarter than everyone else in their faces. She loves doing that,] Cyra communed slyly, which made Jason laugh.

[Don't I know it,] he agreed. *[You two go to Yeri's office and tell her what's going on, and get started.]*

[Yes, Jason,] Cylan replied, and both of them dissolved their holograms. They didn't *have* to do that, they were capable of just manifesting holograms over in Yeri's office, but it reinforced the illusion that they were following his orders. It was part of how the CBIMs acted more like organic beings than computers, part of their core personality templates that only Cybi had shed over her long years.

Knowing what was coming gave him something to work on as he fielded 14 other calls about the diffusers, then spent nearly three hours discussing the diffusers with Dahnai in his office. She'd come over still in her formal robes, and what was now common practice, she had Sirri with her so she could sit in on the meeting and observe. Teaching Sirri what she needed to know to be the Empress started early. The twins and Kaen were over at the strip under Saelle's care, who had come along as well. Saelle went almost *everywhere* that Dahnai went, which both allowed Dahnai more time with her children than Imperial tradition allowed and kept Saelle close by for both her advice and the protection she offered. Saelle was one

of Dahnai's closet and most trusted advisors, full of good old common sense, and on top of that, Saelle was one of Dahnai's closest friends. Dahnai had also never forgotten how Saelle had saved her life, so she kept her close for the security she offered as much as for her intelligence and her friendship. Jason fielded calls from leaders from Zaa to Grran as he discussed refitting the INS with diffusers with Dahnai, at least until Kreeel arrived. Then it became a generic conversation about getting the CCM refitted in time to square off against the Syndicate.

They stayed in Jason's office when the meeting of the Confederate Council started, and as Jason expected, there were no lackeys or aides in his holograms. It was the rulers, *all* of them, and they looked quite excited and animated. Even the Leader of the Zyagya was in attendance. Highlord Traikka of the Jhri currently held the gavel, and the small, wiry little squirrel-man gaveled them into order. The Jhri were just that, humanoids that had evolved from a squirrel-like creature, so they had rodent features vaguely similar to a Grimja, thick but short fur, and a long, bushy tail. Traikka's fur was a dark gray with a white patch under his chin that trailed down under his tunic. What made the Jhri unique among the many races of the Confederation was their manual dexterity and their natural agility. They excelled in any occupation where they used their hands, like the Jobodi, but they also had exceptional hand-eye coordination and body control, with a nearly supernatural understanding of distance, angles, and trajectories. Jhri were some of the best long range gunners and snipers in the galaxy because of it, and they were the scourge of most online games where that manual dexterity gave them an advantage, like Vanguard. Jhri players were some of the few "exies" that could compete against a jacked player, along with the Shurai, Jobodi, and Yood. "We're in order, and I don't think I even need to say why most of us are here," he said in his chittery, high-pitched voice. "I think all of us were informed that the Karinnes placed the blueprints for the diffusers on the Academy mainframe, and we're all here to learn more. Your Grace," he prompted, looking in the direction of Jason's hologram on his side.

"To keep this brief, august rulers, we finally solved the power problem," he began. "We've solved the problem for our own power systems first, and now that we have a methodology for it, our engineers are working on a refit for every member of the Confederation so their ships can run a diffuser

without it interrupting your power. As our teams work up a solution for each Navy in the CCM, we'll send it out to them so they can do the necessary work. Our solution didn't require us to alter the diffusers, so we already had the technical specs ready to release. We sent it out so all of you can get a head start building the units and installing them, and we hope to have the power problem for each member solved by the time you've started installing the diffusers." He gestured, and a hologram of a diffuser unit appeared over his desk. "The units can be installed on any ship from frigate class to capitol class, with different models for different ship sizes, and we have designs for ground-based diffuser field units for infantry protection. We haven't *completely* worked out all the bugs yet, just to warn you. We still haven't figured out a way to prevent the diffusers from interfering with artificial gravity fields, but we felt that wasn't big enough to not move forward. That's something that the Naval crews can take into account and work around when the time comes. So all your crews will be dealing with reduced gravity in their ships when the diffusers are operating. The diffuser offers complete protection against all classes of Torsion bolt weaponry, and all Torsion effects in general," he added. "That's why we've had so much trouble getting them to work, because the diffusion field affects virtually all power plants used by Confederate Navies. All of us use power plants that utilize a Torsion effect in one form or another to generate power, and the diffuser was affecting them along with everything else. That means that Navies that use Torsion shockwave generators and Torsion harmonic wave emitters can't use them if the diffuser is up, the diffuser cancels out the effects. But the bottom line, august rulers, is the diffusers are working, and as soon as we have a fix for your Navy, we'll get it to you. In the meantime, you can build the diffuser units and start installing them on your ships, because the units themselves are ready to go. Just ensure that your people don't try to *use* them until we have a fix for your Navy's power plants."

"Given the critical importance of this information, I move that the Confederate Council hold a summit," Shakizarr called before anyone could speak. "And it should be held on Karis.."

"I second that motion," Assaba nodded. "After all, the Grand Duke is only telling us what he feels comfortable saying over galactic crypto. A summit is the only means by which we can receive *all* the information, we'll need to confer with Admiral Dellin over our operations in Kosigi, and

I'd like to get a personal look at a diffuser unit in action. Those things can only be done on Karis."

"We have a second on the motion. All in favor?" Traikka called. Every single hologram was bordered in green, which was a *yes* vote, and Jason silently sighed, his fate sealed. "Motion is carried. The Confederate Council will meet in person on Karis as soon as it can be arranged by the Karinnes. Your Grace, how soon can you have a schedule prepared?"

"I'll have a representative get back to you when we have a date, Highlord, which I doubt will be longer than maybe four or five days," he replied, impressed with himself to keep the disgust out of his voice. "I'm going to assign the CBIMs to planning the summit, so it will be one of them getting back to you about it rather than Secretary Yeri." He glanced at Dahnai and Kreel. "If no one else has any questions, I'll take my leave and get things started," he declared.

"I think we can wait until the summit to have our questions answered," Traikka reasoned. "And the sooner you can get it organized, the sooner our questions will be answered."

Are you bailing on us and making us sit here while you walk out? Kreel challenged.

Yes I am, he replied shamelessly. *So enjoy sitting here listening to them talk while I go down to the cafeteria and grab a snack. Shen, Suri, come in and make sure my guests don't rifle through my desk while I'm away,* he called, which made Dahnai flip him off in the Faey manner.

Jason lingered in the cafeteria for nearly half an hour, and by the time he returned to his office, the meeting was over, and Sirri was no longer in the office, no doubt sent on to the strip once the meeting was over so she could go spend time with the other kids there, who were her friends. *So, they talk about anything that matters?* he asked as he stepped past his guards. Dahnai and Kreel were still in the chairs in front of his desk, Kreel with his feet up on Jason's desk and Dahnai leaning back with a finger on her interface, probably communing with Kellin or Saelle. Dahnai had a habit of touching her interface when she was using it, and it was a common enough phenomenon for him not to be surprised to see her do it.

Just going over the specs of the diffuser, and a few rulers were discussing helping the smaller empires get them built, Dahnai answered. I offered Grran some factory space, his production capacity is pretty much completely tied up.

For a twenty percent markup no doubt, he accused.

Hey, I have to pay those factory workers, she replied with an unrepentant trill twined through her thought.

Yeah, it was pretty boring, Kreel elaborated, wiggling his unshod toes. The instant they start throwing around numbers, it just turns off my brain.

You are such a liar, Jason accused as he sat back down at his desk. With Kreel's feet up on his desk, he got a good look at the pads on Kreel's feet.

I'm a politician, Jayce. You're surprised? Kreel asked with a grin. So, when's dinner?

Seido said it's in the oven, so whenever we wrap up and head back to my house, he answered. She said that the lasagna doesn't have any meat in it, so you're safe. And she's gonna make a couple of extra veggie dishes for you.

*Good, I don't think you want to be around me if I eat meat any more than I want to be around me, he grinned. Meat did some pretty awful things to a Grimja's digestive system, because they were biologically incapable of digesting it. Severe diarrhea and nausea was just two of the effects of meat on a Grimja, which often struck at the same time. Meat in their digestive tract caused it to try to purge *everything* in their system, so they spewed from both ends until there wasn't anything left. Luckily for them, only meat caused that reaction. Grimja could eat eggs and dairy products without issue.*

I already had that adventure. No thank you, Jason agreed.

What happened? Dahnai asked.

We were downtown last time I was here and ate something called a calzone. We had no idea it had sausage in it, and it had so much stuff in it I couldn't taste the meat, Kreel answered. I found out about an hour later, the hard way. It was very...chunky.

Ew.

Yeah, let's just say that it was a good thing I had my travel pack with spare clothes handy.

I did not need to know that, Kreel, she sent, revulsion threading through her thought.

If you don't wanna hear the answer, don't ask the question, he grinned. So, we ready to head for the strip, Jayce?

More or less, yeah. I don't have anything else tying me here. You hungry or something, Kreel?

Whatever gave you that idea? The teethmarks on the corner of your desk?

Bite marks from a Grimja don't always mean you're hungry, Jason replied lightly.

Well, what are we doing still sitting here? Let's get out of this work environment and go somewhere much more befitting a Grimja The beach, and I packed my Bermuda shorts.

Kreel and Dahnai rode with him in his skimmer, recalling it from the strip, which was escorted by four Wolf fighters and a corvette. Two of Dahnai's white-armored guards were in the back with Shen and Suri, the four of the talking privately between themselves as Dahnai rode in the copilot's chair and Kreel sat just behind her. *Trelle's garland, I keep forgetting about that oye tree growing in Karsa, Dahnai mused, looking down as they passed very close to Cyra's facility. It always puts those monsters in perspective seeing them next to buildings.*

That's not the biggest oye tree on Karis, Jason chuckled mentally. The ones on the northwest coast make that one look like a sapling..

Why is the tree in your back yard so small, then? Kreel asked. It's just as old as that tree.

You wouldn't believe me if I told you.

Well, try me.

Alright. I asked it not to grow so big, because not everyone wanted it towering over the neighborhood. So it only towers over the strip. And everyone kinds likes it that way, they found out that the canopy over the strip keeps it from getting too hot in the summer, but it still lets in enough sunshine that you can find a nice spot to bask. And when the tree flowers, the petals drift down like snow and the smell of them makes you think you've died and gone to heaven It does make it a bit problematic flying a skimmer in and out of the house, but I'll take that inconvenience for everything else the tree gives us.

You asked a tree not to grow so big. And it listened to you, Kreel sent challengingly.

I told you that you wouldn't understand, Jason chuckled.

The Parri brainwashed him. They're trying to turn Jason into one of them, Dahnai accused.

When there's no mystery left in the world, it becomes a very boring place, Dahnai, Jason sent sagely. I've seen the Parri do things that science can't explain. And by now, I don't want to explain it. I like the mystery to be just what it is, it reminds me that there's so much more to the universe than we will ever be able to comprehend. Even a hard-boiled engineer like me needs a little mystery in his life, a little magic, or life would be about nothing but numbers and science, and all the magic in living that makes it such a joy would be gone.

Now that I can understand, Kreel grinned. I should be trying to brainwash you into being a proper Grimja, Jayce. Our way of living is way more fun than yours.

And I'd never get any work done at all, Jason accused, glancing back at the Grimja.

Grimja life is about moderation, Jayce, he grinned. And the one thing you have to take the most in moderation is work..

Jason blurted out a laugh at the sheer absurdity of that statement. Kreel was probably one of the hardest-working members of the Confederate Council, and there was no such thing as *moderation* when it came to a Grimja partying.

Dahnai replied far more elegantly than Jason could have. She turned in her seat and slapped Kreel on the top of the muzzle, which made him recoil and Jason nearly veer into one of the escorting Wolves as he lost it.

Sirri was already on the beach when Jason landed on the pad behind the house, between it and the guard barracks, and one of Dahnai's permanent servants from her summer palace was standing on the pad waiting, holding a bikini and sheer wrap in her hands. "I'm going to go get out of these robes," Dahnai declared. "Don't get too drunk while I'm changing."

"Why Dahnai, I don't get *drunk*," Kreel lied with a straight face.

Dahnai smacked him on the shoulder before heading towards Jason's house with her servant in tow.

"Hey kidlets," Jason said as he came into the kitchen, where Rann and Shya were helping Seido set out finished dishes.

"Hey Dad. Kreel!" Shya said happily, rushing over to him. All the kids on the strip adored Kreel, mainly because he was a whole lot of fun no matter what age someone was.

"Hey Shya! That smells awesome," he said, looking at the spread. "Baked Menodan sugar chutes! Now I'm really glad I crashed this dinner!"

"I was told what you like, High Councilor," Seido said without looking in his direction as she pulled a lasagna from the oven.

"You must be Seido. And don't call me that unless you're in my office," he said in reply with a bucktoothed smile. "I'm Kreel."

"Kreel," she corrected as she turned around, the lasagna held in potholders. "Dinner will be on the table as soon as Her Majesty finishes changing."

"Speaking of that, I need to change myself."

Once everyone was changed into clothes more fitting for an outside deck dinner, Kreel in shorts and no shirt, Dahnai in bikini bottoms and no top, and Jason in a pair of shorts himself, they enjoyed dinner out on the deck with kids running back and forth, grabbing food and taking it down to the beach to eat picnic style. They were avoiding the main table because despite the informal setting, the three rulers still talked shop, and that was

too boring for the kids, even for Sirri when the allure of friends, fun and beach frolicking were within sight. Dahnai let her skip out on the boring talk to go play, and the three of them were more or less alone until Jyslin got home. She came onto the deck from the landing pad wearing a Paladins tee and shorts, and immediately grabbed a plate and sat down beside Jason. *About time, love,* he told her.

We were crunching numbers for a free agent contract, she replied. *We're going to make a serious bid for Laela Fenalle.*

Trelle's garland, seriously? She's the best outside striker in the IBL!

That's why we had to crunch numbers. We had to make sure we could afford to make a serious offer, she said ruefully. *So I heard about the diffusers. They got them working?*

Yup, he nodded. *Now comes the mad scrambling to get them built and installed.*

I almost wish I could have been there helping, she sent wistfully. Like him, she sincerely missed being in the middle of everything in 3D. *What was the fix?*

Hey, you gave up engineering to be the big shot IBL owner, so I doubt you'd understand the fix. Let me put it in simple terms for you, baby. Jenny did technical things with gadgets and now things work,, Jason teased playfully, which made her respond with a rude gesture that made Dahnai and Kreel laugh. *Watch it, buster, I sleep in the same bed with you,* she threatened.

When I can't find anyone better, he retorted while drinking beer, which made Dahnai explode with laughter when Jyslin took her glass of wine and poured it over Jason's head. Jason laughed himself after wiping wine out of his eyes

"Well, at least I'm not wearing a shirt to get soaked," he said aloud, but glanced to the side when Cybi manifested a hologram. "What's up, Cybi?"

"Zaa needs to speak with you immediately," she answered. *"She's on hologram and waiting in your office."*

"Sounds important," Jyslin said.

"She made that clear," Cybi replied.

“Alright, let me go see what she wants,” he said, standing up and picking up a napkin. “At least I can dry off on the way up.”

Zaa’s hologram was indeed waiting for him, pacing back and forth in front of his desk in his home office. She accessed his security and switched the room into Kimdori secure mode as soon as he closed the door, which made him give her a speculative look. “Alright, I’m here, Denmother,” he said, speaking Kimdori. If he didn’t, she wouldn’t be able to hear him. “What’s on your mind?”

“Jason, the Syndicate fleet en route to our galaxy just dropped out of hyperspace,” she told him.

“What? Why?” he asked.

“We don’t know,” she replied. “But they’ve dropped out of hyperspace and are regathering their fleet. They received no orders to drop out of hyperspace, so this had to be a planned event,” she said, pacing again. “They have no real reason to drop out of hyperspace *now*. They made the journey from Andromeda without dropping out of hyperspace once, yet they do so now, a considerable distance away from our galaxy.”

“Are they within range of the string jammer? Maybe a loss of reception of Syndicate pulse communications caused the computers to bring them out of hyperspace to warn the fleet commanders about it.”

“No,” she replied. “They won’t reach the edge of the jammer’s effect for another three months.”

“Hmm,” Jason mused, sitting at his desk and rapping his fingers on the top. “Then the only possible explanation is that this was a planned drop,” he said. “Unless there’s something majorly wrong on one of their main ships. Maybe a malfunction brought it out of hyperspace, and that triggered the entire fleet to drop out as well, so they didn’t leave it behind.”

“That is a possible explanation,” she nodded. “In fact, it might be the most plausible one. I fear to say that I had never considered this possibility, so I have no spy drones in that area,” she fretted. “The Flat Space Effect makes dispatching drones along the path problematic. I’ve rectified my error, however, and they should be there in about a week.”

“A *week*?” They’re four months away by hyperspace!”

“I’m having my children build another one-way wormhole to get them there *now*,” she told him. “It will take them a week to build it, and since I am sending unmanned probes, I can simply keep sending them through until enough of them arrive in one piece to keep eyes on their entire fleet. Once they arrive, they will shadow the fleet for the rest of its journey to our galaxy, and take extensive scans of them while doing so. That way we have detailed intelligence about them, their ships, and their weapons and capabilities before we engage them in battle.”

“Okay, that’s a good idea. And since you’re just sending automated hyperspace probes, I won’t bitch about it this time,” he told her. “This is gonna mess things up,” he added in disgust. “We were counting on them being on a schedule, and now that’s all changed. There’s no telling how long they’re gonna sit out there before getting moving again, and it might change everything. They may try to get in touch with their home base before leaving, which would be a four month delay—no wait, they can’t do that. They’re pretty deep in the Flat Space Effect, it would take *years* for them to get a reply in their time. Hmm. Maybe they stopped to take some sensor readings of their planned arrival point. Fuck, and we’ve got a pretty big fleet sitting over there right now doing wargames that’s *not* behind sensor jammers.”

“A good point,” Zaa said, looking to the side. “Dispatch SCM units to Arrival Point Alpha immediately.”

“Yes, Denmother,” a voice came from off camera.

“But this does offer a potential opportunity,” Zaa said, turning and looking at him. “Because of the temporal shift, we can assume safely that the fleet will be there for a while. The temporal shift where they are would mean that an hour is nearly three days in our time, so if they take their time, they will be out there for *takirs* in our time. We should debate the pros and cons of *contacting* the Syndicate with the Confederate Council, which we can do during the summit. Perhaps we can scare them away without having to engage them in war, or negotiate a peaceful means to prevent it. I personally doubt such an effort would find much success, but it *should* be discussed by the council as a whole. After all, they have traveled nearly five years to get here, I doubt they will simply go back home without at least *trying* to invade our galaxy.”

“I agree with you, Denmother. I also agree that we *should* at least discuss the matter with the others. Leaders like Magran and Kriavos would never forgive us if we didn’t at least try to find a peaceful solution first, so long as doing so doesn’t put us in an exposed position.”

“It might. By making contact, it tells them we are aware of them,” Zaa said calmly. “They would then be wary of attack should the negotiations fail.”

“I thought they *already* knew we were aware of them.”

“The Syndicate in *Andromeda* does. This fleet has been in hyperspace for five years, cousin.”

“That doesn’t mean they couldn’t find out,” he replied. “You forget, Denmother, their ships can *receive* Syndicate pulse communications while in hyperspace. I have no doubt that the fleet commander is right at this moment reading a series of reports sent to him from his HQ while he was in stasis. One of them very well could be *they know you’re coming*.”

She made a face. “You’re right, cousin. I hadn’t considered that,” she agreed. “So, it does make the possibility of contacting them less risky from a military standpoint. If they know we know about them, the element of surprise is already lost.”

“Partially, anyway,” Jason said. “They have no idea what we’re capable of. They know we beat the Consortium expedition, but they won’t hold much water to that, since they’re beating the Consortium themselves. Just knowing that we know they’re coming doesn’t mean they know just how long of an arm the Confederation has. You’ve studied them, Zaa. How do you think they’ll react?”

“Glibly,” she replied. “They are master diplomats and statesmen, cousin, but they are also ruthless and deceptive. No doubt they will make all kinds of promises, none of which they intend to keep. They will try to lie us into a sense of complacency, then attack.”

“Then we make it clear to them that they don’t want to fuck with us,” he said bluntly. “Cybi.”

Cybi manifested a hologram into the room. “*Yes, Jason?*”

“Were you listening?”

“Of course I was.”

“Good, then I don’t have to explain things to you. Get in touch with Tom and have him send a fuckton of automated toys to Kimdori Prime, on every unmanned disposable transport we have that can sit in hyperspace for extended periods of time,” he said. “We’ll send them with the probes, and if the Syndicate doesn’t give us an answer we like, we can start the war early,” he declared in a grim tone.

“That’s clever, cousin. I’ll have them sent on with the probes.”

“Actually. Cybi, have Tom send *everything* we can load onto the unmanned transports,” he told her quickly. “We’ll do as much damage as possible while they’re sitting out in intergalactic space, months from the nearest resources or support. We’ll have the opportunity, no use to waste it.”

“I’ll get him working on it,” she nodded, then her hologram winked out.

“How far away are your scouts from Andromeda?” he asked Zaa.

“They arrive at the edge of the galactic rim in 37 days,” she answered.

“Can you get in touch with the computers and have them run a database search on all messages they’ve intercepted to see if the Syndicate warned the fleet that we know about it?”

“I can. See to it,” she said to the side.

“At once, Denmother,” another aide’s voice called from off camera. “We can let that result guide our next step. If they know, it means we can initiate contact without giving up the element of surprise. If they don’t, then we very well may simply attack first, *then* contact them to warn them that there is much more where that came from.”

“Just so,” he nodded. “They won’t know that we threw everything at them we could get there. We can lie just as good as they can when it comes down to it. If they’re looking at constant attacks while they sit out there, and even attacks while in *hyperspace* while coming in, it may make them decide to turn around without us having to fire a single shot from a manned ship.”

“It sounds like I won’t be dismantling the wormhole generator,” Zaa mused.

“Actually, I think I’ll be building my own over here,” Jason said. “I can put Alya’s propulsion engineering unit from MRDD on it, she’s the best I have at hyperspace applications with Myleena and Emia tied up with Project F. She can build us our own one-way wormhole generator, that way we’re not constantly bothering you with the stuff we’re sending over to go through. She can pull the data your engineering team have on it from the one they built before and run with it.”

“I’ll send it over,” she nodded. “Are you still sending your ships here?”

He nodded. “It’ll take Alya too long to get it built, since she’s never done it before, so we’ll use the one you build until we get ours up. Cyra.”

Cyra’s golden hologram manifested in his office. “*Yes, Jason?*”

“I know you were listening, so gather the data and take it to Alya and get her started on it.”

“*I’ll inform her,*” she replied, then her hologram vanished. Cynna almost immediately manifested her own hologram in his office.

“*I’ll inform Dellin about it, he’ll need to pull the hyperspace engines out of inventory for the wormhole device.*”

“Good idea. Do it,” he nodded. She nodded in return, and her hologram also vanished. “With that wormhole generator up, we can get enough toys to that fleet to harass it for quite a while. And since it’s all disposable anyway, I won’t cry too much if it gets destroyed in transit.”

“Then it sounds like we both have some work to do, cousin, and we’d best get to it. I’ll have the data you requested sent to your gestalt as soon as I get it back.”

“I guess I should call in 3D and tell them about this, see if anyone has any fresh ideas about going after the Syndicate that we can send through once we get the device up and running,” he sighed. “And I was looking forward to hanging out with Kreel.”

“You can go out and get drunk and have your guards drag you back home in the dead of night later, Jason. There is work to do, and work always comes first,” Zaa said lightly.

“Kreel makes sure I have enough fun not to get too jaded in this job,” he told her with a smile. “And I just might get all this done in time to still go out and have some fun tonight.”

“Then you should get to work on it,” she said with a shooing motion.

Jason smiled. “Admit it, you just want to get off here so you can go fawn over your cubs.”

“I don’t *need* a reason to do that,” she replied proudly. “I can’t let Denfather have *too* much time with them. He might convince them that he’s their favorite, when *I’m* the one that bore them and nursed them and rear them properly.”

Jason laughed brightly. “And it’s nice to know that even Kimdori parents fight over who gets to be the favorite with the kids,” he noted. “And I see that female jealousy over the kids is a constant through species.”

“Denfather should count himself lucky that I give him the access he has to the cubs as it is,” she retorted, a bit shortly. “Most Kimdori males have nothing at all to do with the rearing of cubs. If not for my extensive duties as the Denmother, he’d have as little contact as most other males. As it is, he is just a cubsitter, one that I trust enough to take proper care of *my* cubs.”

“And now I see why Kimdori females don’t let the males near their cubs, because you females are so bad at parenting that the cubs would run straight to their fathers if they could.”

Zaa gave him quite the frosty look, that made him laugh and wink at her. “You are a scoundrel, cousin,” she accused, putting her hands on her furry hips. “You just wait until the next time we stand face to face. I’ll have quite a few things to discuss with you.”

“Get in line, Denmother. It starts with Jyslin and goes about fifty deep,” he replied flippantly.

“I’ll be on Karis tomorrow, cousin. And we will have a little *chat*,” she warned, pointing at him.

Jason laughed. “It’ll have to wait til the day after, Denmother. Krirara invited us to dinner on Kirri’arr tomorrow, we won’t be here.”

“I’ll arrive early enough for us to discuss the Syndicate matter before you leave.”

“Then I’ll have Songa on standby to heal the bite wounds.”

“That would be prudent,” she replied ominously, then her hologram winked out, which made Jason laugh.

Chapter 3

Maista, 23 Kedaa, 4404, Faey Orthodox Calendar

Sunday, 13 May 2018 Terran Standard Calendar

*Maista, 23 Kedaa, year 1329 of the 97th Generation, Karinne
Historical Reference Calendar*

Sora Karinne Memorial Complex, Karsa, Karis

Jason could admit, it could be a hell of a lot worse.

Given the sheer number of rulers that had come to Karis to attend the summit, they thankfully didn't expect him to greet every single one of them. Yeri more or less emptied out her entire office to provide diplomatic functionaries to greet the rulers, and all five CBIMs also greeted each ruler as they arrived, and were then billeted in the relatively new Sora Karinne Memorial Complex, which had been built specifically for these summits. It held everything the rulers needed, from suitable quarters that were sufficiently luxurious to entertainment facilities to conference rooms, including the Hall of Peace, the largest of them which would host the full summit meetings. Jason had had the complex built over a year ago after a disastrous summit where he literally had Elbrecht Zor sleeping in the guest room of his house, as he had nowhere else to put him that wouldn't demean Elbrecht's status as the ruler of the Zorian Empire. He'd ticked off a few thousand people by annexing their condo building to build the complex, but they shut up when he moved them to a luxury building over on the south side of Karsa.

Not all the rulers stayed in the complex, however. Shakizarr preferred to stay on his yacht, as did Assaba and about 16 other rulers, mainly those with extreme environmental requirements that made staying on Karis problematic for them. The Birkon ruler Overmaster Birn, for example, breathed methane and was used to temperatures so cold it would kill just

about everyone else on the planet, so he much preferred to stay on the command ship that brought him. Dahnai had her summer palace, so she had no earthly business staying in the complex. She tended to invite this or that ruler to stay in the summer palace with her, whichever one she was schmoozing that month...and this summit, it was the Sha'i-ree ruler, Emperor Enva Shi'Ren. Zaa stayed over in her house in Jaxtra, and Kreel and Krirara always stayed in his house when they visited. Neither of them minded sleeping in a modest guest bedroom, since neither of them took themselves all that seriously, and the strip girls and kids absolutely adored both of them.

Most of the rulers had arrived over the last two days, and after the last four got here, they could start with the official functions. While they were waiting, the other rulers were taking advantage of their visit to go out and look around, so some shopping or sightseeing, and some were up in Kosigi aggravating the everliving fuck out of Dellin. It was a rare opportunity for them to visit Karis—it was the first visit for the six newest members of the Confederation—so there was a lot for them to do, a lot to see, and a lot of trouble to get into.

Miaari had that handled. She was keeping an eye on the rulers and their entourages, many of which held spies. But, the interfaces did make it easy for her to keep track of everything, and also keep people out of places they weren't supposed to be. The interfaces were an exceptionally effective security measure, since you needed one to do *anything* on Karis, and interfaces couldn't be counterfeited to make a door think a spy was actually someone that was allowed to be there. The fact that the visitors' interfaces didn't have a biogenic chip in it was one of the biggest security measures, since no door that led to anything even remotely sensitive would open by command from a non-biogenic interface.

Cylan and Cynna been very busy preparing for this summit, and Jason had divorced himself of the whole thing by doing something he rarely did yet loved to do, and that was work in 3D. He'd spent most of his time over there for the last six days, working on the Imperium team to solve the INS' power problem. It had been a whole lot of fun for him, letting him do something he loved to do but rarely had the time for anymore, and that was engineering work. He'd murdered his inbox and no doubt had Chirk pissed at him for shirking his duties as the Grand Duke, but he'd immensely

enjoyed himself. And he could proudly proclaim that with his help, his team solved the power problem for the INS, and yesterday they pushed out the fix to them so they could get their diffusers working.

That project was over halfway done. While Jason's team had banged away on the INS, other teams had solved the power problem for multiple allies' navies. There were only 12 left on the board, and they'd be the easiest to solve.

But reality reared its ugly head, and now they were ramping up to host the conference. He was walking across the campus of the complex wearing his formal robes, with Zaa, Dahnai, Empress Voss of the Crai Empire, and Observer A of the Ruu all similarly attired, and with Cynna and Cylan floating beside them. Observer A dwarfed the four of them, since he was nearly 6 shakra tall, or a bit over seven feet or around 2.1 meters. Observer A was very tall, skinny, willowy, and looked a bit delicate. He had dark blue skin like a Jeraman Faey, a large, bald head, large ears, and very large eyes set in a long, narrow face. He wore the long-tailed tunic of his station as the highest-ranking of the Observers, his people's diplomats and politicians. He absolutely towered over Voss, who only came up to Jason's chest. Voss was a short, willowy, and very graceful reptilian being with multicolored scales that formed bands that went down her neck, with a head that was very raptor-like that was set on a bipedal body, with a row of large red feather-like plumes rising up from the top of her head, vaguely resembling a mohawk. She did have a tail and claws on her hands and feet, but had a general body shape and design that made her look more like a humanoid than a velociraptor. Her body wasn't horizontally oriented on two legs, it was vertically oriented, with a bit of a kink in her spine caused by her tail. She was one of nine races that made up the Crai Empire, but like the Imperium, the Crai had conquered the other eight and were very much in charge of their empire. All in all, Jason rather liked Voss. She was a no-nonsense ruler that shared his disdain for pomp and circumstance, and despite their warlike past, the Crai were a rather peaceful species...at least *now* they were.

"I must say, I'm surprised that you decided to attend this summit, Observer," Voss said as they walked. This was Voss' first visit to Karis, and Jason was giving her something of a personal tour of the complex.

“It is a rare opportunity to visit Karis, Empress, even for the Ruu,” he said in his deep, sonorous voice. “While we may not concern ourselves with the military aspects of the Confederation, there were several important matters to discuss with the Grand Duke that are best done in personal conference, as well as several matters of diplomacy to address with the Confederation as a whole.”

“Which is still scheduled to begin tomorrow morning, I assume?”

“Yes, Empress,” Jason answered. “That should give everyone time to adjust to local time, as well as get some recreation in. I’m a big believer in people being rested and ready for the boring politics.”

Voss chuckled lightly. “I was quite impressed by the desert on the northern continent,” she told him. “It looks much like my homeworld. It was quite lovely.”

“Some of us prefer different environments,” Dahnai said lightly. “My favorite part of Karis is Karsa. Well, that’s not my palace,” she added.

“Your summer palace is breathtaking, Empress,” Voss said, which made Dahnai preen a bit.

“There are many interesting things to see and do here,” Zaa stated. “I believe you would find a visit to the Kizzik colony on Kirga to be very interesting, Empress Voss. The Kizzik are a remarkable species, and their city is quite fascinating.”

“It’s very...vertical,” Jason noted, which made Dahnai laugh. “The Kizzik don’t build everything on a horizontal plane, since they build underground. Since they can walk right up the walls in their hive, they don’t see anything wrong with building things on the walls and ceilings.”

“It’s an amazing example of three dimensional architecture,” Zaa said. “Only the Korgg and the Makati come close to it.”

“A common trait among subterranean species,” Cylan injected. “And a logical one. But there are exceptions. The Skaa don’t build on such a three dimensional scale despite being a subterranean species. They prefer to build on a gentle sloping plane descending down to the entry to the underground complex.”

“True enough,” Jason agreed. “But I think the ecosystem of their home planet influenced that behavior a little bit. All that rain, if they built on a three dimensional axis, it would flood the lower parts of their cities over time.”

“And since they developed their architectural aesthetics before gaining their current technological ability, they retained their tendencies even after they gained the engineering skills to deal with the flooding,” Observer A speculated.

“That is an intriguing observation,” Cynna mused. “That sometimes, technological advancement does not alter a species’ customs or practices, even when it might make things easier for them to change.”

“Us illogical meat people can get set in our ways, Cynna,” Jason told her lightly. “And we can be contrary to the point of madness when it suits us.”

“You said it, your Grace, I didn’t,” she answered, which made Jason laugh.

Jason led them into the main building and showed Voss all the important rooms inside, from the conference rooms to the restaurant, staffed and stocked to handle the dietary and culinary requirements of all visitors—no ruler would eat in a *cafeteria*, even if that was what it was—to the spa, which was set up to be as appealing as possible to the largest number of species. He showed her the alternate environment lounges as well without going in, which had different induced gravities and air pressures, different atmospheric makeups, and different temperatures. They were built to provide those rulers who had to wear environmental suits a place where they could safely take them off and relax between conferences without having to return to their quarters. Karis’ gravity, air pressure, atmosphere, and temperature was lethal to 12 of the rulers, and those rulers had aides and servants, so there were enough who needed the areas to justify building them.

Voss herself was significantly different from those with her, since she breathed carbon dioxide instead of oxygen, and for her, Karis’ atmosphere was almost dangerously thin in that gas. She could function in the atmosphere here without a breather so long as she didn’t exert herself. And

because of that, Jason showed her the lounge that had very high concentrations of carbon dioxide and was within her environmental tolerance in all other ways, a place where she wouldn't feel like she was like a Terran trying to breathe in thin air.

The main building in the complex was designed so that no lounge was more than three minutes away from the Hall of Peace, and put everything on the same floor to avoid the rulers having to use stairs or elevators. After all, the Amsthat didn't even have legs, so stairs might be a *little* problematic for them.

The Amsthat were a curious aquatic species that Jason would nearly call mermaids. They had arms and a vaguely humanoid torso covered in fine scales, their heads adorned with large, impressive crest-like fins, but their lower bodies were snake-like, eel-like, and they had a long fin running down their lower body. They had both lungs and gills, capable of breathing water or air, and were a very hardy species capable of adapting to a tremendous range of atmospheric and temperature variations. They could live as easily in an arctic sea as they could a tropical ocean, and were capable of operating for extended periods of time out of the water without adverse effects. They were fast and agile in the water, and they could rise up onto a vertical base and slither on land with some surprising speed, easily able to keep up with someone walking, though they couldn't match a running pace.

The galaxy was a wondrous place filled with some truly incredible living things.

Jason finished the tour and walked Voss and Observer A to their assigned quarters, then he, Zaa, and Dahnai boarded a skimmer and headed back to the strip. Jason was quite happy to shed his formal robes, letting Suri and Ryn fly while he changed into a tank top and shorts. He was totally serious when he said that Cylan and Cynna were responsible for the summit, he was staying out of their hair and letting them handle *everything*, even the whining from the rulers when their food wasn't *just so*. They met Krirara and Kreel at the landing pad, and then the five of them went up to Jason's home office. Once there, Zaa put the room into secure mode and brought up holos of the Syndicate fleet, which was fully gathered out in intergalactic space, some 30,000 ships in a loose cluster. "These images are

in real time,” Zaa explained to the others. “We got a hyperspace probe to the area just hours ago. The probes are also intercepting their ship to ship transmissions, so now we know what they are doing.”

“Well, what is it, Zaa?” Krirara asked.

“Simply put, Moderator, this was a planned stop,” she answered. “To ensure that no ships were lost during the journey, check orders from their command structure to ensure they are still on mission, perform any required maintenance before entering potentially hostile territory, give the fleet final orders concerning their arrival in our galaxy, and conduct long-distance visual observation of their arrival point. That is what we can overhear. They’re also transmitting ship to ship using encryption, no doubt their captains and commanders speaking to one another, and as yet we have been unable to break this encryption. It is surprisingly complex, and will take time for our cryptographers to decipher. It impresses me,” she admitted. “Their position is just at the extreme edge of their long-range onboard hyperspace telescopes, a fact of which we were unaware,” she explained. “Ship to ship communications tell us that they intend to begin moving again in approximately sixteen standard hours, at least for us. For them, this stop has taken nearly five days of subjective time, but to us, they have been out of hyperspace for about three days. They intend to jump out in fifteen standard hours, which for them is around nine.”

“What does that mean?” Dahnai asked.

“Their fleet is fairly deep within a cosmological phenomenon known as the *Flat Space Effect*, which exaggerates the observed difference in the passage of time between two points with different temporal velocities,” she answered. “Simply put, Empress, time moves much faster out where they are than it does here, though to them, within the effect, it is as if time moves normally and those they observe outside of the effect are moving with unnatural slowness. The temporal shift is such that for every minute of subjective time for them, approximately 39 standard seconds pass for us. In their subjective time, their fleet is fifteen hours away from jumping back into hyperspace to continue the journey. But for us, it will take them nine more hours, give or take, before they actually execute that jump.”

“Woah. That sounds pretty interesting. I’ll have to do some reading on it,” Dahnai said.

Zaa nodded. "They will be moving *before* the summit begins, which renders our plans to discuss what to do about the situation moot. By the time the council makes a decision, they will be gone."

"It's not a complete loss," Jason said. "We have a *lot* of toys in the area now, and when that fleet jumps out, they'll be following behind it. That way, when they drop out of hyperspace, we can attack them immediately from behind if needs be."

"How did you get all that stuff out there?" Kreel asked.

"We took a page from the Consortium's playbook," Jason said. "Both the Kimdori and the Karinnes have built one-way wormhole generators, and we got some automated equipment out there, stuff we could afford to lose if it was destroyed in transit."

"Just so," Zaa nodded. "We have considerable disposable assets within striking distance of the fleet, as well as sufficient hyperspace probes to keep eyes on them, even if they split up."

"The Kimdori sent spy probes, we sent toys," Jason added. "We have some firepower out there now, and we can start the war with a push of a button."

"I'm a bit surprised you didn't attack them already," Krirara noted.

"We debated it, but we decided that this is a *Confederation* matter," Jason replied, to which Zaa nodded. "The Confederation means dick if we just go off and do whatever we please without their advice or consent. We have to agree to start this war the legal way, and that means the council has to issue the order."

"Well, I'll give you points for following the articles, babes," Dahnai said. "But you did miss a golden opportunity."

"Better to miss the opportunity than see the Confederation fall apart because some felt that we flouted the agreement we signed," Zaa stated simply. "We have to maintain our unity in the face of what is coming, and we felt it best to not risk that unity when the threat of the Consortium looms over us all."

"I can see what you're saying, and it sounds like a good idea," Kreel nodded. "Gotta keep the cats herded, as the Terrans say."

“I do have to say, those ships are *huge*,” Krirara said, looking at the hologram.

“I know, they look pretty intimidating,” Dahnai agreed. “I bet they’re even bigger than they look, since we can only get a sense of scale compared to the little ships. And I’ll bet those ships aren’t that small.”

“They are not,” Zaa agreed. “This ship here, it is the size of Arctus’ moon, Trethis,” she added, pointing at one of the massive spherical super-ships, like giant death balls. It really did remind Jason of the Death Star from the *Star Wars* movies, just without that indentation that held the planet-killer weapon. He supposed that a spherical design was the easiest to build for something that huge, but not all of their giant ships were spheres. Some were ovoid, some were elliptical, one looked like a massive flying cigar, and one looked like a massive cube, almost like a Borg ship from *Star Trek*. They didn’t use complex designs for those giant ships, much unlike their smaller ships, which looked like actual *ships*. But the larger it was, the more spherical it was, and the largest of them were all spherical “The largest one is at the back of the formation, and it is the size of the Terran moon.”

“Grimji’s whiskers,” Kreel breathed. “That’s the size of a small planet.”

“Yes. The sheer size of those ships will make them difficult to destroy, but we can do it. Lorna’s war plans are quite thorough.”

“Can you imagine the size of the jump engines on that thing?” Dahnai mused. “Can you imagine *building* jump engines that big? I’d faint just looking at the bill for the housing!”

“When one has half a galaxy’s resources, one can build things that most others cannot,” Zaa replied.

“Amen. You don’t want to know what it cost us to build the *Tianne*. I think Kumi’s still mad at me,” Jason grunted, which made Dahnai laugh.

“I’ve got quite a few nasty messages from my economic advisors over fleet costs,” she agreed.

“Well, I think we’ve talked enough shop,” Kreel said, looking towards the window. “It’s way too nice a day to sit in here and doom and gloom, not when there’s a beach right over there.”

“I think I’m going to agree with you, Kreel,” Dahnai chuckled. “There’s really not much more we can talk about until tomorrow anyway.”

Zaa did relent, and most of them moved from his office to the beach, to rest and relax before the summit tomorrow. The first part of it wouldn’t be that bad, since it was the practical part of the summit. They’d meet briefly in the morning at the complex, then the rulers would be taken out to see the diffusers in action in a demonstration outside Kosigi. Myleena was taking a break from Project F to do the presentation, to explain the basics of the diffuser unit and let them see it operate, then they’d reconvene in Kosigi itself for a short briefing from Dellin. Then they’d be done, making the first day a relatively short and easy day. The second and third day were the ones he was dreading, for that would be two full days of conferences and discussion. They were going to go ahead and clear the books of everything that was going to be done at the next summit on Terra while they were here, doing those things that could only be done face to face...and at least that meant there would be no summit on Terra next month. There would be no need for one. That all but made it worth it.

But for the moment, he had much more important things on his mind, namely Dahnai’s enticingly naked butt as she knelt in the sand and helped Rann and Shya build a sand castle. Dahnai spent as much time with Shya as she could almost every time she visited his house, or had them come to the summer palace, reminding her that her mother did in fact love her very much. That was a fact that Shya more than understood—she understood how hard it was for Dahnai to let her move to Karis, for a parent to let go of one of their young children like that—and she thoroughly enjoyed the time she got to spend with her. Kreel and Krirara were playing beach volleyball of all things, paired up and facing off against Sheleese and Ilia. There were quite a few kids running around since there was no school today, and a line of hoverstrollers attended by mothers, babysitters, and nannies sat up on the big deck where they had the picnic tables for strip parties, further watched over by the Imperial Guard, both Aya’s girls and Dahnai’s detachment since Kaen was among them. The girls were bringing their infants out for some sun and fresh air, which was entirely safe since none of them could sunburn, and it was well within the babies’ tolerance for heat today. Jason had been up there for a while, fawning over the new twins and Terry and helping Seido give them their lunch bottles, but she’d chased him away and told

him to go relax a little while when the infants were more interested in sleep than they were in cuddles.

He couldn't help it if he wanted to be around his newborns.

With Kaen here, it meant that Saelle and Evin were also here with their own baby Laeri, and Saelle was in the lounge beside his, chatting with him over communion while Evin sat with Miyai and Raisha not far from where Dahnai was, teaching the toddlers the basics of building sand shapes.

[I'm shocked you're not up there with Laeri,] Jason teased.

[She's in good hands at the moment, and besides, she's asleep right now,] she answered lightly. *[I'm keeping tabs on her.]*

[That poor girl will never know a moment's privacy with you around.]

Saelle grinned at him. *[It's how I keep my sanity,]* she replied. Saelle was a woman of remarkable talents, and one of them was that she seemed to have a knack for being able to decipher the usually indecipherable jumble of raw, primal impulses of an infant's mind to figure out exactly what they wanted. Infants had open minds, but their thoughts made no sense to the vast majority of telepaths because they had no basis of rational thought unless their need was a powerful one. A telepath could tell when an infant was hungry, or sleepy, or afraid, but had trouble figuring out *exactly* what was making them uncomfortable or giving them pain, since the infant's mind lacked the cognitive ability to think beyond impulse and instinct. If an infant was laying on something that was causing them pain, they didn't think *I'm laying on something hurting me*, or even *my back hurts*, it was nothing but *I hurt I hurt I hurt I hurt*. It was eerily similar to animals. Most telepaths could get a very general sense of the mind of an animal, but its thoughts made no sense to them. There were some telepaths capable of communicating with animals, but they were pretty rare. As babies grew, matured, started to develop language skills and the ability to think abstractly, their thoughts became more discernable to telepaths, because their minds began to develop cognitive structure. Saelle was one of those rare telepaths able to "get more" out of the mind of an infant, able to pick through their instinctive impulses and get more nuance out of them. *[Why are you laying here instead of playing with your daughter?]*

[That's not a bad idea,] he decided, getting up and going over to Raisha and Miyai. He knelt down beside Raisha, who gave him a bright smile and hugged his side. Raisha was aware of her unique situation, that Evin wasn't her real father and Jason was, but like most Faey children in her position, it didn't make her love Jason any less than Evin. And Raisha was just a little *doll*. She and Miyai both were absolutely adorable, but it was Raisha's jet black hair that got most people's attention. Saelle wouldn't let her cut it, and as a result it was already halfway down her back, where Miyai's white hair was cut very short, in a pixie style, which was common enough for toddler girls in Faey society. Faey encouraged their girls to be very active, to be rough and tumble, and long hair could get snagged on things while they were still learning the basics of motor control and gracefulness. Saelle solved that problem for Raisha by keeping her hair in a tail most of the time, but today it was unbound and spread over her shoulders and back like a dark fan, with a large lock of it over the front of her shoulder and dangling down her torso.

"And what are you two angels up to?" Jason asked as he put his hand on Raisha's shoulder.

"Makin' castles," Miyai answered.

"Learning how to make castles," Evin chuckled with a warm smile at her. "Then we're going to go play in the surf."

"Are you having fun?"

"The sand won't stay together," Raisha complained after letting him go and picking up a small bucket.

"It needs to be a little wetter, then," he said, motioning and using his telekinetic gifts. The toddlers watched in interest as a globe of water was pulled up out of the ocean and drifted over their heads, then the globe all but shattered and sprayed all of them with warm, salty water. That made both the girls squeal in laughter and Evin flinch, then he too laughed as he wiped water off his face.

"Warn a guy first, Jason," he complained with a smile.

"Life on the strip is about the unexpected, Evin. Get used to it," he grinned in reply.

“Stop showing off, Dad,” Rann challenged from the other sand castle.

“Showing off would have been tossing your butt a hundred shakra offshore,” he retorted lightly.

“Do it again, Daddy Jason, do it again!” Raisha pleaded, nudging his leg with her small hands.

For a good hour, Jason spent his time in the best way possible, in his opinion, building sand castles and then playing in the crashing waves with his daughter and goddaughter, getting to spend some good quality time with them. An hour where nobody bothered him—outside of Kreel making a nuisance of himself—and given it was the eve of the summit, Jason was honestly astounded that he hadn’t been interrupted. He even managed to get through dinner with his closest friends among the council without any issues. But, then, reality finally intruded into his afternoon. He spent most of the afternoon and evening over at the complex, putting out any number of small fires that invariably arose when kings, emperors, and galactic rulers were served drinks without exactly three ice cubes in it. He didn’t get back home until after sunset, and that time was spent catching up on his work, including the latest status report that Myleena dropped off for him about the translight drives. Since he knew engineering, she always included the technical details of what they were doing, what they’d tried, their current theories and experimental projects to try to solve the power problem. And he always studied those specs to see if he could help in any way possible, something that Myleena tolerated with patronizing magnanimity.

Today’s report was a bit more cynical and negative than Myleena’s usual reports, but Jason could understand that. They’d been stumped on this problem for over a year, and Myleena wasn’t used to being confronted by a problem she couldn’t solve. He read through all the experiments they’d done over the last couple of takirs, trying to find some modulation in the power stream that would prevent the translight unit from feeding back into it. They’d analyzed the feedback and felt that some kind of harmonic phase matching unit would do the job, but so far they’d had no luck.

At the bottom of the report, along with the specs for the phase matching unit they’d built, Myleena had added a little blurb, *you’re good at harmonic frequency-based tech, you fix this.*

It was the first time she'd ever asked for his help, even if it was little more than a sign of her growing frustration. But, Jason felt that itch to make himself useful, something he often felt he was not sitting in a gilded chair and signing forms all day, so he settled into his workshop in the sub-basement with all the technical data and started studying what was new since the last time he'd looked at Project F's work.

Sure, it was arrogance that he thought he might be able to help the best experts in their fields *and* a CBIM, but it gave him something constructive to do.

He was down there for so long that they came looking for him. Jyslin wandered down—his workshop had security that only allowed Jyslin inside, not even the guards were allowed in *this* room—and leaned over his shoulder as he sat at his desk, studying the tech specs of their harmonic phase match unit. *Hey love, it's nearly 29:00. You do have something fairly important to do tomorrow*, she sent playfully.

Why do you think I'm down here, I'm trying to invent something that lets me travel forward in time to avoid the summit, he answered, which made her laugh softly and lean down, hugging him.

My poor baby. Wanna trade? she offered. *I'll sit at a desk and play games in my interface while others talk, and you run the Paladins.*

No thank you, Jason snorted audibly.

What are you doing, anyway?

Looking over the latest report from Project F, he answered. *Myli's really getting frustrated. She even asked me for help.*

That's desperation, not frustration, she teased, patting his belly teasingly. *Exactly what's got them stumped? I haven't really paid much attention.*

It's the same problem, the translight stage of the drive feeds back a fatal quantum anomaly into the power system when it activates when the engine's in hyperspace, which tends to make the conduit explode. They've tried all kinds of things to get around it, but nothing works.

That's what this is? she asked, pointing at the hologram of the harmonic phase unit.

It's their latest attempt, it's supposed to be a filter of sorts that blocks the translight stage from feeding back into the power system, but it doesn't work

So, the translight stage makes the plasma conduit explode?

Yup.

Then it sounds like we need better plasma conduit, she sent cheekily. She laughed when he reached back and slapped her on the hip and butt very gently, then she kissed him on the cheek. *I'm going to go get ready for bed, love. Don't leave me up there alone for long.*

Jason glanced at her as she padded back out, admiring her naked butt, but then went back to studying the unit...but her words stuck with him. He went back and researched all their work so far, and he found that none of them, not even *Cybi*, had studied indepth *why* the anomaly was making the conduit fail. They had technical reports about it, about how the anomaly was disrupting the molecular bonds in the silicon that formed the conduit and causing it to decay, and that allowed the metaphased plasma inside it to explode violently when it lost containment, which was the other half of what the anomaly was doing. It was disrupting the integrity of the conduit while making the plasma unstable enough to react explosively with the silicon conduit. But they hadn't extensively studied the root cause.

It had to have a cause. When plasma flowed through silicon conduit, it had an effect known as the *tempering effect*, which caused the silicon conduit to harden beyond its norms. It was a basic part of plasma physics, the fact that an energized conduit was harder and more resilient than normal, due to the effect the plasma had on the silicon's molecular structure, energetically reinforcing its molecular bonds and making them harder to break. It wasn't a dramatic increase, it didn't turn the silicon into something as hard as carbidium or Adamantium, but it did make it markedly harder to break or bend while energized, and was one of the reasons why silicon was used for conduit over something like titanium. The anomaly seemed to be acting opposite the tempering effect, either canceling it or causing it to work in reverse, making the plasma *weaken* the molecular bonds of the conduit instead of strengthen it.

He was up most of the night studying and researching the basic theories of the tempering effect, trying to understand it so he could understand why the quantum anomaly was working against it. He read that the effect wasn't limited to just silicon, that several crystalline minerals and metals were also tempered by flowing plasma, but pure silicon had the strongest tempering. That made it a very cheap, replicatable material to use to make conduit that also made it very resilient. Carbon atoms in either an interwoven nanotube structure or tetrahedral crystal structure—pure diamond—would be viable options with natural strength combining with the tempering effect to product equally sturdy conduit, but it was *not easy* to replicate carbon in either form, and it was also extremely difficult to cleanly unanneal and anneal either due to the way the atoms bonded with each other. It was far easier and cheaper to use silicon, since it naturally formed a much more annealer-friendly planar crystalline structure, and that made it ideal for conduit.

He stayed up so long that he was groggy the next morning when Seido woke him up. He dressed in his formal robes with his mind still on the research he'd done the night before, and he wasn't much of a conversationalist for the other rulers when they all met in the Hall of Peace, but only long enough to board transports to take them up to Kosigi, quite a procession of luxury skimmers surrounded by Wolf fighters, frigates, and combat corvettes. He didn't pay the demonstration much mind, as Myleena explained the basics of how a diffuser operated via hologram from the engineering deck of the cruiser *Aravalo*, then the rulers got to see the diffuser do its job, when the heavy cruiser *Jefferson* fired a heavy salvo of Torsion bolts at the cruiser. The searing red lines dimmed the instant they hit the diffusion effect, then petered out some 30 shakra from the outer hull of the cruiser. She then had the heavy cruiser use its shockwave generator in close proximity to the cruiser, and the red distortion effect of the generator, its visible effect, also dimmed out and then vanished the closer it got to the cruiser's hull. He barely paid any attention at all through the demonstration, and even less attention during the briefing Dellin conducted...after all, he already knew everything Dellin was reporting to the rest of the council. And as soon as the day's meetings were over, he rushed right back home and straight to his workshop, not even changing out of his formal robes, and continued his research.

By sunset, he'd thoroughly researched the topic, and felt he had sufficient understanding of the tempering effect to understand what was going on from that angle when the translight drive fed back into the power system. The quantum anomaly was canceling the tempering effect instead of overwhelming it, and from the exhaustive study Myleena had done, it was introducing a fatal molecular decay into the silicon, disrupting its molecular bonds. He ran a few sims of possible replacement conduit materials to see if there was any other material they might be able to use, some material that would have the physical durability to carry double-metaphased plasma without molecular decay and would still physically fit, be the same size as silicon conduit.

And nothing even came close. They used silicon for a *reason*, after all, and no doubt Myleena had already done what he'd done, quite a while ago. She *had* investigated alternatives, and looking for a new conduit material was most likely one of them. Myleena was very thorough.

So, if silicon was the only answer, then perhaps the trick here would be to find some way to super-charge the tempering effect so it overcame the quantum anomaly.

There had been some research into the subject, quite a bit of it, and Jason spent most of the evening looking through the many studies on the tempering effect and the theories and practical experiments to increase or enhance it. Checking the Academy also brought him some extra-Confederation work on the subject, mainly from the Ruu, one of the non-classified research topics they'd uploaded to the Academy mainframe. One Ruu, Scientist XVZ, had tried to make armor out of silicon using the tempering effect, something he called Interphasic Powered Armor. He'd—no wait, it was a female, so she'd—managed to significantly increase the tempering effect, and the result was a paper-thin sheet of silicon that was as hard as titanium so long as power was applied to it. That didn't really make it all that useful as practical armor, but it did increase the tempering effect by nearly 1,850%. That made the silicon have the same hardness as low-grade carbidium, and that was pretty decent for what was effectively a piece of glass.

Jason plugged in Scientist XVZ's interphased plasma waveform into his sims for the conduit experiment he was running, and noticed that the

conduit increased its tempering effect by 437%...but that wasn't enough to make it stand up to the quantum decay. It did slow down the catastrophic failure timeline of the conduit by nearly 14 seconds, though. That was progress.

It was too bad that silicon only had one phased state. If it was multiphasic, the quantum effect of the anomaly would be countered much more by the tempering effect if it was harmonized—

It was like lights popping in his skull.

What if he used this interphasic tempering augment on *multiphasic* material, and tuned the interphasic waveform to create a harmonic based on the natural atomic frequency of silicon? It wasn't that hard to multiphase elemental matter, depending on its chemical makeup. Silicon was one of those elements that could be multiphased without much real effort, turning it from a single phase material to a multiphased material. In a way, that was one of the effects the tempering effect had on silicon, turned its interior into a multiphased material that prevented metaphased plasma from escaping from it. After all, if it didn't have that effect, the silicon conduit would only contain the plasma that matched its phased state. But what Jason was looking at was multiphasing the *entire* conduit, which would amplify the tempering effect created by the harmonic interphasic waveform. Each phased state of the silicon would reinforce every other phased state due to the interphasic reinforcement, creating a whole *greater* than the sum of its parts, and the interphased waveform would couple all phased states back into the ground state, turning the mutiphasic material into an *unphased* material when it came to anything that was not itself multiphased. It would exist as both a phased and unphased material at the same time, which would contain the metaphased plasma while also preventing multiphasic bleed into the unphased anchors and connectors that connected it to the exchanger and the engine housing.

That was the big difference between *multiphasic* and *interphasic*. Multiphasic matter and energy existed in multiple phased states simultaneously, but *interphasic* material and energy existed in one phased state that could interact with any other phased state, even if it was interacting with different phased states at the same time. Terynium was an excellent example of *interphasic* matter, as it existed as a real object that

could interact with any object or energy, even if it was a in state of quantum phase. Interphasing a multiphasic material, if done correctly, created a cascading harmonic effect where all quantum states of a multiphased material were connected by the interphasic effect, both existing in all phases and only one phase at the same time, focusing all potential energy of a multiphased material into a single phased state that yielded a harmonic energy output *greater* than the derived sum of the individual phases that made it up, yet that single phased state existed as if it were in all quantum phases simultaneously. It was effectively taking the most basic of math problems, $1+1$, and making it equal 3, but it equalled 2 in every other case except when it equalled 3.

It was one of those cute little paradoxes in quantum physics that made most physicists alcoholics.

By interphasing a multiphased silicon conduit at a composite harmonic frequency matching silicon's atomic frequency, it would theoretically supercharge the tempering effect to such a degree that it would overcome the quantum decay caused by the engines. Each phase of the silicon would be focused into an interphased singular phase that would interact with each discrete quantum state as if it only existed in that state, yet would also exist coupled to the ground state, the state of "reality" expressed in multiphasic quantum mechanic equations as *state zero*, or the unmodified quantum constant. And each discrete quantum phase would be harmonically synchronized to the ground state, which would produce a composite energy output greater than the sums of the discrete phases. That *should* counter the quantum effect that was causing the flowing plasma to decay the conduit, and should temper the conduit into something with the same hardness factor as carbidium to boot.

He sat up in his chair and changed the parameters of his simulation, changing the silicon into a *multiphasic* material and then altering the interphasic waveform composite frequency to a compound harmonic based on the molecular frequency of silicon, then ran it again.

The conduit maintained its integrity. In fact, it was at 483% of its normal temperance factor even while the translight drive was feeding back into it. The multiphasic silicon was not as affected by the quantum anomaly as single phase silicon was, and the interphasic tempering effect was

canceling out the effect that it had. That was the answer, multiphasing the silicon and reinforcing it with an external harmonic interphasic field. That gave the silicon the integrity to stand up to the quantum decay anomaly.

At least in computer simulations. There was only one way to find out if it worked in reality, and that was to test it.

He sat back and stared at the simulation results, almost disbelieving, then he jumped out of his chair and almost ran upstairs. He went straight to the top floor and to his bedroom, and he literally threw half a drawer's worth of clothes on the floor hunting for a pair of jeans. Jyslin wandered in holding Julia in her arms. *It's about time you came out of the basement. What are you doing?* she asked, giving him a curious look.

I'll explain later, he replied hurriedly, almost scattered, trying to focus on the task of getting out of his formal robes even as he ordered the automated factory at the Shimmer Dome to build him a piece of custom equipment, warned Aya he needed to go to Skeyai Island, activated his skimmer and had it begin preflight, and warned the Marines over on the island he was coming over and would be entering the research facility. She watched as he nearly tore his formal robes struggling out of them, then putting on a pair of jeans and a tee shirt and sliding his feet into a pair of Terran canvas dock shoes.

My, it must be pretty important.

Sorta. No offense love, but don't break my line of thought right now, he told her. *If I lose this, it may take me weeks to figure it out again.*

You should back it up directly to your gestalt.

Good idea, he nodded, and dumped most of his current organic short-term memory into his gestalt's memory, backing everything up. *Done, and thanks for the assist, love,* he said as he stood up. *Aya, I'm leaving! And no, you can't come, I'm going to Skeyai Island!*

The guards will sit on the landing pad while you're inside, she answered. *With the other rulers on the island, you go nowhere without escort, Jason. They'll meet you at your skimmer when you're ready to go.*

Then get them out there, I'm leaving right now, he answered.

Shen and Ryn got into the skimmer with him, and Dera and Suri were lifting up into the two Wolf fighters on the pad as he closed the hatch. *Where are we going, Jason?* Shen asked.

The Shimmer dome first, then Project F, he answered.

I thought they were taking the summit off.

They are, I'm testing something Myli sent me, and the equipment is there.

Oh. Alright, she nodded. *Engines are online, we're ready to take off.*

We're leaving, girls, Jason sent. *Ready?*

We're ready to go, Jason, Dera answered.

After a brief stop at the Shimmer Dome to pick up the piece of equipment he ordered, a relatively simple interphasic waveform generator, something the automated factory attached to 3D could build in about 20 minutes, he was on the way to Skeyai Island. He continued to work on the simulation in his gestalt as Shen flew, having downloaded all of it into his gestalt and nearly taking up all its memory, and sim after sim produced consistent results. The external reinforcement by an interphased plasma waveform meant to incite the multiphased silicon into an augmented tempered state kept the conduit in one piece, and that allowed sufficient power to flow through the conduit to keep the translight stage of the drive in operation. He was about 70 kathra from the island when he got a rather terse commune from Myleena. *[Cybi just told me that you're heading to the facility. What for?]* she demanded. *[Not even you can just walk in there without my authorization, babes. That's my project.]*

[I'm doing what you told me to do, Myli,] he replied, a bit smugly.

[And what did I tell you to do?]

[Fix it myself,] he declared. *[If this works, I'll call you to the warehouse so you can doublecheck my work and my math.]*

[If what works?]

[If it works, you'll find out. If it doesn't, you'll read the failure report, maybe it'll help you guys out,] he replied.

[Bull shit. I'm on the way over right now. I don't want you fucking with anything over there.]

He had a head start on her. The Marines standing guard on the island helped him cart his piece of equipment to the warehouse, but they couldn't follow him inside. He carted it in on a hoverplatform and went over to what he was after, and that was the experimental unit they'd built holding a frigate-sized engine and power system that was something of a practical simulation. They simulated the actual effects of the drive's operation on external equipment without actually sending the warehouse into hyperspace, it was the controlled experimental unit they used to test theories without having to go do it on the *Trailblazer*. He had his interphasic unit halfway installed by the time Myleena arrived, storming into the warehouse wearing nothing but a pair of shorts. *Alright, what the fuck are you doing?* she demanded.

Testing a possible fix, he answered. You told me to use what I know about multiphasic harmonic frequency-based tech, and that's exactly what I did.

What, seriously? You think you fixed it?

I have something that might work, something based on some Ruu scientific research I found in the Academy mainframe, he answered. Even if it doesn't work, it might help your team by giving them a new direction to try.

Well, what does it do?

It reinforces the conduit to make it stand up to the quantum decay caused by the anomaly, he replied. It doesn't stop the anomaly, it just shores up the conduit so it can stand up to it. It's not a perfect fix since the anomaly is still there, but at least with this fix, we might be able to get the drives to actually work long enough to study them in operation, and maybe fix the problem permanently down the line.

She looked wildly curious as she reached him in the experiment area. *What research?*

Some Ruu tried to build armor based on the tempering effect, he replied.

I've seen like fifty different studies on that, she answered dismissively as she helped him bolt his unit down. None of them can produce a tempering effect strong enough to make silicon any stronger than titanium.

Well, this Ruu managed to come up with a process that produced silicon almost as strong as low-grade carbidium, he answered. By combining her research with multiphasing the molecular structure of the entire conduit and introducing a harmonic interphased waveform based on the molecular frequency of silicon, it produces a hybrid tempering effect strong enough for the conduit to maintain its integrity while the drive's operating...at least in sims. We'll test it out on this unit, and if it pans out, we can try it on the Trailblazer.

She gave him a long look, then nodded. *Good plan, she agreed. And you have the specs? I'm curious.*

It's all in my gestalt. I'll dump it to the mainframe here, I doubt your gestalt has the storage to hold it all. He did so, dropping all his research into the Project F mainframe, and the two of them hooked up his device to the 12 shakra long conduit running from the exchanger to the dummy drive unit, which required wrapping it in a sleeve that would multiphase the conduit while the emitters set at precise distances from each other would inject the interphased waveform into the silicon's surface. *Alright, it's ready to go. Let's fire up the drive unit and see what happens...at least after we get behind the blast shield,* he added wryly. They retreated to safety, behind a transparent titanium shield behind a hard shield, then they put on dark visors, since double metaphased plasma was brilliantly bright when exposed to air, like looking at a welding arc

Alright, fire it up, Myleena ordered, and Jason ordered the computer to activate the test unit.

They watched a flat hologram that showed that in the simulation, the translight drive stage of the unit activated, seemed to sputter a little, then became stable.

It was working.

Holy shit! Myleena's sending rampaged across the island. It's fuckin' working! It's WORKING! She grabbed Jason and nearly broke his ribs giving him a crushing hug, then kissed him on the mouth so hard she nearly

chipped his front tooth. *Trelle's garland, your fix is working, babes! Upload the specs for that unit to Cybi, have her build one for the Trailblazer fucking now! I'm calling in everyone in Project F right now! I can't believe this, it's working! IT'S WORKING!!!!* She finished with enough power to give Jason a headache, and no doubt send the guards outside to their knees.

Myleena got loud when she was excited.

Jason completely forgot about the summit, because this was *way* more important. Myleena called in the entire project team, Jason did a briefing explaining his idea in detail, making sure to give Scientist XVZ her due as the original source of the interphasic waveform, and then they went over the simulator with a fine tooth comb, studying everything while it was operating, searching for the tiniest hint that the real engine would behave differently from the simulation model. Some time later, he wasn't sure how long, they all went up to Kosigi to the ultra-top secret dock holding the experimental ship *Trailblazer*, and they installed his upgrades to the drive unit and conduit leading to it.

Then came the ultimate test. Jason was forced off the ship while everyone else on the team stayed on it, and they brought the ship out of its enclosed drydock, a giant box floating in space. The ship looked like a standard destroyer, so it attracted no real attention outside of the fact that it had just emerged from a top secret dock...but just a moment later, it was just another ship moving around inside Kosigi. Jason went to the ops center and took over one of the stations, staying in constant contact with Myleena while all five CBIMs hovered around his chair. "Alright, you're cleared out to jump distance, Myli," Jason told her himself over BG1. "Be damn careful, hon. If you go too far out and the drive fails, you may be looking at a three month wait while we get ships out there to rescue you."

"That's why we have a year's worth of field rations and two food replicators on this thing, Jayce," she replied, a hologram over her over the console in front of him. "And it's why this ship has an automated factory installed as well as enough spare parts for us to rebuild the engine three times over. *Because* of that danger."

"That's only smart," Jason nodded as the ship headed for the smaller doors at dock speed. "You're about fifty minutes from jump distance."

“I know. It’ll be the longest fifty minutes of my life.”

Jason laughed. “You’ll live, hon,” he told her as the ship entered the tunnel to get outside. “Though, you could go mode one and get to jump distance in a matter of seconds.”

“As tempting as that sounds, let’s use the drive in sublight mode so we can study the engine output and see if we see anything out of the ordinary. That’ll give us a good baseline for the actual test.”

“You’re the one in charge here, hon.”

“Fuckin’ right I am,” she declared, which made him chuckle.

The team had lots to do while they got out to jump distance, which was nearly twice as far out as a standard Karinne ship; they were taking absolutely no chances, and that included taking the ship so far out that it was well beyond the planet’s gravity well. Jason studied the telemetry of the ship’s engines while it was operating, running on its translight drive in sublight mode, which was actually far more efficient from a power consumption point of view than running on its translation gravometric engines. Translation engines *were* power hogs, and no amount of tinkering from Myleena had made them any less so. The translight engines in sublight mode weren’t nearly as fast or maneuverable as the gravometric engines, so they wouldn’t be used in combat situations, but for something like cruising out to get to jump distance, it was more efficient to use the translight drive.

But that *was* the slow way. By using the translight drive in FTL mode, translight mode in normal space, she could have gotten the ship out to her planned jump distance in 3.2 seconds. Myleena had coined translight FTL mode in normal space *mode one* and FTL in hyperspace *mode three*. Running under standard hyperspace jump engines without FTL was *mode two*, and operating under standard gravometric translation engines was *mode zero*, or base mode that served as the reference point for all other modes

“*And now the moment of truth,*” Cybi said soberly, putting her hand on Jason’s shoulder.

“Just about,” Jason agreed. “Alright, Myli, you have clearance to jump. Make it very short.”

“We’re going for a ten second jump in mode three,” she told him.

“That’s a two month trip to come get you,” he warned. “That’s deep into the Flat Space Effect.”

“We know,” she winked. “But if anyone’s gonna risk a two month forced vacation while waiting for rescue, it’s *us*, Jayce. We built it, we take the risk,” she declared. “Emia, all stop. Everyone prepare for jump!” she barked. “Report jump readiness directly to the conn!”

Jason listened as every observation post, watching every aspect of the ship’s drives, reported that they were ready, and Myleena took in a deep breath and exhaled. “Alright, Emia, set final coordinates, lock them in, then give us a countdown of ten seconds. Jump on countdown zero,” she ordered.

“Aye, Myli. Jump solution is plotted and locked. Secondary nav computer agrees, the solution is green. The solution is green,” she said, and the camera panned over to the Shio, showing her from behind at the navigation station. “Translight drive is showing green across the board. Power curve is nominal. We are prepared to jump, Myli.”

“Begin countdown,” Myleena ordered.

“Jump engines are in jump mode, translight drive is on standby. Ten. Nine. Eight,” she began to count, and Jason’s eyes locked on the engine telemetry being fed to his station from the *Trailblazer*, and everything looked like it was supposed to. “Two. One. Jump!”

Jason watched from another camera as the *Trailblazer* vanished in a shimmering burst of white light, which was much different from a standard jump engine. His eyes snapped back to the telemetry, and he saw all the power distribution graphs flickering and shimmering right along the projected output lines behind them. The conduit fix was holding. It was holding! The drive was working! He saw on his map, watched the *Trailblazer* absolutely *rocket* away from Karis, like a bullet fired from a gun, exiting the galaxy in under a second and going out into intergalactic space.

Ten seconds later, the ship stopped moving, and it was nearly three months away from the edge of the galaxy by standard jump engines. By doing some quick calculations, he saw that the ship had gone even *further*

than their math suggested that it would. It was even faster in practice than it was in theory! He redid all the math they had on it and saw that the ship could cross the entire galaxy in about 21 seconds, and with this new mathematical formula, it could cross over to Andromeda in about 5.1 *minutes*, give or take a few seconds. Five minutes to go from Karis to the edge of Andromeda. *Five minutes*.

Holy *god*. What were they building here? It seemed almost insane that anything could go that fast!

“*Myleena, report,*” Cybi called. “*Report.*”

“Sec, we’re checking things over, and I see the Flat Space Effect is fucking with our comm. Comm, run our transmission through a temporal filter,” she ordered, her voice and movements a little off due to the Flat Space Effect. Even just ten seconds outside the galaxy was speeding up time for her as Jason observed it, enough to need to have the ship’s incoming signal go through a temporal filter, slowing it down until it seemed normal. To her, Jason’s voice would almost sound like an old fashioned 45RPM vinyl record playing at 33RPM. “Okay, we’ll have a short delay between our comms, Kosigi, we’re filtering for time dilation. But we’re here, guys, we’re here! The drive worked! Emia, report!”

“The nav computer is recalculating, Myli, we’re not where we’re supposed to be,” she replied.

“Well, where the hell are we then?” she demanded.

“We’re *further* than our planned jump,” she replied. “Ummm, getting it now. We’re 37,530 light years past our planned arrival point. The engines are even faster than we thought they were, Myli. We overshot our projected arrival point by a considerable distance.”

“What? Trelle’s holy nipples, that’s amazing!” she blurted. “I’m glad we aimed it out here, we might have jumped back into normal space inside a star or something if we’d gone inter-galactic!” she laughed.

“You’d better not try jumping back into the galaxy in mode three, Myli,” Jason warned. “In fact, you’d better jump *sorta* close and then come back in under mode two.”

“Amen to that, babes, we can’t rely on pinpoint nav until we have all this figured out,” she agreed, looking at him through the hologram and nodding. “Emia, start building an algorithm for the ship’s nav to run in mode three. Astrocartography, figure out how much Flat Space delay we’re dealing with here. Mallik, where’s that status report! Let’s take the engines offline and go over them!”

“Sounds like we’re out of the loop until you finish,” Jason told her. “We’ll be on standby until you finish the inspection, hon. Call in when you have something to report.”

“Time dilation is speeding us up by about 18% compared to Karis time, Myli,” Jason heard someone call.

“You got it, babes,” Myleena told him. “I guess that means you can go to the summit, like you were supposed to,” she grinned.

“Fuck no, I’m not leaving this console until you’re safely back in Kosigi. They’re not talking about anything I care about anyway.”

“I’m sitting in for him,” Cyra said. “They’re a bit concerned about him not being there, because I told them that he’s dealing with an emergency. They theorize it must truly be a big emergency for him to not show up to the summit he’s hosting. Only Dahnai really suspects it’s anything but what I say it is.”

“That sounds like a great excuse to use for every summit,” Jason mused, and Myleena laughed when Cybi lightly slapped him on the back of the head, making him flinch forward.

It took the team three hours to inspect the engines—though for Jason and Kosigi, it was actually only 2 hours 39 minutes due to exaggerated time dilation caused by the Flat Space Effect—and when they were done, they executed six different two second jumps in translight mode, mainly to calibrate the nav computer to the new algorithm. The Flat Space Effect was the reason they were having so much trouble, since the distances kept changing with each jump, and that played hell with a nav computer that didn’t take the idea that the distances in its database weren’t fixed into account. Each jump got the computer closer and closer to landing them on the right spot, and on the sixth jump, they landed exactly where the computer aimed them. But that was still not enough to take risks, so

Myleena jumped them close to the edge of the galaxy and then tested the standard jump engines by undertaking an hour long jump back to Karis.

Those tests showed something else that was quite interesting. The exaggeration of time dilation in three dimensional space caused by the Flat Space Effect was being inherited by the ship when it jumped from flat space, *speeding up time* for the ship while it was in transit. The ship inherited all physical properties that it possessed at the instant it entered the transligh state and were locked in as immutable constants, including the *speed of time*. He did some calculations, and found that the temporal effect very nearly offset the increased distances the ship had to travel due to the increase in relative distance to produce a travel time when viewed from *outside* that was almost identical to the time it would take to travel if the ship had entered the transligh state within the galactic gravity well. But that was only to *him*, being on Karis and watching from outside Myleena's temporal frame. For the crew of the ship, it would take them much longer to travel, because time was *subjective*, it was moving faster for the ship crew than it was for Jason. That was...almost *eerie* in its proportionality. What it meant from a practical point of view was that a ship that dropped into normal space deep in flat space was going to travel much further to get back to the galaxy, but since the ship would be in a much faster temporal frame, the *perceived* time it would take to make the trip was almost the same as if it was still in the galaxy. It would be traveling a much greater distance, but doing it in a temporal frame where, for example, ten seconds of their time passed for every second of "real" time for someone observing the effect from outside. A journey for the crew that might be six hours was only going to take maybe fifty minutes to someone at Karis, but it wouldn't make the journey prohibitively long for either the crew in the ship or those watching it from outside.

And they could easily mitigate the effect by having the ship drop back into normal space at regular short intervals to inherit a new "snapshot" of relative distance that was much shorter, once the ship got out of the deepest of flat space. Instead of a single six hour cruise, Jason calculated that if the ship made a series of ten jumps at five minutes each, the ship would travel the same distance in a much shorter time, at least subjectively. It was effectively the same elapsed time to Jason as an outside observer, but it was a five hour, ten minute reduction in the travel time for the ship crew. But

Jason was basically just kicking around numbers. Myleena could easily find a mathematical model that would dictate the number of jumps at the exact times required to shorten both the distance and the elapsed travel time to the minimum by just running a few simulations.

Still, that was kind of neat, from a geeky physicist's point of view, that a series of short hops was much faster and much less distance traveled than a non-stop cruise.

Physics in action.

Jason stayed right in the ops center almost all the time, and left only to get on a zip ship and race out to the *Trailblazer* as it pulled into the drydock. He entered the bay even as the ship was being locked down by the dock's clamps, completely immobilizing it, and all but ran down to engineering, where everyone else was. "Alright, let's get the drive taken apart and do the internal inspection!" Myleena shouted from the control console. "Get the microscopes in here! We're stripping it all the way down, people, so don't lose any parts!"

[Cybi, I think we can clue in at least one person. If the summit's in recess, get Zaa up here. She needs to see this.]

[It's still in session, Jason, and they're staying an extra day to finish up some loose ends,] Cybi answered. [I'll inform the Denmother to come to Kosigi immediately after the conference ends. She's wearing a memory band.]

[Good.] Alright, cousin, where can I help out the most? he asked Myleena.

You can help with the jump drive stage, you're familiar with it, she answered. We're completely dismantling the drive, all the way down to the boards, babes. Complete disassembly and inspection, then we put it back together.

Got it. I'll go grab some tools.

About four hours later, Zaa arrived, alone. She walked into engineering to see the 87 members of Project F, researchers and machinists who did a lot of the actual building, moving through an engineering section that had pieces and parts laying all over the place, even laid out on the floor, and

they were meticulously inspecting every single piece, even spacers in the drive housing. “And what is this important news, cousin? So important that you have failed to show up at your own summit?” she asked.

“This is the guts of the translight drive, Denmother,” Jason told her from where he was inspecting a biogenic board at a work station. “About nine hours ago, we executed our first successful test jump.”

Her eyes widened. “Truly? You got it working?”

“We got it working, Denmother,” Myleena said with a bright, almost ear-swallowing grin. “We jumped it a total of eight times, and now we’re inspecting the drive unit piece by piece to ensure there was no hidden damage in the test. Once we have it reassembled, we’ll conduct our first long distance jump to test the drive’s ability to operate over time.”

“That is—that is outstanding news!” she said with an explosive sigh.

“So, you think this was important enough for me to blow off the council meeting?” Jason asked lightly, which made Zaa chuckle.

“I dare say, at least for you, cousin,” she replied. “Do you have a timetable to putting them in production yet?”

“Not yet, Denmother, we haven’t even really started our testing,” Myleena answered. “But we took a big step today. A really, really big step.”

Zaa agreed with a nod.

“Babes, it’s time to pull 3D into this,” Myleena said. “We have a second engine built, one we built for a heavy cruiser, and your fix means we don’t have to change the design. I want them to install it, that way if this ship fails that ship can come get us. We also need to test engines built for different ship sizes, to see if different ship sizes and masses affect the drive’s operating characteristics, as well as the ability of a ship to tow something external in translight mode. You need to talk to Dellin and see if there’s a ship out there that only needs to have the engine installed and then commandeer it, then have 3D install the second drive in it.”

“The engines are installed while the ship’s still being built, when it’s easy to get the pieces in there,” Jason told her. “But I know for a fact there’s over a dozen finished heavy cruisers just sitting in reserve. We can steal one of them, and 3D and Naval Engineering will just remove the old drive and

install the new one. It should take them about eight or nine days. They'll have to do some jerry-rigging to get the engines in there."

"Cybi has an installation procedure worked up, they just have to follow it," Myleena told him. "It tells them step by step what they have to move to get the engines in, where to move it to, and how to rearrange engineering to make everything work."

"Well, that'll make it easier," Jason chuckled. "And I'll oversee that project, that way I'm right there to see how it's done."

"Works for me, gets you out of my hair," Myleena grinned.

"I will summon our best engineers from our navy to assist, so they might understand the procedure. It will help when it comes time to install these drives on Kimdori ships," Zaa stated.

"They have the clearance," Jason nodded. "I'll get things started. Cybi, get 3D and the top echelon of Naval Engineering with sufficient clearance assembled in the main conference room up here in Kosigi, like *now*," he ordered as he put down his tool. "Denmother, get those engineers to Kosigi, I'll give everyone a briefing on what we're doing when they get here."

"They will be on their way in moments," Zaa declared, touching her memory band, no doubt issuing the order.

"Where's the engine at, Myli? I'll have it brought up here," Jason said.

"It's in the storage facility on the island," she answered. "It takes up nearly the whole damn building."

Jason laughed. "Ship engines are big, silly," he told her. "I'll have a freighter go down and get it. Just do me a favor and tell the guards down there they're allowed to take it. I don't want them shooting at the freighter."

"No sweat, I'll commune that down right now."

Two hours later, Jason walked into a large conference room holding the entirety of 3D not working on Project F, three dozen of the top engineers in Naval Engineering, and about thirty Kimdori, so many people that about ten of them had to stand along the walls. "Good evening, guys," he called as he came in. "It's about time you got up here."

"What's going on, Jayce?" Tom asked.

“It’s time for you to be brought into Project F,” he declared, which caused some big grins to bloom across the room, at least among 3D. The Naval Engineering people hadn’t even heard of Project F, so they looked more curious than enthusiastic. “This takes precedence even over finishing the diffuser fixes. We’ll get back to those once you guys finish this.”

“You mean we get to know what’s going on now?” Jenny called.

“Yes, and when I’m done explaining it, you’ll understand why we’ve kept it a secret,” he answered as Cybi and Cynna manifested their holograms in the conference room. Jason brought up several holograms showing charts and basic diagrams and explained the translight theory to them, then explained Myleena’s expanded theory about translight operation in hyperspace. When he finished that, he ended the holograms and looked at them. “For over a year, we’ve been trying to build a new engine, a translight drive, that utilizes this science. Earlier today, we had our first successful test,” he declared, which made quite a few eyes widen. “And with the engine finally working, now you’re being brought in to expand our testing. We’re going to be installing a prototype translight drive into a heavy cruiser, taking the old engine out and putting the new one in. That’s what all of you are here to do.”

“Hold on, Jayce, just how fast is this thing? You didn’t specifically say,” Tom called.

“With a translight drive, we could reach Andromeda in a little over five minutes,” he answered, which made several people gasp. “We can cross in *five minutes* what it took the Syndicate and Consortium *five years*. I think every person in this room can see the tactical advantage that will give us.”

Bo laughed. “We can take the war to them!”

“Exactly,” Jason answered. “Locally, it will let KMS ships reach any part of the galaxy within twenty seconds once they’re at jump distance, and the translight drive will run at FTL speed in normal space, so they can *get* to jump distance in seconds,” he added. “That’s almost like having a Stargate at every system in the entire galaxy. We can respond to any attack, anywhere, so quickly that we can catch enemy fleets before they can even organize to cruise to a planet under sublight. Needless to say, Myli and her team have been busting their asses for over a year on this, and now we’re

finally to the point where we can bring you in. The inventing is done, now we need to do the testing to develop a finalized design, so we can adapt this technology to the KMS and the Kimdori fleet, and do it *fast*. And nobody can do it faster than the men and women in this room,” he said proudly.

“You guys represent our best engineers and technical minds, our 3D techs and the best of KMS Naval Engineering and Kimdori Engineering. We’ll be installing the drive in a KMS heavy cruiser to test the installation procedure the CBIMs worked up, identify any problems our engineers may have doing the install, and once we have the drive installed, we’ll be doing some extensive testing with it along with the prototype destroyer. Once they pass those tests, we generate a final design for the engine, start building them, and refit the KMS and Kimdori fleets to translight drive technology.”

“Well, what the fuck are we sitting here for?” Jenny shouted as she stood up. “Let’s get this party started!” Most of 3D cheered her proclamation, and Jason had to laugh.

“It’s gonna be some long hours, guys. We need this drive installed fast, so we’ll be banging away at it until we’re done. And when we do, you guys go right back to what you were doing.”

“That’s like what we do every day, Jayce,” Bo snorted, which caused some laughter.

“Alright then. Tom, go set up the 3D dock to do the job, and you have blanket authority to get anything you need, just talk to Cynna and she’ll get it to the dock. Tools, equipment, you name it. I’ll go talk to Dellin and find a heavy cruiser for us to take. The rest of you, go get things ready to roll. Cynna has the data Myli prepared for us ready for you, she’ll brief you once you’re inside the dock.”

“Where’s the engine?” Tom asked.

“In a freighter outside the dock, waiting for us,” he answered.

The install team rushed out of the conference room once he released them, heading for transports Cynna arranged to get them to the dock, and Jason went up to the ops center and tracked down Dellin. “Jason, Cynna said you were looking for me,” he said in greeting. “She said you need a ship?”

Jason nodded. “We need a heavy cruiser to test some prototype equipment we’re installing on it,” he answered. “I know there are several waiting to be commissioned.”

“There are fifteen,” he answered. “Do you have any preference?”

“One that’s finished and operational is all we need,” he answered.

“I can have one towed in right now.”

“Do it,” he nodded. “Have them tow it to the 3D drydock.”

“It’ll be there in about half an hour.”

“Outstanding,” Jason said.

“This wouldn’t have anything to do with that experiment you were running in the ops center a couple of days ago?” Dellin asked curiously.

“It has everything to do with it,” he answered. “You’ll find out what it is tomorrow morning, Dellin. I’ll be briefing the command staff about Project F then, and you’re part of the command staff.”

“I have to say, I’ve been a bit curious about it since then,” he admitted. “It’s not often you do a 3D experiment in my ops center.”

Chiira, 27 Kedaa, 4404, Faey Orthodox Calendar

Thursday, 17 May 2018 Terran Standard Calendar

*Chiira, 27 Kedaa, year 1329 of the 97th Generation, Karinne
Historical Reference Calendar*

The White House, Karsa, Karis

It had been a long night, and Jason had barely had any sleep for the last few days, so it was a pretty haggard-looking Jason Karinne that dragged his sleepy posterior into the command center. All he’d had was a quick cat nap over the night, overseeing them bringing in the heavy cruiser and then going over the procedure Cybi wrote to make sure both he and everyone else understood exactly what they were doing. And they were doing it at that moment, they’d already cut away some bulkheads and the outer hull of

the ship to start carting out the engines piece by piece, which was the only way they were getting those pieces out. They were too big to remove any other way than to literally cut away the side of the ship, and that meant cutting through the compressed Neutronium carapace hull, Neutronium and Adamantium bulkheads, datalines, pipes, conduits, everything that usually ran between the decks. They'd bring in the new engines piece by piece through that hole, put the engine together, and reanneal the bulkheads and hull sections they removed and put the jigsaw puzzle back together. Jason hadn't shaved in four days or so and was still wearing the same tee and jeans he'd put on to go to Kosigi, so he both looked and smelled the way he felt, and everyone noticed.

The command center held the upper command staff, his cabinet, and a very curious-looking Songa, who had been summoned to the meeting. It was the first time she'd ever been in the military command center.

"You look terrible, Jayce," Myri accused.

"I feel it at the moment," he said, scrubbing a hand down his bearded face. "I recorded a holo of me apologizing to the council for not being there just a few minutes ago, so I'm sure they'll believe my story about a big house emergency."

Juma chuckled. "You do look like you've been dealing with something," she said.

"That's why I'm here," he said as all five CBIMs and Coma manifested holograms into the command center. "I'm here to brief you on something, something new. Something game-changing that Myleena's been working on for quite a while."

"Project F," Myri blurted.

"Project F," Jason nodded. "We're expanding those in the loop to the necessary technicians and upper command staff, so you know what's going on and don't try to kill me or Myli over any outrageous demands we might make."

"So, what *is* Project F, Jayce?" Sioa asked.

"Simply put, Sioa, it's a new kind of engine, called a *translight drive*," he answered, and Cybi put up some holograms over the central table, charts

and diagrams depicting the translight theory, as well as some technical drawings of the external casing of the engine drive section. “This drive operates similar to the Hrathari FTL drives that share the same name, but what makes this one revolutionary is it operates at FTL speeds in *hyperspace*. It’s a two stage engine that incorporates both standard KMS hyperspace jump engines and the new translight drive engines, combining them to get a ship into an FTL translight state while in hyperspace, and that makes it go really, really, *really* fast. Like you can’t even imagine how fast they are fast. We had our first successful test of the engine a few days ago. In ten seconds, it traveled nearly two months of continuous travel by standard hyperspace jump engine.”

They all just stared at him.

“I’m not kidding. Using that test as a baseline, we calculated that this engine can go from Karis to any other part of the galaxy, even the far edge, in 19 seconds or less, and it can travel from Karis to the edge of Andromeda in five minutes, thirteen seconds. I think I can say with some confidence that this new drive is revolutionary,” he said.

“Just a *little*,” Juma breathed. “Seriously? Nineteen seconds?”

“A little bit over 19, but we rounded down,” he answered. “Going from one edge of the galaxy to the other, the longest possible distance, it would take the engine a little under 21 seconds. And since the translight stage of the drive can run at FTL speed in normal space as well, it means that there won’t be long cruises out to get to jump distance. Pop it into translight FTL mode, get to jump distance in seconds, then slow to jump speed and jump. The engine is in prototype stage right now, and we had our first successful test just a few days ago. We’re installing a second engine on a heavy cruiser for additional test data and to test out refitting a ship instead of installing the engines during construction the way we did on our prototype destroyer. That’s what this briefing is about,” he told them. “I want you all to understand what we’re doing so you don’t get pissy if me or Myleena asks you to do something for us, like tie up half the KMS by sending them to some remote system. We’re going to be testing these engines, and we’ll need the help of the KMS to do it.”

“Can you explain exactly how it works, Jason?” Navii asked. “At least as much as you can for us non-engineers?”

“Sure, Navii, everyone in this room has clearance. Just remember that this is beyond top secret. What I’m about to tell you does not get discussed outside of this room,” he warned. He then explained the mechanics of how the engine worked for those like the command staff, who had a solid grasp of hyperspace physics but weren’t experts, explaining how the engine worked in two stages to get a ship into hyperspace and then into a translight state for FTL travel while in hyperspace. “This is something that only the Kimdori and the Ruu could even build,” Jason said when he was done. “The amount of power it takes to run it requires quantum-linked metaphased minimum, Ruu energy tech, and it takes a hardcore computer to handle the math to keep the drive in FTL mode while in hyperspace. It took nearly half of the combined processing power of both Cybi and Cyra to solve the initial equations and develop an algorithm that less powerful computers can use to operate the drive,” he told them, which made Dellin whistle. “I think only us, the Kimdori, the Ruu, and the Moridon could put a computer on a ship capable of governing a translight drive. No other empire except the Kimdori and the Ruu has both the power generation technology and computer architecture necessary to make this thing work. And since the others can’t use it, they don’t need to know about it.”

“They’ll find out eventually, Jason,” Navii noted.

“True, but I want them to find out about it on *our* schedule, not *theirs*. So, ladies, gentlemen, that’s where we stand. We just tested a new engine that will, literally, change the fundamental fabric of everything we know, everything we do, the very essence of who we are. We just became the first known civilization in the universe to develop *practical* intergalactic travel. I want everyone in this room to think about that. Think about what it means, and think about the huge responsibility that was just put on all of our shoulders,” he said gravely. “That first engine can let the ship it’s installed in reach Andromeda in five minutes. But think locally. It can reach the Magnum Dwarf Stellar Supercluster, the closest galactic formation outside the Milky Way, in *four seconds*, since it sits just off from the galactic rim just two sectors over from Karis. It’s actually closer to us than the center of the galaxy is, and I think the Kimdori managed to get ships over there to explore it like a thousand years ago, I’m not sure. It can reach Ilviros, the closest true galaxy, in *fourteen seconds*. It can reach Sumlaki Axiom in 93 seconds. It can reach Cygnus Proxima Ascending in two minutes. It can

reach the Melgonis Twins Galaxy A in three minutes, B in three minutes, six seconds. That's just a few of the galaxies on *our* side of the galactic cluster. If you ladies and gentlemen aren't familiar with galactic cartography, there are 86 galaxies in our cluster arranged in two groups. Our galaxy is the center of one group with the galaxies over here more or less orbiting the Milky Way, and Andromeda is the center of the other. They form a dumbbell shape when you look at them on a stellar holo. Now, consider this. It can reach the Draco Moritan Galactic Formation in twenty three minutes. Think about that. It can reach the most distant galactic formation in our galactic cluster in *twenty three minutes*.

“This is the precipice of a new *age*, ladies and gentlemen. We have just entered the *intergalactic age*, and I can't stress enough to each and every one of you just how much responsibility that fact puts on us. This one little planet with its few billion people can reach out and kill people so far away that they can't even fathom that we could even exist,” he said intensely. “We can affect, for good or ill, the lives of every single living thing in our entire *galactic cluster*. Eighty six galaxies, galactic formations, and stellar superclusters. Hundreds of trillions of stars. Hundreds of *decatillions* of planets. An absolutely uncountable number of lives. This engine gives us tremendous power, almost unfathomable power, and with that power comes tremendous responsibility to use it wisely, to *not* be the Consortium, or the Syndicate. Now more than ever, the strength of the convictions of the House of Karinne are vitally important to us. We must be who we claim to be, because now we can directly affect the lives of so many beings that I don't think even Cybi could count them all.” He looked around. “And you think that's enough responsibility? Think again. With this engine, we could reach any point in the Greater Evanis Galactic String inside a month. If you're not familiar with that, it's the super-cluster of galaxies that we're a part of arrayed in a long double-helix string formation across the universe, like two wires twisted together, or a strand of DNA. A month of hyperspace travel is *feasible* for us, people, because of the advances to prevent jump shock and hyperspace operations. That's *thousands* of galaxies, people. Can you even *imagine* how many star systems that puts within reach of us? It's a number I don't think anyone in this room can rationally comprehend, except maybe the CBIMs.”

They all gave him long, sober looks. Nobody said or sent a word.

“This isn’t just about an *engine*, ladies and gentlemen. This is about *morality*. And we’d better fucking be the people we claim to be, or we could end up being the greatest monsters ever released upon the entire fucking *universe*.” He paused a few moments to let them think about that, then continued. “We should have the second engine installed in the heavy cruiser in about seven days, and while we’re doing that, Myleena is going to be conducting tests with the prototype destroyer. She’ll no doubt call in KMS assets to assist in the tests, and also most likely some Kimdori science vessels to gather additional data. Once we have the second ship up and running, we’ll be doing testing using both of them, to test the operational parameters and capabilities of the engines, and find any design flaws or problems. This is brand new tech, something none of us have ever used before, so we have to do the whole pod of *kaba* nuts. We have to test the engines, define their operational limits, define their optimal operational conditions, determine if the engines adversely affect other ship systems, find out if other ship systems adversely affect the engines, find any weaknesses our crews will have to work around, and so on and so on. We’re literally writing the specs for these engines with these tests, from top to bottom, so they’re going to be comprehensive and thorough.”

“Now I see why I’m here,” Songa said. “You’ll need complete medical observation of the crews doing the testing, to ensure the engines don’t pose a health hazard. For all we know, this FTL translight state might itself be dangerous to the health of the crew if they’re exposed to it for extended periods of time. Everything will need to be studied to make sure it’s medically safe.”

“Exactly, dear,” Jason nodded. “So you’ll need to organize it. Remember, this is top secret, Songa. Only assign doctors with clearance to work on the project.”

“I’ll have a team assembled for this mission an hour after I get back to the annex,” she declared. “And I’ll be heading it personally. We’ll do our best to do our jobs without stepping on the toes of the research team.”

“Does anyone have any questions?” Jason asked.

“Nope. This answers the only question I’ve had since you told me to set up that account,” Kumi declared. “Now I know what’s been costing us so much money!”

“I think it was worth it,” Myri chuckled, which earned her quite a few nods of agreement.

“Groundbreaking tech is expensive, Kumi,” Jason told her. “*Very* expensive.”

“Are we going to have these engines ready for production in enough time to get them installed while doing the diffuser refits?” Dellin asked.

“I seriously doubt it,” he answered. “We’re most likely still a good six months away from signing off on this, Dellin. We have a lot of work to do before we certify it. It’s not really going to do us any good in the upcoming Syndicate operation, but the engines *will* be mainstream by the time the Consortium colonizing force arrives.”

“Bunvar, I think we need to talk about you stepping up those factory construction projects,” Trenirk told her. “We’re going to need those additional factories up and running when these engines get certified. I bet they’ll be even more complicated to build than jump engines, and that means it’ll take more factory production resources to build them.”

“We’ll work out a schedule, Tren,” she nodded. “We can get all the infrastructure ready beforehand so when the engines are ready for production, we can start cranking them out.”

“That sounds like a good idea,” Jason nodded. “But we can’t give you any specs until we’re close to certifying them, in the interests of security.”

“Not a problem. I’ll just assume that they have twice the number of parts as a standard jump engine and work by that assumption when I start organizing factory space,” Trenirk answered. “And I’ll dedicate those facilities to engine production, the same way I do now for our jump engines. They’re too specialized to retool for other work.”

“That’ll work, Tren,” Jason agreed. “But I can say that since we utilize current jump engine technology in the design, some of the parts are going to be the same.”

“That’ll just let me devote even more resources to the new parts,” he said. “And if you can get me a list of those identical parts, we can start producing them so we have plenty in stock when it comes time to build the engines.”

“I’ll talk to Myli about sending you a list,” he answered. “And they won’t go to waste, since we use them in our current engines.”

“Yup.”

“A dumb question, Jason, but will these new engines use the original engines in their design? Are you just installing the new translight section of the drive and leaving the original jump engines intact?” Navii asked.

“When it comes to the final design, I can’t answer that, Navii, it’ll depend on how Myli does the finalized specs,” he answered. “It’s entirely possible that she finds a way to do just that, which would save us a *ton* of time and money doing the refits. But as far as the engine we’re installing on the heavy cruiser goes, that’s an entirely new engine. We’re taking out the old engine and replacing it with a new one.”

“You should broach the idea with her,” Navii said. “If it is in any way possible to simply incorporate a ship’s current engines into the new drive, that is the way it should be done.”

“No promises, but we’ll discuss it,” he nodded. “Anything else?” When silence met him, he clapped his hands. “Alright then. I’ll head back up to Kosigi and get back to work. I’ll keep all of you up to speed on things.”

“Jason, dear, perhaps you should go take a shower before you go back to Kosigi?” Songa suggested.

He laughed. “That’s a pretty good idea. And maybe a quick change of clothes,” he agreed, plucking at his lubricant-smeared tee shirt.

Vesta, 34 Kedaa, 4404, Faey Orthodox Calendar

Thursday, 24 May 2018 Terran Standard Calendar

*Vesta, 34 Kedaa, year 1329 of the 97th Generation, Karinne
Historical Reference Calendar*

Kosigi Lunar Station, Karis

It was a very tired but very happy team that watched the heavy cruiser, recently named the KMS *Legion*, slowly creep out of the 3D dock and out

into the open space of Kosigi. The ship showed no sign that a large piece of its hull had been cut away and then put back—which was *not easy*, since it was a compressed Neutronium carapace—and looked indistinguishable from any other heavy cruiser.

But it was *very* different...and that difference was online.

The new engines were up and running, and it was by them that it was moving, the ship creeping out using its gravometric engines and maneuvering pods, with Zora at the helm. She was the only person on the ship—standard procedure for ships being moved by a pusher pilot—and had several zip ships and flying platforms following her out, filled with the techs that had done the installation.

It had been some long, hard work to get the ship ready. The 3D team, Naval Engineering, and Kimdori engineers had worked around the clock, some of them working 24 to 26 hours a day, to get the engine installed, and nobody had left the ship. They'd bunked in the crew quarters, ate food shipped in for them in the mess hall, and all but dropped off the face of Karis for the duration of the project.

Jason didn't even want to see his inbox...and he knew Chirk was going to *murder* him when he came back to the office. But, truth be told, he was much happier to work himself to exhaustion putting in the new engine than he was sitting at a desk and reading reports.

But that was what he'd be going back to doing now that this was done. Myleena would be taking over the ship, and they'd be doing some pretty thorough testing of it and the destroyer over the next few months, testing every aspect of it to determine the engine's operational parameters and limits. Once they thoroughly tested the engine, learned how hard they could push it and how much abuse it could take, they'd certify it, write up the operational specs, and start installing them on their ships.

But they'd be testing more than these two ships. To fully and completely test the drive design, Myleena had decided that they needed to test every ship class to see if a different sized drive or different sized ships changed the way the drive worked. This was virgin territory for all of them, so they had to cover every single possible base. Cybi had already designed engines for the other ship classes, and now Trenirk had factories working to

build the prototypes. They would test the drives in every class ship they had except for the *Tianne* and the command ships, since they couldn't afford to take those off the board with the Syndicate coming, and use that data to finalize the design, write the technical specs for each size class the drive, and then put them into production.

And that meant that Jason was again just a spectator watching Myleena play her game. He'd enjoyed his vacation doing real engineering work, but the Syndicate less than a month away, and the business of war would now take over his time and attention.

And nothing said that more than the fact that when he returned home later today, Aya's wartime security protocols would be in effect. That meant armor at all times off the strip and outside of his office, security escorts with him everywhere he went, corvettes would carry him around the planet and frigates would be carrying him out of the atmosphere, and the planet would be locked down, heavily restricting outsiders getting authorization to visit the planet. Aya was putting them in place now so everyone had time to adjust to them before the real war began.

He seriously had the notion that Aya masturbated at night while fantasizing over putting him under that kind of control.

"Ain't she a pretty thing?" Bo asked as he, Rook, Tom, and Jason stood on a platform not far from the dock, watching the ship creep out. The three men all had scraggly beards, and all four of them were wearing dirty work coveralls. They'd just finished putting the hull back together less than an hour ago, and Myleena had already activated the ship. Jason arranged for a KMS heavy cruiser crew to man the vessel with Project F techs and Songa's medical crew onboard to do the testing. Captain Miya Foralle and the crew of her heavy cruiser, the *Temeron*, was standing by to take command of the ship as soon as Zora brought it to them at the loading dock, where ships were docked so crews could board and supplies brought on. The ship would need a real crew since it was a KMS ship, with all the standard KMS equipment, where the *Trailblazer* was just a destroyer hull filled with the drive and enough equipment to do their testing. It wasn't a true KMS military vessel, but they were going to fix that. They were going to install a translight drive on the destroyer *Aurora*, to test the ship's drive in a ship that had all the other systems that were also on the power system with the

drive to make sure it worked properly, and also test installing the drive on an older ship, one that had service time, to see how the drives operated on a ship that was “settled in” and wasn’t fresh off the construction dock. And that was a good idea. It would give them more data, a baseline of the prototype destroyer built purely as a test unit and another baseline from a commissioned KMS warship with three years of active service, and that data would be useful to Myleena when she wrote the specs.

“Faey consider their ships to be male, Bo,” Rook noted.

“Well, Faey don’t know shit about some things,” he replied cheekily, which made Jason laugh.

“That sounds like a bit of sexism, Bo,” Jason noted.

“Hey, men still rule, no matter what *they* say,” he retorted.

“Says the guy dating a Shio.”

“Hey, Selia’s hot,” he declared. “And I mean literally. Ever held a Shio girl? Their skin is like seriously hot.”

“Shio have a considerably higher core body temperature than Terrans,” Rook supplied. *“No doubt, to her, you are cold to the touch. I doubt she finds it as pleasant as you do. It would be like you hugging a Birkon.”*

“Dude. You just killed the whole thing,” Bo complained, which made Jason burst out laughing.

“I can’t help it if you don’t like science, Bo.”

“Science has nothing to do with love, you dork.”

“Boys, don’t make me send you to your rooms,” Tom injected as the heavy cruiser cleared the dock, and Zora turned it for the boarding dock and accelerated to dock speed. “And there she goes,” he added.. “Miya’s crew will take good care of her while Myleena does her best to make the engines blow up,” Jason observed

“She *better* not, not after all that work we just did,” Bo growled.

“The engines have to be stress tested, so she probably will,” Rook noted. *“We have no idea what their performance limits are. She’ll need to find them.”*

“She can find them on the destroyer, *not* our ship,” Bo maintained stubbornly. “It’s even named after us!”

“Sounds like someone is fishing for a transfer to the KMS, Jason. No doubt he wants to captain the Legion and fill it with shirtless Shio babes who jiggle in perfect harmony on demand.”

Jason laughed when Bo reached over and punched Rook in the arm. “Dude. Not helping!”

“You raised him, so I’d say it’s your fault, Bo,” Jason laughed as he ordered the platform to follow the *Legion*, and their platform wasn’t the only one. Just about the entire installation crew was doing so, escorting the ship all the way to the boarding dock to make sure it got there in one piece. “Speaking of work, guys, I have a new project, and I think the four of us can head it up. Your team’s done with the diffuser upgrades, so that means you’re available for something new.”

“What’s up, Jayce?” Tom asked.

“While I was solving Myli’s problem with the engine,” he said smugly, which made Bo laugh, “I came across some pretty intriguing work by a Ruu scientist. She was trying to create armor-grade silicon using the tempering effect.”

“I’ve seen some studies on that. Nothing ever came close to working,” Tom noted.

“Well, I think she had the right idea, she just wasn’t going about it the right way,” Jason said. “I did some work on it, and I think there’s a chance we can adapt the CMS cloaking device to change it into a form of *powered* armor, by injecting an interphasic energy matrix into a host material that actively absorbs hostile energy and uses it to reinforce the structural integrity of the hull. It’s something close to what the CMS does already, it just can’t handle weapons-level energy bursts. Well, we’re going to take this Ruu scientist’s work and use it as a baseline to find a way to adapt the CMS, and change it into a reactive powered armor system.”

“That sounds quite intriguing,” Rook sounded. “And I think it might be feasible.”

“Feasible my ass, it’s entirely *possible*,” Tom added. “The CMS already does that with sensor and light energy. We just find a way to have it do it with weapon-grade energy.”

“That’s what we’re going to find out,” Jason said. “Tomorrow morning, a new project file is going to be on the 3D mainframe. Tom, you read it through and pick the best 3D techs to assign to it, at least once they finish the diffuser project. Bo, Rook, you two are heading the research. I’ll be doing my own work on it in my workshop, and I’ll be sending up my data to you guys as often as I can.”

“It’d work best if you did that work in the shop, as part of the team, Jayce.”

“I wish I could, but I’ll be way too busy with the war to do it,” he sighed. “I’ll see if I can’t contact the Ruu scientist that did the work on the powered armor project and get the research she didn’t publicly release.”

“You could always invite her into the house,” Bo urged.

“She’s a Ruu, so no, she won’t go for that,” Jason chuckled. “But, what we *can* do is move the project into a dedicated facility and invite her to consult on the project. It is only fair, since she did a lot of the work we’re going to be using for our own project. Her expertise could be useful.”

“Sure, we could do that,” Tom said. “You have a research facility we can take over?”

“Actually, yeah, there’s an MRDD facility currently not in use up on Virga,” he replied. “They were doing some research on the Titan project, and now that the Titan project is complete, the facility’s just sitting there waiting for another project.”

“Sounds like it’ll have the equipment we need,” Tom said thoughtfully. “I’ll go down and take a look at it as soon as we finish up here and send you a report.”

“*We will*,” Rook corrected.

“Good idea, all three of us should go,” Tom nodded.

“You’ll go down *tomorrow*, after you get some rest,” Jason ordered. “I’m not ordering you guys on to the next project after that long haul work

we just did, you guys are gonna get some fuckin' rest. I'll have Cybi send you the location code and the access codes for the facility. Oh, and I'll warn MRDD we're hijacking their facility for a while," he added.

"So, if this isn't a top secret project like Project F and we're moving it out of the 3D shop, I take it I can pull specialists from other research divisions?" Tom asked.

"You can," he nodded. "I'm sure there are some MRDD, Naval Engineering, ASM, and DRD people that would work well on the team."

"Alright, we'll have a report ready for you by dinnertime tomorrow," Tom said.

"Sounds good," Jason nodded.

The heavy cruiser approached the loading dock and slowed to a crawl, then it was captured in towing beams and pulled into position and locked down by physical clamps. Zora opened the main hatches, and almost immediately, boarding and cargo ramps extended. Jason landed the platform just by the edge and approached Miya Foralle, captain of the *Temeron* and temporarily taking over the *Legion*. Miya was a very tall Faey, though nowhere near as tall as Salira, slender and willowy and with narrower hips and a slightly smaller chest than the usually buxom race, but not so much that she looked unattractive. But she made up for that with her jet black hair and hauntingly beautiful violet eyes, which made her one of the most attractive of all the ship captains, at least to Jason. She was wearing her duty uniform rather than armor, but most of her crew was in armor. She saluted sharply and then gave him a kiss on the cheek, then laughed and tugged on his scraggly beard. "This doesn't look bad," she told him.

"Jyslin disagrees with you," he said dryly, which made her grin.

"Sounds like someone's shaving as soon as he gets home," she winked.

"Probably. You ready to give us a hand, Miya?"

"Myleena briefed us, we know what to expect. A lot of downtime for maintenance," she drawled, which made him laugh.

"Just about. We have to test the engines, and that means we'll be pushing them *beyond* their limits to find out what those limits are. That does tend to make the engines go down. I'm sure your crew can handle it."

“Of course they can, I have the best heavy cruiser crew in the KMS,” she declared proudly.

“Just don’t aggravate the project team and you’ll be alright,” Jason told her. “This ship is fully operational, Miya. Shields, guns, everything, and you’ll be testing those along with the engines in both standard operation and simulated combat conditions. Part of what you’ll be doing is making sure the engines don’t mess with any other system, and the other systems don’t mess with the engines. We have to test *everything*, because these engines are brand new tech. We have to make sure they don’t cause any problems with the other ship systems.”

“Myleena pointed that out,” she nodded. “We’ll get them everything they need, Jason, and keep the ship running in top shape while doing it. That’s a promise.”

“I know. That’s why I specifically pulled you and your crew off the *Temeron* for this mission, because you *do* have the best heavy cruiser crew in the KMS,” he told her, which made her preen.

“Well then, if you don’t mind, your Grace, I’d better get on board and get the ship ready for its mission,” she said.

“Have at it, Miya. Do me proud.”

“I will, that’s a guarantee,” she said, then kissed him on the cheek once more and hurried up the ramp and into the ship.

“That is one very pretty young lady. It’s almost a shock she’s a big ship captain at her age,” Tom noted.

“She’ll have her admiral’s diamond before she turns 50, Tom, there’s no doubt about that,” Jason predicted. “She’s the best heavy cruiser captain we have, with the crew with the highest performance rating. That’s why she pulled this mission.”

“If she’s that good, why isn’t she on a battleship?”

“Because of the minimum experience requirements Juma instituted for ship captains before they rate for a command-class ship,” he answered. “She has six more months until she’s eligible for a battleship. And I guarantee you, she’ll be on one the instant she’s eligible.”

“She must be good, then,” Bo said speculatively.

Jason gave him a look, then gave a low chuckle. “Down boy,” he said.

“What?”

“Stop acting like Tim,” he said, which made Tom laugh. “Besides, Miya’s married.”

“The good ones always are,” Bo sighed. “Who’s the lucky guy?”

“A financial broker in Kumi’s office,” he answered. “Baeren Foralle. Nice guy, sharp as a tack. Knows his shit about the intergalactic stock markets,” he added. “He’s been delving the house’s toes into the Coalition financial markets now that he’s done his research on them. Anyway, Miya has the ship, so we’re done here. We’re done!” he shouted loudly. “Great work everyone! Take the rest of the day off, be back at the warehouse tomorrow morning!”

But not *everyone* was done with work. After returning home, Jason tracked down Scientist XVZ...to find out that now she was Instructor RDX and was working in one of the Ruu’s smaller universities in their applied plasma physics department. Her dark blue skinned, long face appeared on a flat hologram in front of his home office desk later that afternoon, after he had a chance to clean up and shave, and she looked quite surprised to see him. “Your Grace,” she said, bowing in her chair. “You honor me beyond words with this call, though I have no idea why you’re calling.”

“About ten years ago, you did some scientific research on the tempering effect, attempting to make military-grade armor out of silicon,” he said.

“Yes, I remember that project. It met with mixed success.”

“Did you release your entire data with the project, or only the pertinent data for your research?”

“Only the pertinent data,” she answered. “Do you have an interest in that old project?”

“I do,” he replied. “In fact, I would very much appreciate it if you could come to Karis to serve as a consultant for a research project based on your original work. Be assured, you will receive due credit as a major contributor if our research proves successful, and I’m offering you a consulting fee of

one hundred thousand Confederate credits for your time and inconvenience.”

“I—my, that is quite an honor you offer me, your Grace,” she stammered. “Of course I would come! The prestige of working on Karis would propel my career!”

“Then we would welcome you,” he said. “I don’t have the specifics yet, but most likely, in about two or three standard days, someone from my office will contact you with the details. Can you come on such short notice?”

“If your office contacts the school dean, I assure you, my sabbatical will be approved on the spot,” she stated confidently. “Until then, I will gather all the data I have on that old project and get it to you as quickly as possible.”

“I’ll have a Kimdori messenger come to your school. Put the data on a Confederation standard datastick and deliver it to him, and he’ll get it to us.”

“It will be ready as soon as I get to my lab and access the archives,” she assured him. “I look forward to furthering the cause of science with the only other civilization in the galaxy that honors it as we do,” she told him earnestly.

“We look forward to advancing the cause with you, Instructor,” he replied with a nod. “I’ll have a project member get in touch with you tomorrow afternoon your time with basic information about the project and the process of gaining permission to travel to Karis. The Kimdori messenger will arrive tomorrow morning your time, that should give you all the time you need to locate the data and transfer it to a datastick. I’ll have your consultation fee transferred to your personal account by my project financial officer. She’ll get in touch with you in two Confederate standard hours to get the necessary information to get you your fee.”

“You would pay me *before* the project?”

“You’re Ruu, Instructor and I’m familiar with your people’s customs. You are willing to send me your data, so I am willing to honor that trust by paying you now. Besides, I know beyond any doubt that you will perform to

the best of your ability and honor your people with your contribution to my project. You honor the cause.”

“You know us well, your Grace,” she said humbly. “I vow to you by the Overbeing’s wisdom that you will receive my very best for this project.”

“I know I will,” he nodded.

After chatting a bit with Instructor RDX to get to know her on a personal level, Jason let her get to work digging up the data on the old research project and called Miaari and told her about the Ruu. “I’ll handle it, Jason,” she told him. “Where do you want to billet her?”

“Let’s give her some nice quarters up at Emrai Village, something with a nice view of the bay,” he said after looking at a map. “I sure don’t want her to have to live out of a porta-barracks up on Virga. I don’t think she’d appreciate that. She *is* a Ruu with some decent rank, so let’s treat her like the senior member of her society she is.”

“I’ll arrange to have a car and driver available for her to get back and forth to work. And I’ll have several packmates keeping a close eye on her. She *is* an outsider.”

“That’s your department, Mee, I’m sure you’ll keep her out of trouble,” he chuckled. “You do a great job with the bachi players.”

“Speaking of which, the first game of the season is in three days. Are you going to attend, or are you blowing that off too?”

“I’ll blow off council summits, but Jys will *kill* me if I blow off that game,” he said, which made Miaari laugh.

“She would, or at the very least do something truly awful to you while you’re sleeping,” she grinned toothily.

“I like my dick firmly attached to my crotch, thank you very much,” he snorted, which made Miaari explode in helpless laughter.

“Is Dahnai attending?” Dahnai had made something of a tradition out of attending the first Paladins game of the season since it moved to Karis, though she still attended the first game of the IBL champion and the first Immortals match as well. And the IBL schedulers finally decided to make it easy for her by scheduling the first match of the season played by last year’s

champion in the morning Imperial Standard Time, and the first Paladins game was a night game...though it'd be played around noon local time. The Immortals always played away their first game to give Dahnai the opportunity to attend the first game of the IBL champions unless they won the championship...and since they'd won the championship last year, Dahnai would be staying in Dracora for the opening of the new season. And she'd be unbelievably smug when she came to Karis for the Paladins game, since the Immortals *were* the home team for her.

The Paladins weren't going to be sitting in the middle of the pack this year. Jyslin and Frinia had put together a *fantastic* team this year, and the IBL pundits and analysts were predicting that the Paladins would go very deep into the playoffs, and had a good chance of winning the championship. Yila, determined not to lose the bet she had with Jyslin, had spent an *obscene* amount of money on free agents for this year, and her team looked to be equally fearsome. There was a good chance, at least on paper when one looked at the signed talent, that the Paladins just might be facing off against the Tigers for the Empress' Crown this year.

On paper. In reality, Jyslin and Frinia had built a team that played well to each other's strengths and had a coach that knew how to use those talents in her system, where Yila had paid for the best talent she could get regardless of how well that talent would work in her coach's system. It was going to be a curious competition of team chemistry versus signing the available big name talent and having them on the same team. Yila's approach might work, it might not, but it would be interesting to see how it played out.

"Of course she is," he replied. "And no doubt she'll find some excuse to stay on Karis for a takir afterwards."

Miaari chuckled. "She does love her summer palace," she mused.

"Hate to cut it short, Mee, but I have some other stuff to do."

"Of course. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Have a good night." He arranged the payment for Instructor RDX through Kumi's office, but since this wasn't something she needed to attend personally, he organized it through Rahne. [*And where are these funds coming from?*] she asked.

[This is 3D business, so it comes out of 3D's account,] he answered. [Pay her in credits, she can convert it to Ruu amo if she wants to. Besides, she'll need credits while she's here on Karis.]

[I'll take care of it, Jayce.]

[By the way, congrats hon. I heard you're pregnant.]

[Songa needs to keep things to herself,] Rahne accused, which made him laugh.

[Blame Cybi for that. You can't hide anything from her, and she can't keep her mouth shut. So, is it a boy or a girl?]

[It's a boy,] she replied. [I'm not sure what I'm going to name him.]

[And did Adam hit his head on the ceiling when you told him?]

[He almost fainted,] she replied, her thought tinged with mirth. Adam was her husband, a Terran telepath who worked in the financial division. That was where she met him. [Songa estimates I conceived on our wedding night.]

[Then it sounds like you were doing what you were supposed to do on your wedding night,] he replied lightly. [And just think, you have about 24 to go to catch up to me so you can further secure the human Generations from extinction.]

[All your kids are half-Faey. Our boy is all human,] she pointed out. [I would tell you to have some kids by human women, but I don't think there's anything left in you. Those Faey girls wrung you dry.]

Jason laughed. [I'm tempted to prove you wrong, just for the fun of it,] he retorted. [For us guys, having kids is all fun and no responsibility, you know.]

[Oh, go on with you. And speaking of going on, I'll get this bit of work done for you, Jayce.]

[I know when I'm being dismissed,] he answered her. [I'll let you get it done, hon. I have some other stuff to do before I can take a break.]

[Alright then. Have a good night, Jayce.]

[You too.] That bit of business concluded, Jason bundled up all the notes he'd taken about his powered armor idea while working on the translight drive and sent it to 3D via courier, since the 3D mainframe had no external access to protect its secrets. Jason couldn't even commune with it unless he was inside the facility, that was how they'd set it up. The courier was a Rocker, more of Bo's testing of the Rocker systems to see how useful they were in independent mode. It had flown over from 3D in a hovercar by itself, picked up the datastick, and would fly back and upload the stick to the mainframe, by itself.

Rockers...maybe he should talk to Rook about building Jason his own surrogate body that he could send on boring diplomatic trips or send to planets that had lethal environmental conditions for him, something like Rook's own body but with Jason's face and skin that wasn't quite so garishly metallic. Jason could merge to it from the house and do business without ever leaving Karis. And since it was biogenic, the connection between him and the Rocker would be completely secure, so he could even conduct sensitive meetings.

Hmm...that was actually a decent idea. Rook had already built a few simulated humanoid bodies using endoskeletons and internal systems encased in a synthetic polymer that had the same consistency and feel as living tissue. It would be an interesting experiment to try to build a body that mimicked Jason's appearance as closely as possible, made it as *human* as possible, something that would fool people that saw the bionoid from a distance, but may not fool people who were face to face with him. But it wouldn't be there to trick people into thinking it was really him, it would be there so he could shake someone's hand without that hand being encased in armor. The Rocker surrogate would be the perfect option for things like visits to Birkon Prime and Prakarika, planets with deadly conditions for a Terran.

He was intrigued enough to get in touch with Rook and broach the idea. *[It would be fairly easy, Jason,]* he told him. *[I could have my production lab build a synthetic organic bionoid with 99% resemblance to you in about two days. I've managed to streamline the process for polymer casting, and I have an endo unit already built that I was going to use as my next experimental subject. It can easily be resized to your height. It's almost your height now.]*

[Awesome, Rook, think you can get it going without it distracting you too much?]

[I can get all the prep work done on it tonight and let the production unit do the building while I'm at work tomorrow. Then I come home and we see the result.]

[Perfect. Mind doing it for me?]

[Of course not, Jason. I take it I should build the unit to be able to operate in most hostile exo-environments?]

[That's exactly what I had in mind. Something I can use to, say, visit Birkon Prime without having to wear an E-suit or armor. Make it as broad as possible, Rook. Able to operate anywhere from Birkon Prime to Arabok.]

[I can build something that will have operational viability in all but the most extreme environments,] he answered confidently. [The synthetic polymer I use can withstand temperatures from -300 shuki to 900 shuki without polymer damage, and I can synthesize hair strands made of polymer so the unit's hair doesn't burn or melt. The endoframe will be rated for operation in gravity up to 20 times standard, and can be built with an internal inducer to allow it to operate in even stronger gravity wells. And I can pull your measurements and likeness out of Cybi's archives to get exact full-body appearance matching, even give it operational genitalia. I can build a unit with simulated lungs and vocal chords for more normal speaking and to further project the appearance of life, but like the other bodies I've built, it will have no stomach, so it won't be able to eat or drink.]

[Sounds like exactly what I'm looking for,] Jason answered. [Go ahead and fire it up, Rook, and bring it over to my house when it's done.]

[Certainly, Jason. If anything, you'll be advancing my research by field testing some of my most recent changes. And since you're an organic, you can test the simulated lungs, you know, since you breathe and I don't. You can give me feedback on how they work, how they feel to you..]

[Sounds like it's win-win for both of us. But, now that I think of it, there's one thing I want you to include on the unit.]

[What?]

[On board weapons, both ranged and hand to hand.]

[Hmm. I could build recessed monomolecular blades into the arms that extend out similar to how they work on a Rocker. And I could build a ranged weapon into the forearm, using an aperture over the back of the hand, or perhaps in the palm, that unanneals the polymer and extends the barrel's end. And I could shield the weapon housing so it doesn't appear on scans. And since it's all on the arm unit, the arms could be replaced with ones without weapons in about an hour if you don't want to have the weapons on the unit for diplomatic reasons. It would only require a small upgrade to the blueprints to incorporate them into the new design. I could design it in a matter of hours.]

[Think you can get all that worked out tonight?]

[I can. It presents a challenge, and I enjoy a good challenge,] he answered.

[Awesome. Looking forward to seeing the result.]

[I think you'll be pleased, Jason.]

That little bit of business concluded, Jason finished up the last of his paperwork and headed downstairs. It was raining outside, so everyone was clustered in the living room. Rann and Shya were laying on their bellies on the floor watching vidy, Jyslin was sitting on the couch with Jon in her arms, nursing him, Seido was standing over the crib putting a blanket over Julia, and the twins were sitting at Jyslin's feet, playing with some blocks while Amber laid on the couch over them and by Jyslin's leg, keeping a close eye on everything. Even Ayama and Surin were there, sitting on the love seat and with their baby girl Sanjira in a hovercrib beside it, no doubt napping. *It's about time, love. Days up in Kosigi, and you run straight to your office when you finally come home. We were feeling abandoned.*

Such a liar, he accused. I'm finally done, so I'll be well rested when Chirk murders me tomorrow morning for ignoring my Dukal responsibilities.

What have you been doing, Dad? Shya asked.

We installed a new engine on a heavy cruiser as part of a test of a new engine design, he answered. *It required me to be there, and I can't lie, I*

really enjoyed it. I'd much rather be doing engineering work than paperwork any day. I also asked Rook to build me a surrogate bionoid body that I can use to visit planets with hostile environments like Birkon Prime and Prakarika.

Ooo, like that Avatar movie?

Something like that, he nodded when Shya looked over her shoulder at him. Biogenics will make it easy, I can just merge to the computer in the bionoid, so it'll be like I am the bionoid. Rook will build it with full sensory capability, he's really good at it.

That sounds kinda fun, Rann, Shya told him. Imagine if we merged to adult bodies. It'd be like being adults.

You're not merging to anything until your 25th birthday, young lady. No jack, no merge, Jyslin warned.

You take all the fun out of life, Pamma, you know that?

Jason laughed when Jyslin gave her a tart look. Don't old lady me, young lady, she shot back.

You're practically a grandma already, Jys, Jason teased, then laughed at her withering stare. How is Jon, Seido?

He's sleeping, Jason, she answered as she sat in the chair next to the crib. Having a nice nap after getting his dinner.

"And how are you two lovely ladies?" he asked, startling Bethany a little by picking her up, but she laughed when he pushed her up into the air and caught her a couple of times.

"Are you home, Daddy?"

"If you mean am I done with work, yes I am," he replied, holding her at arm's length over his head. "Have you had dinner yet?"

"Uh-huh," she answered. "You took too long."

"Well, I don't blame you," he smiled up at her. "Your empty belly is more important than my work any day."

"Can we go walk?"

“It’s raining, pippy, and I’ll be honest. I’m *very* tired,” he said. “We can go for a nice long walk on the beach tomorrow, okay?”

“Okay.”

“Do you want me to warm something up for you, Jason?” Seido asked.

“If you don’t mind, please,” he replied.

“We have plenty left over from dinner,” she said as she stood up.

“You’re an angel, Seido. Way better than Ayama ever was to me,” he said with a glance at her, and when she gave him a cool, challenging look in reply, he winked at her.

Love, you’re stirring the pot, Jyslin warned privately.

Things have been too quiet around here, I think Sanjira’s had too much of a calming effect on her. Besides, I love it when she’s mad, he replied, which made Shya giggle.

What? Rann asked.

Nothin’. I’ll tell you later.

Kaista, 35 Kedaa, 4404, Faey Orthodox Calendar

Friday, 25 May 2018 Terran Standard Calendar

*Kaista, 35 Kedaa, year 1329 of the 97th Generation, Karinne
Historical Reference Calendar*

Foxwood East, Karis

It...was...*creepy*.

Jason leaned in and took a very careful look at his own face, which Rook had sculpted out of flesh-like gel polymer and placed on the bionoid that he’d built for him, and it was even beyond looking in a mirror. Rook had gotten every detail right, even down to the pore pattern of his skin. The faint scar over his left eyebrow was there, a visible reminder of the attack that took off his hand and killed Rann Berylle, and the color variations in his green irises were also there, perfectly duplicated from images Rook had

pulled of Jason from Cybi's databases. Jason would bet that the eyes would even have his retinal pattern, since Rook was anything if not thorough. Rook had brought the bionoid up to his home office for him to inspect.

"The bionoid is sixteen konn heavier than you are, which can be concealed using the internal inducer," Rook told him as he stared intently at his own face. *"The endoskeleton is foamed iso-aluminum for strength and light weight, and most onboard systems are incorporated into the endoskeleton to remove unnatural bulges or hard spots that could be felt from the outside. Anything unable to fit within the endoskeleton is contained inside the ribcage or within the skull unit. The power plant, gyroscopic systems, and sensory encoding units are contained within the ribcage. The primary biogenic control hardware is in the skull, similar to an organic brain, with a secondary and tertiary backup system within the ribcage to provide triple redundancy in case the unit finds itself under attack. The endoskeleton is based on Terran skeletal structure. It utilizes the artificial muscle strand technology developed for the Titans to simulate musculature and movement, covered over with gel polymer that gives it the same consistency and tactile sensation as flesh and tissue. The skin contains a full sensory mesh system, and for aesthetics, is even capable of sweating and goosebumps due to a dynamic inner skin construct. That is how it mimics a flesh body. The bionoid is capable of picking up nearly 400 konn, can withstand temperatures from -200 shuki to as high as 930 shuki without the external polymer damaging or the internal systems suffering heat failure. It has an internal inducer to give it operational capability in gravity wells as high as 46g, and has computer-assisted eyesight and hearing, giving the bionoid sensory capability far exceeding your Terran body. It utilizes class two nanites to effect maintenance and repairs. It runs on a class V singularity power pack and also had broadcast power receivers in the skull unit for on-planet operations. And as you requested, it is armed with monomolecular blades in the forearms, and is equipped with two Korgg tetryon wave weapons, one in each arm, which fire from a retractable emitter crystal in the heel of the palm."*

"Holy shit, you put tetryon wave weapons in it?" he gasped. Tetryon wave weapons were utterly *nasty* weapons developed by the Korgg, that fired a pulse of coherent tetryons which were extremely destructive. What made the weapon so damn brutal was the fact that the wave pulse wasn't a

projectile or even a beam of coherent energy, it was a *disc* that expanded in size as it traveled away from the emitter crystal. It was like a shotgun, it hit an *area* instead of a *point*, and that area of effect could be altered by changing the focusing aspect of the emitter crystal to increase or decrease the “sweet spot” range, that distance where the expanding disc of tetryons had maximum volume but still had maximum power. Beyond that point, the weapon’s wave pulse continued to expand in size, but the damage the wave caused diminished. It could also fire a coherent beam of coherent tetryon energy, acting like most other energy weapons, but that was only for using the weapon for very long range, where the expanding disc shape of the wave pulse would peter out otherwise. But at close range, anything fifty shakra or closer, nothing was as brutal or as destructive as a Korgg tetryon wave weapon...except maybe a missile or grenade. They were nasty, nasty weapons, and the fact that Rook had managed to build them into the bionoid made it very formidable. It was like having a sawed-off 12 gauge shotgun loaded with double-aught buckshot hidden in each hand.

“It was actually the most efficient weapon system to install, due to the fact that most of the weapon’s parts are incorporated into the radius and ulna of the bionoid’s arm and the barrel is a flexible ionic tube. The weapon can fire with a bent barrel, because the focusing circuitry that aims the wave pulse is built into the base of the emitter crystal at the end of the barrel. The arms were designed to be detachable just above the elbow, so you can replace them with unarmed versions, if you’ll excuse the pun.”

“Jesus, Rook, I was expecting something less powerful than Korgg tetryon wave weaponry. I thought you’d put an ion weapon in it or something. *Maybe* an internal railgun, but holy fuck, wave weapons. That’s insane. Awesome, but insane.”

“If you’re going to have a weapon, Jason, put the best weapon you can in it. And if you’re

using weapons while driving the bionoid, it’s best to have one that’s guaranteed to kill whatever it hits on the first shot that doesn’t require pinpoint accuracy. The large area of effect of a wave pulse and the ability to widen or narrow the pulse makes it a powerful weapon at up to fourteen hundred shakra. I felt that was more than enough range for your ranged weapon.”

Jason laughed. “True enough,” he agreed as he stepped back and looked at the bionoid’s naked body. Rook had perfectly copied his body, even down to those slight imperfections and flaws that every guy wishes weren’t there...he’d even gotten the pubic hair over the simulated penis just right. “When you said it’s a perfect copy, you weren’t kidding.”

“The genitals are fully functional, and will be capable of full sensory indulgence,” he supplied. “The penis is even capable of ejaculating a harmless synthetic bio-compatible liquid with the same consistency and viscosity as semen, manufactured and stored in the testes. It can be altered to simulate multiple flavors, including Terran strawberries.”

Jason looked at him. “And what earthly reason would I need *that* for?”

“Because you never know,” he replied, which made Jason laugh despite himself.

“Rook. You are one sick puppy.”

“Blame Bo for that. Because of the biological simulation features, the bionoid will need to be supplied with water, which the unit can drink in fair imitation of the biological swallowing process. That water is stored in an internal stomach until use. It is important that the unit only drinks water, Jason. Any other liquid will damage its internal systems. The unit also has simulated lungs governed by an automated breathing subroutine that simulates the biological breathing process, and the unit is capable of speech using those lung sacks and vocal chords, as well as an audio speaker located in the throat that generates similar acoustics if you have the breathing routine disabled or are in a medium that makes speech impossible, like an extreme high or low pressure atmosphere, or a marine environment.”

“That’s covering the bases,” Jason nodded as he walked around the unit. Jyslin walked into the office, then stopped short and gasped, then laughed.

“Is that the bionoid?”

“Yup. Does it look like me, Jys?”

She stepped up and gave it a close inspection, taking nearly ten minutes as she slowly walked around it, then slid her fingers over it. She gave him a sly wink when she reached down and cupped the bionoid’s testicles. “It’s

not exact, but it's very close," she finally proclaimed. "It looks like you, but it doesn't *feel* exactly like you."

"Perfect duplication is impossible, but I calculate that the bionoid is a 93.13% match for Jason."

"I'd say that's a pretty good estimation," Jyslin agreed clinically, walking around the bionoid again. "So, this is what you'll use when you go to places like Birkon Prime?"

"Yup. I'll keep it somewhere it doesn't scare people until I need it. Probably down in my lab. Nobody's going to stumble across it down there."

"You should test its merge before I leave it with you, Jason. Let's make sure the onboard systems are functional."

"Yeah," he agreed, going over and sitting down at his desk. He closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and then reached out and communed with the biogenic system in the bionoid. It allowed him access—*only* him, he noticed, Rook had made sure nobody was going to drive it but him—and felt himself rise up into the bionoid's system and merge to it.

He blinked the bionoid's eyes as its sensory systems went into merge mode, feeding him their sensory data, and then he raised the bionoid's hand and looked at them. "It feels like a standard Rocker from the merge side of things," he said through the bionoid's mouth.

"Trelle's garland, it even *sounds* like him!" Jyslin gasped.

"It took me nearly three hours to get the vocal chords to duplicate his voice acoustics correctly," Rook supplied. *"It was, by far, the most challenging part of the job."*

"Well, you did a great job," Jyslin said, her voice impressed. And to Jason's bionoid's ears, her voice sounded just the same...but underneath it was another layer of sounds, sounds his organic ears weren't capable of hearing. His vision was a simulation of his regular vision, but he knew from the bionoid's systems that he could change that vision to different operational modes, like high-res, telescopic, thermographic, and several others. The arms didn't feel heavy to him, but then again, it had superhuman strength compared to a flesh and blood body, so there was no reason for his arms to feel heavy to him. He took a couple of tentative steps,

found the system's onboard gyroscopes and balance algorithms were good, then took the bionoid for a short walk around the office. Like a Rocker, the body was light and responsive, obeyed his commands, and he found it as easy to operate as a Rocker. He stepped back and extended the monomolecular blades, which made Jyslin flinch with a gasp and then laugh. The blade was the length of his forearm and extended out the side of his forearm, just above the wrist, which extended a good shakra and a half of deadly sharp blade out past his closed fist. Since the blade was anchored to his forearm instead of his hand, it didn't follow the motions of his hand, and it also gave it a much sturdier anchor. He retracted the blades and saw that the synthetic skin and polymer pseudo-flesh sealed over and repaired itself—there were nanites in the bionoid that did that repair work—he activated the wave weapons. The focusing emitter crystals popped out of the heels of the palms of his hands, angled so they were straight with his hands bent up at the wrists and fingers straight or curled safely out of the way. When he activated them, crosshairs appeared in the bionoid's vision that told him exactly where the weapons were aimed, including larger circles around those crosshairs based on both the distance to the object from the emitter and the power level and expansion ratio settings. The circles represented what would be hit by the wave pulse as it expanded as it traveled away from the emitter. He changed the power levels and saw the circles change size, changed the expansion ratios and saw them change again, then he switched the weapon to beam mode, which removed the circle entirely, before switching it back to wave mode. He wasn't about to fire the wave weapon in his office—it would blow a gaping hole in whatever it hit and could possibly collapse the entire house, since wood and plascrete weren't anywhere near strong enough to stop a tetryon wave pulse—but outside of actually shooting it, everything else was working just fine. He deactivated the weapons, which caused the emitter crystals to retract into the heels of his hands, and the synthetic skin and flesh quickly sealed over as the nanites did their job. “Everything is showing that it's operational, Rook, I have full sensory capability, and the onboard computer is in perfect sync with me. The merge is one hundred percent.”

“As I expected, but you never know until you turn it on, as it were.”

“You said this bionoid is capable of independent mode?” he asked.

“Yes, just like a Rocker,” he answered. “But the computer in the bionoid isn’t as sophisticated as a Rocker’s, so I would heavily suggest that you do not give it any complex tasks unless you’re supervising the unit, either passively merged or physically accompanying it.”

“That goes without saying,” Jason chuckled through the bionoid’s mouth. “Alright, I’m going to walk it down to my lab and put it somewhere safe and deactivate it. It gonna be okay to just sit for a while, Rook?”

“Yes.”

“Good deal. I’ll play with it later, get used to driving it, maybe use it to scare the life out of Ayama,” he added with a dark smile. “I’ve got a lot of actual work to do, I barely even dented my inbox at work today, and there’s a council meeting in an hour that I’m actually going to attend. Penance for missing the summit,” the bionoid chuckled in his voice. “Truthfully, though, most of the other rulers are also attending, something of a post-summit discussion of what happened at the summit.”

“Well, that answers my question,” Jyslin said. “You’d better get your schedule cleared for the match, love. You miss that and you’re gonna *need* that fake body after I’m done with your real one.”

Jason laughed through the bionoid. “I’ll be at the match, love,” he soothed.

He got the bionoid down to his workshop after warning the house that he was moving it—to avoid startling anyone—deactivated it, said goodbye to Rook with glowing praises for his work, and went back to trying to catch up on his work after nearly ten days of ignoring it. He barely got anywhere before the council meeting, and saw that most all the rulers were attending in person as their holograms appeared in rows and columns over and beyond his desk. “You’re looking much cleaner now, Jason,” Krirara noted as she joined the council. “Did you get everything under control?”

“More or less, yes.”

“Well, now that it’s over, what was it?”

“Unfortunately, I can’t tell you just yet, Krirara,” he answered, which the entire council heard. “It’s confidential house business. Hopefully in a little while I can, but until then, no.”

“Ah, so it was scientific in nature,” she noted.

“I will neither confirm nor deny that statement,” he replied dryly, which made Kreel laugh.

“Yup, that’s what it was,” Kreel said with a sly smile. “Jayce never looks that bedraggled unless he’s neck deep in some technical thingie-what’s-it.”

“Kreel. Bite me.”

Kreel just grinned impudently at him.

Once the council was gaveled into session, Jason actually listened as they went over a great deal of what they discussed at the summit, which was mainly getting the diffusers installed, but they’d also discussed Zaa’s information about the Syndicate’s stop and return to hyperspace. Some of the rulers were a bit put out that they didn’t attack them, but they were also respectful of *why* Zaa and Jason didn’t attack. To attack unilaterally like that was against the Articles, and they had put the law over personal pursuits.

But it had had an effect on the council, and as Jason listened, they debated the motion that Shakizarr put forth that they declare war on the Syndicate, something they hadn’t done *officially* yet. And as Jason expected, the more pacifistic members like Magran and Kriavos lobbied to at least open diplomatic channels to the Syndicate to try to convince them to leave without opening fire, to at least try a peaceful solution first. Jason was impressed that quite a few of the more aggressive rulers seemed swayed by Magran’s argument, as he passionately and eloquently stated his case before the council. “I will vote to declare war on the Syndicate along with the rest of this body,” Magran concluded, “but even in a state of war, there is always the opportunity to negotiate. We should pursue *all* options, my friends, and if there is the smallest chance we can avert this war before lives are lost, we should pursue that chance until reasonable men and women declare that negotiations have failed. And if they fail, then we pursue the just military option and drive the Syndicate out of our galaxy by main force.”

“The Grand Master does present a compelling case,” Shakizarr declared. “And personally, I see no reason why we should not at least make the attempt. After all, our first attack will be by the Karinnes and their

automated weaponry, so even if we lose the element of surprise, we will *not* lose the element of *shock* that the Karinnes have documented they can induce in enemy forces with their unorthodox approach to warfare. Even if the Syndicate expects an attack, they will *not* expect the kind of attack that will come. They have no experience with the Confederation and its members. They have no idea what we are capable of, and they will underestimate us in their arrogance. We will use that against them, even if they know an attack is imminent.”

“That, my dear friend Shakizarr, is a damn good point,” Ethikk agreed. “And it does give us the option to at least try to negotiate a peaceful solution before we unleash the Karinnes and all their dastardly toys on the Syndicate.”

That produced quite a few chuckles.

“The Grand Emperor does speak a strong truth,” Holikk, ambassador from the Subrian Coalition, declared. “Though we’ve not been members of the Confederation long enough to see our new allies fight, we have reviewed the military records you have made available. I concur that the Syndicate will be in no way prepared for our initial assault, even if they know it’s coming. They simply have no experience with the asymmetrical approach to warfare that the Confederation employs through its most cunning members, the Karinnes, the Kimdori, the Beryans of the Alliance, the Vekk, and the Jhri. They will expect an armada of ships to clash with them in a grand battle, not what will hit them squarely in the face.”

“Then I would humbly submit that we should put the matter up to a vote. The question is, should we attempt a diplomatic solution before engaging in warfare with the Syndicate?” Magran said.

“I second that motion,” Enva called.

“Then it is a matter for vote,” the current gavel stated, Prime Senator Quord from the Jun. Jason watched as the motion passed by an impressive margin, and Jun struck the gavel. “By a margin of 26 votes, the motion is passed. The Confederation will attempt to open communications with the Syndicate before we open hostilities. And with that motion passed, the original motion is now set forth for vote. Does a state of war exist between the Confederation of Allied Empires and the Syndicate?”

The vote was unanimous. *Yes*. As Magran promised, he voted to declare war.

“Then let it be stated for the record that a state of war does exist between the Confederation and the governmental entity known as the Syndicate. Which, by the Articles of Confederation, gives the Confederate Combined Military, all Confederate agencies and bureaus, and all member empires of the Confederation the authorization to use all possible force and all legal means by which to end the threat the Syndicate poses to our galaxy and its citizens. This state of war will exist until such time that the Confederate Council votes by two thirds majority that the state of war is ended.”

“This is the just path, brothers and sisters,” Magran called.

“It is indeed, Grand Master,” Assaba agreed with a rumble.

“Let this be the day that the Andromedan invaders will look back upon and realize it was their undoing,” Empress Voss of the Crai Empire said strongly. “They have united our galaxy against them, and now they must face the folly of that endeavor!”

Voss got quite a few cheers, then Quord calmed them down with his gavel, getting them back in order.

“With an official state of war in place against the Syndicate, I will begin operations against them immediately,” Zaa spoke up. “Two days ago, an expeditionary force of Kimdori scouts arrived at the edge of Andromeda after over four years in stasis for the journey, and they have been awakened from stasis and are ready to begin operations. They will be our eyes and ears, revealing the secrets our enemies seek to hide from us. And with them in place, it opens the opportunity for us to send tools of war directly to Andromeda.”

The council stared at her, including Jason. “And how will they perform this miracle?” Anivan asked.

“We have the capability to communicate with the scouts in real time, august rulers, and using that advantage, they can supply us exacting coordinates to open a one-way wormhole from our galaxy to theirs, similar to the device the Consortium used to open a wormhole from Trieste to Karis. This wormhole will be too unstable to send any troops or manned

ships, but it will allow us to send *equipment*, such as Kimdori hyperspace reconnaissance probes and automated Karinne weaponry,” she explained.

“Truly? A wormhole can be opened across *galaxies*?” Sk’Vrae asked in surprise.

“Actually, yeah, they can,” Jason said, which made them all look at him. It was well known that Jason was one of the most educated of all the council members in technical matters, because he was an engineer before he was a ruler. “It’s actually *easier* to open a wormhole the further away the two termini are from each other, from a power consumption point of view. It takes less energy to warp space across vast distances than it does short ones, due to the curvature of space-time and the power required to bend it. We could open a Stargate to Andromeda if we had one over there to link to one over here. But because of the tremendous distances involved, you more or less have to have someone on the other side to supply exact coordinates in real time, since those coordinates are constantly changing due to the fact that both our galaxy and Andromeda are moving. That allows the wormhole generator over here to, well, *aim* the exit terminus, else you could try to open a wormhole to the center of Andromeda and have the terminus open in intergalactic space three galaxies to the left of where you were aiming,” he said ruefully, which made a few of them chuckle. “With the Kimdori over there to call back coordinates in real time, yeah, we can open one-way wormholes to Andromeda and send disposable equipment through. I figure more than three quarters of it will be destroyed in transit, but that’s why it’s *disposable*. You just keep sending stuff til you get enough through for what you need it to do.”

“That...that is quite surprising. And quite good news,” Alros of the Rathii mused. “You could send the pieces of a Stargate through and have the Kimdori assemble them on the far side?”

“Well, I suppose we could, but you’re talking about taking four Stargates out of service, taking them apart, and sending the parts through and *hoping* you get enough undamaged pieces on the other side to build one. Do you have any idea how much that would cost?” Jason asked directly.

“Actually, no. I don’t,” he answered.

“Trust me, Overking, you’re talking about a bill that would make your finance minister’s mind shatter from the shock,” Dahnai said dryly. “And right now, we don’t have any Stargates to spare for something like that. We don’t have enough as it is, and we can’t build them fast enough to meet the demand. Besides, even if we did, it would take the Kimdori over there *months* to reassemble the pieces into a working Stargate, and then they’d have to *operate* it. I don’t think they have those kinds of technical skills, and I’m almost positive they don’t have any Kimdori over there that would know *how* to operate the gate. To say that they’re highly sophisticated equipment that require well trained operators is the father of all understatements. The Stargates you’ve seen around Terra and at Rathiros have very large crews inside of them that operate them and maintain them. They’re not automated. I don’t think the Denmother sent enough Kimdori to keep a Stargate operational long enough for it to link back to one here, long enough to get a crew there to man the gate and keep it stable.”

“We’re working on that problem over here on Karis, esteemed rulers,” Jason said, to which Zaa nodded. “I don’t have anything to report yet, but rest assured, we’re working to solve the problem that our enemy’s home base is so far away that it makes it untouchable. Until we have a solution, the wormhole generator we’ve built will be able to send little love packages to Andromeda, just to show the Syndicate that them being all the way over there is no protection against the *Confederation*.”

Kreel grinned evilly at him. So did Dahnai.

“While it’ll be useful for convincing the Syndicate not to send any more fleets to attack us, it won’t do us any good against the fleet already here,” Jason continued. “Their communication technology isn’t real-time. It takes messages over two months to get to them from Andromeda, so anything we do over there, the fleet here won’t hear about it for quite a while. So, before anyone suggests it, scaring the Syndicate leaders in Andromeda into recalling their fleet won’t work. But, when the time comes, after we’ve crushed the invading fleet and their leaders *know* we’ve crushed it, *that* is when we can use the scare tactic to convince them that we aren’t worth the trouble, and to leave us the hell alone.”

“When that time comes, we will all be glad that we *can* do such a thing, Grand Duke Karinne,” Ojio Ro nodded. “The best kind of victory in war is

the war you avoid fighting in the first place.”

“Well said,” Overlord Derakk of the Kouï concurred.

“Denmother, I believe I can speak as chair and without objection that you have the council’s full support in your operation,” Quord said, which caused a chorus of assent.

“They are already sending back initial scan data,” she replied. “And will take the opportunity to do scientific research as well. Their mission to Andromeda is wide-ranging with both military and scientific objectives.”

“I do hope that you’ll be making that scientific data available to all?” Observer A asked, almost breathlessly.

“Of course, Observer. It will be sent to the Academy for study by all interested parties.”

“And here comes the Academy mainframe crashing,” Kreel quipped, which made Jason laugh.

“You can *try* to crash my Academy mainframe, Kreel. I’ll give you a million credits if you pull off that miracle,” Jason said scornfully. “It’s not a CBIM, but that’s one seriously major piece of computer hardware, one of the most fearsome computers you’ll find anywhere off of Moridon. The Moridon custom built it for the Academy, fully knowing just how much use it was going to see.”

“And it is one of the greatest achievements of our most skilled computer specialists,” Brayrak Kruu said proudly. “And I’ll give you *ten* million credits if you manage it. The pride of the Moridon is at stake here.”

“If *you* say it’s uncrashable, that means it’s uncrashable, Overseer,” Kreel grinned at him, then pointed in the direction of Jason’s hologram, at least from his side. “But you can never take anything *he* says at face value. He’s as sneaky as he is smart.”

“I like him just the way he is, Kreel. He keeps life zesty,” Dahnai drawled, which caused some laughter across the holograms.

“A point,” one of their newest members said, who was still a bit timid in council meetings. Master Mo of the Readdi Empire had only been in the Confederation for about a month, and had spent most of that time listening.

He was a remarkably Terran-looking humanoid species who looked quite handsome to Jason...if one overlooked the fact bright red skin like a Makati. "If the Kimdori in Andromeda can communicate back to our galaxy in real time, does that not mean that we could open negotiations directly with the Syndicate rulers?"

"It will take some time to find their home world, crack their communications systems, and then find a way to make contact they would take seriously, but yes, we could, Master Mo," Zaa answered.

"Then would that not be the best course of action to prevent further invasion attempts? We could attempt negotiation, and if that fails, we unleash the Karinnes and their robotic weapons upon them to *convince* them that peace is more profitable. After all, profit is their only motivation."

"A valid point we can debate when the opportunity arises," Zaa nodded. "But gaining penetration into the Syndicate communication system and mapping out their territory are two of the missions my children were tasked to perform, and will take them some time to accomplish, so it will give us the means to open channels with their leaders when that time comes."

"Very good, Denmother," he said, then seemed content to return to silence.

"I think this is a good place for all of us to take a step back and consider the events of the day," Overmaster Birn of the Birkons injected, his voice strangely resonant due to the methane atmosphere he breathed. "We have made weighty decisions this day, and it is never a bad thing to step back and consider them in quiet contemplation."

"I think the Overmaster is politely suggesting that we should take a break. I think I can second that motion," Kreel said. "I'm getting hungry over here."

"A motion to adjourn has been seconded. By general acclimation, should it be accepted?" Quord asked. When nobody objected, he nodded. "Then this council is in recess until its next scheduled meeting. Note that Emperor Ogrik Vort of the Vekk Empire will begin his tenure as council chair beginning with the next council session. It was my pleasure to chair the council for these ten days, esteemed companions. We are adjourned," he declared, rapping the gavel.

Well, that went better than Jason expected, and wasn't as long as he feared it would be. But it was a momentous council for one simple reason. The Confederation had *officially* declared war on the Syndicate, and that meant that Pandora's box could be opened up on them...at least after an attempt to negotiate a peaceful withdraw of Syndicate forces from their galaxy. Jason was certain that would fail, he knew way too much about the Syndicate thanks to Zaa, but he also couldn't fault the council for wanting to try. It *was* the decent thing to do, and who knows, maybe he was wrong and the Syndicate fleet would pull out without a fight.

But he seriously doubted that.

And he had to admit, he hadn't even *considered* Zaa's idea to use her the ability to communicate with her scouts in real time to open a one-way wormhole to Andromeda to send them equipment, supplies, and weapons. That was just way too damn fucking cunning, and it proved that Zaa was every bit worthy of her title as Denmother. There weren't enough Kimdori over there to do much, but with them programming and guiding Karinne toys, they could shock the hell out of the Syndicate, and that just might be enough to convince the oligarchs and plutocrats that ran it that the Milky Way wasn't worth the *cost* to try to conquer. Until they had enough ships equipped with translight drives to get over there in enough numbers to make an impact, supplying the Kimdori scouts was a pretty damned smart option to deter further invasion attempts.

And he had *seriously* lost track of time that the scouts had arrived in Andromeda two days ago, and he hadn't even realized it. But then again, he'd been totally engrossed in the translight breakthrough and installing the engine to even take notice of what was going on here on his own planet, let alone in the next galaxy over.

Zaa's timeline did sound right. She'd told him that it would take the Kimdori over there about 50 hours to fully awaken from stasis—it wasn't as easy as flipping a switch and waking them up—and now that they'd had a chance to recover from over four years in cryogenic stasis, they could get down to the business of scouting out Andromeda and learning everything they could about everything, satisfying that overpowering Kimdori curiosity. They would scan anything and everything, map the stars of Andromeda, identify Consortium and Syndicate territory, and map out that

territory. They'd identify political and military strongholds, supply lines, trade routes, strategically and logistically critical systems, and penetrate both empires' communication systems...at the same time as they conducted scientific research on just about everything they encountered. And with them there to call back in real time, they could send through any equipment or supplies they needed, including automated Karinne weaponry to unleash on their enemies.

And from Jason's perspective, the most important thing he could do was get his ships upgraded to translight drive technology as fast as safely possible, so he could get them over there to rescue those Kimdori if things turned against them. That, as well as establish a forward base for what he saw as the inevitable need to take the war to Andromeda to convince both the Syndicate and the Consortium that if they wanted to invade another galaxy, there were *other* galaxies out there for them to choose from. If they could tow a Stargate over and set it up in a place where their enemies had no hope of either finding it or reaching it, it would open the door they needed to prosecute an offensive that would once and for all end the threat of those Andromedan mega-empires to the Milky Way.

That would make all of this worth it.

Chapter 4

Baetha (Midsummer's Day), 4404, Faey Orthodox Calendar

Sunday, 27 May 2018 Terran Standard Calendar

*Baetha (Midsummer's Day), year 1329 of the 97th Generation,
Karinne Historical Reference Calendar*

Karsa Sports Complex, Karsa, Karis

If there were such things as omens, Jason had a feeling that he'd just seen a good one.

To call the match a rout was an understatement. Routs were rare in IBL batchi because of the talent and skill level involved, but when a team loses 18-6, that is a *rout*. The Paladins absolutely *dismantled* the Jerama Warlords in one of the most lopsided butt-whoopings the IBL had seen in several seasons. And the score didn't even reflect the true level of utter ownage that had taken place on that field. The Paladins head coach had pulled her girls back at the start of the fourth division to show some mercy on the Warlords, a long-standing unwritten rule of courtesy in the IBL, the *gentleladies' contract*, else the score would have been utterly humiliating. The teams continued to play hard in the fourth division—this *was* IBL batchi and pride was on the line here—but the Paladins passed up multiple obvious scoring opportunities while continuing to play stout defense. They weren't running up the score, but they also weren't allowing the Warlords to get back into the game, either. Any time the Warlords scored, the Paladins came back and played full-out offense to get that point back. And the Warlords could not stop them.

Needless to say, that put the entire upcoming season in a very positive light. If the Paladins could whip last year's Division VIII champions up and down the pitch, it sent a message that this year, the Paladins were *for real*. And it made it that much sweeter because it was the Warlords that beat the

Paladins in the first round of the playoffs last season, so it was sweet, sweet revenge to come back and curbstomp them in the first match of the new season.

From a technical standpoint, it was everything that Jyslin and Frinia hoped. The new free agents and draftees had the ideal skillsets to plug right into their head coach's system seamlessly and played *like a team*. They'd passed up on the biggest available free agents except for Laela Feralle because they didn't think they'd be good fits with the head coach's system, and while many in the IBL punditry had done a little head-scratching over Jyslin and Frinia's strategy pursuing what most felt was D League-level talent in free agency ...well, they weren't scratching their heads anymore. Not after *that*. The head office had identified the best available players to work with their coach, and as a football player, Jason completely understood that methodology. One team's third string cut bait was another team's star player because of the systems they used and the player's skillset.

So, while Dahnai started off the day almost overbearingly annoying, the amount of worried silence coming from her chair increased more and more as the match played out. She was almost sulky by the end of the match, and nearly snapped at Jyslin when she asked if she was ready to go back to the summer palace for some barbecue.

That was *fear*...and it smelled so, so good.

But Jason was far too busy to spend more time than necessary at the game. He was there to see the game and hang out with his family and Dahnai, and now that that was done, he had very important work to do. And for her part, Jyslin understood and didn't bitch *too* much when he took his leave. He had to change into armor before he was allowed to leave the skybox, and four guards escorted him back to the frigate *Taskara*, which was sitting on the big landing pad behind the stadium waiting for him. He had Ryn and Dera with him from his usual complement, but instead of Shen and Suri, he had Mai and Uma from the second shift. Shen and Suri were attending a class at the barracks, part of the Imperial Guard's training regimen. Captain Rambarr Kro saluted as he approached, a hulking Druvom who had very quickly raced through the ranks to achieve the equivalent rank he held in the Druvom Empire. Druvoms were very tall, very burly humanoids who were silicon-based instead of carbon-based, like Stevaks,

but they looked much more *human* than the Stevaki did. Rambarr Kro looked like a stone giant from the old myths and legends, with a wide face, flat nose, and grayish skin that was as tough as synth-leather that covered very dense flesh and even denser bones. Rambarr's exceptionally dense body weighed as much as four Faey despite only being about two shakra taller on the average, so heavy that his armor had an inducer to take the edge off. And with that dense cellular structure came superhuman strength. Rambarr Kro could pick up a hoverbike and throw it a good ten shakra.

Jason found it a bit odd that a being as big as a Druvom would be on a frigate, which was a very cramped ship, but he wasn't complaining. Command officers started their careers commanding ships with the frigates, and the fact that Rambarr might have trouble squeezing through the bridge hatch did not give him any special consideration. "Rambarr, those Lieutenant Commander's bars look good on you," Jason told him, shaking his hand after returning the salute. "Congratulations. How's your first KMS command?"

"It's much like my job in the Druvom Navy before I joined the Karinnes, your Grace," he said with a wide smile, showing off his metallic and entirely *natural* teeth. "I commanded a fast attack frigate for the Navy, and now I'm doing it again for the house."

"And you'll kick some ass," Jason said. "The Navy is better off with you in it."

"Thank you, your Grace. The ship is prepped and ready for departure at your command," he said, motioning for Jason to board.

Jason walked up the ramp with Rambarr behind him, and Jason noticed that he had to duck his head a little to walk down the companionway. "I think you need a bigger ship, Captain," he noted.

Rambarr laughed. "I'm used to it, your Grace," he replied as he turned sideways to let one of his crew, a willowy Shio, squeeze by him. "Most Karinne buildings aren't built with us Druvoms in mind. I fit on the bridge, and that's what matters the most. At least after engineering installed a proper chair," he added, which made Jason laugh.

"I can imagine, he nodded. "I hope you fit in your quarters."

"My bed goes from bulkhead to bulkhead, but yes, I fit. Barely."

Aya, never one to pass up the chance to encase Jason in bubble wrap whenever possible, had decided that since frigates were capable of ground landing on most large landing pads, and also carried two zip ships for ground to air passenger transfers if they couldn't, that Jason would only be allowed to be carried in a frigate if he left the planet's surface. Corvettes could still ferry him around if he stayed in the atmosphere, but if he needed to go anywhere else, a frigate was the *minimum* allowed conveyance. And in what Jason felt was silly overprotectiveness, if he was headed to Kosigi, the frigate had to run in stealth mode to further prevent a possible attack against him. If he was going to go anywhere but Kosigi outside the atmosphere, he had to transfer to at *least* a battleship for the journey. *And* he had to have at least one tactical battleship or tactical cruiser, four destroyers, and four frigates escorting that ship. That was the minimum task force Aya demanded to take Jason anywhere off planet that wasn't Kosigi, and that *only* applied to Karinne holdings that were connected to Karis by Stargates and were behind interdictors. To go anywhere outside of Karinne territory, he had to have Aya's explicit permission, and she had to arrange the security for the trip.

He was surprised she was giving him *that* much freedom. Before, she wouldn't even let him off the planet without extravagant protection, but now she seemed comfortable letting him play in the back yard without chaining him to the swing set, as it were. So long as he stayed inside interdicted Karinne territory, she seemed content allowing him to go about his business without her meddling.

Their destination was Virga, but Jason also planned to go to Kosigi later on, so a frigate was necessary. The *Taskara* had been part of the fly-by celebrating the beginning of the IBL season, so the KMS already had a frigate very close by when Aya called for a transport for Jason. The citizenry of Karsa got to see a procession of KMS line ships do a fly-over of the stadium before the match, including the command ship *Aegis*, which was so low that the ship blotted out the sky when it flew over the stadium. The *Taskara* had been part of a formation of frigates that took part in that aerial parade.

Rambarr Kro got him to his destination quickly and without incident, landing on the bare rock outside the MRDD facility just outside Marine Gunnery Range Delta. The facility had been part of the Titan project, and it

had been in this complex of three buildings that the artificial muscle strand technology developed for Titan mecha had been researched. The complex had been more or less built for the task, three buildings surrounding an external test area where the muscle strands had been tested, a large plascrete pad with various large frames built that simulated the joints of a Titan mecha. But with the Titans now in production, the research lab had been shuttered until a new project could be assigned to it...and now it had one.

Tom and Bo met Jason at the ramp after the frigate landed, and behind them was the very tall, very blue, and very bald Instructor RDX. Ruu shaved their heads and all other body hair except their eyebrows as a social convention—at least that he'd seen—so it was a little different to see a humanoid female who was completely bald. Ruu females often wore habits, skullcaps, or hijab-like garments over their heads that were very form-fitting and stylish, but RDX had opted to go bare-headed. Jason stepped up to them and took RDX's wrist in the ritual Ruu greeting. "It's good to see you made it, Instructor," he said.

"I have been returned to active research for this project, your Grace, but allowed to keep my rank, so my designation has been reverted. I am Scientist RDX for the duration of this project."

"Scientist," he corrected with a nod. "Have they gotten you up to speed on the basic objective of this project?"

"They have, your Grace," she nodded as his guards came down the ramp. "And I've already been warned that there are some aspects of this project I won't be permitted to see due to confidentiality concerns. I fully understand my role here as a consultant, so I have no objection."

"I'm glad that you do," he said. "This project is being designed based on a secret Karinne technology. But, Scientist, you have my full permission to take all the data we can release to you that does not use that technology and try to develop your *own* version of the armor system using Ruu technology. You have joint ownership of the research data."

"I am quite happy to hear that, your Grace, for I intend to do just that," she said.

"And we'll help you with it, if you'll allow us," Jason told her.

“We’d be happy to, since one of the things we’ll also be doing is seeing if we can adapt this armor system for our Confederate allies, who don’t use our tech,” Bo agreed. “Helping you develop the system for Ruu tech will give us a good method to try to create a Confederate version.”

“That honors the cause, Bo,” she smiled. “And the cause is just.”

“What are your initial impressions?” Jason asked.

“My initial impression is that what your thesis proposes is definitely possible,” she replied. “An interphasic waveform *could* be designed so that it actively absorbs incoming energy, which would then actively reinforce the structural integrity of the material in which the field resonates. The key is going to be finding a way to infuse it into the armored hull without disrupting the field integrity. We won’t be able to use silicon for this, it will have to be used with an armor-quality material, something with exceptional strength and durability, and that means an alloy. And as you know, when you start using alloys, the chemical makeup of the various metals can wreak havoc with an interphasic resonance field. There will be no “magic harmonic” we can use, it will have to be a compound composite frequency that gets the best result, and that will not be perfectly ideal. We will also have to find a way to isolate the interphasic field so it *only* infuses the armored hull, that it does not bleed into the support bulkheads and struts, which would weaken the armor effect. I theorize that the key to this project will be finding the right interphasic composite frequency to match to the right armor material to create the strongest intended effect.”

“You were definitely the right Ruu to bring into this project, Scientist,” Jason told her with an impressed look.

“If it pleases you, your Grace, you may call me RDX.”

“And you may call me Jason, RDX,” he said with a smile and a nod. “I’m actually not all that big on titles. Just ask anyone who knows me.”

“That’s the truth,” Tom chuckled.

And if it pleases you thus, know that I have talent, if you wish to address me thusly, RDX sent, which was no surprise. Like the Colonists, nearly half of the Ruu exhibited psionic ability, with the vast majority of them being telepaths.

Our companions lack talent, RDX, so I'll most likely be speaking to you most of the time. But I would be quite happy to send to you when it doesn't exclude our companions.

She gave him a slight smile and a nod.

Dera gave him a slight look, one that he fully understood without having to send anything. RDX having talent just made keeping an eye on her a bit more complicated, since she could eavesdrop on the surface thoughts of the others passively...like when they were thinking a whole lot about the CMS. But, given she was a Ruu, it *might* be easier to simply give her access to the CMS specs. He'd have to look into it and discuss it with Miaari and Myri before he made a decision. If Miaari found she could be trusted to keep that tech to herself—or at least within the Ruu—he might be inclined to share it with her.

“Did you find your quarters acceptable, RDX?” Jason asked.

“They are very nearly luxurious, Jason, and the view from my balcony is picturesque,” she answered brightly. “I’ve already taken quite a few holos of it, and last night’s particularly lovely sunset is now the background on my workstation holodisplay.”

“I’m glad you like them,” he said. “Now, you guys can show me around, I haven’t been here since the start of the Titan project. I’m sure you’ve already worked out how you’re converting the buildings.”

“Yup,” Tom said.

“Are those these Titans, Jason?” RDX asked, pointing at one of the gigantic exomechs that loomed over the east building of the complex, one of two Titans standing guard at the facility.

“Yes it is, RDX, we designed and built them to counter the exomechs the Syndicate uses, which are nearly the same size,” he answered. “We keep security at all facilities performing top secret research, so those two mecha are pulling guard duty. We usually wouldn’t use something like *that* for something like standing guard, but the mecha are relatively new. It’s giving the riggers operating them logged hours, some operating time before the war starts.”

“That makes perfect sense,” she nodded. “You want those pilots to feel completely *comfortable* operating the mecha, so they need to use them. They need to use them a *lot*.”

“Precisely,” he agreed. “Now, give me the grand tour, Tom.”

It wasn’t just Titans at the facility. There were Marine guard units stationed throughout the complex, two at every external door and standing at critical intersections in hallways inside while roving patrols roamed the complex grounds, who all snapped to attention and saluted when Jason approached them. There were also two Gladiator and two Juggernaut exomechs stationed around the complex, one of which came into view as they moved from what Tom was setting up as the main research lab to the fabrication building, where the mini-factory was located. The third building was a warehouse, had been a storage building during the Titan project, but Tom was setting up half of its warehouse space as a secondary test facility, something indoors with lots of space for some experiments that wouldn’t fit in the main research lab. The outside pad where the joint frames were would be converted to the large-scale test area, where they’d bring in large segments of armored hull sections and test their work, hull sections too big to fit in the warehouse. “This place is almost perfect, Jayce,” Tom said as they came out of the warehouse, his four guards following behind him. “The facility mainframe is more than enough for everything we’re gonna do, we have lots of space, and the mini-factory is going to make fabricating parts easy. We’ll be able to do some quality work here.”

“That’s all I needed to hear,” Jason said with a smile. “How’s your candidate search going?”

“I finished building the team, mostly out of 3D and MRDD,” he answered. “A couple have to wrap up what they’re doing before they can start over here, though. We should have thirty-two researchers here with ten assisting master machinists and thirty junior machinists. I’m pulling Luke to run the machinist team, he knows how we do things.”

“Luke’s never a bad choice when it comes to building,” Jason chuckled.

“Rook’s bringing ten Rockers to assist with the heavy lifting,” Bo added. “He wants to test them in a construction environment, see how they do.”

“That’s not a bad idea,” Jason agreed.

“What is this Rocker?” RDX asked.

“It’s an android,” Jason answered. “A robot. We built them as robotic drones to assist our ground forces in the war against the Syndicate, but we’re testing them to see how useful they’ll be in non-combat roles. I’d like to do something more with them than just stick them in a warehouse to collect dust after the war is over.”

“Ah. I would venture a guess to say they’d be quite useful in a construction role, they would be inexhaustible laborers.”

“That’s what we’re going to find out,” Bo said.

“What’s the timetable, Tom?” Jason asked.

“We should be set up and ready to go in about two days, but we won’t have everyone here for four, so we’ll be running at full steam in five days,” he replied. “I’ve got all the materials ordered, and we’re already taking deliveries. We have to do a little converting to get the facilities arranged the way we want, but that’ll only take like two days. Hadjha Siyhaa’s coming over tomorrow to set up the mainframe for us, and after she’s done, we’ll be officially on the clock. We’re gonna start the project as soon as she has the mainframe set up, and the late arrivers can just join in as they get here. You’ll need to set up your house computer so it automatically syncs all data from your work with the database here, but I’d still much rather have you *here* with the team.”

“You are working as a researcher on this project, Jason?” RDX asked in surprise.

“I was an engineer long before I was the Grand Duke Karinne, RDX,” he chuckled. “And I was the one that invented the technology that we’ll be using as a base for the armor project. So yes, I’ll be doing some work on the project on my own and sending you my data, at least when I have the time. I have a lot of other work to do, so for me, it’s something of an indulgence, a labor of love I practice as a hobby in what little spare time I have.”

“When you honor the cause, you find it almost impossible to leave it for another position,” RDX said with a smile.

“Believe me, if I could hand my crown to my son and go back to 3D full time, I’d do it in a heartbeat,” he said sincerely.

“Please god no, you’d drive us all completely nuts,” Bo protested, and Jason laughed when Tom slapped him on the back of the head.

“Yeah, you should be ready for that, RDX. The scientists of 3D aren’t very...formal,” Jason said lightly. “We’re a pretty rough and tumble bunch, and we’ll seem quite immature and maybe a little unprofessional to you, but don’t doubt for a second that they’re very good at what they do.”

“Quite the contrary, Jason, you have never seen Ruu scientists when not in the lab,” she replied with a smile. “Sometimes a good prank breaks up the monotony and brings a little levity into things, and that is healthy for everyone.”

“I knew there was a good reason to like the Ruu,” Bo said with a grin.

“Well, you’re gonna see a lot of it,” Jason predicted. “And be warned. If you prank someone, they *will* retaliate, and their retaliation will be very creative. You’re dealing with some of the most underhanded, sneaky, ruthless, devious, diabolical jackwagons in the galaxy here, RDX. Fiendishness is a job requirement in 3D.”

“I look forward to seeing it applied,” RDX laughed.

“You have been warned,” Jason said in a voice of doom that made both Tom and Bo explode into laughter.

He left them to start getting things organized, boarding the frigate and heading up to Kosigi, but having it take its time getting there since he was going to be early. While going to see Tom had been important, it wasn’t the real reason he’d left his family at the stadium, it was so he could extricate himself from them in a place and at a time that would make it easy. It would have been much harder to disentangle himself from his wife and *amu* back at home, so he made sure he was removed from that temptation before it became one. The command staff was meeting on Kosigi, and this was an *important* meeting. The Syndicate would be arriving in their galaxy in 20 days, and they were having a meeting about preparation and readiness with the full command staff, about operations both with the CCM and unilateral missions and operations...and the Karinnes wouldn’t be the only ones conducting their own operations outside of the CCM. They were holding it

on Kosigi because part of the meeting was going to be visually inspecting KMS assets, so they could *see* just how ready they were for this war.

Jason was there both as the Grand Duke Karinne and as the representative from 3D. He knew what they were going to be doing in the opening days of the war, what plans they had, and he'd be passing them along to the planners so they could take them into account. They would also be officially firing the first shot in this war, as it would be a 3D toy attack that would be the opening salvo. 3D would be both operating with the KMS and CCM as a military force and doing their own thing whenever and wherever they saw an opportunity, and they weren't going to be waiting around for someone to give them permission to do what they were doing. Myri and Lorna wouldn't care about that one bit, but some of the stuffier planners in the CCM's command staff would have issue with a rogue unit like 3D just running around willy-nilly doing whatever they pleased. Those commanders were from the civilizations that weren't used to the kind of asymmetrical warfare in which 3D specialized. Past experience proved that when 3D operated as a conventional military force, it failed. But when they were allowed to do what they did best, strike in windows of opportunity and attack in just about every way except what the enemy would see coming, 3D was one of the most dangerous organizations an enemy might face.

3D did not fight fair. In fact, 3D was infamously notorious for just how outrageously they cheated. 3D was the kind of organization that would kick you in the balls after stabbing you in the back, and they managed to get behind you because they threw sand in your eyes. And that was what made them so dangerous. 3D didn't believe in the nobility of a fair fight, of honor and chivalry and noble combat. 3D believed in slitting your throat while you were looking at the pretty birdie.

And they weren't going to be alone in that fight. Seeing the success of 3D, several other empires had started up or significantly beefed up shadowy pseudo-military organizations that would fight the wars off the battlefields while the militaries fought on them. The Alliance had formed a unit of Beryan special ops specialists to do the dirty stuff, for example. The Imperium had had their own asymmetrical warfare unit headed by Myleena before she came to the house, a division of Black Ops called the Skulkers that specialized in waging or defending against asymmetrical warfare like sabotage and guerilla attacks, which was one reason why she was sent to

Terra to stop Jason. Dahnai had significantly increased the staff and budget of the Skulkers over the last few years. The Republic, the Empire, the Colonies, the Federation, the Collective, and the Rathii had all started their own 3D-style organizations after seeing 3D's success. Those old members of the Confederation had seen what 3D could do from up close and personal, and they knew a smart thing when they saw it.

It was easy for many to forget that while 3D was one of the most successful scientific and technological research organizations, responsible for many important technological breakthroughs, its primary focus was to use the technology they invented for *war*. They were created from the remains of the Legion, who had used the creative application of technology to fight a guerilla war against the Trillanes, and that was still who and what they were at their core. The scientists like Eraen, Siyhaa, and Emia stood shoulder to shoulder with the fighters like Maggie, Bo, Leamon, Jenny, Tom, Luke, Mike, Temika, and the rest of the survivors of the original Legion. Yes, the Legion fighters were some impressive scientists in their own right, trained by Myleena in the arts of engineering, but they were *fighting* scientists.

The *Taskara* landed on the central core of Kosigi and extended its ramp, and the armor-clad Jason Karinne strode down it and towards his war staff, Myri, Juma, Sioa, and Navii, with his four guards following him. Like him, they were all in armor, as were everyone else. The KMS was now officially on a wartime footing, and there would be no more duty uniforms as the uniform of the day. From now until the defeat of the Syndicate, it would be Crusader armor for everyone on duty, no exceptions. Most of the KMS would be all but living in their armor for the next several months.

"Myri," he greeted, then kissed him on the cheek. "We about ready?"

"The command staff is gathered in the main conference room," she replied. "As are the captains of all flagship-level vessels and the command staff of all four armies and the reserve militia."

"That's quite a crowd," Jason mused.

"Nearly a hundred," Juma affirmed.

"Well, let's not keep them waiting," he said, offering his arm to Navii, who smiled and took it.

Jason entered the conference room, and its occupants stood at attention until he reached the table. “Be seated,” he said, and they did so. “As all of you know, this is the initial overview briefing for our upcoming operations against the Syndicate, both attached to the CCM and for independent action. The chiefs of staff will be presenting our strategy for the upcoming war, and afterwards, we’ll discuss it.”

And that took the better part of three hours. Jason already knew everything Myri, Juma, and Sioa revealed as they stood at the podium in the conference room and explained their overall strategy when operating outside of the CCM, which would primarily be to attack any small Syndicate fleets that broke away from the main force and attempt to capture one of their moon-sized super-ships, so Jason didn’t pay super-close attention. He then took Juma’s place on the podium after she explained the general tactics the Navy would use and explained 3D’s role in the upcoming war, something that his military already understood. When he was finished, Sioa presented the ground forces overview, how the Karinne Army would handle dealing with an enemy force that no doubt had hundreds of species in it that had widely varied capabilities, as well as the Benga, who would be formidable both for their size and for their telepaths. She also went over planetary defense, activation schedules for Karinne guard and civilian militia units to fill the gaps created by the shift of army resources offworld, which were sizable. Over half of the lay civilian population of Karis was a member of the guard or militia, and some of them had some pretty in-depth training. He had *civilians* rated to pilot Wolf fighters and exomechs, so they’d be a damn effective defense in case Karis was attacked. They’d proven that in the prior two attacks on Karis by the Consortium.

Then Miaari made her entrance. She went over everything they knew about the Syndicate from an intelligence point of view, from the structure of their government to their military to their technology, which was on the average inferior compared to the Consortium, and roughly equal to the Confederation.

And it was to Miaari that the most curious question was directed, from the commander of the 2nd Army, Hilia Karinne. “If they’re technologically inferior to the Consortium, and the Consortium had beings that could see all Syndicate ship movements in real time, how did they *lose* that war?”

“That is the most important question, and one which we cannot answer yet. The Consortium did not know how the Syndicate was managing to defeat them despite them winning the majority of battles they fought against them. Analysis of the records we stole from the Consortium show that while they won more battles against the Syndicate, the Syndicate won every single *important* battle. The battles for the most important star systems, the battles that did the most damage to Consortium operational capabilities, those battles the Syndicate won virtually every single time. The swiftness with which they began to push into Consortium territory increased dramatically once the Syndicate developed diffuser technology, but they were winning the war even before then, just at a much slower and much bloodier pace. It is indeed a highly curious pattern, almost as if the Syndicate *knew* which battles they had to win in order to defeat the Consortium in the war. In the smaller skirmishes and battles that had little strategic value in the long run, the Syndicate would often just abandon their engaged forces to fate, but when it was a major battle over a critical objective, the Syndicate always had numerical superiority and brought in their largest ships.”

“And we’ve taken that into account in our own planning,” Navii called. “Miaari’s already pointed this out to us, and we’ll be ready for it if we see this kind of behavior in them. If they don’t send reinforcements to a fight, we’ll notice it. But if they suddenly heavily reinforce their fleets, or they devote a significant portion of their fleet to an attack, then we know that *they* believe that the battle is a critical one, and we will respond in kind. The more they commit to a battle, the more we will commit in return. If they deem a battle that important to win, however it is they determine these things, the KMS will ensure that any victories they achieve will be as costly as possible.”

“Remember that our overall strategy for the Syndicate is effectively the same as our war against the Consortium,” Myri called. “The Syndicate may have a massive fleet, but that fleet is operating in *hostile* territory. They have no reinforcements, no bases where they can drydock ships for repairs, no easy means of resupply. Our entire strategy revolves around dealing as much damage as possible to their fleet, to their ships. Attrition, attrition, attrition,” she chanted. “And as Admiral Navii said, when we see them willing to devote significant portions of their very limited resources, we

will respond to it. We give them no easy victories. This is our side of the batchi pitch, so if they're going to score a goal, we're going to beat their strikers senseless before they get in position to take the shot."

"And that's what we're for," Jason continued. "3D's role in this battle plan is to wear down the Syndicate fleet, both physically and psychologically. We will attack them relentlessly, constantly, where the attacks might be small, but they never allow the Syndicate to relax for a single second. They don't have the discipline of the Consortium bugs, so that kind of terror tactic is going to be much more effective against them. And they may not take into account the fact that they can't hide from us, and they can't build any defenses that can keep us out. They have no safety here, and we will drive that point home every second of every minute of every day that that fleet remains in our galaxy."

"Can 3D be effective against moon-sized ships?" someone asked.

"We've had two years to plan for this," he said with a dark, evil smile that made several people chuckle. "Yes, we have a few ideas that will even make the captains of those super-ships constantly look over their shoulders. We've developed several new toys just for the Syndicate, and they'll be playing with them very soon."

"The size of those ships can also be their weakness," Navii injected. "Imagine, if you would, if a sizable hostile force boarded the ship. Yes, there would be tens of thousands of defenders to battle them, but in a ship that big, that massive, that hostile force could *easily* hold out against the defenders for a very long time, so long as they are well organized, well equipped and well supplied for a protracted siege, and well trained to *know* the ship they are invading. If the invaders could secure a foothold inside the ship, it would effectively remove that ship from the Syndicate fleet. They could not send a ship occupied by a hostile force into a battle, the risk would be too great, especially if the invading force captured assets that would make the ship a threat to its own, such as weapon batteries, munitions stockpiles, power generation units, or computer control nodes. In that scenario, two or three thousand Marines could conceivably remove one of their super-ships from the battle plan without the need for the Navy to destroy it."

Several of the command staff took on thoughtful looks, and a few of them nodded in agreement.

“Thanks to the Kimdori, we’ll have detailed scans of those ships by the time they get here, including their layouts,” Jason said with a dark smile. “So when we do invade one of their ships with boarders, those boarders will know *everything* they need to know about that ship. The Marines will know which datalines to cut to disable automated security and cameras, which intersections to take over to gain tactical control of a ship section, which power conduits to break to interrupt power to sections of the ship they don’t control, and where the important ship sections and controls are that contain the critical infrastructure a ship that big needs to operate, to establish that foothold and pose a viable threat to the rest of the ship. And that also brings us to one of the major objectives of the KMS in this war. We will isolate, board, and *capture* one of those super-ships,” he declared.

“The Kimdori will already *be* on those ships by that time,” Miaari added. “We have infiltrators ready to invade the Syndicate fleet, so they may conduct espionage and observation. And as Navii pointed out, the sheer size of those ships will make it comparatively *easy* for those infiltrators to gain access to the ships. When a ship is the size of a moon, the Kimdori infiltrator will undoubtedly find an access airlock and manage to get inside before their internal security can respond. The ship is simply too big for them to guard *everything*.”

“The bigger something is, the easier it is for something *small* to get inside it undetected,” Jason said, to which Miaari nodded knowingly.

“Spiders,” someone blurted.

“That’s one of our plans in 3D, yes,” Jason affirmed. “We’ll see how well those super-ships run when there’s a few billion spiders inside it wreaking havoc with their power and computer systems. We’ll tackle moon-sized ships with microscopic robots, and we have a feeling that the microscopic robots are going to win that fight,” he added with a chuckle.

“That’s more or less what the KMS will be doing outside of the CCM,” Myri stated. “Within the CCM, we’ll be doing what we’ve been doing. Our flag-level ships will be functioning as the flagship in any task force, the battleships will be serving as the flag within the squadrons making up the

fleet when a command ship is present. Our smaller ships will be interspersed into the fleets to do what they do best, kill enemy ships, and 3D will be providing both strategic and tactical support via their weapons, toys, and gadgets to assist in the battle plan. In ground operations, the Karinne Army will be more or less the center of the formation due to our Titans, Juggernauts, Gladiators, and individual infantry soldiers in Crusader armor, with Faey units backing up Imperial Marine units, interspersed into the army units of other species to provide telepathic defense against Benga mindstrikers. The Imperial Marines will mainly be executing that role, but when there aren't enough Marine companies to provide full protection, Karinne Army and Marine units will be pulled to perform that task. Lorna's put together a solid battle plan that utilizes *everyone's* ships and ground forces to maximum effect, exploiting the known weaknesses of the Syndicate forces that the Kimdori discovered for us, and while we're operating in CCM task forces, we'll be following it."

"Indeed," Navii agreed. "She truly understands the strengths and weaknesses of the ships that make up the CCM fleet, and she knows how to deploy them with the greatest effectiveness."

That got a rumble of assent. *Everyone* in that room respected Lorna's abilities. She had proved herself many times over as the most effective commander the CCM had.

That reminded Jason to get with Aya about the summit being held on Terra just before the Syndicate arrived, where no doubt the rulers would be in a conference just like this listening to Lorna explain the CCM battle plan to them...or *try*. Most rulers weren't very good strategists, so Jason hoped that she didn't try to explain everything. If he had his way, he'd only let Lorna brief those rulers with a clue about military strategy and tactics, like Grran, Shakizarr, and Mejik To of the Dardrik. Now those three, they would fully understand and appreciate Lorna's briefing. Everyone else needed to just put their dicks back in their underwear and let the military specialists do their jobs without them thinking they knew better.

That was an idea. Jason was of a mind to invite a few of the more enlightened rulers when it came to military operations to a private dinner... that Lorna would just *happen* to be attending. Lorna was Jyslin's aunt, after all, so it wouldn't be a stretch that she'd have dinner with her family while

they were on Terra. That would give her a chance to be more detailed and give those rulers the chance to ask questions without riling up the rest of the council.

“I’d say we’ve covered just about everything,” Myri said. “Does anyone have any questions?”

There were a few questions, mainly from the ship captains concerning CCM operations, that Jason didn’t pay much attention to since they were mainly procedural. Once that was wrapped up, Myri stood up. “Alright, we’re finished here. Everyone return to your ships or your headquarters and continue preparations. Troop transport and ship deployment schedules are already posted, and I don’t think they’re going to change. Palla, Haema, Salira, we have a cruiser standing by to return you to your ships at Terra.”

Jason rejoined his guards, and they escorted him in the direction of the landing pad where the *Taskara* was still sitting, waiting for him. *How did it go?* Mai asked him.

That’s not the meeting that concerns me, he answered. *I’m more worried about the final council summit on Terra.*

Why is that?

I have this bad feeling that some ruler is going to suddenly decide that he knows better than the command staff, he answered. *There’s a whole lot of silly arrogant pride that’s gonna be sitting in that room.*

I have a slightly different one, Jason. Have they decided who is going to be handling negotiations with the Syndicate commander? Ryn asked. *The entire council can’t do it. Someone has to speak for the council.*

He glanced at her. *They wisely deferred that duty to Lorna and the CCM. They felt that it would be best if it was a negotiation between military officers, given the Syndicate invasion fleet is a military operation. I can live with that, since it would give the Syndicate the idea that they’re worth more than they actually are if a member of the council was the one that conducted the initial negotiation. One of the CCM command staff with a lot of experience in diplomacy can get the point across much better than just about anyone in the council can.*

That point being?

Turn around and go home or die, he replied pugnaciously. *It holds much more weight when it's a military commander that says it than a politician.*

Ryn nodded as they approached the *Taskara*, coming out of the main administration building on the core and approaching the landing pad, which had been enlarged to allow frigates to easily land. The ship and its crew got him back down to Karis in barely half an hour, landing at the summer palace and waiting for him as he got off the ship alone. The “party” was still in full swing, with Dahnai hosting the Highborn Grand Duchesses, Jyslin, Symone and Tim, and their kids. Dahnai had again found a reason to bring Saelle and her younger kids along—she almost never went anywhere without Saelle anymore—all of them gathered around a table set out on the pool deck, and dressed in typical pool attire...none. The only clothing represented in the whole gathering was the bikini bottoms that Semoya Dorrane had on, at least that Jason could see. She'd brought the Highborns over after the game to discuss the Syndicate, something no doubt going on in every government in the Confederation...just probably much more clothed. The only reason Jason was there was to pick up Jyslin, Tim and Symone, and the kids. His wife and *amu dozei* were ignoring the conference of Highborns and playing in the pool with Sirri, Rann, and Shya, while the toddlers were being carefully watched as they played in a sandbox not far from the pool deck.

“Aren't you a little overdressed, Jason?” Carissa asked him.

Jason rapped his armored knuckles on his breastplate. “This is war, Carissa, and I'm not just the Grand Duke of the house on paper. When the time comes, I'll be fighting right alongside the soldiers of the house, in my own way. Besides, I *need* armor to be around this lot without cameras around,” he added, which made most of them laugh. “You ladies made any progress?”

“We're not discussing things that *need* progress,” Emae replied. “We're just discussing the possible consequences to the Imperium after the war. How things might change within the Imperium and within the Confederation.”

“I'm sure it's something you've discussed with your advisors,” Semoya added.

“Things are a bit less complicated for us.”

“Don’t be so patronizing, Jason,” Ardalla Koyanne said bluntly.

“What? I’m not being patronizing, Ardalla,” he protested. “It’s the truth. We try to keep ourselves as much out of the business of others as possible. When the war’s over, we go right back to what we were doing before all this shit started.”

“And what is that, Jason?” Semoya asked lightly.

“None of your business,” he replied in a voice that made her laugh. “We don’t get in your business, you don’t get in ours. That way, we’re both happy.”

“I did want to ask something,” Jiiva Ivanne, the oldest member of the Highborns, spoke up. “Are you pulling the bridges out of Imperium territory for the war? Being able to route cargo around Draconis has made things much more efficient.”

“You’re just happy to avoid the Stargate usage fees, Jiiva,” Dahnai accused.

“We’re still paying fees, Dahnai,” she returned. “Just not to *only* you.”

“No, we don’t have any plans to pull the bridges out of Imperium territory,” Jason told her. “We have bridges already built and set aside for the military operation.” He chuckled. “You should have seen some of the faces of the others in the council when Dahnai added the Imperium into the bridge placement schedule. They couldn’t understand why you’d *want* them.”

“Because Stargates are too expensive to link systems anywhere but to a central hub,” Anya said simply. “The bridges let the systems directly connect to each other, and that has cut way down on the traffic around Draconis and sped up cargo deliveries to all my house operations, since we can ship cargo directly to the destination now.”

“Much as I miss the revenue, I do have to admit, it’s really cut down on the congestion and cargo bottleneck problems around Draconis,” Dahnai said ruefully. “And the Stargates do still see enough use to justify keeping them running.”

“And how much of your house Navies are you committing to the CCM?” Jason asked abruptly.

“Only about a quarter,” Dahnai answered. “We’ll be relying on the house navies to provide defense of the Imperium while the INS and selected elite house assets are engaged with the Syndicate. Each house will be guarding its territory and contributing to a coalition of reserve house forces at Draconis for rapid response to any threatened system, and that should be enough to dissuade the Syndicate from attacking Imperial territory. Given we build the Stargates, we present the most tempting target for invasion.”

“We should have more than enough fleet held back in our home territory to discourage any attack, and the combined house assets at Draconis combined with the planetary defense systems the Karinnes helped us develop should be more than enough to repel anything but them sending their entire fleet at us,” Emae said. “That’s providing the Syndicate finds a way past the interdictors, the way the Hrathrari did.”

“We’ll have the detailed analysis of the Syndicate ships in a few days, once the Kimdori finish the scans,” Jason told them. “Then we’ll know if they can. It takes a *low-tech* approach to get past the interdictors, old fashioned FTL tech, and we just don’t know yet if the Syndicate engines are capable of FTL. Until then, we assume that they can, and plan accordingly.”

“Always the wise thing to do,” Jiiva nodded.

“You’re not afraid they’ll find a way to jump through the interdictors?” Carissa asked.

“They *can*’t,” he replied, almost smugly. “We know enough about their tech to know that they simply can’t do it. Excuse me if I don’t explain *how* we know that, but we do. They could theoretically jump outbound the way everyone else can, but they can’t jump *in*.”

“And that’s the most important direction, at least from our point of view,” Dahnai chuckled.

“I do hope that the CCM intends to use the interdictors offensively, the way they did against the Consortium?” Emae asked.

“Of course they are,” Jason smiled. “If we see an opportunity where we can trap their fleet behind interdiction, we’ll jump all over it.”

“You’ll have one, when the Syndicate fleet first arrives,” Carissa reasoned, then she laughed at Jason’s evil smile. “But of course you’ve already thought of that.”

“We have a plan,” he said lightly. “In fact, it’s already been deployed. With the fleet inbound, we calculated their route, and we set up an armada of interdictors in a formation so that the only way they can jump out is to go back the way they came, and we can close the neck of the bottle with fifteen interdictors. That’ll make them travel for *months* to get back to where they can jump.”

“That must have taken a lot of interdictors,” Semoya mused.

“Three hundred and fifty-three,” Jason nodded. “It encloses a volume of about fifteen cubic parsecs inside an interdiction envelope, as it were, with Kimdori SCM satellites arrayed so their sensors won’t detect the interdiction as they come inbound and drop out of space before entering the bottleneck, or when they’re inside the trap. They won’t find out about the interdiction until they try to jump through it, and by then it’ll be too late. They can jump around *inside* their prison as much as they want, but they’ll be looking at a very long trip to get *out*. And with the negotiation, it actually helps us more by stalling them, giving the interdictors forming the gate of the cage trap time to expand in logarithmic mode, where every second that goes by will mean *days* of extra travel time to get out. So, even if the negotiations fail, they still serve a valuable purpose by holding the Syndicate inside the trap as long as possible before they realize it *is* a trap. And once we have them trapped inside, we can start pounding them with 3D toys from a position of relative safety for our forces.”

“That’s wickedly cunning, Jason,” Marae Enalle said with an impressed smile.

“Thank you, that’s what we’re here for,” he replied easily. “Being jackasses is what we do in 3D.”

That made nearly everyone at the table laugh except for Haela Trillane, who was the new Grand Duchess after Maeri was forced to abdicate in disgrace. Haela was a bit of a surprise appointment, the youngest daughter of Maeri’s youngest sister who had been 14th in line for the house throne, which bypassed Maeri’s own siblings and daughters. But the simple fact of

the matter was, after the giant hole Maeri and her branch of the Trillane family had dug for the House Trillane, it was decided by the entire Trillane family that a fresh face with no connection to Maeri should be put on the throne to try to get the house back into the good graces of the *Siann*. Haela had absolutely nothing to do with anything Trillane had done since the whole Terra debacle, since she'd been in school on Makan at the time. Maeri's two sisters, three brothers, and her four daughters and two sons had all been part of the house's system when the Trillanes tried to break away from the Imperium, so that made them all potentially toxic. Haela was really the only choice, as the only Trillane princess that had nothing to do with that disaster yet had the intelligence and skill to perform as the Grand Duchess. She was very young, only 31 years old and only just graduated from the Makan Academy last year, and Jason could admit that she was kinda cute. But her family had a hell of a lot to answer for...and he supposed that was why she was now sitting on the house throne.

And he could admit, she'd done fairly well over the last seven months that she'd been the Grand Duchess. Her first—and wisest—act was to make peace with the Urumi, fully understanding that the tenacity of the Brood Queen when it came to pursuing a blood debt was something she would be insane to dismiss or ignore. She had settled that account quickly and with some honest humility, fully satisfying the Urumi's outrage with reparations and penance, to the point where the Brood Queen considered the matter with the Trillanes to be settled business. Haela was now working to restore the honor of the Trillanes within the Imperium, but that would be a long road to walk...but she fully understood that. It would be *years* before Dahnai trusted the Trillanes again, but Haela was doing what she needed to do to regain that trust.

The very fact that she was sitting at that table at all was progress.

“Now, if you ladies will excuse me, I'm going to do what I came here to do. Fetch my family,” Jason told them, glancing in the direction where Jyslin and Symone were playing with the kids, and Tim was standing by the pool, whispering in the ear of one of Dahnai's servants. “And get Tim home before he gets too...distracted to leave.”

All the Grand Duchesses laughed at that. “He certainly is vigorous,” Emae noted wickedly.

Jason gave her a look. “Not you too!”

“Hey, he’s cute, and he certainly has some impressive equipment hanging between his legs,” she said with a smirk. “And I wanted to see how much of his talk was just talk.”

“And what’s the prognosis, Emae?” Semoya asked.

“He can back up his boasting,” she answered, which made most of the table giggle like schoolgirls.

Jason sighed in exasperation, which made Emae burst into laughter.

“Somedays I think I should have him neutered,” Jason complained.

“He’s a man doing what a man does, Jason. At least what Faey women want a man to do,” Emae said with a sly smile. “I wish my husband was more like Tim. His wildness is almost intoxicating.”

“Meh,” Jason grunted, which made them all laugh brightly. “I’ll talk to you ladies later.”

“Have a safe trip, babes,” Dahnai said, then they laughed again.

Let’s go, guys, we’re going home, Jason sent openly across the pool deck. *I’ll go get the babies and get them on the ship.*

Aww, we’re having fun! Sirri protested.

Well then, come back with us and spend the night on the strip, silly girl, Jyslin chided. *I don’t think Dahnai will mind.*

No I won’t. If you want to spend more time with your sister and her husband, I’m fine with it, Sirri. Just make sure you’re back at the palace in the morning. We have some important things to do before we go back to Draconis tomorrow.

And with that, they had an extra passenger when Jason rounded up the kids and helped Dahnai’s nannies get them on the frigate, keeping them in the entry bay for the belly boarding ramp into which the boarding ramp opened. On a frigate, there really wasn’t anywhere else to put them except the landing bay, and they wouldn’t be entering that on foot unless they were making a water landing. When docking to a wharf while in the water, the landing bay doubled as the entry bay for foot traffic via the extending

docking ramp. For ground landings, people boarded using the ramp that lowered from the belly of the ship. Sirri hadn't bothered putting anything on, just throwing a towel over her shoulders, sitting beside Shya in a row of seats along the wall bare-ass naked for the 20-minute trip back to the strip. Jason was almost relieved to get home, to go up to the room and get out of his armor and come back down wearing nothing but a pair of shorts, showing off a body that he'd worked very hard to get back into shape over the last year or so. He came out onto the deck to see that Sirri and the kids had replaced the pool with the ocean, splashing and playing in the breaking waves with guards watching them casually, including a Gladiator standing at each end of the beach, just inside the fence, with an Imperial Guard inside serving as the rigger. Aya had gone to full wartime security mode, and that included exomechs present on the strip to provide additional protection. Tim was over in the house, putting Terry back down in his crib after the trip over, and Symone had Jyslin all but pinned against the picnic table, her hands glued to Jyslin's butt and rubbing her breasts all over Jyslin's chest as she kissed and nibbled at her neck, trying to get Jyslin's motor running. *C'mon baby, let's go upstairs*, Symone purred at her, her thought absolutely charged with sexual desire. *Just you and me, sexy beast, doing all the things we love to do when we're alone.*

It was almost impossible for Jyslin to resist when Symone was doing *that*, so she took Symone's hand and dragged her towards Symone's deck door, then ended up being dragged inside herself when they got there. Jason just had to chuckle and marvel at how much Symone was never going to change. The woman had a one-track mind...which, he supposed, was a part of her charm. And it said a lot about the *amu* bond between them that Jyslin was so comfortable with the relationship she had with Symone, yet she had absolutely no attraction to any other woman. Jyslin would even carry on with Symone on in public now, though she drew the line at doing anything blatantly *sexual* in public spaces...which the deck was *not*, but Jyslin must be looking for something horizontal for what she had in mind. Jyslin would be a little frisky in the open areas of the strip, but she wouldn't act like that outside the strip, outside of what she considered to be intimate personal space for her, her family, and her closest friends. But then again, she wouldn't carry on in public spaces with Jason or Tim either, it had nothing to do with her relationship with her *amu dozei*. She was a girl that preferred to do her conquering behind a closed door, and she wasn't alone. Though

Faey had a very open society when it came to sexual behavior, with there being no laws against having sex in public and sex and sexual innuendo being laced into nearly every aspect of Faey culture and society, even *children's shows*, many individual Faey preferred to have sex in private. It was the Faey version of modesty, and those who were like that were considered modest, reserved people. Dahnai was another of those kinds of Faey. She was as hot-blooded as any Faey woman—actually, she was *way* more hot-blooded than most Faey women—but she was almost adamantly insistent that she had sex in private and *without* the guards present. It was the one thing she felt she had the right to do without having an audience, and she jealously guarded that hard-won conciliation from her guards.

A far cry from Dahnai's mother, who was best known for having sex on her throne in front of the entire *Siann* during open court and for her monthly “new moon parties,” which were nothing more than orgies attended by the nobles of the *Siann*. That Dahnai would be so different from her mother was actually rather surprising...but then again, Dahnai wasn't really raised by her mother, she was raised by her foster mother.

But at least they weren't Sha'i-ree, he supposed with a wry smile. Sha'i-ree could even make a Faey woman blush.

Jason decided to blow off paperwork and relax on the beach with a growing number of kids, who were coming out to hang out with Sirri when they realized she was here. Sirri was *very* popular among the older kids on the strip, was friends with everyone and loved the freedom that came with being on Karis, loved having the chance to be the 12-year-old girl that she was. Which, in Faey society, meant playing sports, hanging out with her friends, and talking about boys. Sirri hadn't started puberty yet, but boys were already on her mind. And that was an indication that puberty was right around the corner for her. Jason more or less ignored the boy talk as he played catch with Rann and Danelle, tossing a baseball back and forth as they talked about a project they had to do for art class. It was nice to hear something so mundane after the last few days, filled with dreadfully important conferences and meetings and reports, and further reinforced in his mind just what they were fighting for.

Family. Freedom. Home. Happiness.

Unfortunately for him, what Jyslin was doing in private with Symone wasn't as personal or as private as it would have been if they were Terran. Jason was getting an awful lot of sense of them—that was common when they had their ardor up, it bled through the bonds they shared with each other even if they weren't actively sending—and that was a touch distracting to him, to the point where he completely missed Rann throwing the ball back to him, and consequently took a baseball to the left cheek. Rann had a pretty strong arm despite being so young, so he *felt* that hit, and the dull *crack* he heard echo in his ear told him that it had done more damage than just giving him a bruise. He'd heard that sound once before, when he fractured the orbital socket of his right eye in high school during a football game. He'd made an interception, got hit hard enough to knock his helmet off and was hit again right in the head by an offensive lineman. It had broken the orbital bone and given him a concussion, and he'd been out for nearly four months and missed the rest of the season. Just about all activity on the beach stopped as the guards rushed towards him, him leaning over with both hands over his profusely bleeding nose.

Songa! Mai's sending boomed across the strip. We have an emergency! Jason's injured!

It's not an emergency, you worry warts, Jason chided, but he could feel the blood just pouring out of his nose.

Are you okay, Dad? Rann asked, anguish laced through this thought.

Just a bloody nose, pips, and it was my fault, so don't you kick yourself. I wasn't paying attention, and got what I deserved, he replied reassuringly. *You're getting some velocity behind the ball, I'm impressed. So is my nose.*

Rann laughed nervously.

Despite Jason reassuring everyone that he was just fine, Songa wasn't quite so casual. She took one look at his face and immediately had him hustled into an ambulance and rushed to the annex, then he spent nearly an hour in the chair in Songa's private exam room while Songa repaired a broken cheekbone and nasal cavity, which was why his nose was bleeding so badly. And that was the beauty of Faey medicine, she could fix in an hour what would have taken months to heal naturally. But it wasn't *entirely* pleasant. Having bone repaired by a bone fuser was not fun for the patient,

and effectively having his skull repaired made it even more uncomfortable, to the point where Songa put him out when it came time to repair his nasal cavity.

Really, dear, can you do anything without needing me to be nearby? Songa chided after she turned off the sleep inducer and woke him up, making him hold still as she used a probe she literally had stuck up his nose. It wasn't a pleasant feeling, that was for sure.

Accidents happen, silly, he told her.

Oh really? I should give you a full exam to find out how you could miss something like a baseball coming right at your nose.

Blame Jys and Symone for that, he sent dryly. *They can be very distracting.*

Songa looked down at him, then burst out laughing. *I take it they were upstairs?*

Yup, he answered evenly.

Then you should know better than to do anything potentially dangerous with them distracting you, dear, she winked.

Playing catch with Rann wasn't that dangerous until a couple of months ago, when he decided to start practicing to play organized baseball. His arm is really developing, Jason sent, pride staining his thought. *He wants to play in junior little league next year, when he's old enough, so he's been practicing.*

I'm sure he'll enjoy it, she replied as all five CBIMs and Coma manifested in the room. "He's almost done, ladies, Cylan," she told them. "The bone's repaired, and I'm sealing up the damaged flesh and tissue now."

"That's good to hear, doctor," Cybi answered. *"Perhaps this is a good time to talk about the spider project."*

"I'm against using the Grand Duke as a test subject," Songa replied.

"What project? The medical nanites?" Jason asked.

“Yes, dear,” she answered, and Jason had to resist the urge to sneeze when the probe irritated his nasal passage. “We’re in the final phase of testing of permanent medical spiders, DNA-matched to the recipient so the body’s immune system doesn’t attack them. If you’d have had the spiders in your bloodstream, they could have stopped the bleeding within two minutes of your injury. We hope to have fully tested medical spiders in use by the start of the war and injected into our Naval and Army personnel. They could save quite a few lives by acting as immediate medical response to traumatic injury.”

“That sounds promising,” Jason said. “So, they’re not like the spiders you use for surgery?”

“No, dear, they stay in your body at all times, and can self-repair, even issue an order for more spiders to be built for the host as needed to maintain their numbers,” she answered. “They’re controlled by the interface or gestalt and run on broadcast power. So far, the testing has been very promising, since they’re keeping their hosts in perfect physical health beyond responding to injury.”

“That almost sounds like too much of a good thing, dear,” Jason noted. “If the spiders are in there killing all the microbes, the host body won’t learn how to repel them on their own.”

“That’s why they *don’t* do that,” Songa told him. “They only actively augment the body’s immune system when an infection exceeds the health-threatening microbial count, for that very reason. But they do many small things that keep a host’s body in peak physical condition while they observe and monitor the body and its systems looking for malignant conditions and anomalies. The spiders don’t just stay dormant until an injury happens, they’re quite busy helping the host’s body in its day to day processes, *without* interfering with them. If the host body became dependent on the spiders, it could be deadly if they’re removed or stop working.”

“I’m glad you saw that trap and didn’t walk into it,” Jason told her. “And hurry up, I need to sneeze *so* bad.”

Songa laughed softly. “Just another few seconds, dear,” she promised. And true to her word, she withdrew the probe a short moment later, which gave Jason the freedom to sneeze several times.

“That sounds like the spiders we use,” Jason mused. “They do repairs and maintenance from the inside.”

“We consulted a great deal with both Rook and Myleena as we developed the medical spiders,” Songa nodded.

“Sounds pretty cool, dear. Send me a report, now I’m curious.”

“Certainly. And you’re done, dear. Go straight to the cafeteria and eat the meal I’m ordering for you, drink at least four glasses of water, then we’re both free to go home.”

“Sure thing, doc, I was hungry before I got beaned,” he said as he stood up.

Songa stayed in her office to do some paperwork, waiting for Jason to finish his medically prescribed meal, then she rode back with him on the corvette that came to pick him up. He returned to the beach about three hours after the beaning, enduring a fair amount of teasing from the girls, to the point where he chased Sheleese down the beach with a batchi stick when she wouldn’t give over on it.

After things calmed down, and after dinner, Jason had a very relaxing evening that was almost Terran in its domesticity; standing at the rail with Tim, Mike, and Luke, the four Terran men on the strip, drinking beer and talking about work and sports. The four of them were something of a small minority, nearly a fraternity on the strip, with the only other men living on the strip permanently being Vell and Surin. And that, in a way, seemed curious to Jason, that none of the single girls on the strip had married, even though they had plenty of boyfriends to chase down and wring a commitment out of them. Meya seemed the most likely candidate given how much she dated Jenn—he practically lived in her house—but none of the other available girls seemed inclined to marriage. They certainly had their share of men, it was almost a joke among the guards about the constant stream of handsome young men coming in and out of the gate leading outside, but not one of them had married since moving to the strip.

A few of them, Jason could sort of understand...Yana, Aura, and Zora. Yana still had her crush on Jason, and that prevented her from *seriously* looking for a husband. Aura was, in her own way, still trying to come to terms over the loss of her husband years ago and wasn’t ready yet for

another lifetime commitment. Yana, like Aura, was perfectly content with the current arrangement where Jason was an on-again, off-again boyfriend of sorts, there when they needed attention and affection and keeping his distance when they didn't. Zora was still stinging from her divorce, and Jason doubted that she'd seriously think about finding another husband for a couple more years. Myri and Myra were too involved in their jobs, Myleena even more so, Kumi was too wild to ever marry, and he'd pity the man that was dumb enough to marry her. Lyn and Bryn were too wrapped up in their twin bond to let a man in...and if they ever did, they'd both marry the same man (which was legal for identical twins in Faey society). Maya was already married, obviously, so she didn't count. But Min, Sheleese, and Ilia, they *should* have been married by now. Despite being the dominant sex in their society, the primary instinctive goal of just about any Faey woman was to form a pair bond, to marry.

Four Terran men living in a Faey society, and it was a curious spectrum of how it had affected them. Mike had barely been affected at all, mainly since he was married to Temika and she had some very strong Terran views, but to be honest, Mike shared most of them. Mike could easily cheat on Temika, but he didn't. About the only way he and Temika had conformed to Faey customs was that they were willing to go nude on the beach, but they would *never* do it anywhere else. Jason and Luke represented the middle ground, both of them were married to Faey and had changed in some ways but held onto their Terran societal norms in others. Tim represented the shameless sell-out, the man who had completely adopted Faey society... mainly for the free and easy sex. Yet despite that, Mike didn't hold that against Tim, nor did Tim harp on Mike to take advantage of the availability of very beautiful and very willing women. And telepathy didn't have the impact that a sociologist might think. Despite both of them being telepaths, and even being *amu dozei*, Jason and Tim had adopted very different outlooks concerning how they fit into Faey society. And Mike and Luke had also found different ways to fit in despite *not* being telepaths, though both were married to telepaths.

After nearly half an hour talking about baseball and batchi, they worked themselves around to work, as Jason leaned back, elbows on the rail behind him, and watched the setting sun behind them paint beautiful colors across the Karsa Sea, as Kosigi peeked over the water at the horizon. "They have

you on the new project too, Mike?” Tim asked before taking another drink of his beer. Guinness, imported all the way from Terra. And in something of a tradition among them, when they hung out and talked, they spoke English. Really, it was about the only time Jason spoke English anymore. Faey was more or less the official language of the House Karinne.

“Yeah, some of the stuff we’re gonna be doing is pretty large scale, so Luke needs muscle,” Mike said lightly, flexing his gigantic bicep a little. Mike still lifted weights, and if anything, was reaching *Conan the Barbarian* levels of muscle.

“Lot of the work we’ll be doing is on large-scale hull sections,” Luke said. “It’s gonna take some manhandling to get them in place even with the hovercranes, and nobody manhandles in the shop like Mike.”

“Dunno, Rook, probably outdoes him,” Tim chuckled.

“Rook doesn’t count, he’s a robot,” Mike replied, almost primly. “I just finished reading the specs on it. Sounds like we can figure it out, and pretty quick.”

“What’s that Ruu like?” Tim asked.

“She’s not as stuffy as I thought she might be,” Mike said.

Luke laughed. “Yeah. I was expecting a bald blue Siyhaa without horns, but she’s actually fairly laid back. And holy shit, is she smart.”

“Amen to that,” Mike nodded. “She memorized the entire initial experiment parameter file after reading it *once*.”

“A lot of Ruu have photographic memories, Mike,” Jason said absently. “Did Miaari start vetting her?” he asked Tim.

“Yeah, she’s actually done, she just hasn’t sent you the report yet. She said she’s trustworthy to reveal Karinne tech to her. So, you’re gonna let her see the specs for the CMS?”

“May as well, most likely she’ll figure it out by herself anyway. And it may move the project along. She knows more about interphasic field theory than anyone I researched, and the more she knows about how it’s going to be used, the better chance we have of finding something viable.”

“I’ll leave the science to the scientists,” Mike said easily. “I’m there to build stuff.”

“Says the guy a semester away from graduating with an engineering degree,” Luke teased.

“Says the guy that has his degree,” Mike retorted. “Dunno why Tom put you on the project as the lead machinist, you should be on it as a researcher.”

“Cause I’m still a better builder than I am a tinkerer,” he replied. “So you may as well give up on takin’ my office, Mike. I’m still the head of the build team no matter what pieces of paper are hangin’ on the wall behind my desk.”

“Yeah, fuck you too, Luke,” Mike snorted, which made the others laugh.

“So, how’s life in Miaari’s office, Tim?” Luke asked.

“Majorly busy the last few weeks,” he answered. “Right now, we’re working on the scan data the spy probes are sending back about the Syndicate fleet. There’s so fuckin’ many of ‘em, it’s gonna take us days to go through all the data just to where we can build a basic overview of what we’re dealing with.”

“Answer the simplest question, then. What kind of weapons are they packin’?” Luke asked.

“A mix from what we’ve seen, but most of their heaviest weapons are Torsion-based,” he answered. “Which means they’ll be in for a shock the first time they come up against the KMS,” he added with a dark chuckle. “Maybe the entire CCM, depending on how fast the others can refit. Most of the ships have some pretty average shields but have some tough armor. It’s a form of shocked Adamantium interlaced with binary strands of ionized Telvestium. We ran some sims, and it’s surprisingly...well, *springy*.”

“Springy?”

“It bends,” he replied. “It’ll bend before it breaks, which means it’ll do pretty well against rail weaponry and weapons that use a lot of kinetic energy, like explosive missile warheads. The sims we ran shows that the

armor is *soft*, that you could put your hand on it and bend it like plastic, but the further you bend it, the stronger it gets. It can stand up to explosive missile tech fairly well, no doubt designed cause of the Consortium's hardon for missiles, but it doesn't hold up against energy weapons quite so much. Various forms of ion and plasma particularly, they ionically decouple the Telvestium strands and make it lose its resilience. So plasma and ion weapons will make it lose its, well, pliability. Plus, you know how plasma affects Adamantium, so that'll be the weapon of choice against them. But, the super-ships, they use a different kind of armor," he added. "I guess they can't mass produce that pliable Adamantium enough to armor the big ships. They rely on layers and layers and layers of different armor materials, making the outer hull like a giant fuckin' jawbreaker, a multi-layered armored casing holding the rest of the ship. Seriously, on the biggest one, we counted 163 different layers of armor, mostly carbidium, unrefined Adamantium, and a form of molecularly altered elbrium, just layer on layer on layer. The average armor thickness on the biggest ship is nearly 100 feet, 100 feet of pure armor before you even get to the hull. I mean, think about it. The carapace on the *Tiann* is only about three feet thick on the average."

"The carapace on the *Tiann* is compressed Neutronium," Mike countered. "Like a millimeter-thick sliver of it can stop an MPAC. Three feet is almost overkill."

Tim laughed. "Remember what Kumi did when she found out how much that carapace was gonna cost?" he said, grinning at Jason. "I'm surprised you don't have a scar on your ass, Jayce."

"That's actually not a bad idea," Jason mused, scratching his cheek, which made the others burst out laughing. "Their armor," he explained, which calmed them down a bit. "Each metal has different properties that make it more effective against certain forms of weaponry. By stacking layers on top of layers, it turns the hulls into like freakin' Wolverine's skeleton. Unbreakable and nearly indestructible. As long as they build layers with metals that won't chemically react to each other, it would be pretty effective. The layer weak to a certain type of weapon will get penetrated, but the one under it won't. And even if you concentrate fire in one spot, the layers means that you have to pound on the armor with different weapons for a long time to finally breach it, and all the while the super-ship is beating the shit out of you with its arsenal. Sounds like the

armor is designed to slow down any threat rather than completely stop it, give the ship enough time to bring all that firepower to bear to wipe out the threat. Bend but don't break, like a football defense in the red zone."

"CCM ships won't wipe easily," Luke chuckled. "Even without the Torsion weapons, lots of them have ion weapons, or can build them, and that'll handle the smaller ships. We have the GRAF cannons for the big ships," he said with an evil grin.

"Even the GRAF is gonna have to work to penetrate 100 feet of armor," Jason said thoughtfully. "They'll have to fire it at full power to go through that much armor, and that means it's gonna be a nearly three-minute cycle time. If they send multiple super-ships, the GRAF won't be able to fire fast enough to take them out before they threaten the command ship, and you know they can't fire the GRAF if the enemy can hit the barrel while it's charged, it'll blow the command ship to hell and back. But the Teryon rail slugs, the next-gen Teryon heavy pulse cannons, now *those* are gonna punch holes in those ships like Swiss cheese."

"Sounds like the mark II battleships are gonna see some front-line action," Luke speculated.

"That's what we built them for," Jason shrugged. "They were built to be super-ship killers, so we don't have to commit the command ships to an engagement to threaten the super-ships. And we have 52 of them, so I think we have enough."

"So, can a Faey join this little party?" Jenn asked in pretty good English as he approached. Jenn was a *very* handsome Faey, with black hair and the kind of face that would be plastered all over billboards—and that was exactly what Jenn did before moving to Karis, he was a model. He was nude, which wasn't unusual at all for the beach, showing off that model's body. And for a Faey man, that meant that he was *very* well endowed. For a professional male model, that was probably the single most important feature he could have. Jenn had a very affable personality that made him very much liked by just about everyone on the strip. He was modest and unassuming despite being a famous supermodel in the Imperium before moving to Karis, really down to earth, and didn't take himself, his looks, or his fame all that seriously.

“You’re a guy, so I guess,” Mike said lightly. “This is the Karsa chapter of the He-Man woman hater’s club, Jenn. Guys only.”

Jenn laughed, taking a beer offered to him by Tim. “Thanks.”

“Seein’ Meya again?”

“More like trying to get away from her,” he said with a face that made the others laugh. “Shit, guys, I never knew she could be so clingy. She never seemed the type to me.”

“She likes you. That was your first mistake,” Jason drawled, which made Jenn laugh. “It’s not like you have to go far to get home anyway. Shit, dude, your house is right over there,” he added with a point towards Aura’s house. Jenn’s house was right on the other side of the fence, and because of that fact combined with his looks and affable personality, he was one of the most frequent visitors on the strip. He was also the father of five of the children on the strip. He’d fathered children by Myri, Kumi, Ilia, Yana, and Maya, part of the overall plan that the strip girls have three children by three different Generations to expand the gene pool. The neighborhood just outside the strip was dominated by the Generations, with a large number of higher-ranking members of the government and KMS, like Yeri, Trenirk, Jerim, and Bunvar. But given the houses around the strip weren’t mansions, Jason had made sure that the neighborhood was filled with upper middle-class houses, most of the really rich and self-important Karisians lived over on the south side of Karsa, on Stardust Beach. Jason made sure that anyone that wanted to pretend to be important by living close to him had to at least *pretend* to be middle class, by living in middle class houses.

“So how’s life in big business, Jenn?” Luke asked.

“Same old same old,” he replied easily. Jenn had moved on from modeling and was now the Chief Operating Executive and on the board of directors at KMC, Karinne Metals Corporation. It was one of Kumi’s shell companies that bought and sold raw ores and refined metals, but primarily sold the metals that the Karinnes could replicate but others couldn’t to outside empires. It was a real company, it just didn’t do much business outside of acting as a proxy for the house, and Jenn had wisely prepared for life after modeling by earning the Terran equivalent of a Master’s degree in

business administration, the proverbial MBA, so he was no figurehead. He had real responsibility at KMC, and he took his job seriously.

Jenn had another job, though. As a Generation, he was a member of the KMS reserves and could be called upon to fight from a merge, as he had when Karis was attacked. And since he and his twin sister Jezzi had the strongest merge with Cyra, that was where he'd be if Karis was threatened. That meant that he had a lot of real combat training, so he could understand military operations and operate inside of them during battle. Jenn was a Major in the Karinne Army Reserves, and that rank wasn't ceremonial.

"We closed a deal with the Crai for tungsten yesterday, at half a point over market average. They were willing to pay extra for quick delivery, and we have the tungsten already replicated, it was just waiting to be sold. Kumi negotiated the terms, now we have to do all the paperwork and arrange the shipments," Jenn continued, which explained in a nutshell what KMC did that had nothing to do with Kumi.

"Nice, so another big bonus," Mike teased.

Jenn laughed. "I wish," he replied. "But I did get a little extravagant. I bought a new skimmer yesterday."

"Cool, what did you get?" Jason asked.

"A KSV 40," he answered.

"Nice, dude, nice," Tim congratulated. "You get all the bells and whistles?"

"Of course I did, what do I look like, a peasant?" he retorted, which made Tim laugh as Jenn took a healthy swig of his beer. "I got the full executive package with the space cruising option, so it can get me just about anywhere. It even has heaters in the seats. That added about twenty thousand credits to the deal, but I figured what the hell," he shrugged. "You only live once."

"I'm sure you can afford it," Jason chuckled.

"I didn't buy it to have it sit on the landing pad for people to admire," he replied. "I intend to *use* that bad boy. Me and Meya are going to go over to Kirga tomorrow and visit the Painted Spires nature preserve. The holos

of that place make me really want to see it live, see if the holos are the best it offers or if they're just the candles on the cake."

"Trust me, you'll be glad you went, just take your hiking shoes. Or a hoverbike," Jason said. "Just mind they don't allow hoverbikes to operate under a thousand *shakra* over the park. They don't want anyone crashing into one of the rock spires."

"Yeah, that'd hurt," Jenn observed lightly. "I could always take my armor and just use it to fly around. I have flight pods for it."

"Meya can't get at you if you're in your armor," Tim noted with a wicked little smile, which made Jenn laugh.

"That's just another reason to wear it," he said cheekily, then took another drink. "Gotta make 'em work for it, boys. That's how Faey men do things."

"We're not Faey, Jenn. Our strategy is to wear them out to the point where they don't come looking for it unless they're well rested," Tim said with an outrageous grin.

"That's *your* strategy," Mike corrected. "Mine is survival."

They all laughed. "Dude, that's why you never marry a woman that can throw a punch," Tim teased. "I bet Temika could coldcock just about anyone."

"Okay, you just went past my English vocabulary there, Tim," Jenn said.

"Coldcock means to knock unconscious, usually with one punch," Jason supplied.

Jenn laughed. "She does look pretty strong," he noted.

"She is," all four of them replied in unison, which made Jenn erupt into laughter.

A camera pod zoomed over, and Cyra manifested a hologram from it. "*Jason, Myleena needs to see you,*" she replied. "*She has the initial data from Project F compiled.*"

"Awesome, I've been waiting for that. Where is she?"

“On Skeyai Island. Current security protocols require you to meet her face to face.”

“Yup. Do me a favor and warn Aya, that’ll give me time to go get on my armor while she calls in a corvette.”

“Certainly.”

All five CBIMs and Coma were in the warehouse when Jason arrived, along with several researchers on Myleena’s team. They’d been doing initial testing of the drive on both ships for the last few days, restricting it to short jumps and keeping it out in empty intergalactic space, *far* away from anything they could even remotely get close enough to crash into. The sheer speed of the drive made any kind of pinpoint jump exercise extremely dangerous, even with the refined navigation algorithms, so they were taking no chances. Myleena, Emia, and one of the Kimdori scientists were gathered around a holotable, discussing a graph put up over the table, when he came in. “Alright, I’m here, Myli,” Jason said. “What have you got?”

“Quite a bit,” she replied as she turned around.

“Good or bad?”

“Both,” she replied, “at least from a purist point of view.”

“Alright, let’s start with the bad.”

“The biggest item on the bad list is something of a doozy,” she replied, turning again and bringing up a holo of a hyperspace jump engine in cross section, one of the technical drawings in their manuals. “We just did another inspection on the destroyer, Jayce, and we’ve found a problem.”

“Not too much of a surprise.”

“Well, this is a big problem,” she grunted, pointing at the drawing. “The Terynium cores in the engine are deteriorating at an accelerated rate. And it’s *fast*.”

“Ouch,” he grunted, looking at the drawing. “At what rate?”

“Going on the rate of decay we’ve calculated, the core in the *Trailblazer* will be too unstable to use after another combined 83 minutes of operation,” she replied. “From just an initial impression, something about the translight state is accelerating the natural decay of Terynium back into to its raw state

and escaping back into hyperspace, creating a *swiss cheese* effect in the core, to use a Terran saying.” Terynium didn’t *stay* refined once they refined it, it slowly decayed back into its natural, unrefined state, and escaped back into hyperspace. That was something they were used to, and everything they built using Terynium was designed so the Terynium elements could be removed and replaced once it decayed beyond usability. The average life cycle of a hyperspace comm unit was about 120 years, but the life cycle of a hyperspace jump engine core was only about seven years. The more Terynium present, the faster it decayed as the Terynium reacted to itself. From what Myleena was saying, the transligh state was drastically accelerating the natural decay of the Terynium in the jump engines.

“Well, we’re dealing with brand new shit here, Myli,” Jason sighed. “So, you’re positive the transligh state is decaying the cores?”

“It has to be,” she replied. “The cores in regular engines aren’t decaying. I had them pull the core out of a destroyer and check it just as a control. That core was forged at the same time as the one in the *Trailblazer*.”

“Good thinking. What are your initial thoughts?”

“I *think* we might be able to work around it,” she said, bringing up a power curve graph, one he recognized as the Transligh Curve. “I’ve ordered the *Legion* to continue testing, but they’re going to reduce the power to the transligh drive and see if that changes the decay rate of the core. We’ve been operating them at the top end of the curve, because we weren’t sure if we could get the ship into transligh mode at a lower power,” she said, tapping the top of the graph’s curve. “But we have enough data now to show that we *can* reduce power and still get into a transligh state. We have a good array of data, enough to work out some mathematical models for applied power versus state integrity. Reducing power to the transligh drive will slow the ship down, but if it slows down the core decay, it’ll be worth it. Replacing those cores after three hours of engine uptime is gonna get prohibitively expensive real fast, babes. Even if we *had* enough Terynium to replace the cores as fast as they decay.”

“Alright. So, we continue testing and see how using different power levels affects the core?”

“Exactly,” she nodded. “I want to see if the core decay is a constant or is based on the power applied to the drive. If it’s constant, it’s not gonna make this engine as useful as we thought it was. But if the decay rate isn’t linear, we might be able to find a sweet spot that gets the ship around at translight speed without burning out the cores. It won’t be getting to Andromeda in five minutes, but if we can get there in like two hours, that’s still fuckin’ awesome.”

“Sounds like a good approach,” Jason nodded. “When will you have some preliminary results?”

“In about ten minutes, Jason,” Emia replied. “We can measure core decay without cracking open the engines, now that we know what we’re looking for. We tweaked the internal engine sensors to recognize and measure core decay, and the *Legion* should be sending that telemetry back to us over BG1 as soon as they finish their test jumps.”

“Good deal,” he told her. “What else is on the bad list?”

“It isn’t only the Terynium cores showing detrimental effects exposed to the translight state,” the Kimdori scientist, Emrirr, stated. He was a gray furred Kimdori about Jason’s height, a little slender, with longer and shaggier fur than average for a Kimdori. “We’ve seen some stress in the molecular structure of the main support bulkheads, keel, and main spars in the ship. The translight state is putting some physical stresses on the ship, cousin, beyond the usual stress applied by hyperspace.”

“Can we fix it?”

“I think we can,” Myleena nodded. “We reinforce those parts of the ship, maybe replace the main support bulkheads and main load spars with armor-quality metal. If the ship can’t handle the stress, we just build a tougher ship.”

Jason chuckled. “Alright, that sounds easy enough,” he said. “How does it look from a refit situation?”

“It will take some work, but we can do the upgrades to the superstructure without completely taking the ships apart,” Cybi answered.

“Alright. What else is on the bad list?”

“We’ve found that some equipment won’t operate in a translight state,” Myleena said. “We found out the hard way that if you try to run a replicator while the ship’s in translight mode, either in normal space or hyperspace, it makes the replicator melt. Literally.”

Jason laughed. “So, we flag that one under *incompatible equipment* and just make sure nobody uses a replicator in translight mode,” he said. “But I guess it’s not a surprise that subatomic physical behavior would change in a translight state. After all, the translight state has its own physical rules.”

“Indeed. We might do a study when all this is done, try to document the changes and why a replicator melts,” Emia said absently.

“Next item on the bad list?”

“We’ve found that running at translight mode creates, well, *shockwaves* in hyperspace, probably due to the sheer speed involved,” Myleena said, bringing up another holo, this one a graphical model showing what almost looked like a sonic boom. “While they don’t affect the ship itself, the math suggests that any other ship close to it will be affected by the hyperspace flux. If this model sim is right, a larger ship could very well knock a smaller one out of hyperspace, and since it’s going at translight speed in hyperspace, we’re honestly not sure what would happen to a ship that drops into normal space in a translight state. The computer algorithm that governs the drive isn’t set up to deal with that much flux. The effect is even worse in intergalactic space, probably due to the fact that it’s so flat and unaffected by gravity. We’re going to do some more study before we test out jumping both ships at the same time in formation, until we’re more certain what will happen if they do.”

“So, we either upgrade the governing algorithm or we don’t bunch up ships together to jump in formation,” Jason mused. “Have the hyperspace experts studied this shockwave effect to see if it has any lasting detrimental effects on hyperspace itself?”

“Good question, cousin,” Emrirr said with a nod. “We have them working on it now.”

Jason flashed him a quick smile. “And let me guess, reducing speed in the translight state will reduce this shockwave effect?”

“Correct, cousin,” he nodded. “So for ships jumping in formation, they may be going slower anyway, just so they can *stay* in formation.”

“Like Myli said, two hours to Andromeda is still pretty fuckin’ awesome,” he said, giving her a grin. “Next on the bad list?”

“That’s the bad list,” Myleena told him with a smile.

“Ooh, so we’re getting to the good list. Hit me.”

“Outside of the replicators and shields, we haven’t had any other real issues with incompatible equipment. We’ve found we can’t raise shields in a translight state, but just about everything else works. We haven’t actively fired the weapons in the translight state, but we’re not *going* to. Those weapons have no reason to fire in translight mode, there’s nothing for them to shoot at but other Karinne ships. Besides, most weapons don’t work in hyperspace anyway except pulse weaponry, phased weapons like MPACS and multiphased ion weapons, and Kimdori stream weaponry. Hyperspace physics don’t support most forms of three-dimensional energy, and missiles and other physical weapons drop out of hyperspace the instant they leave the ship unless they’re equipped with jump engines.”

“I can support that,” he nodded. “I couldn’t imagine any targeting computer being able to aim the weapons anyway.”

“Thus far, Doctor Songa has found no medical issues with the crew being exposed to the translight state or being in close proximity to the engines while they’re in translight mode,” Emia continued. “It seems the engines and the state itself are safe. So far, anyway.”

“That’s always a good thing,” Jason chuckled.

“The biggest thing on the good list is that we’ve found out that we can jump directly into hyperspace while in FTL translight mode in normal space,” Myleena told him. “The entry into hyperspace is a whole lot rougher than usual, but they *can* do it. I’ve ordered the ships to jump only at safe jump speed as standard operating procedure, to save the wear and tear on the ships, but the ships can directly jump into hyperspace while in FTL mode in normal space if they have to, like if there’s an emergency and they’re in a bloody fucking hurry to get somewhere *now*, or Trelle forbid, they’re executing a retreat from a lost battle and they’re being pursued. That

way they don't have to reduce to jump speed and leave themselves open until they get into hyperspace."

"That's awesome!" Jason said exuberantly. "Straight to hyperspace without stopping?"

"As long as they're moving at a certain FTL speed or slower, yes," Emia nodded. "And as Myli said, it puts a *lot* of stress on the ships to do it. I rode on the *Trailblazer* when it did it, Jason, and it was like being trapped in one of those old fashioned Terran clothes dryers while it was running."

Jason laughed. "That's what jump restraints are for, but for them to have the capability, that's a good thing. Like you said, we'd best make sure that's only done under emergency conditions, if the entry is *that* rough."

"It's rough, alright," Myleena nodded in agreement.

"*The Legion is back in normal space and uploading its diagnostics telemetry,*" Cylan announced, and all of them, even the holograms of the computers, crowded around the holotable as Myleena brought up the data. "Here's the decay report," she said, pointing. She then gave a gleeful squeal and jumped into the air, nearly startling the others. "It's not a constant! It's *logarithmic*! Oh *fuck* yes, best possible scenario, people! We lucked out fuckin' big time!"

Logarithmic...that meant that instead of decaying at a linear rate, the decay rate was *exponential*, increasing by exponential amounts as the strength of the translight field increased. Before Myleena even said a word, he could see from that graph that by reducing the speed of the translight drive, it would slow the decay rate down to almost negligible levels, within the normal life cycle of a Terynium jump engine core. They'd be replacing the core due to the effect of Terynium being in normal space before the decay reached a point where the core had to be replaced due to translight damage. Then they just re-process what was left and add replacement Terynium to form a new core, and boom, new core ready for installation.

"*If this decay curve is constant regardless of the size of the ship drive and core, then reducing the ship's operational speed to five hundred light years per second reduces the decay rate to virtual nil, within the service lifespan of a Terynium jump engine core,*" Cyvanne observed, sliding her

holographic finger along the curve. *“If I’m reading this data right, anyway.”*

“I reach the same result in my own calculations, Cyvanne,” Cynna agreed. *“That is the proverbial sweet spot. Five hundred light years a second.”*

“That would make the trip to Andromeda take about 84 minutes, give or take 40 seconds, without damaging the engines,” Jason mused after his gestalt did the math for him. “So, an hour and a half or so to Andromeda, and inside the galaxy, the ships can cross the entire galaxy in about 6 minutes at this speed. That’s not 20 seconds, but it’s still an order of magnitude faster than what anyone else can even come close to doing. As for trips to Andromeda, eh, an hour and a half is way fuckin’ better than five years,” he added, then he laughed.

“But the ships will still be capable of a five-minute jump in an emergency situation,” Cybi added. *“It would just damage the engines to do it. Part of the process of defining the operational limits of the engines, I suppose,”* she said lightly. *“We’ve defined the safe operational maximum speed, but also have determined the maximum unsafe speed.”*

“We haven’t found the upper speed limit yet, Cybi,” Myleena told her. “There’s still some room at the top of the translight curve, we just didn’t go there because our models said it could be unstable. We might get it to go even faster, at the risk of blowing up the engines,” she said with a whimsical smile at Jason.

“I’m taking that out of *your* paycheck if it happens, woman,” he warned.

“We need to validate our hypothesis,” Cybi declared. *“We need to do more testing on both ships, find out if the core decay curve is constant between core classes, due to the increasing decay rate of Terynium when it is in large quantities, and test our proposed solution to make sure it actually works.”*

“Yeah. Cybi, tell the crew on the *Trailblazer* to step it up, we need the ship back up so we can test the decay rate and make sure it matches the *Legion* data.”

“Then it sounds like I’m about to be kicked out,” Jason noted, which made Myleena laugh and nod at him. “Cybi can tell me the results of the testing. Coma, I want you to run some sims based on the data we have, see if it’s feasible to install the translight drive on the *Tianne*, including the effect of the translight state on the core. Your ship has the biggest core, so it’ll be the most affected. Nobody knows your ship like you do, you’re best suited to run the sims.”

“I have already been doing such work, Jason. I’ll have a courier send you the data I have so far. But to summarize it, given what we know, a translight drive would function if installed in my ship. It would be considerably larger than the drives on other ships by proportion, but it would function. We’ll need more data before I can determine the effect of the translight state on the core.”

“Send it to me when you figure it out,” he said. “And yeah, send me the data you already have, I want to take a look at it. I’m curious to see how the translight state changes depending on the size of the ship.”

“My data is simulated, thus far not validated, but we feel confident it is very close to correct,” she warned.

“Remember to keep it in your office or your lab,” Cybi warned.

“I will,” he replied, almost insolently. “Sheesh, you think I don’t know the security protocols I helped write? Push off, woman. But what I want you CBIMs to do is put your processing power together and answer a very important question.”

“What is that, Jason?”

“Navii wants to know if it would be possible to refit our current ships to translight drives using the jump engines already installed in them. In other words, we just install the translight section of the drive and make the changes to the existing engines to make it work. It would dramatically speed up the refit process, as well as drastically reduce the cost.”

“We can study the problem and have an answer for you and Navii in a couple of days. But mind, that answer might change as we test the engines and potentially change their design,” Cybi answered.

“I’m aware of that. But Navii does make a good point. Just installing the translight section of the drive and upgrading the existing jump engines would be faster, easier, and cheaper than replacing everything.”

“It might very well be possible, Cyra speculated. “But we’ll have to do more in-depth research before we know for sure.”

“That’s why I asked,” he nodded. “So, I’ll get out of your hair now and head home. Don’t stay up too late, guys, it’s already 23:00. *Try* to get some rest, will ya?”

“I’ll be home after we get the *Trailblazer* back online and have it do enough jumps to test the decay rate, then test our solution,” Myleena replied.

In the corvette, Jason sat at the tactical station and considered what he’d just learned. The drives couldn’t *safely* go as fast as they’d been pushing them, they were damaging the engines at that speed, but still, the *safe* speed they calculated was still just...just fucking *insane*. 84 minutes, 27 seconds to the edge of Andromeda from Karis, if they held with the maximum safe speed of 500 light years per second.

Even that number just seemed nuts. Five *hundred* light years a *second*. It seemed utterly ludicrous. He could almost imagine Rick Moranis in his Dark Helmet costume standing at the helm of a ship about to go translight, screaming *“ludicrous speed, GO!!!”* and that thought made him chuckle softly to himself.

“They’ve gone plaid!”

Silly memories of cheesy yet hilarious Mel Brooks movies notwithstanding, he almost felt like a caveman who was just handed a pulse rifle and told to go hunting using it. These engines, they were *beyond* a quantum leap compared to modern technology. It was like going straight from an abacus to a supercomputer, like from a yak-pulled cart to a Formula 1 race car. These engines represented the ultimate expression of propulsion science, something capable of practical travel between galaxies...fuck, practical travel through the *universe*. They just needed one ship to tow one Stargate to another galaxy, link it, and that galaxy just became completely accessible to anyone they allowed to use that Stargate.

The responsibility of it...to know that through their actions, they could unleash warlike civilizations like the Faey, the Urumi, the Skaa, the Verutans on not just their own galaxy, but *every galaxy in the cluster*, fuck, that was a sobering thought. Just like he'd told the command staff and his cabinet when he briefed them on Project F, they held such incredible power in their hands now, it could be a crime of *universal* proportions if they misused it.

He wasn't sure exactly when he gave the order, or even if he *did* give the order, but his corvette was landing outside the Parri village about an hour after leaving Skeyai island. He found in himself a need to seek some advice, and he knew of no one better to give it to him than the Parri *shaman*. Despite the late hour, she met him at the ramp, rising up onto her hind legs and swallowing up his armored hands in her hand-paws. "It is good to see you again, Jason Karinne," she said in her husky voice. "What brings you to the village at this hour?"

"Just passing by, *shaman*," he lied, and she smiled knowingly at him for saying it. "I was hoping to share some tea with you before heading home."

"My fire always welcomes you, Jason Karinne. Tea for our guest," she called in her gentle yet commanding voice as she turned and dropped down to all fours and started walking back towards the huts of her village.

It was rather nice to sit in the cool night air, hearing the squeaking of the Imbrian bloodbats in the tree branches high overhead, one of the transplant species introduced to Karis to build a working ecosystem, and enjoy some of the Parri's delicious *oye* bark tea with one of his most trusted advisors. She was contentedly silent, allowing him to get around to what he was here for in his own time, and he didn't make her wait too long before he broached the subject. "You've asked me in the past about negative emotions," he began. "Fear. Hate. Anger."

"Yes."

"How about doubt?" he asked. "Would you consider that a negative emotion?"

"In some ways. But, doubt also provides value by making one who is uncertain carefully consider a course of action before he commits to it," she answered. "It is when doubt *prevents* the proper path that it becomes

negative. But such things only happen to those who lack confidence in themselves. And you, Jason Karinne, do not suffer that weakness. You have the strength to face your doubt and move down the path you set for yourself, even if you are wrong.”

“And sometimes, that can be a bad thing,” he said, swirling the tea around in the hand-carved simple wooden cup in which they served it.

“Even when we are wrong, Jason Karinne, it can be a good thing.”

“Not about this,” he grunted, then he blew out his breath and looked at the Parri. “Our science has come across something...I don’t know how to explain it. It’s something *miraculous*. It will change everything, *shaman*. Everything. And I almost feel afraid of it.”

“That is why you are a good leader,” she told him. “You *should* fear the power you wield, Jason Karinne.”

“I don’t fear the power for what *we* may do with it,” he told her. “I fear how the power might corrupt those who come after us. It would be like us suddenly becoming as mighty over the rest of the galaxy as you are over this fire,” he said, motioning. “Though the fire seeks to escape your control, you keep it completely imprisoned within this firepit, and you dictate its life and death. You can end it with a bucket of water, or watch it slowly starve to death by denying it fuel. You fully accept this power and use it wisely, but will the cub just allowed to come out of the hut be able to do the same? He might unleash the fire from the firepit and burn down the entire village in his desire to play with the flames. I...I feel uneasy,” he sighed. “I trust the people of my house to treat this miracle with respect and carry the burden it represents wisely, but we won’t be here forever. How will our children handle this power? Our children’s children? Will it turn them away from the path of love? Will the House of Karinne *become* the loveless ones, and be reviled by the entire universe until the end of time? Am I unleashing a monster upon the world, and that monster is *us*?”

“If it worries you so, Jason Karinne, perhaps the answer is to deny this miracle to all, including yourself. There is nothing saying that all knowledge must be used. Or that all knowledge is good.”

“I wish I could,” he sighed. “This miracle is the answer to our conflict with the loveless ones, *shaman*. This miracle will end the threat they pose

forever *without* destroying them, and without forcing us to fight a war that might last generations before it comes to an end. It will convince them to leave us alone, leave us alone for good, which I think is a humane and compassionate way to end the conflict between us. We *need* this miracle, yet I fear what may become of us after I unleash it upon the universe. We Terrans have an old myth something like this situation called Pandora's Box, which myth said held all the darkness and evil of the world within it. I feel like I have my hand on that box and am about to open the lid."

"Truly, a vexing situation," she said after a moment. "The question you should ask yourself, Jason Karinne, is not how well you trust those who come after you, but how well you trust those here now to teach them how to properly respect the responsibility that this miracle sets upon them. And if I remember that old story correctly, did not Pandora find *hope* deep within the box after all the evils and sins fled?"

He gave her a surprised look.

"There is wisdom to be found wherever you have the inclination to look, Jason Karinne," she said mildly. "Even when you see only darkness before you, there is always hope. And hope is one of the greatest things in the universe, for it is boundless. It will be as strong as the heart that holds deeply to it, Jason Karinne, and your heart is strong."

"But how strong is everyone else's?" he asked.

"That depends upon you," she replied. "You are the light of this world, Jason Karinne. I have told you this before. It is why the loveless ones tried to extinguish your light, for they knew it would cast this entire world into darkness. If your illumination banishes the darkness, it will chase away the shadows from even those far down the road of time from you. It is up to you to rise high into the sky and cast down the light of your love upon your people, and upon your descendants. A beacon of light in the night will show those lost and seeking shelter the path home, Jason Karinne," she said gently. "If this miracle carries a great darkness within it, a potential for evil, then it is up to you and those whom you trust to banish that darkness with the light of your love."

"So, you're saying that the evil that this miracle may do falls upon me to prevent."

“You are the ruler of this world. Was it ever anyone else’s responsibility but yours?”

“I suppose not,” he sighed, setting down his half-empty cup and leaning back on his armored hands. “Sometimes I hate this job.”

She gave him a compassionate, but amused, look. “Answer me truthfully, Jason Karinne. Would you allow another to shoulder this burden?”

“Not yet, Rann’s not ready,” he said in a low growl after a moment. “So, either I’m remembered as one of the people who ushered in a new age of peace, or I’ll be singled out as the villain that destroyed it,” he reasoned. “All based on how well I teach my children to respect the power this miracle will give them, and how well they teach *their* children after I’m gone.”

The *shaman* nodded quietly.

“You certainly don’t ask much from me, do you?” he told her, which made her chuckle huskily.

“The trees believe in you, Jason Karinne. And so do I,” she told him simply.

“Well, I appreciate your confidence. I just wish I shared it,” he replied. “You wouldn’t happen to have a deep and introspective question about doubt that will make everything seem much less muddled after I answer it, would you?”

She laughed earnestly. “I have no question that you have not already answered, deep in your heart, Jason Karinne. You do not need my counsel. You only need a sympathetic ear,” she told him. “You know what you must do. You simply feel that it overwhelms you and need someone to tell you that you are right. Well, you are right,” she declared easily. “There. Does that make you feel better?”

He laughed. “I guess so, a little bit,” he replied. “And I can always count on you to listen to my troubles, *shaman*. You should start billing me for these therapy sessions.”

“It is never a burden to help those we love, Jason Karinne. It is a privilege,” she answered. “Now tell me, how are your babies? Do you have

any new pictures of them to show?”

“I *always* have pictures of my babies to show off,” he told her with a smile, scooting over to sit beside her. That quickly, the visit went from a serious one to a social one, as Jason showed the *shaman* a series of pics saved in his gestalt of not only his babies, but all the new babies on the strip, then they spent nearly an hour just talking. Jason happened to be good friends with the *shaman*, and often their visits were little more than gossip or catching up.

It was nearly midnight by the time Jason finally boarded the corvette, no doubt thankfully for the crew, and Jason could admit, he *did* feel much better about things as the ship lifted off from the hard-packed dirt pad and turned towards the east-southeast, back towards Karsa. Maybe she was right, maybe he *did* just need a sympathetic ear, someone he trusted to listen to him and assure him that he was doing the right thing. In the years he had known the Parri, he had never once felt that their advice was bad. And if their advice to him now was to move forward, that he *could* keep the House of Karinne from being consumed by the power these engines would give them, then he would do so. He would still worry, he would still have doubt, but he would show faith in those who had invested so much faith into him.

They had believed in him by joining the house and coming to Karis. He would now show faith in them that they would honor the house by treating this newfound power with the respect it was due.

Chiira, 7 Kiraa, 4404, Faey Orthodox Calendar

Sunday, 3 June 2018 Terran Standard Calendar

Chiira, 7 Kiraa, year 1329 of the 97th Generation, Karinne Historical Reference Calendar

KMS Legion, orbiting star S2M-1478-1771-3963

For once, he wasn't all that surprised that Aya *wasn't* pitching a complete and total fit over him doing something dangerous, because this time, she got to be there with him.

He wasn't going to be anywhere else, not today. Not for this. Today the House of Karinne was going to make history, and he and Jyslin wanted to be a part of it. He wasn't going to just sit in his office and observe it over holos, she wasn't going to hear about it when she got home from the front office, they were going to be on the ship, they were going to be part of that history.

When the *Legion* dropped back into normal space just outside another *galaxy*, he and his beloved wife were going to be on the bridge to look at the view with their own eyes and witness that history.

They had carefully chosen the galaxy the Faey and Karinnes referred to as Alybdis, but which the Terran astronomers referred to as the Large Magellanic Cloud, which was the largest of the satellite galaxies surrounding the Milky Way and the fourth largest galaxy in the galactic cluster. The location of the galaxy would allow them to approach it at a tangent to its outer edge without much trouble, then enter the galaxy under standard jump engines. The galaxy was 162.76 kilo-light years (or 162.76kly in astronomical shorthand) from their current location, the outermost star in the rim sector in the radial "spoke" holding Karis' sector, and thus the ideal jumping-off point to get there. The ship would cruise for an estimated five minutes, 26.217732666667 seconds to reach the edge of the galaxy in tangent with their current location, at a distance that would require approximately 30 minutes of hyperspace jump time to reach the outermost star of the galaxy.

They were doing it that way for a reason. The sheer speed of the translight drive made any kind of pinpoint navigation into unknown territory prohibitively dangerous...though *suicidal* was a much better term for it. It would even be dangerous inside their home galaxy until they refined their navigation algorithms, but it was sheer insanity to try to jump *inside* an uncharted galaxy when coming in at that speed. A picosecond off coming out of hyperspace might mean them crashing into a star. So, much as Myleena's return to the Milky Way after the first successful test of the engine, the *Legion* would jump *close* to its destination in translight mode, then adjust their course and come in the rest of the way under normal jump engines.

And their destination was on the tactical display to the right of the forward view, a hyperspace telescope image of star A2XX-1483-3555-9019. It was a red dwarf on the very rim of the irregular galaxy, the closest star to their arrival point which was on the left edge of Alybdis as viewed from the Milky Way, a small, dim red star that had two planets orbiting it.

Curiously enough, that star was *closer* to their current location than the stars on the rim of the Milky Way on the far side of the galaxy, closer by around 18,000 light years. But, while it was theoretically closer than the far side of the galaxy, the Flat Space Effect made traveling to the other side of the home galaxy much faster than trying to reach Alybdis. Under normal jump engines, reaching the far side of the galaxy would take about three hours. To reach Alybdis, it would take five months.

As Jason suspected, this wasn't the first *true* instance where someone from their galaxy left it. He suspected the Kimdori had reached the Magnum Dwarf Stellar Supercluster, a large group of stars outside the galaxy that had once been part of the Ilviros galaxy but had been pulled out of it by the gravity of the Milky Way to form a cluster of stars in intergalactic space between Ilviros and the Milky Way. The Magnum formation was actually closer to Karis than the center of the galaxy, and because of that, it made it reachable by the Kimdori and their real-time jump engines even with the Flat Space Effect slowing them down a long, long time ago. And since it was reachable, the Kimdori, being the curious creatures they were, reached it. They'd reached it about 970 years ago but found nothing of interest at all out there. No life, very few terrestrial solar systems, just stars and orbiting iceballs and supergiants.

But the Magnum formation wasn't a true *galaxy*, it was just a cluster of a few million stars outside the galaxy. They had also visited two stars in the formation the Faey called the Strands of Trelle, or what the Terrans called the Monocerus Ring, a halo-like string of stars outside the galaxy that were pulled from the Velaris Wanderer galaxy as it orbited the Milky Way. They were like the Ort Cloud that surrounded the Terran star, a distant ring of stars well outside the galactic rim, the stars a great distance from each other and wrapping around the galaxy three times. They were close enough to the galaxy for the Flat Space Effect to be minimal, making them only moderately inconvenient to visit.

Formations like the Strands of Trelle were why they were being so very cautious with this translight drive. Even the tiniest navigation error could cause the ship to drop out of hyperspace inside a rogue star or undetected cosmic anomaly like free neutron star or roaming black hole out in intergalactic space. That was why they'd chosen their arrival point very carefully to minimize that danger, choosing an arrival point that was fairly well known to their astrocartographers as being empty. The risk was compounded by the fact that the Alybdis galaxy was irregular, just a ball of stars with no defined shape, and that made the borders of its rim hard to define even with the powerful hyperspace telescopes they had available to them.

Miya Foralle took her chair, crossing her legs demurely as the bridge crew completed their preparations, and Myleena and Emia sat at the engineering station behind the captain's chair and prepared the translight drive. Jason and Jyslin were standing beside her chair, and Aya, Dera, Ryn, Shen, and Suri were standing around the edges of the bridge. They would get to be witnesses to this history.

"Navigation," Miya called.

"We have the destination coordinates locked, sir," the young Faey woman replied, looking back over her shoulder nervously. "Both the primary and secondary nav computers agree, our jump solution is viable. We're ready to jump at your command."

"Myli, are the engines ready?"

"We're running the last check now, Captain," Myleena answered.

This is both scary and exciting, Jyslin sent, gripping his hand. Are you sure these things are safe?

This is the 76th jump for the Legion, hon, but it will be the longest it's attempted so far, he assured her.

It's just a little daunting, knowing that if the drive craps out on us, we're like months away from rescue.

That's why we have two ships with the drives. If the Legion's engines go down, the Trailblazer can come get us.

Well, that's something, she sent, gripping his hand again. And I gotta say, Miya's pretty calm about this.

She's been captain for all these tests, so she has reason to feel confident. She's been here for all of them, he answered.

"Alright, the translight drive is ready to go, Captain," Myleena announced. "We can jump whenever you're ready."

"Navigator, begin jump operations. Set the countdown for thirty seconds, jump at countdown zero." *All hands, thirty seconds to translight, thirty seconds to translight*, she sent across the ship. "Engineering, cut power to all replicators."

"Aye sir. All replicators are showing offline," Emia answered.

"Then begin countdown, navigator."

"Aye, sir. Thirty seconds to jump and counting down," the navigator called out.

Is it like a regular jump? Jyslin asked.

Don't ask me, this is my first translight jump too, he replied with a smile. But Myli says that you don't feel anything different, though she did say the view from the external cameras is pretty wild, because of the translight effect. Since we're inside the effect, everything we see is even more distorted than usual when looking out into hyperspace. She says there's this thing she calls the translight echo, where the ship's image is reflected off the border of the translight effect like a mirror, but it's like a funhouse mirror. She says sometimes, you even see ghost images of the ship in front or behind, which is caused when we pass through natural quantum vibrations in hyperspace. The images are of the ship in the past or future, like a window in time...just time like a fraction of a picosecond in the past or future.

Neat.

"Five seconds," the navigator called.

"Here we go your Graces!" Miya barked.

"One. Jump!"

The ship lurched under their feet, and they were in hyperspace. Just as Myleena described, the forward view showed the interior “wall” of the translight effect, letting them see through it like looking through a visible energy shield, and the hyperspace outside the effect swirled around them in a spiral as they raced through it at translight speed. He saw one of those echoes Myleena described within seconds, a shimmering image of the *Legion* as if they were looking at it from the stern about 1,000 shakra ahead of them, but the ghostly, insubstantial image faded almost as quickly as it appeared.

“Speed, navigator?” Miya asked calmly.

“We are at cruising speed, sir,” she answered. “Five hundred light years per second. We are on course and the engines are stable. All power curves nominal.”

“Very good. Maintain course and speed.”

“Aye, sir.”

Jason and Jyslin watched in awed silence as the ship traveled at insane speeds, a graph to the left of the forward display showing their current position and how they were quickly leaving the Milky Way behind. The irregular ball of Alybdis crept into the upper right corner of the navigation chart as their home galaxy began to fall off the bottom of the holo, as they entered the region of space more and more affected by the Flat Space Effect, but the distance to Alybdis didn’t increase as they moved deeper into flat space because of the translight state. It was hard for Jason to quantify how it felt to be on a ship traveling between two *galaxies*, and he was on the ship watching it happen, watching them travel from the Milky Way to a point just outside Alybdis in a matter of *minutes*.

But minutes was all it took. Exactly on time, the ship dropped back into normal space, the front viewscreen flaring with bright white light before the black emptiness of intergalactic space swallowed it up. The navigation chart showed them just off the edge of Alybdis, the icon of the ship blinking green, indicating that it had arrived at its planned point.

“We are safely back in normal space, Captain,” the navigator called. “Engines are resetting to mode zero. We are within the margin of error in our jump solution.”

Margin of error? Jyslin asked privately, her expression fearful.

The engines just go too fast for the ship to land on a dime, as the Terrans say, love, he explained. So the arrival point has a margin of error. That's why we're not jumping directly into Alybdis. We'll enter the galaxy under standard jump engines, where we do have pinpoint accuracy.

Okay. That makes sense, and that makes me feel a whole lot better.

"Secure for normal space operations," she called, then she sent across the ship. *Secure for normal space operations. We jump the second leg of our course in thirty minutes. Thirty minutes.* "Launch the probes," Miya barked.

"Navigation probes away, sir," the navigator called. "They're in hyperspace and en route to the destination star."

What are those for?

To get some detailed scans of our arrival point. They'll feed that data back as we cruise in on jump engines and allow us to come out of hyperspace in a safe place. Remember, this area isn't charted, so we're more or less charting it on our way in. Half the reason we're gonna sit out here for a little while is to give the probes the chance to get there first and survey our arrival point, so we have time to go over the data they send back before we get there.

Ah. Clever.

You can thank Myli for that, he told her.

"How are the engines, ladies?" Miya asked, looking back at Myleena and Emia.

"Just fine, Captain," Myleena answered. "All power outputs are normal, and we have no warning indicators on the board. The engines are good for operation in any mode."

"Let's get some uptime on them in mode one," Miya said. "Navigation, make for our destination, mode one, speed thirty."

"Aye sir, setting course 171 mark 28, translight mode one, speed thirty," the navigator said, turning her head slightly. *Thirty* referred to a speed of 30 light years per hour, which wasn't the maximum speed the drive was capable of in mode one. The max speed was 54 light years per hour, but to

avoid stressing the engines, they'd set a maximum non-emergency speed of 30 light years per hour. Jason felt the ship turn, then the forward view flared with bright light. The light faded, and it almost looked like they were in a tunnel of energy, ribbons and wisps of light flowing by the ship, which were light photons and light waves in normal space that they were blowing past at 30 light years an hour.

The darker streaks were from matter, dust, molecules, some stray hydrogen atoms, maybe a couple of micro-meteors whizzing about in intergalactic space, but they were unable to interact with the ship due to the translight state. They wrapped around the translight bubble and returned to their original position and velocity vector after they passed, which removed the threat of colliding with them at a speed that would cause the ship to just obliterate if it even hit a speck of dust. The translight bubble surrounding the ship acted like the deflector array from the old *Star Trek* shows, but the translight effect only nudged smaller things out of its way, because of the mass of the ship. The ship had an order of magnitude more mass than the speck of dust, so the speck of dust got pushed aside when the translight effect went past it. If they flew directly into a planet, however, the ship would slam right into it, and be reduced to subatomic particles in a picosecond. The translight effect couldn't scoot aside something with more effective mass than the ship's *phantom mass*. The ship had "phantom mass" in real space as defined by Einstein's Relativity theory, as expressed by the equation $PM=(MV)^2$, where PM was the phantom mass, M was the ship's mass and V was the ship's FTL velocity vector as expressed in light years per hour. At 30 light years an hour, the *Legion* had the square of its mass multiplied by thirty in phantom mass, and that was a fucking *lot* of mass, enough to push even a large asteroid out of the way. And when the ship passed, the asteroid returned to its original position and vector as if the ship had never interacted with it in the first place. Also, while the ship had a massive amount of phantom mass, the real physical universe outside the translight bubble saw *no* mass, meaning the ship had absolutely no effect on gravity or the spatial fabric...which was how mass it pushed aside would return to their original position and vector after the ship went by. It was one of those curious little paradoxes when one started dealing with alternate state physics. The ship's phantom mass was what mattered when it came down to who was going to move when the translight bubble encountered

outside mass, but the universe didn't think the ship existed at all when it came to how the ship affected gravitational fields and the spatial curve.

Translight physics were *fun*.

But, the good news in that scenario was that the hyperspace probes preceding them along their course were mapping their approach vector, and would warn them if there was something in their path large enough to threaten the ship, so they'd see any potentially dangerous hazard in front of them before they reached it and change course to avoid it. The ship could turn in mode one translight, albeit *very* slowly, but that slow turn would usually be enough to avoid a dangerous object in their path. After all, a course correction of a millionth of a degree at thirty light years an hour would shift them hundreds of thousands of kathra in real space, and that made it easy to course correct around potentially dangerous objects like large meteors. "We are in mode one, captain, speed thirty. Estimated time of arrival, 37 years, six months, 12 days," she added, rather cheekily as she glanced back at them.

"Well, that will give us plenty of time to scan the arrival point," Miya said lightly. "Astrocartography, start your scans of the galactic rim. Let's get some good navigation data while we're waiting for the probes to get far enough ahead of us."

"Aye sir," the astrocartography officer on the bridge called. "We're starting our long-distance scans now."

"You enjoying yourself, Jys?" Myleena asked.

"Oh yeah, this is *way* better than watching the team practice," she replied eagerly. "I have so many questions, I'm almost afraid to talk."

"Well, we got half an hour, so let 'er rip," she winked in reply.

Jason listened as Jyslin asked a ton of questions about the drives, getting to learn everything about them now that she'd been included in the small circle that knew about the drives, and she kept it up right until they made their second jump. They cruised in under standard jump engines for nearly 20 minutes, as Jyslin kept asking questions, then the ship dropped into normal space. A small red star was in their viewscreen, and they were at standard jump distance to the largest of its two planets, which orbited very

close to its parent star. So close that one year on the planet was only 12 days.

“Welcome to the Alybdis galaxy, ladies and gentlemen,” Miya announced over ship’s intercom, which caused a huge cheer to rise up from just about the entire ship. “We are 24 minutes out from our destination planet, where we will conduct scientific scans, visit the planet surface and lay a wreath commemorating our visit, and launch navigation probes to further scan the interior of the galaxy before returning home. Conn out.”

“Wow. We’re—wow,” Jyslin breathed, looking at the planet in the viewscreen, which was magnified to allow them to see its barren surface. It was a planet like the Terran moon, barren and without an atmosphere, but its surface temperatures were easily within safe tolerance even without an E-suit or armor. Of course, the airless vacuum would kill anyone without one, but an unlucky visitor to the surface without protection wouldn’t be dying of the cold or heat, they’d be dying of vacuum exposure and asphyxiation.

“What’s the planet like, Astrocartography?” Jason asked curiously.

“The planet is about half the size of Karis,” the officer replied, looking back at him. “It has no atmosphere, so we’ll be visiting the surface in armor. The planet orbits at a distance of 24 million kathra from the star, has an orbital year of 11.63 standard days, and has a rotational velocity of 31.323 hours per local day. Surface temperatures everywhere but the polar regions are within life-sustaining tolerance, but the planet has no magnetic field, so exposure without armor or a radiation-proof E-suit will have to be minimized.”

“No magnetic field, that explains why it has no atmosphere,” Jyslin mused. “It got blown away by the solar wind.”

“Most likely,” Jason agreed.

The ship entered orbit around the planet, and Jason was one of the lucky ones in the KV-130 personnel dropship that went down to the planet’s surface. He wasn’t the first one to set foot on a planet in another galaxy, that was Myleena—her engines, her honor—but Jason got to be third, behind Miya. Jyslin came down behind him, and Emia was behind her, followed by about 60 others, members of Project F and the ship’s command crew as

camera pods recorded the event for posterity. Jason knelt down and ran his armored fingers through the dry alien soil of this exogalactic planet, feeling its texture thanks to the sensor mesh in his gauntlets. The soil was sandy, gritty, which told him that there *was* an atmosphere on this planet before it was stripped away by the star's solar wind, since it was wind and water action that produced this kind of fine sandy soil. If it was produced by multiple meteor strikes, it would be more like a handful of tiny glassy pellets, or a fine powder

"There used to be water here, and an atmosphere," Myleena noted, her voice coming in over local gravband, picking up a weathered sedimentary rock. "Look."

"Yup, that looks like a rock you'd find in a riverbed," Jason agreed. "This is what Mars would have eventually looked like had the Suralles not terraformed it. A planet with weathered rocks and soil without an atmosphere to further weather it."

"Incredible," Miya breathed, picking up another rounded rock. "I think I'm going to keep this."

"After microbiology makes sure it's safe, Captain," the project team doctor called. "Everyone remember that, everything here has to go through bioscans, and we'll have to go through decontamination when we get back to the ship. There might be microbes living in the soil, and our handheld equipment may not be able to detect it."

"It's warm enough," Jason said, looking up at the red star in the very curious sky. On the horizon, as one looked away from the Alybdis galaxy, there was nothing but *blackness*, but looking towards the galaxy showed other stars. That was because this star was sitting on the very rim of its galaxy, and this planet was currently outward from the galaxy in its orbital track around the star. When it was inward, the night sky would be full of stars, but when it was where it was now, outward, the night sky would be nothing but utter blackness. "And there are some microbes that can survive in a vacuum."

"I can scan the rock right now, Captain, but it won't be conclusive," the doctor said, offering his hand for it. She handed it to him, and he set it down on the ground and passed his sensor unit over it very slowly.

Can you believe this, love? We're in another galaxy, Jyslin sent in wonder, looking around. Since she was wearing her helmet with the large faceplate, he could see the child-like awe on her face.

I know, it's almost too much to believe, he agreed. *To think that everything past that star is completely unknown to us, just waiting for us to explore it, to learn about it. Now I know how the Kimdori feel.*

Jyslin laughed. *When we give them the drives, we may never see them again. They may depopulate Kimdori Prime in their mad rush to go explore.*

I can't disagree with that, he laughed in agreement. *Denmother will have to fight to keep enough Kimdori on their homeworld to keep it from falling into ruin. And the ones getting left behind won't be happy about it.*

They stayed on the surface for nearly two hours. The large group ranged out a bit and explored the flat plain selected as their landing site—so they could easily keep visual sight on each other and the ship—and looked around. Miya found what had to have been a streambed at one time, filled with rounded, smoothed rocks, and Jyslin found a piece of obsidian, volcanic glass, in a small crater in the loose, sandy soil that hinted that it landed there after being ejected from a crater formed by a meteor strike. Without weathering effects, the obsidian and the small pockmark it made in the soil had been unaltered since the obsidian landed, which might have been millions of years ago, or might have been last week, there was no way to easily tell. The medical team found no microbes in the soil, making this a sterile area, but that didn't mean that they'd get out of having to decontaminate. There might be forms of life their scanners didn't pick up, or wouldn't see as life, so they would take no chances. All their samples would be sealed both to prevent contamination by the ship's internal atmosphere and also to keep anything their scans might have missed inside the sample containers, and the souvenirs everyone was picking up would be bagged, tagged, and given to the finders once they were thoroughly investigated to make sure they were safe. That meant that Miya would eventually get her rock, and Jyslin would get her piece of obsidian. Jason picked up a few mementos for himself, the kids, Miaari, Kiaari, Kemaari, Jinaami, and Zaa, ending up with nearly 20 konn of some pretty rocks, several of them multicolored, and even a fairly large piece of quartz crystal

he found in the streambed. That was going on his desk back at the White House.

Just before they left, they gathered for the wreath laying. Myleena did the honors, taking the large wreath, made of synthetic materials and artificial *meys* so it would stand up to exposure to the solar wind, and set it on its stand set up not far from the dropship. Under the wreath was an inscription in Faey, [Placed In The Cause of Science and the Hope for Peace Among All Beings. Placed by the Crew of the KMS *Legion* of the House of Karinne, 7 Kiraa 4404.] They took several holopics of the wreath, of various people standing beside it in different combinations, and then they were done. They all piled back into the dropship after stowing their samples, which would keep the exobiology and exogeology people on the ship happy for *months*, and the pilots lifted off and headed back for the ship.

But it wasn't as easy as just landing and disembarking. They landed in a special hazmat bay on the ship and then underwent nearly an hour of decontamination, where every square tikra of their external armor surface and joints were thoroughly cleaned, scanned, cleaned again, then scanned again. Then they took off the armor and went through another round of decontamination just in case something on the surface of the armor got onto them while they were taking it off. When Jason finally walked out of the decon bay, he felt almost like cheese raked over a grater a few times. And as soon as he walked out, Aya held up the breastplate of his second suit of armor they'd brought, so he went from armored to naked and right back to armored. He returned to the bridge with Miya, Myleena, Emia, and Jyslin., and as soon as they were there, Miya was back to all business. "Report," she called.

"All ship operations are normal, Captain," her XO, Commander Halia Shelanne, answered. "Astrocartography is nearly finished with their local scans, and all hyperspace probes are on their way back to the ship. We should have all probes back on board in ten minutes. Scans are nearly complete."

"Anything interesting to report?"

"We've located some unusual energy fluctuations at a star on the far side of the sector," her sensor officer replied. "It might be indicative of a low technology civilization."

“Life?”

“We think so, sir,” she answered. “We’re detecting some unusual EM signatures. They might be old style EM transmissions, like what the Terrans use for on-planet communications.”

“That’s pre-spacefaring,” Miya mused. “No offense, Jason,” she added lightly.

“None taken, you insufferable arrogant Faey bitch,” he replied playfully, which made her laugh. So did half the bridge crew.

“How far is that star from our current location?”

“A little over eight minutes by standard jump engines, sir,” the navigator answered. “We have detailed scans of the space between here and there. It would be a safe jump.”

“Not today,” Miya said. “We’re not here to investigate possible alien life, and this mission has very specific objectives. Maybe the next time we come here we’ll go take a look, but not this time. Navigator, go ahead plot a jump out far enough into deep space to safely jump back to Arrival Point Delta in mode three.”

“Aye sir,” she replied.

“Comm two, upload all our sensor data and operational logs back to KMS command via BG1,” she added, glancing at her bank of 10 comm officers. “And point that possible civilization out to them for future investigation.”

“Aye sir,” came the response.

“Are we suffering any relativity delay using BG1?” Jyslin asked curiously.

“None, Jys,” Myleena answered. “Since it’s based on biogenic commune, and that’s a form of telepathy, it transcends time and space. Now the transmission’s content can be affected by exaggerated time dilation caused by the Flat Space Effect if the ship’s out in intergalactic space, but the actual transmissions between Karis and the ship are in real time. Just really weird.” She laughed. “When we did our first test, Jason moved and sounded like he was in slow motion.”

segment of the trip. As you know, you can't really course correct in hyperspace more than just the slightest nudge in any direction, and that might not be enough to get back on course."

"So, some major upgrades to our entire navigation system are gonna be needed to use these drives efficiently," Jason surmised.

"Yup, and I've already got some people on it," Myleena answered. "But that's just tweaking how the nav system does things. The computers themselves have the computing power necessary to do the job. It's the software that needs upgrading."

"Not my department," Jason declared.

"Yeah, we know how much you suck at coding," Myleena winked.

"At least it's not TEL."

"I wouldn't let you within ten kathra of that project team if it was TEL, your epic awfulness would taint the whole thing."

"So, I take it we're going to be setting navigation beacons to aid the nav computers?" Jyslin asked.

"Eventually yeah, but we're not setting beacons anywhere we haven't already explored," Jason said. "I don't want an unknown civilization to stumble across the beacons. They may consider them hostile."

"And any beacons we do put out will only hold stock Confederate tech in them. No way are we leaving biogenics out there for someone to find," Myleena added.

"If you two are done kissing each other, we're about to jump," Miya said lightly.

That jump was about twenty minutes in standard hyperspace, and they spent that time chatting with Myleena and Emia while they watched the engine outputs on their engineering board. Despite their staring, the engines operated perfectly, and delivered them back to Karis at standard jump distance about five hours after they left.

Five hours to make a round trip to another *galaxy*, three hours of which was basically glorified sightseeing. They certainly had entered a new age... the *intergalactic* age. And Jason and Jyslin had had the honor and privilege

to be on the first Karinne ship that achieved that feat. “Secure for normal space operations,” Miya barked. “Navigator, make for Kosigi, standard approach.”

“Aye sir. Setting course 214 mark 0, one half.”

“Comm one, contact Kosigi and let them know we’re home,” Miya called.

“I already have Kosigi on the comm, sir,” she answered. “They’ll send us approach vectors when we pass the inner marker.”

“Very good.”

It was a strange feeling entering Kosigi, knowing where they’d been and what they’d done, especially since nobody knew it but Dellin and the ops center. There was no fanfare, no greeting ships to escort them in after the groundbreaking achievement, just Kosigi doing what Kosigi did on any given day. Nobody knew just where they’d gone or how momentous that trip was, and if Jason had his way, no one *would* for a while, not even the citizens of his own house. A secret unspoken remains a secret after all, and the more who know a secret, the less of a secret it is. They had to keep this under tight wraps until they were *ready* to reveal it to the house, which would in turn reveal it to the Confederation. Despite Miaari’s and Siyhaa’s best efforts, someone in the house would leak it to someone outside over CivNet, and then that knowledge would spread across the galaxy. So, the dock workers and logistics crews, the pusher pilots and KMS crews on shore leave, they had no idea that the heavy cruiser passing by had just returned from a trip to *Alybdis*.

And the crew and team members on board the *Legion* would say not one word about it. They had the holopics, they had their souvenirs, or at least they would once exobiology certified them as clean and released them from quarantine, and when the time came, their accomplishment *would* be known. But until that time when the house was ready to reveal that secret, a secret it would stay. When they disembarked for some shore leave before the next test, they’d say they were just doing some testing of some upgrades, which wasn’t all that unusual in the KMS. The *Legion* wasn’t the first ship yanked out of mothballs and upgraded with some new technology and then tested.

They didn't talk about it until they were back home, back on the strip after the frigate *Emaran* dropped them off, and it wasn't just Jason and Jyslin. Aya and the guards discussed what they saw, what they experienced as Jason changed from armor to shorts and tee, and the one common observation was that the planet didn't *seem* exotic, only its *location* was exotic. That planet wasn't all that amazing, but what made the experience amazing was how they got to it. It just went to show that even different galaxies had similar physics, similar conditions, and that produced things that would seem *familiar* to them, even if the condition through which they came to be was far removed from what they considered normal.

Gora's law in its ultimate expression.

I'm glad they put the sensor mesh in my armor, Dera mused. *It wouldn't have been half as immersive if I hadn't been able to run my fingers through the soil and feel it.*

Yeah, that did make it seem much more real, much more like you were really there, Jyslin agreed as she came out of the bathroom, delightfully topless, in the act of tying her long auburn hair back into a ponytail. She saw where Jason was looking and grinned, even waggled her bare breasts a little for his viewing pleasure. *I wonder when we can pick up our rocks.*

I doubt it'll take them more than a couple of days to clear them, Jason predicted.

Pick what up? Symone asked, sending from her house across the deck.

We went on a little trip today, Symone, Jason answered. *To a star outside the galaxy.*

And you didn't invite me? Dick.

I'm not taking you anywhere unless you're on a leash, he retorted, which made Jyslin burst out laughing. *Besides, we can't take everyone on a trip like that. If something went wrong, someone competent has to be here to keep things going until they manage to rescue us. So, how did the qualifying tests go?*

We had twelve passes, eight fails, she replied, referring to the final qualification exam for Titan riggers. That was about average for the course, because Titans were *that complex*. Only about 15% of Titan riggers passed

the exam on the first attempt. The average Titan rigger passed it on the third attempt, and a rigger could try to qualify five times before they washed out and had to retake the course from the beginning. *The next test is in eight days, so I'll be doing some one on one instruction with the candidates for the next takir. This is gonna be my last class before I'm put on deployment. Why can't they put a merge pod in the house, anyway? I don't want to have to go all the way out to Joint Base Alpha to drive my rig.*

That's too bad, Jason sent firmly. What happens if you get shot down and suffer a bad case of dump shock? You have to be where the techs and doctors can respond quickly, and that means you do your driving at Joint Base Alpha.

So much confidence in me, she all but pouted mentally.

Even Kyva's had her rig blown out from under her, and if you don't recall, Justin Taggart was nearly killed at the Second Battle of Karis, Jason retorted. Even the best can get shot down, love. Being good is not a shield of invulnerability from bad luck.

Well...I guess so.

Now stop being silly and bring Lyra and Terry over while we wait for Tim to get off work.

They settled in for a quiet evening once Tim arrived, but that only meant that work was going to hunt him down...and it was no exception. He had to remove himself from a game of Terran *Monopoly* with Rann, Shya, Danelle, and Zach to answer a call from Cybi, and once he was up in his home office, Zaa walked in, which surprised him a little. "I didn't know you were here, Denmother."

"I was over in Jaxtra," she replied. "I just received some reports and thought it would be more efficient to just come over."

"The scouts in Andromeda?" he asked hopefully, and when she nodded, he gave a big smile. "I've been waiting for this."

"As have I," she replied, sitting down in the chair facing his desk. She held up her arm, which had a memory band. "May I access your house computer?"

"You have access."

Seconds later, a hologram of Andromeda appeared between them, a three dimensional one that fit the entire galaxy over the desk. “My children have finished their initial assessment of the situation in Andromeda,” she began, causing the view to zoom in a bit. “Firstly, they’ve determined that the Syndicate controls roughly 78% of Andromeda. The initial rough estimate is that they control nearly thirty million terrestrial systems and nearly five times that number in mining operations, deep space colonies, and other permanent settlements that don’t really qualify as planetary-scale populations.”

“That seems...I dunno, *small* given Andromeda is even bigger than our galaxy. There are nearly ten times that number of charted terrestrial systems in the Milky Way.”

“I know, but we suspect that small number is due to the fact that their entire galaxy has been at war for nearly six thousand years,” she said dryly. “It’s hard to colonize new planets or build new deep space stations when the enemy destroys them. Then there are the atrocities, where entire planet populations are wiped out, and so on and so on.”

“Well, that’s sobering,” Jason grunted.

“Truly,” she agreed. “The long-time border between the two empires is a gigantic wasteland of destroyed planets and debris fields from past battles, nearly *five sectors* across, roughly across the center of Andromeda along the edges of the core. And the Syndicate began committing wholesale genocide against Consortium holdings they conquered to expedite the war against them, to win it faster. After all, it is more *cost efficient* to wipe out a hostile civilian population than it is to try to assimilate them into your government, and the Syndicate puts profit above all else,” she told him, which made him nearly pale. Just how many beings had died in their war? *Trillions? Quadrillions?* “But the sheer scope of the resources that the Syndicate has at its command does become clear when you think about it.”

“Yeah. Building one of those super-ships must be barely a fraction of the daily revenue stream for a government that controls thirty *million* systems.”

She nodded. “My children have identified and located the capitol system of the Syndicate,” she said, and the hologram zoomed way in so fast

that it nearly made Jason dizzy. It focused in on a system of a blue supergiant with some 27 planets in its system, then the 8th planet in the system blinked, a planet that almost immediately made him think of Coruscant from the *Star Wars* movies. It was a planet without green, a planet where buildings rose up from all available land, and land covered 82% of the planet's surface. What water there was there was an unhealthy-looking greenish color instead of blue. The city covered the entire *planet*. "This is E Chaio, the Syndicate capitol, home of the headquarters of all 132 mega-corporations that makes up the Board of Directors. That is their governing body," she explained. "It is a corporate plutocracy, where the CEO of one of those megacorps has a seat on the Board, which makes all decisions. My children have acquired penetration of E Chaio's local communication grid, holding their low-priority and civilian communications, and their public domain computer network, much like our CivNet."

"Well, now I know where to send the toys," Jason mused, which made her chuckle huskily.

"We've done a bit more than that. Jason, my children managed to make an appointment to confer with one of the lower ranking executives within one of the megacorps," she said with a slight smile. "They have no idea who made the appointment, they think it was a meeting to discuss the sale of a moon in one of Andromeda's rim sectors. They used that deception to learn a great deal about Syndicate government culture and gain access to the megacorp's computer."

Jason laughed. "Seriously? They made an *appointment*?"

"It wasn't as difficult as you might think," she said dryly. "But we'll come back to that information in a bit. My children have analyzed what data they've gathered so far, and from what they can see, the Syndicate is carrying out its prosecution of the war. Virtually their entire military arsenal, some three *million* vessels, is pushing the Consortium's back against the wall," she explained, and the map shifted to show Consortium territory, which was a small wedge of sectors directly facing the Milky Way. That was why they were able to launch so many ships towards their galaxy, and why the Syndicate had had to cross hostile territory to get their expeditionary fleet to the Milky Way. "The Consortium is trying to hold

them along this line while they concentrate all possible ships and vessels here, in this system, preparing to evacuate Andromeda and come to our galaxy. From what my children have observed, the Consortium will be defeated within six years. The transmissions they've intercepted, since we cracked Consortium codes, hint that the Consortium is discussing formal surrender to the Syndicate to save those they cannot evacuate, seeking to join the Board as the 133rd corporation, to become part of *their* system, while the refugees start over here in our galaxy and rebuild. That would give the Syndicate complete control of the entire galaxy of Andromeda, and all the resources it contains."

"And they'll use that to boil out of Andromeda and invade all the satellite galaxies around it, as well as send forces over here, since we're the second largest galaxy in the cluster," Jason growled. "We have the most resources for them to exploit."

"Correct, cousin," she nodded. "The Consortium kept them contained and engaged for six thousand years, but now the Syndicate has defeated their ancient foe, and the only direction in which they can look to continue their quest to possess wealth is to start invading other galaxies. Their greed is truly staggering in its scope. They don't wish to *conquer* the Milky Way so much as they desire to *own* it. Purely for the *wealth*. My sociologists theorize that they may stay contained in Andromeda for perhaps sixty to seventy more years, until they completely disburse the spoils of Consortium territory to their member corporations and complete the assimilation process. But without anything left to acquire, to *own*, in Andromeda, they will start looking to possess that which lies outside their galaxy. And most of my experts agree, they will start with *us*. We are the largest galaxy they can reach, and we represent viable material worth in the empires and technology they know exist here, and our galaxy is the logical staging point for the invasion of all the satellite galaxies around us, since we lie at the center of the galactic formation on this side of the cluster. They will come for us, and they will not stop until they *own* us the way they *own* Andromeda. They don't have to waste years and resources searching for valuable planets to conquer when they already know where quite a few are."

"Over here," Jason grunted.

She nodded. “We are the most lucrative target, even though we aren’t the closest, because they *know* there is much here worth owning. The fact that we defeated the Consortium expedition tells them we have technology, we have assets, and that makes us *valuable*.”

“Well, we know where they are now, so we can do something about that,” Jason said blandly. “We’ll have to teach them why the Terrans call greed one of the seven deadly sins.”

She grinned at him.

“Speaking of which, how much equipment did the scouts receive from you? We sent them a pretty big package yesterday, I haven’t read a report yet on how much made it to the other side in one piece.”

“A substantial amount, both probes and other surveillance equipment, and a large percentage of your 3D weaponry survived the transit, nearly 43% of what you sent. Enough to make a few very impressive points.”

“Let’s not tip them off that we can hit them until we can make it *hurt*,” he said. “Just blowing up a couple of freighters somewhere doesn’t have the same impact as shutting down all ship movements in an entire sector. What we need most right now is more information.”

“And my children will get it for us,” Zaa said confidently. “Now, as to that appointment. My children managed to learn a great deal about how the megacorp runs by enticing their contact into gossip. It as much as we suspected, a corporate culture that is as ruthless within as it is without. Assassinations among executives are not uncommon, for killing one’s supervisor is seen as a viable means to climb the corporate ladder. So long as they don’t *catch* you, that is. A successful assassination shows that you have skill and potential and is rewarded with promotion. Failed assassinations result in *termination*,” she said dryly. “We managed to gain entry into their computer network through that appointment. The executive sent my children a computer passcode to a public domain archive to review the moon’s file, and they used that to gain penetration into their system. Their public domain archives are connected to their secure systems, and my children had little trouble hacking into their system.”

“Well done!” Jason said with a laugh. “What have they got so far?”

“They’ll send that information later, once they have time to explore the megacorp’s mainframe,” she answered. “As for us, my children are setting up a temporary base of operations close to Andromeda’s core, deep enough that the radiation masks it from long range sensors and poses a lethal threat to anything that might come after them,” she said, and the hologram of Andromeda zoomed in, then blinked over a star system very close to the center of the galaxy. It was well within the Kimdori’s resistance to radiation, that point where the radiation ripped their bodies apart from the pure energy radiation. It was at that point that no radiation resistant species could withstand it. “They have salvaged an intact battleship from the debris fields of the many battles between the two empires to be able to fashion a temporary outpost. The ship is an old Syndicate battleship nearly completely intact; my children report that the Syndicate crew was killed by depressurization and loss of life support, and the battleship drifted out of the battle area without being destroyed. My children placed a stealth field generator within it to hide it from sensors, towed it to the destination system, and placed it in orbit around the planet. They report they have just finished installing sufficient equipment to turn it into an orbital base and installed sufficient infrastructure to make the battleship a viable orbital space station. They have power, life support, and communications back to homeworld, but did not repair any of the ship’s technology, just in case they might inadvertently activate a homing beacon or stumble across some other device that alerts the Syndicate that the battleship has been commandeered. In fact, they are gutting it of all Syndicate technology both to remove that threat and also to study the technology. So, Jason, we now have a permanent base of operations within Andromeda, in a location where the radiation of the galactic core hides it from long range sensors, the SCM unit hides it from any possible high-sensitivity sensor sweeps, and the core radiation makes the entire system lethal to other forms of known life except Jakkans, Kimdori, and Generations. It is just within your radiation tolerance limit. They may never think to look for anything in a place where nothing can survive, a tactic we have successfully used many times over here.”

“Clever,” Jason said with a nod. “You need to give the KMS the coordinates so we can send them some equipment via wormhole.”

“I’ve already done so, before I came to see you,” she nodded.

“Good deal,” he said. “And it was damn smart of them to put it on a salvaged battleship. That makes the whole thing *mobile*, as long as the three scout ships can tow it. And since they towed it there, they obviously can.”

“That is exactly why they used it,” she agreed. “They report that there is little of use within the battleship, but they are studying the technology present within it if only for the value of the knowledge. The ship is roughly six thousand years old, so its systems and equipment are extremely low-tech by current standards. However, it is worth studying just to see what they *used* to use.”

“I bet the engines in it are barely viable.”

“Yes, with a relativity delay so bad that they were barely faster than FTL drives,” she affirmed. “But it does tell us that six thousand years ago, they *had* hyperspace jump engine technology. And that is valuable information.”

“True enough. But still, well done, Zaa. With a permanent base over there, someplace we can stockpile equipment, but something we can *move* if necessary, it gives us options. The scouts don’t have to carry everything on their ships.”

“We should consider something, cousin. We should upgrade a ship with CMS to a translight drive so it can deliver critical supplies and equipment to our forward outpost, guaranteeing that it arrives, as well as securing a means by which we can evacuate my children from Andromeda if it becomes needful. It would also give us the ability to get infiltrators and Gamekeepers into Andromeda to begin working our way into their organizations, specialists with skills that our forward scouts lack.”

“That’s...a damn good idea.” He looked to the side, and a flat hologram appeared to the side of his desk showing Dellin’s face. “Dellin.”

“Yes, Jason?”

“Did they finish building the new *drive* for the frigate?” he stressed.

“I—hold on.” He touched his interface, then nodded. “It’s finished and ready for installation.”

“Then have them install it *immediately*,” he ordered. “I want that ship operational as soon as possible. I’ll tell Myli I want the ship activated, so

she'll get with Juma and get a crew assembled for it."

"I'll send down the orders to the refit dock," he answered. "But it'll have to wait. They're in the last stages of installing the *drive* on the *Aurora*. I think they'll be done with it by tomorrow morning."

"Can the destroyer be fitted with a CMS?" Zaa asked.

Jason shook his head. "It's too big. Scout ships are the largest ships that can run a CMS, which are about the same size as frigates, and that's way smaller than destroyers," he answered. "Dellin, go down there personally and kick people in the ass until they get the destroyer finished, then have them get that frigate in there and start the refit the instant the destroyer is off the dock. In fact, have them start prepping the frigate for the refit while it's waiting for the dock to open up. I want that frigate operational *yesterday*."

"I'll take care of it, Jason," Dellin assured him.

"Good man. Send me status reports by the hour until the frigate's done."

"I will." Then the hologram winked out.

"I'm curious why a CMS has a size restriction."

"Power," he answered. "I *could* install a CMS on a destroyer, but the CMS would drain so much power from the ship to run it that it would have to take the engines offline, and that kinda defeats the purpose of having it. That's why frigates can't raise their shields or fire their weapons with the CMS running, the CMS drains way too much power."

"Ah."

"What else have you got, Denmother?"

"Just more pestering about the status of the translight drive testing," she smiled. "We are *extremely* eager to get them, Jason."

"So are we, Denmother, but let's give Myli the time and space she needs to make sure we don't blow up our entire fleets by accident after upgrading," he replied, which made her chuckle. "What we *should* do is bring in some Kimdori ship classes and have the CBIMs design engines for them based on the current data, then start testing them. Since you'll be using them too, we should be testing them on more than KMS ships."

“That is a very good idea,” Zaa agreed. “I will send the newest ship of each class in our inventory to Kosigi for the upgrades.”

“Cybi,” he called, and immediately, her hologram manifested in the room. “Were you listening?”

“When am I not listening, Jason?” she asked winsomely.

“Then you know what we want you to do.”

“I’ll get the CBIMs to donate processing power for the task immediately,” she nodded. *“We should have a design for a standard Kimdori destroyer class vessel ready for initial assessment in approximately ten hours. If the design passes inspection, it will depend on Trenirk as to how fast it can be built.”*

“That’s my girl,” Jason smiled.

“Flirting will get you nowhere with me, Jason. I don’t even have a physical body,” she winked, then her hologram winked out.

“Hmm, there’s an idea,” he mused. Maybe she *should* have one. She’d be just as capable of merging to it as Jason was the bionoid in his workshop. That way, she could *use* that swimming pool at her facility.

“What?” Zaa asked.

“Giving Cybi a physical body.”

“Jason. That is *Tim* levels of debased perversion.”

He burst into helpless laughter. “Not for *that*, just so she could have some fun with it. You know, experience sensations based on more than what her hologram can interact with, from a unit calibrated to provide sensory data based on real bodies. Be able to walk around without attracting attention and interact with people who don’t know she’s a CBIM.”

“Ah. That makes much more sense.”

“I’ll talk to Rook about it. I’m sure he has some designs for a female bionoid.”

It turned out, Rook did in fact have design specs for a female bionoid. Jason had to resort to a little subterfuge to talk to him about it, though, because he wanted it to be a surprise for Cybi. He sent Rook a hand-written

letter, written outside of any holocam, which would let Cybi see it, and he responded by coming over to the house that evening after dinner, a few hours after Zaa returned to Kimdori Prime. He sat down in the lounge beside Jason's as he enjoyed the late evening breeze, and after Jason made sure that there were no camera pods around, he broached the idea.

"It won't surprise her, Jason, since I've discussed bionoid surrogates with them already," Rook warned. *"We just haven't built any."*

"Well, I want you to build them, one for each of them, as well as one for Coma," he replied. "Cybi's, Cylan's, and Coma's will be easiest, since her face is something she's not going to change, Coma has a different face unique from the others, and Cylan identifies as male. But Cyra and Cynna will need a little physical customization so they're not just duplicates of Cybi," he mused. "Cyvanne, well, she'll just be stuck with whatever you build for her, since she changes her appearance so often. I think not only would it be educational for them to have bionoids, they might enjoy the sensation of having a physical body that is *all theirs*. Bionoids built specifically for them, set up so *only* they can merge to them, something that makes them feel unique. And, something they can use to walk around Karsa without being so recognizable."

"I can do that, easily," Rook assured him. *"And I can have Cybi's bionoid ready by morning. I have the specs for a female bionoid body uploaded to my manufacturing unit already. I'll alter the specs to most closely match the appearance and physical measurements Cybi uses for her hologram."*

"Who got you on about female bionoids, anyway?"

"Kumi. She wanted a bionoid after she heard about yours."

"Fuckin' Kumi," he sighed, which made Rook chuckle. "Did you build it for her?"

"Of course, it gave me plenty to do overnight last takir. But I made her pay for it, both the materials and my time. She's not a 3D member, I can't just write that off as lab work. It cost her 25,000 credits between the materials and my fee. Bionoid materials aren't cheap, and neither is my time."

Jason burst out laughing. “That’ll make the others think before they start pestering you,” he grinned. “And let me guess, if Kumi wanted it, it’s, ah, *fully operational*.”

“*You know Kumi well,*” Rook said gravely, which made Jason laugh again. “*She sees it as a big experiment, she wants to see just how complete the experience is. Plus, she thinks that surrogate sex is the next big thing in simsense porn, since she has control over what goes on instead of simply experiencing a recorded simsense. Merge to a bionoid capable of the full sensory spectrum and built with fully functional genitalia, have your fun the way you want to have fun with a male bionoid designed to be as handsome as possible, maybe or maybe not driven by a man, go about your business when you’re done. And the owner of the surrogate bodies gets a nice big fee for the service. She related that even at 25,000 credits a bionoid, she could make them pay for themselves inside two years. Everything after that would be pure profit.*”

“Good god, that woman is even more disgusting than Tim,” Jason complained, which made Rook laugh.

“*Come by Project G tomorrow morning, I’ll unveil it then.*”

“Sure.”

It was nice to actually drop a surprise on Cybi.

Somehow, Rook had done it. He’d built the body and got it over to the research facility on Virga without Cybi finding out—that was impressive—so when he called for Cybi to manifest a hologram just after Jason arrived, she looked honestly curious when he removed the sheet covering the bionoid, which was laying on a work table in a corner of the research lab. It was nude, but unlike the pseudo-nude holograms Cybi used, this one had full detail, with nipples, pubic hair, and labia just barely visible from Jason’s vantage point. It looked *exactly* like Cybi’s hologram given material form, except the skin was Faey blue and the eyes were a very lovely shade of violet, as the original Sora Karinne’s had been. The only way the bionoid diverged from Sora was the color of the hair, which Rook had made so long that it would reach her ankles when she was standing...no doubt to allow her to style it as she pleased. Rook had gone for the hologram’s silver hair

color over Sora's original hair color. *"What is this? A bionoid based on Sora Karinne?"*

"It's *your* bionoid," Jason told her. "Rook built it for you last night."

"It's much like Jason's, Cybi, capable of full sensory experience as if you had a flesh and blood body," Rook told her. *"And like his, it can imitate certain biological processes to appear alive. This unit is even capable of simulating urination,"* he said evenly. *"My most recent upgrade. I'd appreciate it if you test it for me, I may add it to my and Jason's bionoids with future upgrades. And like Jason's bionoid, your bionoid is armed with monomolecular blades and tetrayon wave weapons in the arms, for self-defense."*

"But why build this for me?" she asked.

"So you can actually *swim* in your swimming pool, silly," Jason told her. "Plus, I thought you might like the idea of being able to walk down the streets of Karsa without everyone knowing who you are."

She gave him a look, then touched her upper chest with her fingertips. *"I am truly touched that you would think of me, Jason,"* she told him with a smile. *"It is a thoughtful and lovely gift, and yes, I think I would very much like to know what it is like to swim in my pool."*

"Well, woman? The biogenic unit's online. Jump into it and take it for a test drive."

She smiled, then almost immediately, the bionoid's violet eyes blinked and lost that glassy mechanical stare, focusing and becoming lucid, taking on awareness. It sat up smoothly, easily, belying the mechanical strength hiding inside that very Faey-like exterior, and it again touched its fingertips to its chest—*her* chest. "It's...it's very different from my sensory scanners, and even from the Rockers and other bionoids I've controlled as part of Rook's experiments," she noted, looking at Jason. "You look different through simulated eyes, Jason."

"Hopefully I'm not ugly," he smiled, which made her laugh.

"No, of course not. It's just a much different level of detail, and my sense of depth perception is different, that's all," she said, swinging her legs over the edge of the table. She stood up gracefully, solidly, and Jason

noticed that Rook hadn't skimped on making the body as real as possible, for the bionoid's breasts jiggled slightly from the movement. She moved to and fro, testing her balance and the range of motion of the bionoid, then stepped well away from him and Rook and extended the monomolecular blades in both arms, testing their operation. She retracted them quickly, then tested the tetryon wave weapons by extending the crystals in the heels of the palms of the hands briefly before retracting them. "This is quite interesting. I've never processed sensory data quite like this before."

"The level of detail is impressive, Rook," she said through her hologram as her hologram studied the bionoid. "If I didn't know it was a bionoid, I would think it was a living Faey."

"That's the objective of this branch of the bionoid project, Cybi, to create as lifelike a bionoid as possible. Each bionoid built and tested refines the process and produces better results."

"I hope you like it," Jason said.

"I do," she said, stepping back over to them and putting a hand on his shoulder, then she slid her fingers up and down his armor. "This feels much different to fingers than it does to my hologram. Interesting," she said, pursing her lips as she traced her fingers over the house crest on his shoulder.

"I made sure the body has the same buoyancy as a flesh body for the purposes of swimming, and the experience should be virtually the same as if the bionoid were a flesh and blood body," Rook supplied. "The lungs within will do well simulating changes of buoyancy when the bionoid holds its breath for an even more natural experience. But since you can't drown, you don't have to worry about potential danger as you learn to swim the natural way."

She laughed. "Yes, that's a good thing," she agreed.

"You do need one thing," Jason said, touching his cheek as he looked the bionoid up and down.

"What is that?"

"Clothes."

She smiled at him. “Not on *this* planet I don’t. This is perfectly acceptable for walking down the streets of Karsa,” she said, motioning at her unclad form.

“Well, your opinion will change the first time you walk across a hot sidewalk without shoes. Even without a pain response, you *will* feel the discomfort. That’s the bionoid’s way of telling you you’re doing something that’s not a good idea.”

She gave him a curious look, then chuckled softly. “Now *that* is a point. And I suppose, it might be *fun* to try out wearing clothes, just for the experience of it. It would give me something to spend my money on,” she mused.

“Just don’t go nuts, I don’t want to come into your facility to do a PMI and find piles of clothes stuffed into every closet and strewn all over the core room,” Jason said dryly, which made her laugh. “So, why don’t you ride with me back to Karsa and go have a little fun?” he offered. “You can drop in on Jyslin over at the front office and shock the hell out of her. She has no idea we built you a bionoid.”

Cybi’s bionoid body laughed brightly. “Oh, I must do that!” she said with an evil smile.

“You can borrow some of my clothes in the office to wear for your shopping trip,” Jason said. “I have a whole dresser full of clothes, but they’re not your size. The shirt, that won’t matter that much, but you won’t really fit very well in any of my pants, they’re men’s pants. You won’t find them very comfortable,” he speculated, looking at the bionoid assessively. “I’m sure Chirk can dig up some pants and shoes for you, that Kizzik can find almost anything you ask her for. She’s gonna need an interface, Rook. We have any spare ones laying around here?”

“I don’t think so, but I can go look.”

“I don’t need one.”

“Yes, but if you’re not wearing one, you’re gonna attract attention. *Everyone* here wears an interface, Cybi, except Rook. And it’s pretty clear just looking at him why he doesn’t.”

She laughed. “That’s true,” she admitted. “I’ll arrange to have one delivered to your office and I’ll pick it up when I arrive.”

“Sounds like a plan,” he said, then he was a bit surprised when she gave him a hug, which he felt thanks to the sensory mesh in his armor, felt that her simulated flesh was warm to the touch, like a flesh body. He chuckled and patted her on the back, and it felt just like real skin covering real flesh. He even felt the ridge of her spine through his armored fingers.

“Thank you, Jason. Your gift is very thoughtful.”

“You’re welcome, Cybi. Damn, Rook, you did a great job,” he said, sliding a finger up her backbone. “Even her vertebrae feel natural.”

“Thank you,” he said modestly.

“Now get ready to build five more.”

Rook laughed, and so did Cybi. “The others are already pestering the hell out of him, as you’d say it, Jason, even Coma,” Cybi smiled as she looked up at him. “He might shut off his biogenic link at this point.”

Jason burst out laughing, and patted Cybi on the back again. “We planned for this. As soon as the others work out how they want their bionoids to look, I’ll have the specs uploaded to the main facility and Rook can have the factory build them, that way they can get them faster.”

“That’s a very good idea,” Rook agreed. *“They can build all five inside two hours, where I can only build one every ten hours or so.”*

“And to save the factory a lot of heartburn, Cyvanne only gets *one* bionoid, so she’d better pick a look and be ready to stick with it for a while.”

“That is entirely unfair, Jason!” Cyvanne complained through the nearby console.

“I can design a more modular bionoid for you, Cyvanne, one with a detachable faceplate and removable scalp so you can change your appearance and hair,” Rook promised. *“But you may have to wait until tomorrow to get it. I can’t do the design changes right now. I am at work, and the bionoid design is a leisure activity.”*

“That sounds intriguing. Let’s discuss that idea, Rook, and by the time you have time to do the designing, we’ll have some solid ideas to make changing the bionoid’s appearance easy. I’m more than happy to wait, if it means I get exactly what I want.”

“We’ve created a monster,” Jason predicted, which made Cybi laugh. “Now, let’s get you to Karsa so you can go on your shopping spree. And what were you saying yesterday about you not having a body?” he asked, patting Cybi on the rear playfully, which made her laugh again and slap him on the shoulder.

“That was not an invitation,” she retorted, which made him laugh.

Cybi was quite distracted as they rode back to Karsa on the Marine corvette *Honor*, touching almost everything, looking around, even smelling things, comparing how different her sensory perception was in a bionoid compared to her usual scanners...which was probably much less precise, and that what made it so interesting to her. Everything looked different, felt different, even smelled different to her, and she was exploring those differences. Chirk really came through when they got back to the office, taking one of Jason’s own *Paladins* tee shirts from the dresser in the small bedroom off his office and coming up with a pair of unsized memory fabric shorts, the one size fits all variety that started out the size of a toddler’s shorts but would stretch to fit anyone for a snug fit that wasn’t too tight, and then slowly return to its original size once taken off. They had to pull the size of Cybi’s feet from Rook’s specs and get someone to deliver a pair of shoes for her, however, and Cybi opted for Terran sneakers, which arrived at the same time as the interface she ordered from storage. When she put it all on, she looked entirely *normal*, like any Faey woman that might be walking around Karsa at that moment. There was absolutely nothing about her that betrayed the fact that she was a bionoid, not a flesh and blood person. She had Jason tie her hair back into a high ponytail that still reached her calves and admired her clothes in the mirror in his bathroom as Jason ordered a government hovercar from the inventory for her to use. She was more than capable of driving it, or operating any vehicle or mecha on the planet, for that matter. It was very easy for her; she’d just take control of its computer and operate it by remote. Since nothing had physical controls anywhere on Karis, it was her way of emulating an interface.

And it wasn't like she was limited by the bionoid in any way. She was still a CBIM, capable of playing in her bionoid while running the entire planet by herself, if she had to. Multitasking was what she was born to do.

"You almost look like a tourist," Jason told her when she came out of the bathroom. She laughed and twirled around, almost showing off for him, then came up to the desk. He laughed when she manifested a hologram and floated around her bionoid as it turned this way and that for the hologram, looking at it from the outside using her sensors, then gave a nod of approval.

"I think I'm going to enjoy this," she said through the hologram, then she looked at Jason with the bionoid and winked. "But don't think it's going to distract me so much I can't do my job, Jason."

"I know, rub the fact that you're capable of a few zillion operations a second in my face," he drawled, which made her smile lightly. "Now go have fun. And save a holorecording of Jyslin's reaction when you drop in on her."

"I will," she smiled through the bionoid, then it walked out of the office, leaving her hologram behind. She sat demurely on the edge of his desk, her favorite place, and Jason sat down and gave a chuckle.

"Well, that was a good way to start the day," he said. "Now let me plow through my inbox. And I think I'm going to have a long talk with Kumi about her utter depravity," he added dryly.

Cybi laughed brightly. *"Good luck fighting that losing battle, Jason,"* she said lightly. *"The only way you're going to change her is if you spay her."*

"You say that like it's not a viable option," he grunted, which made Cybi laugh harder.

Chapter 5

Daira, 20 Kiraa, 4404, Faey Orthodox Calendar

Saturday, 16 June 2018 Terran Standard Calendar

*Daira, 20 Kiraa, year 1329 of the 97th Generation, Karinne
Historical Reference Calendar*

KMS Tianne, orbiting Karis

Jason felt that this was just a little bit ostentatious, but Aya was *fucking* Aya.

Continuing in her incessant need to be the biggest jerk possible, when she planned the security for his trip to Terra for the final Confederate Council summit before the arrival of the Syndicate, she made it abundantly clear that the Grand Duke Karinne was not going to be taken there in any ship *other* than the *Tianne*. It was the biggest, baddest, most kick-ass ship of the line in the Karinne Navy, and as such, it meant that Jason would be afforded maximum protection en route to Terra...a trip that was only going to take about an hour. Aya was so fucking anal about it that she got into a short spat with Lorna over the ship, yanking the ship out of wargames so it could be a taxi, and Lorna wasn't all that appreciative. Jason felt Aya was going into overkill territory, but he'd learned long ago that there were some things that you did not argue with Aya about, and this was one of those things. She would not feel that he was afforded maximum safety and protection on any ship other than the *Tianne*, so good luck convincing her that one of the other command ships or a mark II battleship would be good enough.

She was going to have a *cow* when she found out about a few of Jason's plans.

Palla kissed him on the cheek when he, Jyslin, Rann, Shya, and Yeri stepped off the frigate that had landed in the starboard main bay, all of them

in armor, then escorted them to a large stateroom/waiting room just off the landing bay for just these sorts of things, a convenient and somewhat luxurious sitting area for distinguished passengers. Quite a few command staff from the CCM had been on the ship, and had relaxed in this large, well-appointed stateroom as the ship carried them to their destination. Usually for them, that destination was a task force where they then disembarked to man other ships, while the command staff staying on the *Tianne* wouldn't be waiting in here. It had also carried Dahnai and a few other rulers several times since it was commissioned, Krirara and Kreel more than anyone else. So this stateroom didn't just sit idle. Rann and Shya ran up to the huge window and peered out, running from floor to ceiling and taking up nearly half the wall, as Jason and Jyslin sat down, the guards taking up positions at the hatch and along the walls. There were 24 guards with them on this trip, and they would be supplying protection both for Jason and for the others as they did some shopping and sightseeing while he was in council. Both Jason and Jyslin were feeling a few separation issues from the girls and the twins, but Bethany and Siyae were too young to bring to something like this, and the babies even more so. Ayama, Surin, Maya, and Symone would be taking turns watching them while the rest of the family was on Terra.

That is so cool! Shya sent excitedly as they looked down on Kosigi and Karis, with the moon in front of the planet, blocking the view of Karga and half of Virga. The ship was sitting along the twilight edge of the planet, so both Kosigi and Karis were illuminated by the blue sun of Karis with their other sides shrouded in darkness. It was a very lovely view, Jason had to admit, enough that he had his gestalt snap a photo of it. But Shya wasn't referring to the view of the planet and moon, she was pointing at the capitol ship *Soyanne*, the command ship hovering not far from the window and blocking the view of just about everything below the planet. The mighty command ship was reduced to escort for this short mission, as were the 39 other ships in the task force. The *Soyanne* was the newest command ship added to the fleet, commissioned just three months ago, but three more command ships would be coming off the docks in the next three days. Dellin had busted his figurative ass to get those ships off the docks before the Syndicate arrived and they should finish their shakedowns just in time to fight in the war. Those new command ships would give them a total of eight command ships in the inventory...and they'd be active only for the

war. Admirals out of the command staff would be taking over the ships for the campaign against the Syndicate, and once the war was over, the ships would be temporarily deactivated while new ship captains would be considered for them, and those officers would return to the command center.

It certainly is big, isn't it? Jason agreed as he put his arm around Jyslin, and she sighed a little and snuggled up against him, at least as best she could in her armor.

They don't look that big unless you can see them compared to other ships, Shya sent. *And it looked like a toy compared to this one when we flew in.*

This is the biggest ship in the CCM, kidlet, Jason sent, a bit of pride in his thought. Coma manifested a hologram in the stateroom and floated over to look over the kids' heads. "Hey Coma," Jason greeted. "Ship ready for the taxi run?"

Coma looked over her shoulder at him, her expression amused...and that showed just how far Coma had come since coming online. She had a definite personality now, and she had a very well-developed sense of humor. *"The task force will be starting out for the Stargate in a few moments, as soon as Captain Palla reaches the bridge,"* she answered. *"And what are we looking at here, your Graces?"*

"Hi Coma," Rann said. "We're looking at that command ship."

"That is the Soyanne, being commanded by Admiral Malai," she told them. *"Do you know who it was named after?"*

"Yallia Soyanne," Shya answered, almost immediately.

"Very good, your Grace," Coma said, patting the shoulder of Shya's armor with a holographic hand. *"And why is she important?"*

"She was the first woman in space," Shya said. "Almost seven thousand years ago. First woman to ride a spaceship out of the atmosphere."

"Well done. You know your history, your Grace."

"Mom loves history, so it kinda rubbed off I guess," Shya replied.

“And to think, the Terrans managed that feat only about seventy years ago,” Jason mused. “From slide rules to space travel in less than a century. What a world.”

“That’s what we’re for, love, to educate you barbarians,” Jyslin teased, patting his leg.

“I’ll show you some education when we get back home,” he threatened, which made Rann and Shya laugh.

We’re about to depart, your Graces, Palla sent to the entire room from the bridge, showing off her underestimated skill in telepathy, sending only to those in a defined location, in effect sending to the *room* instead of the people *in* the room. That was not easy, and proved that Palla wasn’t just a powerful telepath, she was a skilled telepath. *Please stay close to the jump restraints, we’ll be needing them in about twenty minutes.*

“*We are ordered underway,*” Coma related, and the ship very slowly began to move. Jason felt the initial surge of movement, which was a burst of power necessary to get something that big moving when it had no inertia, then the ship smoothly began to accelerate and turn away from the view. The ships, moon, and planet started to slide towards the back of the viewing window, then the *Soyanne* started to climb back into view as it started to move itself, turning with the flagship and falling into formation. Two cruisers, three destroyers, and five frigates were arrayed behind it, and a squadron of Wolf fighters zoomed across the window.

“I meant to ask,” Rann said. “Mom, does it bother you that Coma looks like you?”

Jyslin laughed. “Not at all, pippy. I think it’s very flattering,” she answered, to which Coma turned her head and smiled back in Jyslin’s direction.

“I do find this appearance to be quite pleasing,” Coma supplied. *“That’s why I kept it despite being able to alter my hologram’s appearance.”*

“Well, you’re not going to hear me complain, Coma,” Jyslin said grandly.

“Vain, vain, vain,” Jason accused, which made Jyslin laugh.

“Are you enjoying your bionoid?” Jyslin asked her.

“Very much so, your Grace,” she answered. “I have two of them now. One is on Karis, and the other is aboard the Tianne. I find operating through the bionoids to be strangely challenging, entertaining, and educational.”

“How is it challenging?”

“Because in many ways, it reduces my core sensory abilities, and I find it oddly challenging to perceive the world and attempt to interact with it in that reduced state. The ship’s scanners are vastly different and more powerful than the sensory units in the bionoid. It has opened my eyes in many ways by forcing me to process data, to think, in new ways, and it expands my understanding.”

“Hmm, that’s pretty interesting,” Jyslin mused, tapping her chin. “But the big question is, is it fun?”

“Oh yes, it is very fun,” she replied with a smile. “The six of us went shopping just yesterday, and no one knew who we were. That kind of anonymity was...enjoyable. I understand his Grace’s aversion to celebrity now.”

“Cybi’s starting to get a bit silly with the clothes,” Jason grunted. “But I gotta admit, she’s using the hell out of her pool. She loves swimming.”

“I don’t see the same entertainment in it she does, but it is a fun recreational activity,” Coma noted.

“I thought you said that the CBIMs were only getting one bionoid,” Jyslin noted to Jason.

“They are. Coma’s not a CBIM,” he answered. “Besides, she has a viable *reason* to need two bionoids. She keeps one on the ship for crew interaction and the other on Karis for her own personal use. And trust me, Cyvanne is *not happy* about it.”

Jyslin laughed. “She’d have fifty if you let her.”

“And that’s why she only gets one. Besides, only having one means they have to appreciate the bionoid and not do anything stupid that breaks them. Bionoids aren’t cheap.”

“Ooooh, can you bring the bionoid up here so we can see it?” Rann asked.

“I certainly can, your Grace,” she replied. “I have it on its way now, but it won’t arrive before we pass through the Stargate.”

Coma continued to chat with the kids as the task force headed for the Terra Stargate, gently teaching even as she talked to them, displaying one of the elements of her blossoming personality. Coma was a nurturer, she always sought to teach, to better, to improve her crew, and it showed in how she was interacting with the kids. Coma was going to make sure that the crew of her ship wasn’t just the best in the KMS, but the best *educated* in the KMS. She laced those little questions like asking who Soyanne was in her conversation with Rann and Shya, testing their knowledge and expanding it when she asked a question they couldn’t answer, then she helped them into their jump restraints as they neared the Stargate. Aya locked Jason and Jyslin into their seats, then took the one beside Jason and locked herself in. *The Ducal party is secured for passage*, Aya sent strongly back to the bridge.

Understood. We’ll be entering the Stargate in about thirty seconds, Palla answered.

“What’s a gate passage like in this ship?” Jyslin asked.

“It can get a little rough, due to the size of the ship,” Jason answered. “It’s just so big, when it comes out of the Terra Stargate, it’s got some impressive momentum. They have to clear local space out to about thirty thousand kathra so the ship has time to bring the engines back up and slow down.”

“Damn,” Jyslin hummed.

“There are tugs on the Terra side of the gate that will capture the ship in towing beams to keep it on course as the engines are restarted, as well as aid it in slowing down,” Coma added. “The size of the engines means they take longer to restart after gate passage, due to the need to charge much more plasma in the primary coils before they can activate. We’ve learned that the sheer size of my ship requires special procedures when it uses a Stargate.”

“I’m not all that surprised,” Jyslin said, looking at Coma’s hologram, which was now hovering just in front of them.

“Stargate passage in ten seconds,” Coma’s voice came from the ship’s intercom, meaning it was a ship wide broadcast. *“All hands, brace for passage. All hands, brace for passage.”*

It was like riding on a catapult stone being launched. The ship surged forward so fast that it took him by surprise, and made him glad he had a headrest...it also explained to him why all seats with jump restraints faced the bow of the ship, else that would have given him whiplash. The ship accelerated forward and vibrated around them—they had to take most systems offline, including inertial dampers—and the gate’s border passed by so fast it was just a flash of bluish light in the window. Jason saw one of the tugs once they were through, pulling up to the side of the ship and projecting out a towing beam, and he could feel the ship vibrate a little through his chair. *“Engines are back online, beginning deceleration,”* Coma informed them after a moment. *“Please remain in your jump restraints until the all clear signal is given.”* Jason felt the vibrations ease after a few seconds, and Coma made a gesture. *“It is now safe to move about the cabin, your Graces,”* she announced.

“Resume normal ship operations,” Coma’s voice came from the intercom as a green light came on over the hatch and blinked several times before going out.

The ship came to a complete stop and waited for the task force to reassemble around them, then the entire formation started for Terra after about a twenty-minute delay. That gave Coma plenty of time to get her bionoid to the stateroom, and Jason had to laugh when he got his first real look at it. It looked so much like Jyslin in the face that they were almost twins, and the bionoid had Jyslin’s light gray eyes, but the bionoid was a good four tikra taller than both he and Jyslin were, given they were almost the same height. The bionoid also had dark brown hair instead of Jyslin’s auburn that she wore in a long topknot that reached her waist, so she did look significantly different from Jyslin about everywhere except the face. It was no surprise to Jason that the bionoid was in a suit of Crusader armor, so he couldn’t get an idea of how she’d decided to have the factory do the bionoid’s body proportions, but the fact that she’d decided to make her

bionoid nearly abnormally tall for a Faey was a good indication that she'd done very well personalizing it. And to complete the illusion that she was flesh and blood, the bionoid wore an interface, even though it didn't need it. The bionoid's onboard computer could emulate any function of an interface easily. Coma endured a few hundred questions from the kids while she stood with them as a bionoid instead of a hologram, dissolving her hologram when the bionoid arrived, from silly things like if she could take her head off like a piece of equipment to rather insightful questions like why she was breathing when she didn't have to.

Given Jason didn't really use the bionoid he kept in his lab, it was no surprise that the kids would be so curious about seeing one in action.

But, that bionoid wasn't in his lab right now. It was in a large case with their other luggage, still on the frigate that was sitting in the landing bay. Jason had brought it with him because he wanted to test it out in the alternate environment modules on the Academy grounds while they were here. Since they were staying there, in Ayuma's house, he'd have his chance to try it out. He thought it was going to be pretty interesting to stroll his bionoid into units that would kill him in seconds if it was his flesh and blood body, from the deathly cold methane-filled module for the Birkons to the 170 shuki nitrogen modules for the Araban, the sentient race that had the highest average life-sustaining temperature known in the galaxy. An Araban could survive in the Terran atmosphere due to the rich nitrogen but would freeze to death if exposed to the Terran environment, and do so in a matter of minutes.

The Araban considered an invigorating swim to be in boiling water.

That described Arabok very well. With an average planetary temperature of 140 shuki—that was around 155 degrees Fahrenheit or 68 degrees Celsius, there were lakes on Arabok that boiled in the noontime sun or boiled away during summer, only to recondense back to liquid water in winter. There were two forms of liquid on the planet, though, water and a petroleum-based liquid not unlike vegetable oil, but the oily liquid didn't evaporate nearly as quickly as the water did. There were rivers and lakes of near-boiling water on Arabok, storms of both water and liquid oil raining from the sky, and the planet's oceans were oil instead of water, oil that had continent-sized infernos raging across the surface. The planet would have

turned into another Venus but for one important difference, which was a *huge* lack of oxygen in the planet's crust and atmosphere compared to most other planets, and the vast majority of the oxygen that was present in the planet's ecosystem was in the form of water. There wasn't enough oxygen left to form enough carbon dioxide to create runaway greenhouse effect, the planet's dominant gas was *nitrogen*, some 96% of the atmosphere was nitrogen, and that was a critical aspect of why it remained stable. The oceans of Arabok didn't burn away because there wasn't enough oxygen in the atmosphere to allow it to burn off, but there were pockets of oxygen in the atmosphere formed from the chemical breakdown of water molecules that allowed the ocean to flare up in infernos that moved across the surface, almost like storm fronts.

Arabok was one of the most unique planets in the galaxy, and the Araban were one of the most unique life forms in the Confederation because of it, right up there with the Kimdori, the Jakkans, and the Birkons. Their biology was carbon-based, but it wasn't water based, it was actually based on that natural organic oily liquid prevalent on their planet, which covered their home planet of Arabok with two major oceans...just oceans that were *on fire*. For that matter, water was poisonous to them in large amounts. They could handle the water vapor present in an atmosphere but couldn't drink water. Their bodies did need *some* water, but they got all the water they needed just by breathing, getting it in vapor form. The Araban could survive in temperatures as extreme as 700 shuki without needing environmental modules and could withstand and survive extremely brief exposure to temperatures as high as 2,000 shuki...like the blast of an incendiary explosion. Their bodies and blood were biologically evolved to adapt them to an environment that was lethal to 99.99995547% of all other known life, and from an exo-biological point of view, that made them absolutely *fascinating*.

Needless to say, some of the other life on Arabok was unique, could not be found on any other planet even in an evolutionally similar branch, like the fire cats. They were feline creatures who were literally *on fire*, their skin exuded a liquid that was a biological equivalent to kerosene, and it was designed to ignite when exposed to certain elements and compounds present in the planet's atmosphere. They actively extracted nourishing compounds out of the burning of that liquid on their skin, which pulled

essential elements and compounds out of the air and trapped them in an oxidized form on the skin, which the fire cats then licked off and metabolized. They still preyed on smaller life, but this exceptionally odd evolutionary tactic reduced their need for sustenance by supplying them with some of what they needed passively. The life forms on Arabok couldn't survive anywhere else but on Arabok, at least not without environmental modules. They had two fire cats in the zoo in Karsa, and they were one of the most popular exhibits there.

Despite the radical difference in biology and environment on Arabok compared to other planets, the Araban were a *humanoid* race, about the same size as the Shio and remarkably Terran in appearance, outside of the fact that they only had two large fingers and a thumb on each hand.

While the Birkons had similar extreme environmental preferences, the big difference was, a Birkon could easily survive in Terran temperatures, though they wouldn't be all that comfortable, where an Araban would die in minutes. Birkons would die without a breather due to the lack of methane, but all they needed to survive comfortably on Terra was a breather, one that simply mixed methane in with the ambient air as they inhaled. That meant that they didn't have to wear full masks, only breather tubes that attached to their nasal intakes. They didn't need full E-suits, where the Araban did.

The *Tianne* had to make a special approach so its mass didn't affect the moon or the rotation of the planet, and it moved slowly through *thousands* of other ships that were in various orbits around Terra. The CCM was mustering the fleet here at Terra, so the kids, Jason, and Jyslin got to see hundreds of different ship designs in almost every imaginable size, from the size of fighters up to the next-largest ship in the CCM, the Skaa command ships. Elegant Faey battle cruisers shared space with bulky, blocky Urumi battleships. Sleek, deadly Verutan fast attack ships were in formation with those weird, ultra-practical modular Koui ships, almost looking like a bunch of different ship modules thrown together like Lego blocks. Ten frisbee-shaped "flying saucer" vessels of the Ubutu escorted the KMS *Dreamer* as it moved into the center of a formation of 30 other ships, each one a different size and shape, taking its designed place in the formation as the commanding ship of the squadron. Due to the exceptional durability and firepower of their ships and the neutrality of the Karinnes, most commanding ships in task forces were KMS vessels.

So many ships. So many designs. So many empires, and all here to stop the Syndicate from gaining a foothold in their galaxy. It almost made Jason proud to look out that window and see how many others shared in his devout belief that cooperation was the key to victory, that only together could they stand up to the Syndicate and drive them back to Andromeda. What had started as a mutual defense pact between the Faey and the Urumi had evolved into what he saw outside that window, and it gave him both a sense of pride and a sense of tremendous responsibility to know that he was a part of it, and he had a role to play in protecting his home—and his home galaxy—from the brutal, avaricious claws of their attackers.

Aya escorted them back out to the bay, where the frigate *Arizona* was waiting for them. Its captain, a rakishly handsome young Terran officer named Kyle Conley, was talking with the *Tianne's* XO, Samantha Kerry. The two were friends from way back when Kyle first came to the house, recruited off Terra about six years ago, and Sam had been the XO on the destroyer that brought him and the other recruits here. It was Sam that convinced Kyle to join the KMS, and he'd done her proud by rising up through the ranks and earning a frigate command. They'd both come a long, long way. Kyle from civilian to a frigate captain, and Sam from military cargo pilot to first officer on the flagship of the KMS and had been assigned that post out of her position commanding a battleship.

"Hey guys," Jason said in English; Kyle wasn't a telepath, but that did not disqualify him from being a captain. "I figured you'd find a way to come down and say hello, Sammy," he said lightly.

"Palla likes to keep one of us on the bridge as much as possible," she chuckled. "She came down here to greet you, so I got stuck at the conn."

"Well, glad you could come down, I don't get to see my favorite Terran flag officer very often," he told her.

"I'm the *only* Terran flag officer."

"Well, that guarantees that you're the favorite, doesn't it?" he asked, which made Kyle laugh.

"We're ready to go as soon as you're on board, your Grace," Kyle told him. "We'll have you at the Academy about half an hour after we launch."

“And how much extra silliness did Aya demand for the trip down?” he asked, then ducked before Aya could swat him on the back of the head.

“We’ll have a pretty impressive escort down, both the Ghost Squadron *and* the Banshees mixed in with five other frigates, three destroyers, and a heavy cruiser,” Kyle chuckled. “Justin said he didn’t mind, and you know how Liira jumps at any chance to show off.”

“I’m gonna tell her you said that,” Sam warned.

“Go ahead, I don’t care,” he grinned in reply.

“You *will*,” she warned.

Jason laughed. “Let’s not start a civil war here,” he chided, then looked back to the others. *Well, don’t just stand there, goofballs, get on board*, he ordered. “Alright, Kyle, you got us up here, you take us back down,” he added as Rann and Shya ran past them and up the ramp.

The bridge on a frigate was way too small for them to be there without getting in the way, but Jason let Rann and Shya go up there with Aya to see it while the rest of them waited just off the boarding bay, but they did get a good look at the aft view from a hologram as the frigate lifted off from the bay deck and exited the airskin shield...a line vessel taking off from another line vessel, that was how big the *Tianne* was. The black fighters of the Ghost squadron and black exomechs from the Banshees surrounded the ship, the Banshees piloting Gladiators, Juggernauts, *and* two Titans all with flight pods attached, and Liira was piloting one of the Titans. She’d been one of the first riggers outside the KBB to rate on a Titan and had been there with select members of the KBB and Red Warriors who had field tested the prototypes. And all that experience showed in her sims and performance records, she was one of the best Titan riggers in the KMS.

Now that he thought of it, she hadn’t piloted anything else since the Titans were officially added to the inventory. They’d even let her keep her prototype and just changed its serial number to reflect it being commissioned.

And those two Titans were loaded for bear. Slung behind Liira’s rig’s back, between the flight pods, was a Vindicator gatling disruptor, one of the most frightening weapons any enemy might ever face. Its ability to spray an intense volume of heavily destructive fire in a short time let it utterly lay

waste to anything caught in its sights. Jason had to admit, that weapon was just as scary as an auto-fire heavy pulse cannon, at least to anything that lacked ablative armor. Disruptors worked by doing just that, disrupting molecular bonds in whatever they hit, much like the metal guns that 3D had invented, but the difference was, a disruptor made that destabilization *explosive*. That literally turned whatever the disruptor shot into an explosive, where the struck material itself detonated like a hand grenade, like an MPAC on steroids. But where an MPAC penetrated then exploded, the disruptor blast caused what it penetrated to explode. Only ablative forms of armor could stand up to a disruptor, armor designed to *reflect* or *deflect* rather than *absorb*, and thank God compressed neutronium was one such ablative material. The intensely dense molecular structure of compressed Neutronium acted like ablative armor, making things bounce off of it thanks to the laws of momentum. Even the energy blast of a disruptor would rebound due to its own momentum before it could penetrate the carapace, though it would cause the surface of the carapace to detonate, which would leave a very small pitted scar behind.

The only weapons known that could penetrate a carapace without a hell of a lot of pounding on it to soften it up were weapons that ignored matter or molecular physics altogether, like Torsion weapons and pulse weapons. Not even a particle beam could easily cut through a carapace. It could do it, but it was more like a saw blade very slowly working its way through a thick board rather than a Samurai slicing something in half with a katana in the blink of an eye.

Jason could say one thing, having those two Titans flanking the ship oozed intimidation, just *daring* anyone to even look at the frigate sideways.

The procession entered the atmosphere over the Atlantic with the sun low on the horizon, and descended in an arc down to Norfolk, descending down into the early night, and came in over the Academy. They landed on an enlarged pad just beside the Dean's House, which was Ayuma's residence before she was recalled to Karis. Jason was made to wait inside until half the guards went out, and then Aya allowed him and the family to walk the 70 or so shakra from the pad to the back door of the house. It hadn't changed at all since their last visit, so Jason had no problem navigating. Seido came out of the kitchen to greet them, since she'd come

in advance to get her kitchen stocked, taking a carry bag from Dera as she came in behind them. “Are they unloading the luggage?” she asked.

Dera nodded without sending.

“I have your rooms ready upstairs, your Grace, with a change of clothing laid out so all of you can get out of your armor,” she continued. “And dinner should be done a little bit after you dress. We’re having a full rack of *ambrida* with *duru* stew, sautéed *iziro*, and green beans.”

“Thanks Seido,” Jason answered as Jyslin ushered the kids towards the stairs. “Kiaari here yet?”

“She sent a message, she said she should be here by dinnertime,” she answered.

“Good deal.”

Jason could have invited over rulers, but he wanted a nice quiet evening completely devoid of politics, and Kiaari could keep things silly and whimsical. She caught him up with everything going on in the Academy and around Terra in general over some gigantic ribs of some really, really big animal that Seido prepared masterfully, and after that very enjoyable dinner, he brought the bionoid out for her to check out...which *really* creeped her out. And Jason could understand why, since it looked so lifelike, yet would have absolutely no presence to her touch. Since the bionoid’s biogenics were isolated from her, she couldn’t even access that. She could sense the biogenic chips in the bionoid, but she couldn’t make direct contact with the sensor mesh connected to the biogenic unit, so she couldn’t access it. She did, however, really enjoy Jason using it to scare the hell out of Aya, since it had no sense of telepathic awareness, thus a telepath wouldn’t sense it. Aya was almost impossible to sneak up on because she constantly scanned the immediate area with her talent, searching for either unshielded minds or telepathic minds that were closed. A telepath had to use a special technique to completely hide their mind, something telepaths didn’t do as a matter of course. But not even that was proof against Aya or the guards, who were trained to be able to see through that deception and still sense nearby minds. But the bionoid had no mind for her to sense, and it was agile enough to move with enough stealth to get right behind her before she realized it was there.

And in a way, Jason's scare of her revealed a hole in her security, one she immediately started closing. Bionoids were undetectable by telepaths and light-footed enough to move with silence, so she sent a message to Rook right then and there to discuss ways for the guards protecting Jason and other sensitive sites to detect bionoids in case someone hijacked a bionoid for nefarious purposes and they didn't know about it, thus they wouldn't think to shut down the bionoid remotely. She didn't want a rogue in a hijacked bionoid to do something drastic before anyone realized what was going on and had a CBIM shut it down. And, Jason could admit, she did have something of a point. Rook sent back a simple program barely an hour later that all guards could insert into their interfaces that allowed them to detect the biogenic chip in every bionoid produced, identifying them by serial number so she even knew who owned the bionoid, and further sent her an update to that program that alerted her whenever a Karinne weapon using a biogenic chip in it was brought inside her security zone. They already had that program in their security systems, but Rook thought she might like the ability to keep track of any Karinne weapons in close proximity to her while out in the field.

Bionoids did have a locator transponder in them, but a rogue in a hijacked bionoid could turn that off, so Rook had gone the extra step of sending her a program that detected the one thing in a bionoid that couldn't be taken out or shut down, the biogenic master processor that served as the CPU of the bionoid's systems, the chip with which a Generation or interface communed to merge to the bionoid. And since Jason knew how biogenics worked at their deepest level, he knew how easy that program was for Rook to write. Biogenic chips could sense other biogenic chips within their local commune range and there was absolutely no way to prevent it short of turning the biogenic chip off, it was a fundamental aspect of how biogenics worked, so all Rook did was write a little program that had Aya's interface alert her if any of the biogenic chips installed in a bionoid came within local commune range of Aya's interface, which was about 600 shakra, or 720 feet or somewhere around 220 meters. So long as the database kept an updated list of active bionoid chips, and Aya used a biogenic interface, no bionoid would get past her.

After a nice long talk just relaxing around the living room, Kiaari took her leave to go get the last reports in from her spies, and Jason helped Jyslin

all but wrestle Rann and Shya into their bedroom. It was barely 15:00 local Karsa time, yet it was nearly midnight by the time Kiaari left, so the two of them weren't really all that sleepy. Jason wasn't either, for that matter, but he'd been doing this long enough to know that just laying down and resting a while was nearly as good as sleep, and if anything, Jason was capable of taking short naps. He didn't used to be like that, but old age was catching up to him, he often joked to Songa.

Then again, Jyslin was *always* willing to tire him out to the point where he fell asleep anyway.

Despite her best attempts to exhaust him, he was up right on time and freshly showered, enjoying a nice breakfast made by Seido when Kiaari came back. She took one look at him and laughed then sat down at the table across from him. "Seriously? Armor?"

"It sets the tone," he replied between bites of Terran pancakes. "But hey, at least I'm wearing my formal dress armor." He rapped his fingers on his chestplate, which had a very stylish and elegant relief of the house crest on it, the Legion phoenix set squarely on his chest with the star at the collar and the waves across his stomach. The house crest was gold while the rest of his armor was Karinne blue.

She laughed again. "It does look pretty fancy. Tactical in it?"

"Oh yes," he answered. "But I'm not using the armed vambraces, in the interests of security for everyone else."

"At least you're not in that creepy bionoid."

"I'm gonna play with it after the meeting today," he told her. "I'm gonna take it out for a tour of the habitat modules, places I can't usually go without dying. I think it's gonna be really interesting."

"And Aya's gonna let you?"

"It's not *me*, so she can't really say anything about it," he snorted.

"Yeah, but if someone shoots it in the head, you're gonna get dump shock," Kiaari warned.

"Better the bionoid than me. Besides, the bionoid will be wearing armor too," he replied flippantly.

“If it’s in armor, what’s the point of taking it into the habitat modules? You’ll be in *armor!*”

“But I won’t have the EV systems on,” he challenged, which made her laugh harder.

“You are weird,” she accused.

“You’re not the first person to tell me that,” he replied easily.

Aya brought seven other guards with her as Jason boarded a frigate for the trip up to New York, the rest remaining behind to protect Jyslin and the kids, and it landed on the concrete plaza outside the United Nations building, which was where their council summits on Terra took place. They’d built an entire building just for the sessions behind the south wing of the building, which held the meeting chamber and offices for the staffs that came with the rulers so they could conduct business while on Terra. Two Faey Imperial Marines standing guard at the entry doors snapped to attention and saluted as Jason and his guards passed, who were just one of the many elements of the security force for the U.N. Each member race of the Confederation who could survive in Terra’s environment contributed guards to the U.N., and it was seen as an honor to be assigned to the detail by virtually all of those who served. There were 38 empires who contributed six guards to the contingent, along with a companion Terran force of 100 guards. Jason had timed his arrival so he had to go straight to the council chamber, and he was among one of the last rulers to get there. All of the other seats were filled except for the Birkons and the Crai, and Kim was sitting just behind the podium as his staff organized several panels on his desk for him. He hosted all summits on Terra, and as such, he’d be holding the gavel for these meetings.

The seating in the chamber was arranged by seniority, which put Dahnai and Sk’Vrae at the center of the front row, and each empire arrayed in a staggered pattern to the left and right from them. That put Grayhawk beside Dahnai and Magran beside Sk’Vrae, and the “original” members of the Confederation, the Alliance, the Skaa Empire and Republic, and the Jobodi on the front row. Each row behind the first had two additional desks, an auditorium style seating arrangement, with ten rows, with a total of 170 seats. Shakizarr and Kreel sat in the center of the second row, and so on and so on all the way to the eighth row with Master Mo at the end of the row

with seats open between him and the end of the row, and everything behind him empty, which was a symbol of the anticipation that the Confederation would expand in the future. The reason there were so many seats filled was because of the Coalition. They allowed Holikk to represent the entire Coalition on the council, but for formal summits, all 51 rulers of the Coalition attended. Jason and the other neutral observers didn't sit in the gallery, they sat at a row of desks to the side, almost like a jury box. There were seven neutral observers, and Jason sat in the center of them with Zaa on one side and Brayrak Kruu on the other...company he did not mind keeping one bit. He considered Mesaiima, Hraga, Observer A, and Ami Ji of the Kyai to be friends. Jason, Zaa, and Ami Ji represented the three observers that were part of the military alliance but were neutral in all other respects.

"Making a grand entrance, Jason?" Brayrak Kruu asked, leaning down so he could speak softly.

"More like making sure I don't have to sit here long before we get started," he answered as his guards took up places along the walls, joining the honor guards of other rulers in the chamber. While the U.N. provided security for the building, this room was guarded exclusively by the honor guards when summits were in session.

Kim got them started, and Jason more or less tuned out. They weren't being presented with anything he didn't already know, given his connections with Zaa and Lorna, spent most of the time chatting with Jyslin over commune or bantering with Kreel in private sending, acting almost like bored high schoolers passing secret messages to each other rather than pay attention to the teacher. Nothing had changed intelligence wise since Zaa's last report.

But there were some important things they'd discuss during this summit that Jason didn't know. Miaari was going to present the result of all their scans of the enemy fleet to the council so the rulers had a good idea of what they were up against, information that Lorna already had. Jason had already heard most of it as well, but what he hadn't heard was Lorna's plan to counter the fleet's weapons. And it had a *lot* of weapons. Its primary weapons were Torsion cannons, but it had enough secondary weaponry to pose a viable threat to the CCM, particularly the moon-sized super ships.

When the Syndicate managed to steal the specs on Torsion weapons from the Consortium, they hadn't replaced all weapons on their ships, they just added Torsion weapons to their arsenals. Their newest ships were armed with almost all Torsion weapons, which would make them the most ineffective—cute irony that, a fleet's newest ships would be their most useless—but the Syndicate was all about profit, so they saw completely rearming older ships to be too expensive. So those ships just had Torsion weapons added to them, and thus, those ships had older hot plasma and striated ion blaster weapons that would pose a threat to CCM ships, on top of their arsenals of missiles.

It showed a decided lack of flexibility and adaptability in the enemy, and Jason felt that that was a fatal flaw. They didn't adapt to changing situations, they simply tried to throw enough resources at it to overcome it. A government based purely on making money for its client corporations was not agile, was not dynamic, did not react quickly to problems nor did it handle those problems well when it did get around to addressing them. It was crippled by its own greed, when greed told the government that it was *too expensive* to upgrade ships to deal with a changing world. That was a flaw that the Karinnes fully intended to exploit to the fullest when the time came to convince them that trying to conquer the Milky Way was not cost effective.

Their fleet was the ultimate example of that. They used old technology, had ships in their inventory that were hundreds of years old, because they refused to upgrade their fleet to modern technological standards, most likely due to cost. Their newest ships certainly had all the bells and whistles, but their older ships did not. Their thinking that once a ship was built, that was it, it stayed as it was with maybe only minor upgrades until it was destroyed or decommissioned. That was diametrically opposed to how the Karinnes did it. The *Defiant* was almost unrecognizable from what they'd found in Kosigi when the house was reformed, at least on the inside, given how many refits and upgrades the ship had had in the years as the Karinnes dug useful technologies out of Cybi's archives or fully researched and mastered the half-studied new technologies of the old Karinnes and evolved, adapted. Their ships evolved with them, and that was why the 1,421-year-old *Defiant* was just as deadly as any cruiser that just came off the dock yesterday.

It even showed in their civilian technology. They still used that hyperspace pulse communication system despite having access to Consortium string communication technology. Why? Because upgrading to string communications would require substantial investment in the infrastructure of their entire territory. That was a *very big* price tag, one they simply refused to pay. They had plans to upgrade their communications...in 150 years. When they had full and complete control of the entire galaxy of Andromeda, they had some infrastructure projects scheduled, which would be paid for by the income from the newly conquered territory.

It seemed almost criminal to Jason that they wouldn't even upgrade to string comm in their *military*, simply because they felt that the cost of it didn't justify the improvements. Hyperspace pulse comm worked just fine as it was, it was cheap if not very efficient, and they'd done well with it for the last five thousand years.

That was a glaring, critical, *crippling* flaw in their basic philosophy, and Jason was going to make them pay for it. Their fleet of three million ships would do *shit* for them against a single squadron of KMS vessels, whose vastly superior technology would make them absolutely unstoppable when they attacked Syndicate infrastructure, going after things like space stations and power plants and mining operations and their trade routes rather than their military. For that matter, a single frigate with a CMS could wreak utter havoc, and their old, outdated tech would give them no way to stop it.

Greed was not a virtue. Greed was a *killer* of a sin.

They got into that after lunch, when Lorna came in with the seven top-ranking members of the CCM and gave her report. She didn't reveal their entire strategy, but she did roughly describe how they were going to battle a fleet roughly three times their size and holding nearly 9,000 ships that were the size of small moons. Despite being heavily outnumbered and outgunned in that respect, however, the CCM had a major technological advantage, with ships from most member empires that could easily destroy their smaller ship classes. Eventually, Lorna theorized, their fleet would only have the super ships left, and that was when they would shift tactics, since their enemy would shift tactics to deal with the loss of its escorting ships.

Jason paid very close attention to her briefing, because if he had his way, he'd be fighting within that battle plan *personally*.

They adjourned in the early afternoon, the first day done of their planned three day conference, and Jason did his best to quietly slink away before he got invited to any number of private dinners or conferences, pulling his usual Houdini act for which he was infamous in the council. The other members would barely blink after the gavel hit the wood, and Jason Karinne was mysteriously gone. Today he was halfway to the landing pad before most of the others even left the council chamber, and the fact that he was in armor made it relatively easy for him. He didn't *look* like a member of the council, he looked more like one of the many guards patrolling the building, maybe a guard commander since his armor was so intricate and ornate, and once he had his helmet on, he gained the anonymity that hiding his face granted him. But those who knew him knew how to track him down, and that was how Dahnai managed to all but run up behind him, holding her robes in her hands to keep them from fouling in her legs as she abandoned a little dignity. *Would you slow down?* Dahnai barked at him as he got within sight of his destination, the door to the landing pad.

Not until I'm on the frigate, he replied.

Aya, Dahnai called, and Jason was grabbed and physically yanked back, which made him laugh. *Don't you ever forget, babes, those are my guards,* she sent tauntingly as she reached him. *Now then,* she sent, smoothing her robes as her white-armored guards joined Jason's black-armored ones.

Now then, hold him there for just another moment, Krirara sent from behind them, then she joined them, with a grinning Kreel in tow.

"It looks we're all here," Kreel said grandly, putting an arm over Krirara and Dahnai's shoulders. "Now let's go back to wherever Jason's hiding, eat some of Ayama's awesome cooking, and get drunk on Makati ale."

"Ayama's back at home caring for her baby. Seido's here," Jason said absently as he smacked Aya's hand off the collar of his armor.

"That's just as good," Kreel declared.

"Kreel," Dahnai said easily, then the Grimja wheezed when she elbowed him in the side forcefully. He gave a breathless laugh even as he hunched over his side, then grinned those big front teeth at her as he put his palm against his ribs.

“I could have you arrested for that, you brute,” Kreel threatened with a grin. “You could have broken my delicate little ribs.” This from the guy that *literally* had metal bones.

“I’d be given a medal, not a conviction,” Dahnai snorted, which made Krirara laugh.

Jason did more or less end up with three uninvited guests and their guard retinues, riding with him on the frigate back to Norfolk, but these were among the rulers Jason didn’t mind spending personal time with. Kreel and Krirara were among his best friends on the council, and Dahnai was the mother of one of his children. Dahnai had Kellin and the rest of her family come down to Norfolk to join them, and Krirara had her mate join them as well, making a rare appearance. Krarrik was very much a homebody husband, a middle executive in a Kirri civil engineering firm. Kirri law made it virtually impossible for Krirara to personally benefit from her civil service, which was why she lived in a pretty nice upper middle class house on her homeworld and her husband was a middle manager rather than some board executive. Krirara did make a fairly sizable salary as the Moderator, but it wasn’t enough for her to put on airs and pretend to be rich...and that was one of the many reasons why he liked her so much. Krirara was very wisely saving and investing her salary rather than pretending to be rich, which would secure her retirement when she had to leave Kirri government in six years due to term limits.

And Jason was already devising a plan to get Krirara to Karis when she retired, because Krirara was exactly the kind of person that the house looked for when searching for new recruits.

Krirara and Krarrik were well known and well liked in the family household, and Kreel was as much a fixture as Dahnai was anymore. They lounged about Ayuma’s living room and talked about politics and the upcoming war, then all business was put aside when Seido served them dinner. “So, why haven’t I got Maer’s wedding invitation yet, Dahnai?” Kreel said with a light smile as Seido dropped a sizable portion of broccoli and cheese on his plate.

“I haven’t sent any of them out yet,” she countered as one of her guards put a sizzling steak on her plate from the platter. “We’re still ironing out the last of the details.”

“You’ve had fifteen years to plan this out, you know,” Jason noted.

“That’s not what we’re ironing out,” she said primly, giving him a dirty look. “It’s the increased security we’re working out. We *are* in an official state of war, here. We’re taking the possibility that some Syndicate spy might try to attack the wedding seriously.”

“That’s a good reason,” Kreel said in a more serious tone. “After the dirty tricks the Consortium tried, it only makes sense that the Syndicate might be just as dirty.”

“Yup,” Dahnai nodded. “We’ve even gone to the point where we do everything assuming that the Syndicate *already* has spies here. I know it’s virtually impossible, but a lot of the shit the Consortium pulled was stuff we didn’t think was possible either. The Syndicate might have sent a couple of ships here holding spies and operatives months ago and our scanners didn’t pick it up.”

“That’s a healthy attitude, Dahnai,” Krarrik agreed with a nod. He was a frequent enough visitor to know that titles were *never* used in Jason’s house. “Those who think something is impossible are quickly taught that nothing is.”

“Anyway, once we have the security all organized, we’ll be sending out the initiations,” Dahnai promised. “Maybe by the start of next takir. And everyone at this table gets one.”

“Like I need one,” Jason chuckled. “I *am* family, you know.”

“You’re the leader of a hostile foreign government,” she told him coolly, in a voice that made Sirri giggle.

“Hostile? *Moi?*” he said in French, which made Krirara’s head tilt slightly in curiosity. “You wound me, Dahnai. I thought I meant something to you.”

“You mean something to me, alright,” she said, flipping him off in the Faey manner.

“Your mother sounds like she doesn’t like me anymore, Shya,” he told her in French, which made her grin at him and Rann laugh. She’d taken an interest in French years ago after hearing him teaching it to Rann, which was something that virtually any parent who spoke more than one language

did. Any child of Jason Karinne was damn well going to speak both English and French in addition to Faey, they were his family's ancestral languages. It would dishonor the memory of his cherished mother not to teach her native French to his own children. But, Shya *was* fairly serious about learning it, wasn't quite fluent but had a good grasp on it. She thought it was a very pretty language, almost as pretty as Faey.

Dahnai put a finger on her interface, no doubt getting a translation, then she threw a piece of broccoli at him, which made all three kids at the table erupt into laughter.

"Food is for eating, not for throwing. That's what the dishes are for," Seido chided in a deadpan voice that made the entire table crack up.

After quite a delicious dinner, they lounged in the living room and caught up, hearing Krarrik complain about work and Kreel complain about having to work so much. Krirara and Jyslin harped on Kreel to find a wife, which he deflected with his usual aplomb, while the kids watched a Terran TV station on the vidy. It was into this picture of domesticity that Myri intruded, a hologram of her appearing in place of the vidy program. That meant that she used her emergency override, and that meant that it was pretty serious. "Jason," she said. "Jason."

"What is it, Myri?"

"The Syndicate fleet just dropped out of hyperspace, just inside the Strands of Trelle," she replied. "Comm chatter picked up by our probes makes it clear this wasn't planned. Something automated in the ships triggered a drop, some kind of alarm or warning. It came from the flagship, the biggest one. It broadcasted the drop command, and the fleet dropped into normal space."

Jason and Jyslin traded curious looks, then Jason stood up. "Did you warn Lorna?"

"Before I called you."

"Then I'm on my way to the Spires," he announced, referring to the CCM's headquarters, which were built on the former Norfolk naval base, very close to the Academy. The base was still a naval base, it just also hosted the CCM. It was more than big enough. In the age of starships, there wasn't much need for a waterborne navy anymore, and the Norfolk naval

base had been one of the largest in America before the subjugation. The base still served as the home port of some waterborne naval vessels, hosted the CCM headquarters, served as a military starport for the movement of military personnel and assets, and had a very large and impressive museum of the history of the American Navy and seafaring in general. *From the Constitution to the Stars Above* was written on the sign over the door to the museum.

“Not alone you’re not,” Dahnai barked, standing up herself. “Captain Reeli, we’re going to the Spires.”

Yes, your Majesty. I’ll have your armor unpacked immediately.

“And just why do you think you’re going with me? I’m not *staying*,” Jason challenged. “I’m just going to find out what’s going on. Security protocols won’t let Myri tell me *everything*, even over crypto.”

“Because you always know everything before anyone else, and I don’t wanna get blindsided at council when you finally tell everyone else what you want us to know,” she retorted.

“She’s got ya there, Jayce,” Kreel chuckled. “You *do* do that. And I think I’m gonna tag along this time too.”

“As am I,” Krirara declared. “What Lorna has to say is of importance to everyone opposing the Syndicate.”

“As long as you *listen* instead of *order*,” Jason warned. “Nobody in this room is a military specialist outside of the guards. I’m going over there to listen, and everyone else will too.”

“Lorna runs the CCM, not me,” Dahnai answered.

“Keep that in mind,” Jason said. “Now I’m going to go get my armor on.”

The Spires was a fitting name for the CCM headquarters. It consisted of three tapered skyscrapers rising up over the coastline, two shorter 93 floor buildings with the tallest in the middle, which was 137 floors, with eight much smaller buildings in a rough circle around them, each one around 40 stories, and there was nearly a maze of suspended walkways and bridges that interconnected the 11 buildings in the complex. They were encased in crystal cladding which created some breathtaking visual effects when the

sun rose over the ocean and hit them, and those three skyscrapers were the heart of the CCM. The main command center was actually underground, on the third underground level under the center building, to provide the CCM command center some protection in case it was attacked. That command center was the heart and nerve center of the whole thing, where hundreds of officers from member empires gathered information and then issued orders out to the CCM from the command staff. They'd decided to build the headquarters on the naval base because it was already a controlled area by virtue of it being a military installation, which created an additional layer of security to keep those without clearance out of the complex. It wasn't easy to get on the naval base, and those that managed that feat faced the daunting task of breaking into one of the most heavily guarded complexes in the *Confederation*.

Jason had taken a page from his own house when he helped set up the security for the complex, since it was heavily influenced by interfaces. Only authorized interfaces could do anything inside the complex, even flush a toilet, and they kept very tight control over the complex by keeping a tight grip on those interfaces. Someone had to be jacked to have any hope of infiltrating the Spires, and they had to do it with an interface they stole from someone who had clearance...which would promptly broadcast a panic alarm and then shut down most functions if it was worn by someone that didn't match the biometric signature of its user. And that was based on both physical biometrics such as DNA and the unique brain architecture of the wearer picked up from the I/O chip in the jack itself, something that was virtually impossible to fake or duplicate. The only way to change an interface's biometric passcode was to turn it off and manually update its hard programming with a new chip, and the instant any of those interfaces were taken offline, it triggered an alert at the CCM; after all, an interface going offline could mean that its wearer had been injured. In a way, Jason's people had come up with a way to mimic how a biogenic chip could uniquely identify a user in a way that was virtually impossible to spoof into non-biogenic tech.

Naturally, Jason was programmed with access to the Spires, but not every ruler in the Confederation was. He led the others into the main entrance about half an hour later, Jason and Dahnai in armor, Krirara unclothed as usual, and Kreel wearing his formal council attire, which was

a Grimja suit of sorts. He headed straight for the command center, where Lorna and quite a few of her command staff were clustered around a central console towards the back of the huge room, which had flat holograms hanging in the air over stations, against the walls, all over the place, which showed the dispensation and readiness of all CCM assets, as well as maps and charts of quite a bit of the Q quadrant, which was where the Syndicate would enter the galaxy. One of the sectors up on those maps was the one holding Exile.

“They insisted?” Lorna asked simply as Jason approached.

“It was bring them or get bit, and there are some sharp teeth over there,” he said dryly, which made the corner of Lorna’s mouth twitch upward. “What have you found out?”

“The Kimdori probes are catching virtually all of their ship to ship comm,” she said, pointing at a hologram showing that gigantic fleet sitting out in intergalactic space. “The command to drop out of hyperspace was sent by the flagship, the largest one.” The image zoomed in on that ship. “Right now, the ships are communicating status back to the flagship, reporting in. Since there are thirty thousand of them, it’s not an instantaneous process.”

“Why did they drop out?”

“We’re not sure yet,” she answered. “We just know that the flagship ordered the fleet to drop into normal space, and it wasn’t planned. They’ve had their automated sensors on since returning to hyperspace. Perhaps they got a reading that the computers flagged as important enough to issue the command to drop, so they could investigate the alarm.”

“Possible,” Jason said, looking up at the hologram of the fleet. “What about the toys?”

“In hyperspace within striking distance,” Shio Admiral Jarik Furystorm answered. “Just in case.”

“Just in case always makes me feel better,” Jason grunted, which made Jarik smile. “Any idea if they’re staying there a while or jumping out?”

“As of right now, no idea, your Grace,” Emperor’s Admiral Hezivarr of the Verutan Navy replied. “Not even *they* really know why they dropped

into normal space yet. When they figure it out, no doubt it'll be broadcast to their ships, and then we'll know."

"I take it the Kimdori cracked their ship to ship encryption?" Dahnai asked.

"Just three days ago, your Majesty," Hezivarr nodded. "They combined their efforts with the Moridon and the Ruu to break the code. Between the three of them, it really stood no chance."

"Kimdori and Moridon working together. It's the first sign of the apocalypse," Kreel quipped, which made Jason laugh.

"So, we got dressed up to run over here to basically sit in a corner and wait," Jason surmised.

"More or less, your Grace," Lorna smiled slightly. "As soon as we learn something, I'll make sure you know."

"Cybi," he called. Immediately, her hologram manifested over the central console.

"Yes, Jason?"

"Wait, what? Cybi has access to the CCM?" Dahnai asked.

"Obviously, Dahnai," she replied mildly. *"Though the other CBIMs do not. I work as a consultant for Lorna and the command staff."*

"Let's use that big brain of yours, Cybi. Have you picked up anything from the spy probes we missed?"

"Not as yet," she answered. *"But to be honest, there's very little information. We only know that their command ship ordered the fleet to drop into normal space, and not even the ship captains know why. They await orders, and we await intercepting them."*

"Getting something, General," one of the staffers at a console nearby said. He was a Terran, and he put a finger on his interface. "The flagship is broadcasting on their local crypto. Getting the translation now."

"Cybi?" Jason asked.

"Hold position until new coordinates are broadcast for jump," Cybi said, relaying what was being transmitted. *"Initial entry point into the*

galaxy unsafe.”

“They must have spotted the trap,” Dahnai growled. “An SCM ship must have broken down.”

“Cybi, get in touch with the Denmother, find out if they had a ship go down,” Lorna ordered.

“At once, General,” she nodded.

“Cybi, break out the tacklers,” Jason ordered.

“I’m relaying the order to Myri now.”

“Tacklers?” Kreel asked.

“Cruisers built with interdictors incorporated into them, basically they’re mobile interdictors with jump engines,” he replied. “They have no weaponry, but they’re not designed for fighting the enemy. I had them built to chase down and trap Syndicate squadrons in normal space. I want them ready to move if Lorna orders that fleet interdicted where they are.”

“Not yet, but get them on the board, Jason,” Lorna said.

“They’ll be ready for deployment in fifteen minutes,” Cybi assured her.

“You’ve been busy over there, Jayce,” Kreel noted in a half amused, half serious tone.

“I told you, Kreel, we’ve had two years to get ready for this. I have all sorts of new toys in my toolbox,” he said with grim amusement that made Lorna chuckle.

A hologram of Zaa appeared over the central console. “I have just received reports from my SCM detachment. They report no loss of SCM in the area,” she stated. “And our scans of their ships make it clear their sensors aren’t sophisticated enough to penetrate the SCM blanket.”

“Maybe they detected the interdiction field,” Hezivarr proposed. “I don’t think the SCM can cover all of it.”

“They’re deployed between the fleet and the trap, intercepting Syndicate sensor pulses,” she answered. “They don’t have to cover the entire volume of the trap, the same way one’s own hand can hide an entire building from view when held close to one’s eyes.”

“Let’s just wait and see what they do,” Lorna said. “They’re still six days out from the rim of the galaxy, that gives us time to react to any change in their plans.”

For nearly an hour, they watched, and they waited, but the Syndicate flagship was very quiet during that time, giving them no new information. Finally, though, it broadcasted a set of jump coordinates, and their navigation station in the command center solved the plot points in about thirty seconds. “Generals, Admirals, this jump destination is *outbound*,” the Shio declared. “It’s star S1-3395-3903-9824 in the Strands of Trelle. It’s a nine hour jump from their current position.”

“Bring up the file on that star,” Lorna barked, and almost immediately, a holo of a large white star appeared over the central console.

Jason perused the file data, which was presented as text boxes around the points of note of the star. It had 14 planets orbiting it, 6 terrestrial planets and 8 gas giants, with 187 moons and an asteroid belt between planet 6 and planet 7. There were no exploitable resources on any of the planets or moons, though planet 4 did fall within the habitable zone and might be life-sustaining. Cybi had no doubt turned her arrays towards that star, because a new set of holograms popped up showing real-time images of the system.

“Planet four?” Jason asked Cybi.

“I have a hyperspace probe locking its long-range sensors on the system, I’ll have more data in a few moments,” she answered.

[Cybi, tell Myli to get the Legion ready to move. I want it to take some hyperspace probes directly there so they’re in place and ready to spy on the Syndicate when the fleet gets there,] he communed, which was picked up and relayed back to Karis through the *Tianne*.

[The Legion is currently doing drive testing in intergalactic space. I’ll order it back to Karis immediately.]

“I have data. Planet four is life-sustaining,” she announced as a picture of a very Terra-like planet popped up. *“Roughly the same size as Shio. Oxygen/nitrogen atmosphere, gravity .93, pressure 1.02, average planetary mean temperature, 63 shuki. Its conditions are well within tolerance for*

80% of Confederate species, not counting breathable gases. It has a vibrant ecosystem, no detectable advanced civilization.”

“They’re forting up,” Lorna growled.

“A forward base outside the galactic rim,” Jarik agreed. “Someplace very hard to reach.”

“How long would it take us to jump out to that star?” Hezivarr asked the navigation officer.

“Seven days, sir,” she answered.

“They’ll see us coming a kathra away,” Lorna growled.

“If we decide to attack,” Jarik added. “If we can just *keep* them out there, it serves our own purposes. We might even be able to avoid a war with them.”

Jason could almost see the writing on the wall, rubbing his chin with an armored finger as he considered the situation. *[Cybi.]*

[I think I know what you’re about to order. I’ll have Dellin double the workers doing the refits for the new drives.]

[You read my mind,] he agreed. [And tell him to go ahead and install the new drive on that command ship about to be commissioned. I want at least one capitol ship with a drive in it.]

[I’ll talk to Trenirk about finishing work on it. It’s still being built. Last report said it was about four days from completion. I’ll see if he can shorten that time.]

[You’re there, so you have my permission to use the spiked bat.]

She communed back a pure emotion, amusement.

“Jason? Jason,” Dahnai said, nudging him. “What are you up to? You have that scheming expression.”

Jason chuckled. “Yes, I’m scheming. I just ordered Cybi to activate some toys, and if they decide to fort up at that star, we can interdict it. We just move the trap,” he said. “Lorna, I think your chance to make contact is when they reach that star and bogging them down in negotiations gives us time to get new stuff out there. Do you have your negotiator chosen?”

“We have that all ready to go,” she replied. “Are you going to use that one-way wormhole?”

“I’m seriously considering it,” he replied. “If I can get just *one* interdictor through in working order, we can trap them at that star. But the kicker is, if it’s destroyed in transit, that leaves salvageable Karinne technology out for the Syndicate to pick over, and we can’t do shit to stop it. They might be able to devise a means to defeat the interdictors if they get their hands on the wreckage and reverse engineer it.” He looked up at Cybi. “What are the odds of anything surviving a trip through at that distance?”

“61.2335%”

“Better than half, but not very good,” Jason grunted, pretending to think it over. After all, he could get an interdictor there in about ten minutes by sending it with the *Legion*, and that included the time it would take to pick up the interdictor and tow it out to jump distance.

“In my professional opinion, your Grace, that’s worth the risk,” Hezivarr said. “It’s a chance to trap their entire fleet a full week outside the galaxy. Out there, they’re no threat. We don’t *have* to attack. We simply negotiate their return to Andromeda and let them out once they agree.”

He looked to the hologram of Zaa, who had been listening. “Denmother, can the probes shadowing the Syndicate fleet all together tow an interdictor in case we have to pull it out?”

“They can,” she replied. She too picked up on Jason’s game and gave him everything he needed to supposedly make a decision. “They’re type two probes, Jason.”

“What significance is that?” Jarik asked.

“It means they can be overloaded and explode with the force of a fusion bomb, their version of a self-destruct, and that could destroy the wreckage of an interdictor if it doesn’t make it through.”

“Hmm,” he mused. “Cybi, make the calculations,” he ordered. “Have them get ready to activate the wormhole array. We’ll time it so the interdictor gets sent just as the probes reach the area. That way, if the interdictor gets destroyed in transit, a probe can wipe out the wreckage so the Syndicate can’t salvage it.”

“I’ll get things ready.”

“Cybi, send the planned arrival coordinates to my office,” Zaa said. “They’ll divert a probe to rendezvous at those coordinates.”

“I’ll send them as soon as we have a point selected,” she answered.

“Your house is quite adept at robotics, your Grace. Do you have a completely automated ship you can send through the wormhole that can tow the interdicator?” Hezivarr asked. “That ship could shadow the fleet’s every move and be there to spring the trap at any time. That way you risk no lives trying to get it there, just equipment.”

Jason gave him a look. “Actually...Cybi, could Rockers conceivably man a destroyer?”

“If they were controlled remotely from Karis,” she replied. *“And we used the maintenance models that have sufficient manual dexterity to perform delicate tasks.”*

“Can you do such a thing?” Hezivarr asked.

“Easily,” he snorted. “Our comm system is *telepathic*, Hezivarr, and that transcends time and distance. They can communicate with the ship and the Rockers inside it in real time. Just get a jacked crew, have them merge to the Rockers manning the ship so they can keep the ship operating, and boom. Automated destroyer.”

“I’d say that that might be worth trying,” Lorna said. “But it’s your ship, Jason. It’s your call. It’s your bill if it gets destroyed in transit.”

“It might be worth the risk,” he mused, crossing his arms and taking on a thoughtful expression.

[Don’t milk it too much, Jason,] Cybi warned lightly.

[Stop interfering in my fun, woman,] he retorted. “Cybi, pull a tackler and scrape up the Rockers needed to man it. If we’re gonna try this, let’s minimize the risk to our equipment and send a tackler instead of an interdicator and destroyer. That way we only have to roll the dice *once*.”

“I’ll send down the orders. They should have everything organized in about an hour.” [Jason, the Legion is on the way back to Kosigi. There’s a

tackler ship waiting there for them to tow out to the Strands. They can have it in place 32 minutes after you give the order.]

“Excellent,” he responded, to both her public and private declarations. Thanks to this bit of subterfuge, they’d have a perfectly viable explanation as to how they were getting something like an interdicator out to the Strands of Trelle in hours instead of days.

And Hezivarr had stumbled across a *damn good idea*...a ship manned entirely by *bionoids*. Remotely operated crews meant that no lives were at risk, just equipment, and the crews could just do their shift on the ship, unmerge and let the next man in the shift rotation take over the bionoid, and go home and have dinner with the family. The ships wouldn’t need living quarters, which would let them put in more equipment, it would cut the bionoid crew down by half since they wouldn’t have to have enough people on board to man the ship in three different shifts, the same bionoid would be working more or less nonstop, driven by different controllers in shifts, so they’d just need enough bionoids on board to run the ship with some extras in reserve for combat situations, which could be activated only when needed. He’d just need a CBIM to keep track of everything, since managing remote links like that would take a pretty serious computer. The computers at the Lake facility were pretty hardcore, and they ran through Cyra, who managed the remote links between drivers in the merge pods and the equipment they were operating remotely.

Cynna. She’d be looking for things to do when they drew down shipbuilding operations in Kosigi. She could take over as the official KMS CBIM, the CBIM managing biogenic link operations with all ships out in the field. That kind of work was already in her basic core programming as the CBIM in charge of Kosigi, a *military* installation. They just build a military merge facility for bionoids operating Naval line vessels, similar to the facility at Joint Base Alpha they used for exomechs and Wolf fighters and let Cynna handle managing the remote links.

The idea wasn’t to convert the entire KMS to remote operation, but having some dedicated ships manned solely by bionoids meant they could be sent to do the dangerous work, assets they could risk in very dangerous operations but *not* just throw away. A ship was a *very* expensive piece of hardware, and the bionoids inside it would not be cheap either, he wasn’t

just going to throw away assets that expensive or that technologically sensitive, given the ship and the bionoids were filled with biogenic chips. Merged assets weren't the answer to every solution, they'd already learned that with their remote operation experiments using exomechs. In many ways, having a live pilot was superior to a merged pilot, mainly for the ability to bring telepathy to the battlefield as a weapon, but the fact that the pilot couldn't be killed made using a merged exomech the ideal asset for an exceedingly dangerous or risky operation. But having the option to use either a live crew or a bionoid crew for a line vessel gave them options, and options were always good. A bionoid crew would be immune to any telepathic attacks, and the ship and bionoids would be unhackable by external systems due to the biogenic systems. If the hack attempt could even somehow manage to deal with the fact that biogenic chips communicated via commune, biogenic systems used a unique programming language based on the fact that biogenic chips were programmed via a synthetic form of DNA. Most outside computers had their CPUs melt trying to make sense of it, since it was based on an *organic* system.

To Jason, it meant there would be no more suits of armor standing in the Hall of Heroes in the White house. Instead of risking the life of a brave house member, they'd be risking a C20,000 bionoid. Jason would pay that a million times over to save just one life.

Even on ships crewed by live beings, having some bionoids on board to activate as additional crew in combat or emergency situations, or to use to do maintenance that required entering hazardous parts of the ship, were also pretty damn smart options to have.

What started out as Rook's little hobby to refine his robotic body to produce a more engaging merge experience was suddenly starting to show some real and game-changing possibilities.

It only took him a few seconds to convey his idea to Cybi, and she gave him an approving nod from her hologram. *[I think that's a very good idea. I'll relay it to Cynna, and she can study it and come up with some official proposals to discuss with you when you get back. In the short term, we can produce bionoids to replace the crew on the tackler ship, then send the Legion out to swap them out once they're ready. I'll institute some basic training for the crews that will merge to the bionoids. It does take a little*

practice to get the hang of it. They should be ready for remote piloting by the time the bionoids are built.]

[Good deal. Tell Rook to send up some production specs for generic bionoids with random faces, you know, face in the crowd bionoids, they can produce and store on ships to activate when needed.]

[Certainly.]

“Sounds like we’re more or less just in wait and see mode until they get there,” Kreel said.

“For you. I’d better go back to Karis and oversee the plan,” Jason said. “I want to be there in case something goes wrong.”

“So, you’re skipping out on *another* summit?” Dahnai asked.

“Nah, I’ll leave my other me here,” he replied. “Unless they send to me, they’ll never know the difference.”

“Other you?”

“His bionoid,” Cybi supplied. “A remarkably lifelike robot built to resemble him. It will fool you,” she added. “He can merge to it from Karis and attend the summit while he’s on Karis, at hand just in case he’s needed.”

“You built a robot double?” Dahnai almost accused.

“Yeah, it was part of an experiment, based on the Rockers,” he replied. “Turned out to be a pretty damn good one. We just built units that look like the people operating them instead of generic robotic drones. Part of the experiment was that I was going to have it walk around on the grounds and see if anyone noticed it was a robot. It’s like scary lifelike. It even breathes,” he chuckled.

“And what purpose would such a device serve?” Krirara asked curiously.

“I built it so I could enter deadly environments to be able to meet other rulers face to face in their home territory, without armor or helmets in the way,” he replied. “Since it *is* a robot, it doesn’t care how hot or cold it is, or if there’s no oxygen in the air.”

“Hmm, that does seem rather useful,” she mused.

“Well, Rook sorta took that idea and ran with it, and created the bionoids,” he continued. “They’re built to be almost indistinguishable from living things in about every way but smell, to give people a way to be somewhere else without any danger to themselves. If you have a jack, you can merge to the bionoid, in effect *be* the bionoid, and its systems are designed to mimic organic senses as closely as possible, so it won’t feel like you’re merged to a machine.”

“Okay, now that’s starting to sound pretty cool,” Dahnai said. “I want one.”

“You want *everything*,” he accused, which made her laugh.

“Your Grace, what you’re describing has some real military usefulness,” Hezivarr noted. “Surrogate, remotely operated crew members for a ship you send to the galactic core, where the radiation would kill them in moments? Remotely piloted ground infantry to send to planets that would otherwise be deadly to them?”

“Yeah, we’re exploring those possibilities as we speak,” he replied. “We’re still working out the bugs, which was half of what this experiment was about. Bionoids are still in the development stage, we don’t have them up to production stage yet.”

“Why do you call them *bionoids*?” Krirara asked. “Are they not just robots?”

“They’re biogenic androids. Myli coined them *bionoids*, and the nickname stuck. And it does distinguish them from regular robots, because they *are* different. Bionoids are built to resemble living things and blend in among them, not so they can hide, but so they give the driver merged to it the most realistic sense of being there possible, and part of that is being able to walk down the street without everyone staring and pointing at you. And each experimental unit gets them closer and closer to that,” he chuckled. “The most current model breathes, it can drink liquids, and it can even simulate urination. Rook hasn’t quite figured out a way to make one eat yet, but he’s working on it.”

“That seems like it would be easy to figure out,” Dahnai mused. “Put the food in your mouth, chew, swallow.”

“The problem is what the bionoid does with that food once it swallows it,” Jason answered “Remember, the bionoids are built to resemble living things as closely as possible, so you don’t just build an access door in the torso to remove a full stomach. And you kinda have to remove the food before it rots, or it creates all kinds of problems, the foulest dragon breath imaginable being just one of them. It *does* present something of a challenge when you remember that bionoids can’t *digest* food.”

“Oh. Ohhhh, I see what you’re saying,” she said.

“Anyway, I’d better get back home and oversee them trying to get that tackler out there. I’ll leave my bionoid here, so when council resumes, most likely it’ll be it there instead of me. I guess it’ll be a pretty interesting experiment to see if anyone notices,” he said, then he laughed. “The ones most likely to give me away are right here, my telepathic friends,” he grinned. “The bionoid can’t send, that’s something no machine can simulate.”

“I am *most* curious about this machine now,” Krirara said.

“Yeah, me too. Mind if we go back to the house and take a look at it?” Dahnai added.

“I don’t mind,” he shrugged. “Jys can show it to you. I just won’t be able to activate it and show you how it works until I have spare time. I don’t want to be tangled up in the bionoid merge with the tackler getting ready to ship out.”

“I think I’d like to get a look at this device myself, your Grace,” Hezivarr said. “It intrigues me.”

“Sure, just come over to the house once you have some time,” he replied. “If I’m gone before you can find the time, talk to Myri and arrange to come over to Karis and we can show them to you. She has access to the bionoid project. Just keep in mind that it’s still in development. The bionoids are still experimental.”

“I think I’ll be doing that no matter what, your Grace.”

Aya and Dera escorted him back to Karis aboard the *Arizona*, at least after he and Aya had a pretty involved argument over his safety. Aya *finally* capitulated when Jason agreed to bring in a squadron of frigates and take

the return journey running in stealth mode. Kyle got him back to Kosigi quickly, and he came into Dellin's ops center almost at a run. Myri, Juma, Sioa, and Navii were in the ops center when he arrived, there in person, clustered around a holodisplay with the rather short commander of Kosigi, which surprised him a little bit. "Where we at, Dellin?"

"We have the tackler in position at jump distance, and the *Legion* already has it docked," he said, as Cynna manifested a hologram and brought up a flat holo. The *Legion* was sitting at jump distance, and the tackler ship was physically attached to it using a towing rig. They'd discovered that ships couldn't tow other ships with towing beams using the drive, but they could if the towed ship was physically attached to it, either docked to it or attached to it with clamps. So, Naval Engineering had come up with that rather clever towing assembly, which was one size fits all. It could attach to the stern or bow of any KMS ship, allowing any ship to tow any other ship...within reason. A ship had to have strong enough jump engines to tow another ship in addition to itself to get the ship into hyperspace, so the rule of thumb was that a ship could only tow a smaller ship. But thanks to the way the translight drive worked, the drive could get any towed ship into a translight state that was of equal or lesser volume. Not mass, *volume*. The physical size of the ship was what mattered, not how heavy it was. A translight drive could tow an equal sized volume of pure compressed Neutronium without issue, but could not tow a gigantic ball of cotton candy that exceeded the volume of the towing ship.

The tackler was built on the same hull as a cruiser, so there was absolutely no visible indication that the ship was a tackler instead of a warship. It was attached to the stern of the *Legion* by what looked like a stout segmented metal spar, which was jointed so it would bend, and connected to the pyramid-shaped bow of the tackler ship, a securing "foot" pad on each of the four planar surfaces.

"Which tackler is that?" Jason asked.

"It's the Backgammon," Cynna answered. Each of the tacklers was named after a common strategic board game, to reflect their strategic purpose. The ships were equipped with Kimdori SCM tech so they could hide the interdiction effect until it was nearly 20% developed, which meant that a ship would have to cruise in sublight mode for nearly two months to

reach it once the interdiction effect became detectable. *“The Legion will detach it at a point that puts the tackler an hour’s jump away, so it has plenty of time to see them coming and move if they can somehow detect it,”* she explained.

“Why not just set it so they drop into the interdiction effect?” Sioa asked.

“Because we need to find out if they somehow detected the interdictors we have at the arrival point,” Jason answer, to which Cynna nodded. “If we turn it on while they’re on the way to that star, it might cause them to drop into normal space again. Once we figure out why they changed plans and rule out them detecting the interdiction field, we can use the tackler.”

“Lorna’s going to stall them with the negotiations, right?” Myri asked.

Jason nodded. “She said she’ll stall as long as she possibly can to give our forces time to prepare.”

“What about all those interdictors? Are we leaving them in place?” Sioa asked.

“I’m not sure,” Myri said. “That’s more or less Lorna’s call.”

“Will the interdiction effect cover that star if it activates it from where the tackler will be dropped?” Jason asked.

“No.”

“Then have them move it up close enough so it can,” he ordered. “It can’t run its stealth field in hyperspace. That’s Kimdori stealth field tech. As long as the ship’s in normal space, they’re not going to see it.”

“That puts it only a half second away by jump, Jason. They won’t be able to get away.”

“Put it *behind* the star, 500,000 kathra inside the orbital track of the first planet, on a synchronous solar orbit matching the entry point. That way it’s always directly behind the star in relation to the Syndicate fleet,” Navii said from her chair. “The Syndicate can’t directly jump across the star’s gravity well from that close, and the ship will be too close to the star for them to attempt a pinpoint in-well jump to ambush it. The only way they could possibly reach the ship is by sublight engines, and the ship will see them

coming and can jump out before they can come around the star to reach them. The star's mass and energy will also help hide it from their sensors if they're that close to it. I believe they don't have anything that can get readings directly through the solar mass, and we know they have no sensor probes in the system to get advance readings. As long as our ship gets there and gets their stealth field up before they arrive, it should remain undetected."

Jason's eyes lit up a bit, and he nodded in agreement. It was basic hyperspace physics. A ship could jump *away* from a gravity well at jump distance but couldn't turn around and jump *towards* that gravity well, else the star's gravity well would knock it out of hyperspace. It could do it from further away, but not from standard jump distance, as long as it didn't attempt to directly jump across the star's solar mass in relation to normal space...but there were some hyperspace navigational tricks a ship could use to get around a star's solar mass and still get directly behind the star. In that instant that a ship entered hyperspace, it was much more sensitive to hyperspace flux, and a star's gravity well created enough flux to knock it into normal space. But, if it went out further then turned around and attempted it, it would be able to pull it off, able to sort of "coast" across the gravity well and reach the other side without getting knocked back into normal space. That was what Navii was talking about when she mentioned them attempting a pinpoint jump. But, with the tackler so close to the star, they wouldn't even be able to try that, there was no way they could accurately get the ship to drop into normal space close enough to be a threat to the *Backgammon*. Even if they didn't try to directly jump across the star, tried to jump in tangent to the deepest part of its gravity well to try to get close to the *Backgammon*, they *still* had to do it from a greater jump distance. The only practical way they'd have to go after the *Backgammon* was to send ships to circle around the star under sublight, and the *Backgammon* would see them coming from the proverbial mile away. In both scenarios, both the plausible one and the implausible one, the *Backgammon* would have to achieve jump distance from the star and jump out, which for the tackler would only be about 87,000 kathra, or about 17 seconds running at flank. In either scenario, the *Backgammon* would have at *least* 15 minutes' warning before a Syndicate ship got close enough to threaten it, and it would only take it about 29 seconds to get out to jump distance, slow to jump speed, and jump.

And the even more beautiful aspect of her idea was that the interdicator could activate at that distance from the star. It was far enough outside the star's gravity well for it to be able to work.

"I knew there was a reason I pay you that ridiculous salary, Navii," Jason told her, which made Myri laugh and Navii smile.

"That's a damn good idea," Juma agreed. "Send down that order to the *Legion*."

"*The Legion reports that it is ready to depart,*" Cynna announced.

To his surprise, Zaa strode into the ops center. "I bring important news," she declared.

"It must be if you're not on hologram," Jason said. "Do we need to retreat to a secure room?"

"No," she replied, touching her memory band. Seconds later, a hologram appeared over the table, showing the Syndicate flagship. "They dropped out of hyperspace due to a system on this ship called the *oracle* system," she relayed. "I have no data on this system, it does not appear in any of the data my children have pulled from them so far. It must be one of their most closely guarded military secrets. This oracle system was what issued the order for the fleet to drop into normal space, then ordered it to travel to their new destination. It transmitted this command directly, along with an extremely curious bit of extra data."

"What?"

"It listed odds of success," she replied. "The exact translation we received from our cryptographers reads thus: 'Odds of mission success increase to 77.2335% with this change of course.'"

"Some kind of top-secret supercomputer?" Juma asked. "Maybe a computer something similar to Coma on the *Tianne*? Analyzing the odds for any given action then acting on the one that it thinks has the best odds of success?"

"It seems so," Zaa replied. "But what we do not know yet is why this system ordered the fleet to change course. We do not know if they somehow detected our emplaced defenses, and if they did, which one they detected. Our scans of them indicate they should not have been able to detect

anything we have in place around Arrival Point Alpha. We thoroughly analyzed their sensor systems and determined that they do not have that capability.”

“If they’re using them the way you think they are,” Jason grunted. “I confused the hell out of the Trillanes by using stock Imperium technology in ways they hadn’t seen before. They had no idea it could be used the way I was using it. The Trillanes just could not figure out my inverse phase emitter because it used a stock RTX-97 transceiver to hide from their sensors.”

“That is a valid point, cousin,” Zaa said after a moment. “Perhaps their *software*, which we cannot analyze, is utilizing their *hardware* in unorthodox ways.”

“It sounds like we need to do some old-fashioned probing actions to determine the capabilities of our enemy, with assets instead of sensors,” Navii said. “We undertake a series of tests isolating the various possible things they could have detected at the arrival point and revealing them to the Syndicate one by one, then see which ones invoke a reaction. That way we know what they’re detecting.”

“A wise course of action, Navii,” Zaa agreed. “But it also means that getting infiltrators onto those ships is even more important now than it was before, since our foe is demonstrating that they cannot be taken at face value. I need eyes behind the mask they present to us so we can see the truth of them.”

“Well, Denmother, we’re about to drop off a tackler relatively close to their arrival point,” Jason said, pointing at the holo of the *Legion* and the *Backgammon*. “They may be close enough for you to get infiltrators there.”

“How close?”

“We intend to plant the *Backgammon* on the far side of the star, inside the orbital track of the first planet.”

“Using the star to hide the ship from them,” she said with an approving nod. “That is close enough. Is there room for us to send in some equipment on the tackler? Some external sensor pods we can seed into the system, and some of the infiltration pods we use to move infiltrators close to enemy ships?”

“Those little drones? Sure, there’s room,” Jason nodded. What she was referring to was a very, *very* small device that was like a remote controlled toy, only about a shakra long, which they used to get infiltrators close to enemy ships they were tasked to board. Kimdori would shape themselves into something about the size of a mouse to ride in it, and it would jettison them into space close to their target ship. “I just wish we could send some spiders,” he growled.

“No broadcast power to run them,” Myri reminded him. “And we can’t send a remote power emitter until we know if they can detect it or not.”

“I know,” he nodded. “Get your gear and your infiltrators here, Denmother, so we can load them on the tackler.”

“They are on their way now,” she replied. “They will be put on the planet. The Syndicate will, no doubt, dispatch a scouting party to the planet, for scientific reasons if nothing else. My children will be set at strategic points where they can reach a Syndicate landing party and have them take them back up to the fleet.”

“Very clever,” Navii breathed.

“That’s impressively sneaky, cousin,” Jason agreed. “They’ll have plenty of time to get on the planet before the Syndicate arrives.”

It only took about fifteen minutes for the Kimdori freighter to rush into the hologram—it was given permission to exceed dock speed—and they transferred some Kimdori and some equipment into the *Backgammon*. As soon as they were done, the *Legion* started pulling the smaller ship, and the holo moved with them. “How long will it take to get there?” Zaa asked.

“From right now, a little over thirty minutes,” Myri answered. “Once the ship clears Kosigi, it’ll run at FTL out to jump distance, then jump. Most of the time is going to be getting out of Kosigi. They’ll beat the Syndicate fleet to the star by seven hours.”

“Excellent,” Zaa said firmly. “That will be more than enough time for the tackler to get its stealth fields up and get my children onto the planet and in ideal position to intercept Syndicate landing parties.”

“What if they don’t land?” Juma asked.

“Their travel pods are capable of space travel, so they’ll simply use them to intercept their fleet,” she replied.

Jason stayed right there in the ops center and watched holos and tactical displays that showed the *Legion* and *Backgammon* move through Kosigi, exit, then only take about six seconds to reach jump distance by going to FTL mode one at its lowest possible speed. The ship then came to a stop, hesitated about five seconds, and then jumped into hyperspace in a brilliant flash of white light, which indicated that it was jumping in mode three. “ETA to destination, 21 seconds,” one of Dellin’s ops staffers called, who was usually a traffic controller.

“God, I love those translight drives,” Jason said fervently.

“You and me both, cousin,” Zaa said with a toothy smile.

Just that fast, the *Legion* dropped back into normal space fairly close to the white star holding the Syndicate’s destination planet. “That system needs a name,” Jason said. “I’m not going to refer to it by its location code, it’s too damn long. So, let’s call it *Oasis*.”

“Why that?” Zaa asked.

“What is that? English?” Myri asked.

“It’s an English word for a small wellspring of life in a vast desert of emptiness, so *Oasis* fits it,” he replied.

“Ah.”

“*I’ll update all Karinne starcharts to reflect the change of designation,*” Cynna announced with a small smile.

The *Legion* followed usual protocol for mode three travel, dropping back into normal space at a tangent to its destination to prevent dropping into normal space inside a celestial body. But the newest round of navigation algorithm upgrades showed that they were getting more and more precise, because the ship dropped back into normal space almost right beside the star, only .136% off its target destination coordinates. That only required about three minutes of travel under normal jump engines to reach the star system, and Jason figured that by the time they had the engines fully tested and certified, they’d have navigational algorithms and navigational computers capable of handling them. It dropped back into

normal space and cruised into the system in FTL mode one, which got it to its destination in about a minute, which demonstrated how fucking *useful* it was to have a ship that could run in FTL in normal space, drastically cutting down travel times to and from jump distance. It pulled the tackler into position, then it disengaged its towing apparatus, which just dangled behind the ship like a tail as it pulled away. Jason saw from telemetry that the *Backgammon* activated its stealth fields, which hid it from virtually all sensors and visible light, the ship shimmering out of view as the field bent light around the area of effect, rendering it effectively invisible. The *Legion* again used FTL mode one to get out to safe jump distance in a matter of seconds, then it turned its bow towards a tangential destination point outside the galaxy that would let it get back to Karis in about five minutes of standard hyperspace travel, then jumped out.

“And it’s done,” Jason declared. “Myri, I want every drive-capable ship we have kept on active standby and ready to jump out to assist the *Backgammon* if necessary. The *Legion* will be part of that. Tell them *not* to remove the towing rig.”

“I’ll see to it, Jayce.”

“How many ships do you have with drives?”

“Nine,” Myri replied. “One of each ship class except a command ship, part of Myli’s testing program for different sized ships, plus the original *Trailblazer*. And we’ll have a command ship with a drive in two days, they’re installing it on one of the three command ships we just finished building.”

“The *Axumai*,” Juma supplied.

“You have both a fleet and a tactical battleship with a drive?” Zaa asked.

Jason nodded. “Both were just installed yesterday and passed the initial tests, so we know they work,” he answered. “The *Ori Ai* and the *Arabax*.”

“We put a drive on Sevi’s ship. We’re all doomed,” Juma said dryly, which made Jason laugh.

“That is some significant firepower,” she noted.

“That’s why we refitted it,” he replied with a grin.

“The question is, why did you not have a tackler with a drive?”

“Because we don’t know how the drive will behave with the interdictor installed inside the ship,” Jason answered. “Given the problems we had with the standard hyperspace jump engines with the interdictor installed inside the ship, that close to it, we weren’t going to take any chances with the drive. Tacklers are barebones ships because of all the shielding we had to install in the ship to isolate the engine from the interdictor, they’re almost like two different ships welded together with about 170 solid shakra of shielding material stuck between them. There wasn’t much room left over for systems. We haven’t done enough tests to know if it’s safe to install a drive in a tackler yet, and we won’t until we have more data.”

“Ah. Understandable. Perhaps you should look into installing a retractable version of that towing apparatus into the sterns of your ships.”

“That’s such a good idea that Naval Engineering is already doing it,” Jason told her. “The docking clamp will be universal, able to tow *any* ship frigate sized or larger.”

“Always on the vanguard,” she said with an approving smile.

“Well, there’s not much more we can do until the Syndicate gets there,” Jason said. “Have the probes scan the system, it might be useful to *us* as a base after we push the Syndicate out of the galaxy. Send the data to the twins, but don’t tell them where the system is. Have them run up possible outpost or even full colonization contingency plans.”

“I’ll take care of it, Jason,” Cynna nodded.

“I’ll have them load two standard interdictors on the *Ori Ai* to take out there, just in case,” Juma added.

“Good idea,” Myri nodded. “Have them add some weapon platforms and a broadcast power node.”

“Cynna,” Jason said.

“Yes, Jason?”

“How close are they to finishing the drive for the *Tianne*?”

“My last update from Trenirk is he expects it to be complete in 20 hours. With a fourteen-day refit timetable from the Shield’s Hammers, that puts it

fifteen days from activation.”

“Lorna will *murder* you if you pull the *Tianne* off the board, Jayce,” Myri warned. “It’s a key component of her overall battle plan.”

“Coma,” he called. Almost immediately, a hologram of her manifested in the ops center. “Talk to the Shield’s Hammers and find out how much of the drive installation prepwork they can do *without* taking the engines offline. Get a timeline of the absolute minimum time the ship will be down for the upgrade.”

She nodded. “*I’ll speak with Chief Braxa right now.*”

“I take it the *Tianne*’s drive upgrade is modular?” Zaa asked.

Jason nodded. “The Project F team worked out a way to use the original jump engines and just install the new drive section as an upgrade, the way Navii wanted. They have to do some work to the engines to make it accept the new drive section and move a bunch of stuff around in engineering to make it all work, but we don’t have to completely replace them. That cuts the install time *way* down. I think they got the drive installed on the *Arabax* in six days, and that’s a tactical battleship.”

“Installing the drives in each class of ship gave us a practical installation procedure to use with the rest,” Cynna added. *“We tested the proposed theoretical install procedure Project F formulated and came up with a practical procedure. Not all of them worked as proposed.”*

“That’s the truth,” Myri grunted. “The battleship install was very messy. I think at one point, they had the entire engineering section of the ship in pieces, laid out in the companionways halfway to the bow.”

“They ran out of room in the cargo bays,” Jason told Zaa, who chuckled. “Yeah, so, they figured out a *better* way to do the install on the battleships after that adventure.”

“But the drive works on it?”

Jason nodded. “We installed it in the *Dreamer*, to soothe Marayi a little bit. She’s still kinda fuming over Palla stealing the Ghost Squadron from her.”

“Like it matters now,” Juma chuckled. “Marayi was promoted to command the *Ori Ai* yesterday. She moved up to a fleet battleship. She takes official command of it later today.”

“Yeah, that did a whole lot to defuse her,” Myri grinned. “Giving her command of the drive-capable mark II battleship was a big salve on the Ghost Squadron wound.”

“She’s a good choice regardless. She’s the best battleship captain we have, she deserves to command a fleet battleship,” Jason stated. “Who did you promote up to the *Dreamer*?”

“Joni Suvalle,” Juma answered. “You should have an application from her in your inbox.”

“That? I approved that two days ago. She’s Zarina Joni *Karinne* now.”

“She certainly earned it,” Juma said with an approving nod.

“Ten times over,” Jason snorted. “We just didn’t have time to do the official ceremony, with her deployed and the summit coming up. We’ll have it the next time she’s back home. But she’s already authorized to wear gold.” Gold heraldry on dress uniforms denoted a noble of the house. Silver heraldry denoted a house member. On armor, nobility was denoted with a gold house crest over the rank insignia

“Braxa just got back to me, Jason. He says the absolute minimum downtime he can guarantee is ten days,” Coma announced. *“And that comes at something of a risk, since they’ll have to jerry-rig some parts of engineering so they can move things around. So it’s not completely safe.”*

“It’s not worth risking having the ship’s engines fail in battle to gain five days on the refit,” Myri said, and Juma nodded in agreement.

“Yeah, I agree. Scrap that idea,” he said. “But warn Naval Engineering that when we *do* do the refit, everyone and their grandmother is going to get pulled from whatever they’re doing to go assist.”

Myri laughed. “Go back to Terra, you silly man. We’ll tell you when we have something to report.” “Actually, I’m going to go home,” he said with a smile. “I’m going to test out the bionoid by sending it to the next summit meeting in my place and see if anyone notices.”

Myri laughed richly. “Dahnai will the first time she tries to send to you.”

“I already told my talented friends. They promised not to give me away,” he grinned.

Kyle got him back to the strip on the *Arizona*, and he took the opportunity to play with the girls and the new twins without his attention-hogging wife getting in the way, helped Ayama and Surin give them their bottles, and wore out Bethany and Siyae to the point where they fell asleep on each side of him on the couch, snuggled up against him, and made him feel like the luckiest father in the universe. He couldn’t follow suit, however, warning Ayama and Surin he was about to zone out, then he leaned back on the couch, closed his eyes, and sent his mind hundreds of light years away. He merged to the bionoid in Norfolk, and then his senses were shunted off in favor of a new source. He opened the bionoid’s eyes and saw that they were all gathered around it, that it was still laying in the padded case in which it was brought. He synced fully with the sensory stream, which was currently running in organic compatibility mode, which limited them to the norms of his own body. He shook his head a little bit to settle in fully to the merge, then he sat up in the coffin-like carrying case. “So, what do you guys think?” he asked Dahnai, Kreel, Krirara, and Krarrik.

“I think that is the creepiest and most awesome thing I’ve ever seen in my life,” Kreel replied, reaching over and poking his forearm. “It feels like real flesh.”

“It does from the inside as well,” he replied as he easily stood up, not really caring that the bionoid was naked, and so by extension he was too, since it was a faithful duplication of his own body. “I’ve been working with Rook to make the merge feel as real as possible for an organic being. He doesn’t have that kind of experience.”

“It is almost disturbing, knowing that this is a *machine*,” Krirara said, sliding her padded hand up his upper arm. “The flesh is warm. There is body hair. The irises change size. It even has your scars. I would almost believe that it would bleed should I dig in my claws.”

“You’ll damage the sensor mesh under the epidermis if you do that, so please don’t,” he chuckled. “So, you think this’ll fool people?”

“It’s fooling me right now, at least from an appearance point of view, and I know what it is,” Dahnai declared, studying his face intently. “I couldn’t tell you apart if you were standing side by side. But it doesn’t have your sense of presence. There’s no *mind* inside it.”

“Yeah, it has no sense of awareness at all,” Kreel agreed. “To my talent, it’s either not alive or it’s actively hiding its mind from me. It has the same telepathic presence as the refrigerator does.”

“Always about food with you,” Dahnai accused, which made him laugh.

“Hey, I’d appreciate not being called an *it*,” Jason protested cheekily as he stepped out of the cargo unit.

“And you are controlling that device from *Karis*, Jason?” Krarrik asked.

“Yup. I’m sitting on the couch right now, with the twins curled up and napping on each side of me,” he grinned. “Biogenics make it possible. I could control this unit from anywhere in the universe, Krarrik, so long as we have a strong enough transceiver that lets me talk to it.”

“Telepathy ignores time and distance in some ways, mate, and only *one* of the participants in the communication has to be strong enough to reach the other for both to talk,” Krirara told him. “That is what makes biogenics so powerful. It is the only viable means of communication across extreme distances. Every other known form of comm has a time delay at great distances, but biogenics do not.”

“Just about,” Jason agreed.

“Ah, that’s how you can hear me respond when you send to me, even though I have no talent,” Krarrik realized.

“Yes, mate. I establish the connection we both use.”

“That’s how I can drive this bionoid from the other side of the next sector over,” Jason chuckled. “Kaera!” he shouted. “I’m in the bionoid! Get my spare suit of armor ready for the meeting!”

[It’s upstairs and waiting for you, Jason,] she replied from her interface. She already knew she couldn’t send to the bionoid.

“So, Dahnai, Jyslin, does it pass your *complete* inspection?” Kreel asked playfully.

Dahnai smacked the bionoid on the butt. “That feels about the same. I’m not so sure about the front yet,” she replied, which made Jyslin burst out laughing.

“I’ve inspected that side. It’s a pretty good imitation, but I haven’t tried out its, ah, *full functionality* yet,” she grinned, which made them laugh.

“Okay, now we’re getting into Faey perv territory,” Kreel protested. “The whole race of ya, nothing but pervs. You know that?”

“Don’t hate us because we know how to have a good time, Kreel,” Dahnai replied shamelessly.

“Have you seen the population problem in the Union, woman? Do you really think we didn’t figure that out long before you did?” he retaliated, which made Jason burst out laughing.

It felt almost no different to armor up in the bionoid, outside of the fact that the armor felt a little lighter than usual, and he answered a bunch of questions from the others about the bionoid and how it felt to be merged to it as he did so. This suit of armor had a tactical gestalt in it since it was his backup suit of armor, which he couldn’t use, and looked identical to the armor Jason had on the stand up in the bedroom. He stamped his feet a little to settle himself fully into the armor, then took his helmet from Kaera and locked it behind his neck in its carry configuration. “This part of the meeting is only supposed to last about two hours, love,” he told Jyslin, kissing her on the cheek. “So we shouldn’t be very long.”

“We’re gonna go on a tour of the *Tianne*,” Jyslin told him. “Palla arranged it for us.”

“You should enjoy that,” he nodded. “More than the kids will.”

He did his best to act completely natural as they again headed up to New York, this time in the frigate *Molari*, with Dahnai, Kreel, and Krirara riding with him. They entered the summit building, and Jason saw that nobody that was not security gave him a second glance. Nobody could tell that the bionoid wasn’t him, but to be fair, the building’s security had already been warned that Jason would be remote operating an experimental

robot instead of coming in person, and *please* don't tell anyone, as genuine reactions were part of the experiment. He had to warn them because the building scanners would pick up instantly that it wasn't him, and that might trigger a reaction from them that may involve guns. So, to save the repair bill, he warned security beforehand so they wouldn't panic. And they followed his wishes by not giving him away, though many of the security guards did give him a close look and looked quite impressed.

Nobody in the council chamber noticed either, though Zaa did give him a very long, assessing look when he sat down beside her. Then again, she knew it was a bionoid, so it was just her being curious. But, also, nobody really got all that close to him except Brayrak Kruu, and he didn't really pay much attention outside of some smalltalk. Rook had done an amazing job making sure that Jason's voice was perfectly duplicated by the bionoid.

Lorna hijacked the conference by showing up in person and explaining the Syndicate fleet's change of course, then she gave them a report about their destination. "The KMS used their wormhole generator to get assets into position in the star system," she said. "They and the Kimdori have a sizable amount of automated and drone equipment and weaponry either in place at the star or following behind the enemy fleet. We're going to use those assets to make initial contact with the Syndicate to try to convince them to withdraw from our galaxy and use the time we gain in the deliberations to draw up new battle plans. Their decision to establish an outpost in the Strands of Trelle has both advantages and disadvantages for both parties. They are well outside our reach, but it also means that we will see any attempt they make to invade coming from six days away. That gives us plenty of time to redeploy assets to meet them no matter where they try to invade."

"So, the trap we set for them at their arrival point is useless now?" someone called. He wasn't sure who.

"I'm afraid so, your Majesty," she nodded. "But we still have the overall advantage, given we will have six days to respond to any moves they make. We can get our entire fleet anywhere in the galaxy in seven hours. They cannot take us by surprise the way the Consortium did. However, since we won't be able to trap them upon entry into the galaxy, we're reassigning those assets to a defensive posture. The Karinnes have already agreed to

take the interdictors set as part of the original trap and redeploy them to unprotected systems in the Coalition. Coalition rulers, you need to get with General Myri Karinne of the KMS and work out with her exactly which systems you want placed under protection.”

“We already have a list of systems to protect based on strategic value, General,” Holikk answered. “We’ll get in contact with the KMS immediately after this conference.”

“Can they get past the interdictors, General?” Magran asked.

“No, Grand Master, they cannot,” she replied confidently. “We’ve thoroughly analyzed all data sent by the Kimdori, and their ships simply cannot do it. The only possible way they could breach an interdictor would be to somehow gain access to a hyperspace bridge linked to a bridge on the inside, and all of those are behind interdictors. The catapults the Karinnes deploy to allow any ship to jump in real time cannot get ships through the interdiction effect. That requires a bridge.”

“So, the weak point in our system is Terra,” Dahnai surmised. “Due to the need to allow ships in to access the Academy.”

“A weakness we can cover,” she nodded. “We can close the door into Terra at any time, to use a Terran idiom. “Any time any Syndicate ships leave *Oasis*, we’ll close that door so the interdiction effect is fully expanded by the time they get here.”

“*Oasis*?” Dahnai asked.

“The Karinne name for the destination system of the Syndicate,” she replied. That, of course, made it the name everyone would use. “It’s an English word referring to a pond or lake of water located in a desert. I believe his Grace named it himself,” she added, looking over at Jason.

“Hey, it fit,” he shrugged, which caused a few chuckles.

She brought up a holo of the system. “The system consists of a class IV white giant star with a system of fourteen planets, six terrestrial and eight gas giants,” she described. “Planet four contains a viable ecosystem well within Faey tolerance, which is why we think they selected this system as their destination. It has no other concrete assets. No heavy metal deposits, no valuable substances outside of the usual heavy core gases found in gas

giants, like Sepparium and Infinitum. But with a viable terrestrial planet under their control, they could conceivably replenish or extend their food reserves with farming or harvesting plant and animal resources on the planet. The planet has an extensive and vibrant ecosystem, and if the Syndicate races can digest the local flora and fauna, they could subsist off the planet in perpetuity. For a fleet of thirty thousand ships operating in hostile territory, we feel that their decision to take this system is based entirely on planet four and the food it can provide.”

“That is a very reasonable assumption,” Grran’s interface intoned.

“While we won’t get them into our trap, them setting up in a system so far outside the galaxy does give us the advantage of seeing them coming,” Lorna repeated. “They can’t hide from us, and with them being about six days of constant hyperspace travel from the nearest Confederate planet, we will have *days* to prepare for any hostile move they make.”

“Then I’d say that you’re right, General, this is the perfect time to open diplomatic channels with them,” Magran called.

Lorna nodded. “That’s the extent of my information, esteemed rulers. I’ll return the floor to Emperor’s Admiral Hezivarr to go over the original material.”

“Thank you, General,” Hezivarr said with a nod as he stood. “I have our full report on our readiness with the diffusers, as reported to the CCM by our member military organizations, including the most recent data of diffuser upgrades for ships assigned to the CCM. In short, we should have all ships assigned to the CCM for the duration of this action upgraded with diffusers, and with the Syndicate pulling back to Oasis, that just gives us more time for our member empires to complete the upgrades for their ships held in reserve.”

And with that, Jason more or less zoned out. Three times during the briefing, he put the bionoid in something of an independent mode where he told it to look like it was paying attention to Lorna, and he disengaged from the merge just enough to do other things, such as put his girls down for a nap while listening in on the briefing using the audio from the bionoid’s sensory feed, or have a snack and watch some viddy. He managed to get everything squared away and back into a full merge just as the briefing

ended, then he took over the bionoid again just in time to get up with the others and prepare to file out.

And that was when he learned that his little trick didn't go completely unnoticed. Sk'Vrae all but pulled him aside once they left the room, her eyes hard. "What manner of trick is this? I told the guards that this isn't you, and they simply said that they know, and to talk to you about it. What goes on?"

He laughed, "I shoulda known you wouldn't be fooled by it," he said. "What gave me away?"

"Answer. What is going on?"

"This is a robot," he told her. "A very lifelike robot. What gave it away?"

"It has no sense of awareness like you do," she answered. "There is no mind inside it I can sense."

"Dammit, I completely forgot to warn you, since you have talent," he chuckled. "Dahnai and the other talented council members know, since I can't really hide from them."

"Even beyond that, it doesn't *smell* like you do, Jason. It smells like artificial compounds and lubricants. Any Urumi would know as soon as they got close to it that it is not a person. It smells like a machine."

"Now that I didn't think about," he said, tapping his chin. "I don't have your sense of smell, so it never really occurred to me."

"You keep saying *I*. Are you not just a robot pretending to be Jason Karinne?"

"No, it's *me*, Sk'Vrae," he answered. "I'm merged to this robot via biogenic commune, so I see and hear everything that it does. This robot is an experiment we're conducting. I brought it here to see if it could fool the council, and it did. At least *most* of them."

Sk'Vrae wasn't the only one that noticed. Hrathin of the Hrathrari, who also had an exceptionally keen sense of smell, also realized that the bionoid was a fake. And to Jason's delightful surprise, Quord also saw through the deception, but he did it with his eyes, not his nose. He picked up on those

tiny, almost insignificant little details that separated a living thing from a machine, things like how the bionoid didn't move in those very subtle, slight ways when it was sitting down the way a living thing would, or how the bionoid's eyes didn't move and scan quite the way Jason's did. Since one of those was unconscious and the other was autonomic, based on how a Terran's eyes worked and how a machine operated its optic sensors, they were things Jason couldn't really control. But it said a *ton* about Quord's powers of observation that he noticed such small clues. He would be one *hell* of a detective.

Instead of going straight back to Ayuma's house, he took the frigate back to the Academy and walked the grounds, doing what he intended to do. He surprised quite a few of the students by walking into alternate environment modules and talking to them, wearing his helmet as basic protection and security but with the enviro systems off, meaning he was fully exposed to the environmental conditions within the module. And that made it *fun* for him, going from the frigid, methane-filled Birkon module to the searing hot nitrogen module of the Araban to the carbon dioxide module of Crai to the *really* exotic modules, like the one for the Psiyacho that held nitric acid in a gaseous form. A species that breathed *acid*...the universe was truly a wondrous place.

The most fun, though was entering the aquatic habitats for the marine species, like the Menoda, the Ubutu, the Amsthat, and some 83 other aquatic species that attended the Academy, multiple species sharing the habitats most closely matching the environmental conditions of their home planets. Some of them were tropical, like the Menoda and Amsthat, some were fresh water, some salt water, and some were very cold, with various PH levels to accommodate the biological needs of the inhabitants. He allowed the interior of the armor to fill with water and simply shut down the bionoid's breathing so it didn't get water in its pseudo-lungs, and relied on the armor's external speaker to talk to the students, sending what he wanted to say directly to the speaker and allowing it to convert it to audio.

He found that even without the ability to feel pain, going into the habitat for the cold-water species was a bit un-fun, since his normal biology registered water that was below freezing to be *very* uncomfortable. Twelve different species shared that module, the only one in the Confederation being the Ubutu.

Ubutu weren't *entirely* marine, like the Menoda were. They were capable of breathing both air and water and operating equally effectively either on land or on water, but unlike the Amsthat, they were capable of operating outside of the water for indefinite periods of time. They were truly amphibious creatures, equally at home both in the water and on dry land, and unlike many other amphibious creatures, they didn't suffer adverse health effects from extended periods of time out of the water. They were best described as large bipedal bear-like creatures, sort of like the Haumda, covered in thick white fur, which made them more polar bear-ish. They preferred arctic climates, like the Jobodi and the Birkons, but preferred *marine* arctic environments. They were the only Confederation member capable of operating in arctic marine environments for extended periods without life support.

What made them so curious—and awesome—was that when they were underwater, they breathed the water *itself*. They didn't extract anything out of the water to breathe, they used water molecules themselves to get what they needed. They used oxygen like many carbon-based creatures, and could breathe gaseous oxygen in the atmosphere like most oxygen-dependent creatures, but they could also directly extract oxygen from water molecules through a rather complex biological process in their compartmented lungs, which both generated heat that helped keep them warm in the frigid arctic seas in which they swam and made them exhale pure aerated hydrocarbons as the hydrogen left behind by the process chemically combined with carbon dioxide molecules released into their lungs, which had the double beneficial effect of extracting *that* oxygen for re-use inside the Ubutu's body. Those exhaled hydrocarbons combined in the atmosphere to form more complex hydrocarbons like methane, which were consumed by microbes in the ecosystem. That prevented methane buildup in their atmosphere, preventing greenhouse gas buildup and keeping their home planet cold.

An Ubutu's breath was *literally* flammable, and they had the ability to ignite their breath through an organ in the throat that injected a chemical into their breath that ignited it in a delayed reaction, *after* it left their mouths. So, the Ubutu were intelligent polar bears that could *breathe fire*, and that made them pretty damn awesome.

Most didn't connect a cold-climate species with an ability like breathing fire, but it was a *damn* effective defensive mechanism on their home planet. Their home was an arctic planet like the Jobodi homeworld, where the equatorial "tropical" regions were classified as cold temperate, borderline sub-arctic, and ice caps covered 55% of the planet's surface at all times. It was on those permanent ice packs that the Ubutu had built most of their largest cities. The planet was populated by megaflora and megafauna, where most species grew to huge proportions, and that included *very* large predators. Ubutu were over six shakra tall on the average, around seven feet or a bit over two meters, but they were *small* compared to many life forms on their home planet, and thus they had evolved additional defenses to make up for their small size in comparison to other life on their home planet. For cold-climate creatures who almost always had thick fur upon which they depended for survival against the cold, fire was particularly damaging and destructive, so the Ubutu were well evolved for dealing with the large predatory animals from their home ecosystem.

Jason spent nearly an hour in the arctic marine habitat chatting with the Ubutu—he liked them a great deal, they were pretty fun people—despite the cold water being a tad uncomfortable, to the point where he had to adjust his sensory data stream so it wouldn't register the cold as uncomfortable. And when he was done, he walked with his guards back to Ayuma's house, where Jyslin greeted him with a kiss on the cheek. "You had your fun, love, so put your toy away and come back."

He laughed. "I should," he agreed. "Just let me get out of this armor first. The gel backing needs to be cleaned or it's gonna get a bit chalky in here."

About an hour later, the *real* Jason was coming in through the side door with four of his guards, and he was carrying one of the girls in each arm. They were wearing their own armor, toddler-sized armor, and looked quite excited. "Hello, baby girls!" Jyslin said with a bright smile, rushing over to them. "Couldn't leave them?"

"They both went full-out tantrum mode," he replied, which made Jyslin laugh.

"That's my girls!" Jyslin declared, taking Bethany and bouncing the giggling toddler in her arms. "Let's get you two out of this silly armor.

Seido, we need to make up an extra room for the girls, they came back with Jayce!" she called loudly.

"I'll order some appropriate beds," Seido called. "They should be here and ready for them by bedtime."

"How long are you here, love?" Jyslin asked.

"We're reconvening in about six hours, when the Syndicate reaches *Oasis* and has a little time before we initiate contact," he replied, falling back to their usual habit of speaking when one of the girls was with them, so she could hear them talking. That expanded her vocabulary and was a critical learning tool for her. "That's gonna be the first real test for the rulers."

"What do you mean?"

"She's having Admiral Jarik Furystorm of the Shio handle the initial contact," he replied. "I'm sure *someone* is going to find a reason to not want him to do it."

"Why? Jarik's an experienced diplomat!" Jyslin protested. "He was in the Shio diplomatic corps before joining the military!"

"You're dealing with a roomful of toddlers, love, who want their own way all day every day," he replied. "But this isn't their call. Lorna runs the CCM, this is a CCM operation, so she has authority to pick whoever she damn well pleases." He kissed Siyae noisily on the cheek, which made her giggle, and started towards the stairs. "We'll be listening in on a feed while Jarik does his talking from CCM headquarters. And I think I'm going to use my bionoid again."

"Oh? How?"

"I'll ask Lorna if she wants me right there in the command center so I can issue rapid orders to the KMS while Jarik's talking," he replied.

"You're being a micromanager again, love," Jyslin chuckled in warning. "Cybi has access to the CCM, they can tell her and she can relay. You're not part of that chain of command, you know."

"I am if I want to be," he replied flippantly.

“And you accuse the others of being a toddler,” she grinned, smacking his armored posterior lightly, which he felt thanks to the sensor mesh.

Everyone got out of their armor, then the girls explored the house with one of the guards watching them—like typical twins, they did almost everything together—while Jason caught up on some reports that Chirk sent him, making sure his inbox wasn’t a mountain by the time he returned. He got in a very quick catnap before putting his armor back on, then he was on his way back to New York. He rode with Kiaari, discussing the possible responses to the parlay by the Syndicate, one of which was something he hadn’t considered. “They may demand face to face meetings,” she mused, tapping her muzzle in thought. “If I wanted to stall, that’s what I’d do.”

“Why would *they* want to stall? That just gives us time to get ready for them.”

“Because if they’re made, and they are, then their priority becomes finding out as much as they possibly can about us, about the possible threat we pose, and the galaxy near where they are so they know where to go when they do deploy. We’ve completely ruined their original plan, and militaries like plans, cousin. They’ll want time to come up with a new one. If I were them, I’d demand a face to face meeting.”

“There is no fucking way in hell am I allowing *any* Confederate diplomat to go out there,” he said vehemently. “That’s a six-day trip. They’d be totally exposed.”

“And that slows things down even more,” she said. “They could burn days, maybe even takirs, bogging us down in negotiations over where, when, and how to hold the actual negotiations. Remember, Denmother said that what we have on them says that they know how to use diplomacy *way* better than the Consortium does. That the Benga can talk as fast as the Beryans when it suits them. They need to buy time, and they’ll do it by talking us into giving it to them.”

He couldn’t refute that opinion. Kiaari was young, but she was very, very good at her job. She actually had no idea that her parents were probably just as proud of her as they were of Miaari because she had risen to such an important position as Gamekeeper of Terra at such a staggeringly young age, as Kimdori reckoned thing. Miaari was the result of centuries of

training and experience, but Kiaari was pure, raw *talent*. They and the Denmother rode her maybe a little harder than they needed to because she *was* so young, holding her to a higher standard than other Gamekeepers because of her youth. But so far, Kiaari had proved that she was more than up to the task.

“So, your recommendation is to move the negotiations along,” he surmised.

“Time helps both of us, cousin, but it helps them *more*.”

“Fuck,” he growled as the frigate started descending and decelerating, making its approach to New York. He put a finger to his gestalt and caused it to project out a visible hologram for both of them. Rook’s metallic face appeared on the hologram. “Rook.”

“What is it, Jayce?”

“Time to push the boundaries of the bionoid project. I need you to build me a Benga-sized bionoid. Like mine, just their size. This is official business, Rook. So I need you to put your work on Project G on hold until you get it done.”

He took on a thoughtful expression for a second. *“I can do it,”* he replied. *“Give me three days. Same equipment as your current one?”*

“No. I’ll send you a datafile when I have a moment, explaining exactly what it’ll be for, and then you can get with the CBIMs and discuss how best to equip it for its task. But the one thing I *can* tell you it’s going to need is a self destruct. And a *nasty* one.”

He nodded. *“I’ll begin the design as soon as I finish what I’m doing, since I’m waiting for that file.”*

“That works. I’ll call you back in a few hours with more info.”

“What are you pondering, cousin?”

“If giving them time hinders us more than them, well, we just remove all the blockades they’re no doubt going to throw up,” he replied.

She gave him a long look. “You’re gonna reveal Project F.”

“If I have to,” he replied simply. “It’s certainly something I want to avoid doing if at all possible, but I won’t let my wish to keep that secret get in the way of our objectives. It’s not worth losing half our fleet and getting tens of thousands killed, not when we *need* those ships and those soldiers for the Consortium invasion.”

“I’m glad you told me that *now*. I’d better get ready for the firestorm that’s coming if you do.”

“A fucking men,” he grunted. “You can spread the word to the others, and I’ll tell Denmother at the conference.”

She nodded.

Jason had to go all the way to the council chamber to find Zaa, sitting down beside her. He took off his gauntlet without preamble and took hold of her bare hand, and her eyes widened after she almost reflexively connected to him the way the Kimdori did and accessed his mind, seeing his conversation with Kiaari and some of his plans to counter Benga stalling tactics. *[Going that far may not be necessary, cousin,]* she communed to him through her memory band. *[But I will say that it is prudent to plan for the eventuality. You don’t have to use the plan, but having it gives us options.]*

[I’d like to avoid using it if at all possible, cousin. It means revealing Project F to the Confederation. There is no way I could possibly explain how I’m getting negotiators out there so fast. That’s going to cause a complete firestorm, as Kiaari described it.]

[An apt description if there ever was one,] she agreed. *[I approve of your warning Kiaari to spread the word for Gamekeepers to tighten up in their territories. I will confirm her warning as soon as we finish here.]*

[Jason,] Cybi cut in.

[What is it, Cybi?]

[I know this is a pretty bad time, but the Parri shaman is asking to see you,] she replied. *[She just made the request. She says it’s urgent.]*

[Meh. Can you tell her that I’m on Terra, but I’ll come see her as soon as I can find the time?]

[Hold on, you can tell her yourself. Let me connect the comm unit in the village to the biogenic network.] There was a pause, then in his mind's eye, supplied over commune, an image of the *shaman* appeared, as if he were looking at her over a vidlink. *[This device is quite confusing,]* she said in her mellow tone. *[Is that you, Jason Karinne?]*

[Yes, it's me, shaman. What can I do for you?]

[I find myself in need to speak with you, Jason Karinne. At your earliest convenience.]

[I'm currently not on the planet, friend. I can't come over right at this moment. But I think I can get there, um,] he accessed local time at the Parri village. *[Just a little before midnight. But I can wait until morning if that's more convenient for you.]*

[It would be best for you to come as soon as you are able,] she replied, and that made it *fucking serious*, at least from her point of view. She was a Parri, her idea of earth-shattering importance was very different from most other people.

[Then I promise that as soon as I can possibly manage it, I'll be there.]

[That is fine. I will have tea waiting for you,] she said with a smile, then the image of her disappeared from his mind.

[Well, fuck,] Jason growled to Zaa, who was privy to the whole exchange thanks to her connection to him. *[I'm almost afraid to ask what she wants. The last time she was this serious about seeing me, it turned out to be a Parri thing. But the time before that, it was when she blinded the Consortium energy being so it couldn't see into our territory. So I have no idea if this is important to her, or important period.]*

[Either way, it's important for you to answer her call,] Zaa told him. *[I am of the opinion that the mystic abilities of the Parri are not to be overlooked, nor underestimated.]*

[Truth,] he agreed. *[Even outside of that, I've found that the advice she gives me is always good. She's one of my most important advisors.]*

[You don't fall into the trap of confusing her primitive lifestyle with a lack of intelligence, cousin, as most others would.]

[If you're saying that the Parri aren't the cavemen they appear to be, you're exactly right,] he told her. [You once told Rann that the Parri simply decided to advance themselves in a different way than we did, and I've never forgotten it. She may look like a loincloth-wearing savage, but if she's not smarter and wiser than everyone else on the planet except the CBIMs, you can put me in a monkey suit and have me dance for coins on a street corner.]

She gave a growling chortle at his choice of metaphors, giving him an amused look.

"And what are you two on about?" Brayrak Kruu asked from the other side of Jason.

"Nothing, Overseer, nothing," Zaa replied. "Jason was just showing me an amusing image from home. It seems his twin girls have discovered the dangers of flour and powdered sugar."

Brayrak laughed. "I take it they made a mess?"

"Monumentally so," Jason said dryly, then shared the particular image Zaa was mentioning with him via his desk's holo emitter. He gave a deep rumble of mirth at the image of the girls covered in flour after knocking over Seido's mixing bowl, Amber caught in mid-sneeze by the camera. That particular adventure took place nearly ten days ago, but Brayrak Kruu didn't need to know that.

Clever, clever Zaa. She was just as skilled at playing the game as her Gamekeeper children.

The last of the rulers came in, and Kim gaveled them to order. Almost immediately, he yielded the floor to Royal Admiral Ra'Vekk of the Urumi Collective, and he briefed them on the impending diplomatic contact. To Jason's surprise, nobody objected at them choosing Jarik Furystorm for the task, actually yielding to Lorna's wisdom and authority over the CCM... that was a first. Several holograms appeared in front of them showing the CCM command center, a feed of Jarik waiting to make contact, and feeds of the Syndicate fleet deploying around Oasis IV, the terrestrial planet. They'd been right, the fleet was deploying in a defensive position around the planet, and they already had landers descending towards the surface.

And they had no idea that the Kimdori were already down there and were waiting for them.

But *fuck*, to see that fleet around the planet, it made it clear just how big some of those ships were. The largest of them weren't in orbit, else their mass would affect the rotation of the planet and affect the tidal forces on its six oceans. They were in a loose ring around the planet, a good distance away from it, and Jason could see that they'd carefully deployed their fleet so the mass of the ships was balanced around the planet, which prevented their gravity from interfering with the planet or its three moons, or causing their gravity to alter the orbital tracks of the planet around its sun or the moons around the planet. If the entire fleet was on one side of the planet, the fleet's combined gravitational pull would pull the planet out of its orbital track. The added mass of the fleet increased the overall gravity well of the planet and its moons by nearly 24%.

That was how big those ships were. That was how many of them there were. Enough to alter the orbits of *planets*.

And that fleet was only a *small fraction* of the fleet the Syndicate had available to it. They were the ships that the Syndicate could easily afford to lose on this expeditionary mission.

"We're ready, Secretary Kim," Ra'Vekk called. "Admiral Furystorm is about to initiate contact over their diplomatic contact frequency, which they use to communicate with civilian Syndicate corporate ships. The fact that they receive any transmission on this frequency at all will allow us to quickly get in contact with their commanding officer."

"The council has already voted for you to proceed," he replied with a nod. "As we Terrans say, this is now your show, Admiral. Good luck."

"Thank you, Mister Secretary," Jarik said. "Comm one, initiate the hail."

"Aye sir. Hail is being sent."

It took about a minute. During that time, Jarik's face was being broadcast to the Syndicate fleet, but no answer came, which Jason felt was no doubt them trying to figure out who he was and why he was calling them. Eventually, a *very* handsome green-skinned woman's face appeared on another hologram. This was a Benga. Her skin was a darker shade of

green than Jarik's, and seeing her and Jarik at the same time reinforced the fact that the Shio and the Benga did look quite similar to each other, and not just because they both had green skin. She had a high-cheeked, narrow-nosed bone structure of which many Faey women would be jealous. Her eyes were the color of jade, not far from her skin, and her eyebrows and the hair pulled back away from her face above them were jet black. This was an *attractive* woman, clearly mature but not old, and she had an intrigued look on her face...no doubt curious as to exactly who was hailing her. She looked to be sitting at a desk with the Syndicate standard on a tapestry hanging on the wall behind her, a backdrop of sorts, and there was a small viewing monitor visible on her desk in the lower right corner of the hologram. "Who uses this frequency?" she said in a surprisingly deep, husky voice, addressing Jarik, then she gave him a closer look. She was speaking in the Benga language, also known as Syndicate Common, which the Kimdori had deciphered. Jason could understand her thanks to his gestalt, but subtitles in Faey were appearing at the bottom of the image for those who hadn't had the language inserted. "You are no Trader, there couldn't possibly be any Trader vessels *here*. Who are you? What species are you? You are no Benga, though you look remarkably like us."

"Madam, my name is Admiral Jarik Furystorm, officer of the Shio Federation," he answered calmly, speaking their language. "I represent a governmental entity known as the Confederation of Allied Empires. Simply put, madam, we are the citizens of the galaxy you are about to enter."

She raised one of those elegant eyebrows, then leaned back a little in her chair. "I am Fleet Commander Au Mai Sha Ra, commander of the Third Expeditionary Fleet of the Syndicate of United Corporations," she returned. "Might I ask exactly *how* you are hailing us over our diplomatic channel?"

"To make it simple, Fleet Commander, we have communications technologies that allow us to emulate your communication format and communicate with you in real time," he answered. "And your language and communication methods were data we extracted from the Consortium fleet we destroyed three of your standard orbits ago. Those data are how we knew how to hail you, and to do so in a language you understand."

She didn't so much as blink. "Well, it seems that half the reason we were deployed to this galaxy is gone," she said conversationally. "One of

the reasons we were sent was to destroy that fleet before they could establish a foothold in your galaxy that future Consortium expeditions could use as a base of operations. But our secondary goal remains, which is scientific study and exploration. It is our honor to be the first *manned* Syndicate fleet to reach a galaxy so distant from our home,” she said proudly. “We are tasked to conduct surveys and scientific research after the destruction of the Consortium fleet, then return home with our data. And since the Consortium seems to be no longer active in your galaxy, then our scientific mission can commence.” She glanced to the side, then looked back at the camera. “And one of the easiest means by which we can fulfill our mission is to speak with the locals,” she added smoothly. “It would be our honor to invite your Confederation’s scientific researchers to speak with our science officers, so an exchange of data might be arranged. There is much we can learn from you, and in return, much you can learn from us.”

“While a peaceful meeting in the interests of science is very much something we could discuss, it does fall to me to warn you, in very stern and frank terms, madam, that any entry into our galaxy of your fleet will be construed as a military invasion, and thus an act of war,” he informed her. “It is definitely good fortune for both of us that you decided to stop where you did, else a...tense confrontation might have ensued,” he added dryly. “So long as your fleet remains outside of our galactic rim, madam, we would be most happy to arrange diplomatic conferences to discuss the exchange of scientific information.”

“I would have no objection to such a meeting,” she replied immediately. “And if the presence of our fleet would cause you concern, then I will order it to hold fast where we are until formal arrangements can be negotiated for our peaceful entry into your galaxy so we might complete our scientific mission. We will enter your galaxy as guests, Admiral, not invaders,” she said smoothly, giving him a warm smile. “If you have learned of us from your defeat of the Consortium, then you know that it is long our custom and tradition that all negotiations take place face to face. If you have the means to reach us at our current location, then we would gladly host a summit to discuss these matters. If not, we can send a diplomatic detachment to the edge of your galactic rim carrying our most senior diplomatic officers to enter into those discussions. In either case, it would be a trip of approximately ten standard revolutions.”

Kiaari was right. They wanted that extra time. She didn't even question the destruction of the Consortium fleet, taking Jarik's claim at face value because it furthered her own position. *[The SCM ships are blocking any Syndicate long-range scans of the galaxy, right?]* he asked Zaa.

[They are,] she replied. *[And they are now within the effect of the string jammer, which blocks all of their long-distance communications. They are blind and deaf in their current position so long as they look towards us.]*

"And there is little reason to worry, Admiral. I'm sure the information you extracted of us from the Consortium painted us as the darkest of villains and scoundrels, but I would entreat you to consider the source of that information. We have been at war with the Consortium for six thousand years, and so in their eyes, we *are* villains and scoundrels. But that is not who we truly are, it is only what they see in us."

"Of course, madam, which is why we're talking to you now," Jarik told her easily. "If it pleases you, we will initiate contact with you in two standard divisions so we might further discuss this meeting. I have need to report your offer to my superiors, so your proposal may be considered, and a decision reached."

"Oh, I certainly understand. Often, the gears of bureaucracy turn slowly and with much resistance," she declared with a wry smile. "I will await your communication in two standard divisions."

"Promptly," Jarik returned. "Until then, as we Shio say, warm winds guide you, Fleet Commander."

"Prosperity be yours, Admiral," she answered, and then her hologram winked out.

[Jarik was the proper choice,] Zaa communed, her thought impressed. *[He revealed nothing that they might use and caused this Fleet Commander to reveal far more information than she gained in return. He would be a skilled player of the game.]*

"Well done, Admiral," Grayhawk called. "Well done."

"Thank you, your Highness," he replied.

"We'll begin preparations for the summit with the Syndicate, esteemed rulers," Lorna injected. "But we'll need your approval for certain aspects of

the meeting. First of which, do we go to them, or have them come to us?”

“We go to them,” Jason said strongly, standing up. “I would ask this body to let me take care of this. In fact, I think it would be best if I was there to help handle the initial negotiations. I *am* a neutral party, at least on paper, and I have a few ideas about how we can minimize the danger, both to the ship that makes the journey and the diplomats handling the negotiations.”

Lorna gave him a look, then gasped and nodded vigorously. “I would support that idea, your Grace,” she agreed.

Dahnai barked out a laugh as well. “The bionoid!” she blurted.

“That was my idea, Dahnai,” he agreed mildly. “I’ve ordered a Benga sized bionoid be built. I’ll send *that*, so we negotiate eye to eye, as it were.”

“What do you have in mind, Jason?” Grayhawk asked.

“Trust me, Grayhawk,” he said. “Mesaiima, High Staff Ethikk, we’re going to need your assistance,” he added, turning and looking past Zaa, to the ethereal, winged Imbiri. “You two are the most skilled and eloquent diplomats among us. It’ll fall to you to handle this.”

“My skills in arbitration are at your service, Jason,” she replied immediately, giving him a nod.

“What service can I provide to this august body, your Grace?” Ethikk asked.

“Exactly what do you have in mind, your Grace?” Assaba asked.

“I’m going to build three bionoids, one for me, one for Ethikk, and one for Mesaiima, but built to be the same size as the Benga,” he said, putting a finger on his gestalt and hijacking the holo emitters in the conference room. “Bionoids are biogenic androids, built to closely resemble living beings, robotic units with full sensory capability designed to mimic the sensation of a biological body as closely as possible, and designed to be indistinguishable from living beings by anything but a sensor scan. They’re an experiment currently being run by our scientific division on Karis,” he explained as a holo of Jason’s bionoid appeared. “These bionoids are biogenic, so anyone with a cyberjack can merge to it in real time regardless of distance. Using these surrogate bodies, Ethikk and Mesaiima will

conduct this diplomatic meeting face to face, and I'll be there to assist them, without having to actually be there in person and put ourselves at risk. We send a ship out carrying the bionoids, then we merge to them and conduct the negotiations."

"That is a most intriguing device," Ethikk said easily, looking at the hologram. "They're that lifelike?"

"I attended our last meeting with the *bionoid*, Ethikk," he revealed. "I wasn't here, it was, I was actually sitting on my couch at home back on Karis. It was an experiment to see if any of you would notice the switch. Only three of you did. Dahnai, Kreel, Krirara, and the Denmother were aware of the experiment before the summit, so they don't count. Among the rest of you, only the Brood Queen Sk'Vrae, Grand Emperor Hrathin, and Prime Senator Quord realized that it wasn't me."

They all gave him a surprised look, and Brayrak Kruu gave a laugh. "I was sitting right beside you and didn't notice!"

"That's the point of the bionoids," he said mildly. "They're not infiltration units or spy robots, Overseer, they're designed to provide the driver with as lifelike an experience as possible, and that can't be achieved if everyone's staring at you all the time. They were originally designed to be used by Rook and the CBIMs to provide them with a way to experience life as a flesh and blood person, with all of our senses and limitations, and we sorta stumbled across how useful they can be, so we've been expanding the experiment. When we realized that *anyone* with a cyberjack can merge to a bionoid, the possibilities beyond just using them as surrogates for the CBIMs started opening up," he said easily. "My idea is to build a special Karinne Scout Ship for this mission, something that we can not only afford to lose, but is more or less built to be expendable, and then crew it with bionoids and send it to Oasis. The bionoids can crew the ship, since they'll be driven by the actual crew from the safety of Karis, and get me, Mesaiima, and Ethikk out there—or our bionoids, actually. President Mesaiima and High Staff Ethikk, our most skilled diplomats and arbitrators, will then conduct the negotiations, and I'll assist them. No lives will be at risk, and there won't be any risk that we'll be taken hostage by the Syndicate. If they try, we just self-destruct the bionoids and the ship that delivered us will jump out. if they capture the scout ship, it self-destructs,

destroying the bionoid crew and probably taking out quite a few of their ships in the bargain. Trust me, when one of our power plants is intentionally overloaded, it makes a *very* big explosion,” he said dryly. “That way we put nothing at risk that wasn’t specifically built to be expendable, and what’s most important, it protects the lives of our negotiators. The ship won’t have any technology in it that might entice the Syndicate into capturing it except the bionoids, it won’t even have real-time jump engines in it. We’ll get it out there using a catapult. Since it’ll have bionoids on it, they won’t really care how long it may take for the ship to jump back. It will leave them completely blind to our real technology and capabilities.”

“It has some definite possibilities,” Zaa mused from beside him.

“It does indeed,” Mesaiima agreed.

“That is a cunning and clever idea, your Grace,” Ethikk said with an impressed look. “I would be most willing to take part in your plan. We should give your idea great weight.”

They liked Jason’s idea. They liked it so much that after three hours of debate and input from Lorna, they adopted his plan, at least with a few changes. His idea to send three was expanded to sending six, adding Dahnai, Magran, and Holikk—Dahnai just had to make sure she was part of it—and they would send three ships to look more like a delegation, the scout ship and two Imxi battle cruisers, ships captured during the second Battle of Karis with original Imxi technology, which was inferior to Confederate tech. That would look more *natural*, Lorna insisted, a diplomatic vessel with two military escorts, but military escorts that the Syndicate might scan and discover nothing of use to them. A few rulers argued for their most powerful ships to be sent as a show of force, that sending two Imxi ships might make the Syndicate think that they were weak, but the council followed Lorna’s recommendation and went with the Imxi ships.

What the council found most interesting was seeing a bionoid live, when Jason brought his up from the Academy and had it report to the council chamber in independent mode. Quite a few of them just looked back and forth between him and the bionoid, trying to figure out which was real, and which was a robot.

“And you can merge to this robot and take it over?” Assaba asked as he walked around the bionoid, which was in armor and standing in the well in front of Kim’s podium.

“I can, Emperor,” Jason nodded. “It’s running in independent mode at the moment, which makes it about as effective as any other robot. It can perform simple tasks and follow basic instructions like that, it’s running off the same AI program we use for damage control macro robots in our ships. In other words, it’s not very smart,” he chuckled. “It relies on a controller, be it me or a control computer, to tell it what to do. Getting it to follow one of the compound guards and walk in here from the landing pad is about the extent of its ability to function independently.”

“It is truly uncanny, how much it resembles you, Jason,” Assaba said.

“Rook will be very pleased by your praise, Emperor Assaba. He worked very hard to make it so.”

“I would wonder if one of these devices could be built for me,” Assaba mused.

Jason laughed despite himself. “I’m afraid I can’t do that, Emperor. It *is* a biogenic unit. But,” he said musingly, rapping his fingers on the table. “I think we could replace the biogenic control computer with a moleculartronic computer and use simsense algorithms to emulate the sensory capabilities of the unit,” he speculated. “The hardware in the bionoid would be the same, we’d just have to adapt the moleculartronic unit to know how to make sense of what the sensor mesh system in the bionoid is telling it. I think the current generation simsense sensory decoding algorithms could be adapted. It would be restricted by the time delay of Confederate comm systems, so it would have too much time delay to be viable if you’re not in the same system with it. But if you’re in the same solar system as the bionoid, yeah, that would work. You might even be able to manage driving a bionoid up to five light years away before the time delay caused by the long-distance gravband comm became too great to make the merge feasible. Sure, that delay is only microseconds, but even a few microseconds of delay in the data stream to and from the bionoid would jack with the merge, make it unstable. I’m not sure about the exact distance that the merge would be viable, but it would definitely be out to about five light years.”

“That’s one of the things I wanted to talk to you about, Jason,” Lorna injected. “These bionoids have real military value, even if they’re not biogenic.”

“This is Rook’s project, Lorna. He knows way more about the bionoids than I do. I’ll have him get in touch with you and you two can discuss it. But for sure, I’ll have him start researching the possibility of replacing the biogenic system with a moleculartronic system for use outside the house. We may need to confer with Yila Trefani, she owns the research facilities working with moleculartronic simsense technology. Her experts may be needed to get it to work.”

“I believe that those robots fulfill several omens,” Gau rumbled. “I’ll have to speak to the clergy when I get home.”

“So, could I merge to that bionoid? Find out what it’s like to be Jason Karinne?” Kreel asked.

Jason laughed. “Sorry, Kreel, the bionoid is hard-wired so only I can merge to it,” he replied. “Having another me running around is a security issue. Aya wouldn’t let them build it without some pretty extravagant security precautions to prevent someone from hijacking it and trying to pretend to be me, there’s only one of them, and it’s kept locked down in a secure facility when it’s not in use.”

“I could see why,” Vizzie mused. “I’d think that was you.”

“Seeing this robot, I think that his Grace’s idea could very well work,” Shakizarr declared. “I was skeptical at first, but now I’ll put my full support behind this plan.”

“Thank you, your Grand Imperial Majesty,” Jason said with a nod.

They finished up the council session after making a few more refinements to Jason’s idea, then he immediately boarded a frigate and had it take him back to Karis. He had it land just outside the Parri village, and he came down the ramp and into the warm Karis night. The *shaman* greeted him at the base of the ramp, rising up on her hind legs and taking his offered hands with a gentle smile. “It is good to see you again, Jason Karinne,” she told him in a warm voice. “You are earlier than expected.”

“I came here straight from the summit, *shaman*,” he replied. “Now, let’s sit down, share some tea, and you can tell me why you needed to see me.”

She nodded, then glanced to the side. “Tea for our guest,” she called in her soft yet steely voice, the voice of command.

They sat on opposite sides of the small fire outside her hut, its warmth and light strangely comforting as he enjoyed the delicious tea that was offered to him, served in a cup made from *oye* wood. She was content to talk of nothing important at first, which was her way, catching up with him about the kids, the shenanigans going on back at the strip, and making sure to ask about what new torments the twins and Kumi were inflicting upon each other lately. Finally, however, she got around to what caused her to call him to the village. “Things progress, Jason Karinne,” she began. “The soul of this world is healing at a faster rate than we originally expected. Our trees grow and prosper, they flower and bear seed, and the fruits grow sweet and healthy.”

Jason was almost dreading that she was about to ask to leave, and nearly interrupted her.

“The time of binding the wounds of this world is ending, and the time of the rehabilitation begins,” she said. “It is for this reason that I had need to speak with you, Jason Karinne. For what must be done now, there needs be more Parri here to tend things.”

He literally sighed in relief. “You’re asking if more Parri can come?”

She nodded. “There are plans, Jason Karinne. Some several dozen new villages, including ones on the other four landmasses, plus a small grove on the island that holds the old hut of the Sleeper, before she moved to your great village of glass trees, which is now the abode of the Changeling.”

“The who?”

“Cybi and Cyvanne,” she replied with a gentle smile. “That is our name for them, she who slept for centuries awaiting the chance to live again, and she who changes her appearance like the shifting colors of the scales on a sand dragon, searching for truth. It must be by their permission that we establish a grove on the island. Even though Cybi no longer dwells there, by virtue of the many years she slept there, it would not be seemly to establish a grove there without her permission. And since it is now her home, the

Changeling must also agree. Some four or five trees to bear seeds for this world and a small village to tend them is all that is asked. They will cause no trouble to your people there.”

“Cybi, Cyvanne,” he called, and almost immediately, a hologram of them appeared, projected by his gestalt. It was very small, only maybe a shakra high, the two of them standing side by side. “The *shaman* wishes your permission to establish a small grove of *oye* trees and a village on Kosiningi.”

“I would welcome the Parri to this island gladly, shaman,” Cyvanne replied over his gestalt’s speaker. *“There is plenty of room for them, and I think oye trees growing over the KERA building would be quite lovely. And I think it would be quite nice to have the Parri nearby to visit and talk to.”*

“If Cyvanne welcomes you to Kosiningi, shaman, then you go with my blessing,” Cybi agreed.

“Then the matter is settled, *shaman*,” Jason told her easily. “How many Parri are planning on making the journey?”

“Some several thousand,” she replied. “Might I impose upon you to send some of your iron birds to Imbria to bring them?”

“I would be honored,” he replied immediately. “I can have six of our big *Jailo* class freighters to go to Imbria and pick up the Parri and everything they need for their journey. Each one by itself is large enough to carry five thousand Parri and all of their possessions and equipment, so six of them should be enough to carry your people and all their possessions. You just tell me where they want to start their villages—”

“That is something they will not know until they arrive, Jason Karinne,” she cut him off with a smile. “As you once left on your own journey to find where to plant your seed, they must listen to their hearts and journey to locate the place to plant theirs. Their hearts will guide them as your heart guided you. They only needs be delivered to the other landmasses, and they will begin their search after a brief sojourn to prepare for the journey.”

“My, that sounds almost...spiritual,” Cyvanne mused.

“It is a journey of discovery, Cyvanne, both of the world around you and of yourself,” she replied in her nurturing voice, the voice of a teacher

imparting knowledge. “Each new village will be led by a *shaman* new to his or her *jaingi*, who must listen to the soul of this world and the whispers of the seeds in their pouches and find the place where they belong. When they are led to their place, as I was led to this one, they will establish a new village and begin the process of planting new trees. In time, Jason Karinne, dear Cybi and Cyvanne, there will be *oye* trees spread across this healed world, taking their place here and belonging here as much as you do,” she declared with a smile. “In time, the trees will grow and seed and spread without our tending, and when that happens, this world will be fully healed. But, since this is the only other world we have ever found whose soul resonates with our trees, we would wish to remain here. This is now our home, and we are content here.”

“That is something I hope I live long enough to see, *shaman*,” Jason said earnestly. “And the Parri will *always* be welcome on Karis,” he added strongly. “Cyvanne, you heard what they need. Can you get with Jrz’kii and get the freighters on the board?”

“I’ll have a schedule ready as soon as we know when the Parri are ready to leave, and where we need to pick them up,” she answered.

“They are ready now, Cyvanne. Your people within the iron bird need only land anywhere on Imbria and ask any *shaman* where they wait, and your iron birds will be guided to them.”

“Don’t ask,” Jason said, seeing Cyvanne’s quizzical look. “Get the ships on the way as soon as they’re available, Cyvanne.”

“I’ll see to it, Jason,” she replied, and her hologram dissolved.

“*Shaman*, I’m sure that they won’t need our help, but I’m going to have your travelers watched from space,” Jason told her. “We won’t bother them or disturb them in any way, we don’t want to interfere with their search for their new home, but if it looks like they’re in trouble, we’ll come assist them.”

“That is most appreciated, Jason Karinne,” she nodded. “But I would ask that you only assist if things become dire. If they suffer no hardship on their journey, then they will gain no wisdom from the experience.”

“I’ll order my people to only intervene if the guiding *shaman* requests it, or if the group suffers some kind of calamity and we’re certain that their

lives are in jeopardy. We'll give each of them a device they can use to signal us if they need help, so it will be up to their leader to decide if we're needed."

"That is most acceptable."

"Remember, *shaman*, most of this world is still barren desert. Your people will have much trouble finding food and water out in the unterraformed parts of Karis."

"They are aware of what awaits them, Jason Karinne, and will be suitably prepared. They are also aware that it is their task to help transform those wastelands back into the living places they used to be, before this world was wounded and scarred."

"Very good, *shaman*," he nodded.

Cybi's hologram looked to the side. "*Cyvanne just told me that she has the freighters, Jrz 'kii is pulling ships not currently busy from the logistics schedule,*" she replied. "*They're being recalled to Karis. They'll be leaving for Imbria in about two hours, once they all get here. They'll be leaving together, so they can deliver the Parri here at the same time.*"

"Have Myri warn the Imperium that we're coming, and what we're doing," Jason said. "We're not part of the Imperium anymore, so they might take issue with our freighters showing up and taking Parri."

"*I'll contact Dahnai personally. She won't fuss if I arrange it,*" Cybi smiled.

"Good thinking," Jason chuckled.

"Then things are settled, Jason Karinne," the *shaman* declared with a smile. "And you should return to what you were doing. They are going to need you."

"Someday I hope they don't," he said wryly as he stood up.

"*If it pleases you, shaman, might I come visit your village today?*" Cybi asked. "*I have very much wanted to sit and speak with you, and now I have a means to do it that makes it easy. I'll be sending a machine that looks almost as if it lives.*"

“I would gladly welcome you to my fire, Cybi,” she replied with a smile. “I will await you a short time after sunrise?”

“*I’ll be here,*” she declared eagerly, then the hologram winked out.

“Just to warn you, *shaman*, the machine looks so much like a living thing that it can be surprising,” Jason chuckled. “I had them built for Cybi and the other CBIMs so they could experience what it’s like to have a physical body. We built them to be as lifelike as possible, so they could walk among people without the people knowing they’re machines. Cybi’s machine looks like a Faey with the face she shows through her hologram, so you know what to expect.”

“A most clever thing to do,” she said with a smile. “And she will reside within the machine so she might speak to me, or does the machine take back what it hears and reports to her?”

“She won’t be residing within the machine, but you’ll be talking to Cybi, not the machine,” he replied. “Cybi can see and hear through the machine from where she is, so it’s as good as her being here herself. Oh, and the machine can drink liquids, so there’s no doubt she’ll want to try your tea. She’s heard me go on and on about it.”

“I would be happy to share some with her,” she said as she stood up, and Jason did the same. He went around the fire and took her hands, looking up into her bobcat-like face. “The Parri are grateful to you for your help, Jason Karinne,” she told him, gripping his hands gently.

“When Cybi brings her machine here to visit you tomorrow, she’ll be able to tell you all about your people coming,” he told her. “She’ll keep you informed. And I’ll have them send it to the talking box in the stone building to let you know when the iron birds carrying your people arrive.”

“That is most kind of you, Jason Karinne,” she told him. “Some of them will be delivered here, so I’ll know when those arrive. They will begin their journey from here. The others will be delivered to their new lands and will abide for some short time by the sea where they are dropped off before beginning their journey.”

“If they need anything at all, *shaman*, they need only ask.”

“The light of your love for this world and for its inhabitants shines like a beacon, Jason Karinne,” she told him, then she leaned down and pressed her nose against his cheek, which was surprisingly cold and a little wet.

“And now, it is time to spread your light upon the path at your feet, so you might guide those who walk with you. Your path leads into a dark place, Jason Karinne, enshrouded in the darkness of the loveless ones, and those with you will need your light to guide them.”

“I’ll take that as the warning it is, *shaman*,” he said, which made her smile. “I *am* going back to arrange a diplomatic conference with the loveless ones, trying to avoid conflict by convincing them to go away.”

“It will bear no fruit, Jason Karinne. The darkness of their greed consumes them.”

“I know, but it’s proper to try,” he replied. “That way we *know* that we did all we can to avoid this war. We can enter into it with our conscious clear.”

“That is seemly,” she agreed. “And it is seemly that you know the truth of them before you speak to them.”

“I know *exactly* what they are, my friend,” he said grimly.

As the frigate ascended on a high arc that would bring it back down at Karsa so they could pick up Rook, Jason looked back down at the village and the expanding northwest coast of Karga as they went higher and higher, illuminated by the full moon of Kosigi. So, Karis was healing, and healing faster than they expected, that was a good thing. And now there would be more Parri villages, which Jason also saw as a good thing. The Parri were kind, peaceful, and considerate neighbors, and Jason had a great fondness for them, particularly the *shaman*. They were mysterious, enigmatic people who saw the world in a radically different way than he did, and he appreciated that difference instead of looking down on them for it. She was primitive by most spacefaring races’ standards, but Jason knew that she was primitive by *choice*, not by some lack of intelligence. She simply had no desire to learn about modern technology, because it had no real worth to her, it actively clashed with the culture and society of her people. And there was no doubt in his mind, no one he knew was as wise or as insightful as the Parri *shaman*. The only one that came anywhere near close to her was

Denmother Zaa. That was why he valued the Parri's counsel above just about all others who advised him. While she may not understand or care about the *technology* of the Karinnes, her advice kept them on the *ethical* high ground.

That there'd be a few thousand more Parri on Karis was a good thing.

He was halfway back when Kim told him that they were about to go back into session, and he *was* supposed to be there. He told the truth, said he'd had a small mini-emergency on Karis to take care of, and was on the way back. Rook was going to give a better explanation of the bionoids to the council and answer some questions, and Jason broached the idea of swapping out control computers as they approached Terra. *"I've already done some work on that, I was predicting we might do this,"* he answered. *"It would be fairly easy to swap out a biogenic control unit with a moleculartronic one, but we'll have some additional work to do to make it compatible with the sensor mesh system. That was designed to interact with a biogenic computer, and we use different sensory encoding algorithms than current moleculartronic simsense does. I'll need to confer with Yila Trefani's simsense research lab so we can develop usable simsense encoding and decoding algorithms, hopefully adapt the ones currently in use to the sensor mesh system. This aspect of the project may become commercial, so we may as well make sure it's compatible with current commercial technology."*

"That's a good point," he agreed. "Yila's on Karis right now, so I'll tell her to stay on planet until you get back and talk to her."

Rook's metallic-skinned head nodded. *"Another business meeting with Kumi?"*

"That's their excuse. The two of them just hang out most of the time," Jason noted, which made Rook give a weird chuckle.

"Oh, since I'm thinking about it. I'll be moving to a new body tomorrow," he replied. *"A new prototype with all the current upgrades. It will be the most lifelike yet."*

"Awesome, I can't wait to see it," he answered. "Finally giving over on the metal skin?"

“Of course not. I rather like this look,” he replied, patting his metallic-skinned forearm. “I’ll be testing the new internal bioprocess emulation system. Heartbeat, arterial pulse, autonomic pupillary response based on the emotional state of the driver, that sort of thing.”

“Sounds pretty cool. How about the Benga-sized bionoid? How’s that going?”

“I have the designs done, I have a factory producing them now,” he replied. “I’m building two, one for you and one for me. It’s not the one you’ll be using for the conference. You haven’t given me the specifics about how you want it built yet. The ones I’m building are mainly so you can acclimate to merging to something the size of a Gladiator that’s not a Gladiator. There are going to be some differences from your regular bionoid, so you’ll need some practice to get accustomed to it. While I’m here, I’ll get images and biometrics for the rulers meeting with the Syndicate so I can start work on their bionoids. I’ll need to get them built and give the others enough time to practice with them so they don’t look clumsy. You have enough experience with driving a bionoid to know that it’s not quite as easy as just being in your own body. They’ll need at least a couple of days to acclimate to it.”

“I was going to ask about that,” he nodded. “You ready to build an Imbiri bionoid, Rook? Think you can get the wings right?”

“I look at it as a challenge, Jayce. It should be quite fun to design and build an Imbiri bionoid, and I fully intend to make sure it can fly, just like President Mesaiima can. I can use some gravometric pods in the unit to counter its mass, put some muscle strand tech in the back and wings so they have the same range of motion and strength. That should let the bionoid’s wings get it off the ground, and that should give the President the same experience as her natural body. It will be my greatest challenge in the bionoid project yet.”

“I might be tempted to merge to it just to see what it’s like to have wings,” he chuckled.

“It would definitely be odd to you. My research shows that merging to bionoids with body parts you don’t have can cause some motor control issues. After all, you don’t have them, so you don’t know how to use them.

And there are some psychosomatic issues after you break the merge, similar to the ghost effect from piloting mecha, trying to use its extra abilities that your flesh body doesn't. Mainly it's phantom sensations from the limbs you don't have."

"That's not a surprise," Jason said. "Maybe you could build me a Farguut bionoid. I'd like to see what it's like to have four eyes and a tail."

"That wouldn't be that difficult to build, but might be difficult for your brain to handle," he replied. "Your brain's visual cortex isn't designed to deal with four eyes, so you may not be able to use the extra two at all. And if you can, your brain may not be able to make any sense out of what the eyes are telling it. I'd probably have to install a filter in the bionoid's sensory processing node that converts its four eyes of sensory data into two eyes so your brain can understand it. A Jun might be better. That way you only have the tail."

"Jun tails are vestigial," he chuckled. "I'd like a tail that's long enough to actually move around and play with. Farguut tails are much more awesome, they go down to their ankles and have that cool tufted tip on the end."

"I could give you a tail like a Sha'i-ree."

"A male with a tail? No. Just no," he said, which made Rook give another weird sound of amusement.

"That would be corrupting the carnal fantasies of quite a few Terran and Faey men," Rook noted bawdily, which made Jason laugh. "The bionoid I'd like to build is a Moridon," he mused. "I am very much curious to see what it's like to see the world the way they do. Their mode of vision is truly unique."

"That's a pretty good point," Jason chuckled. "You think you could build simulated Moridon eyes?"

"I consulted with Songa about it. It's entirely possible."

"Now you got me curious," he said.

"I think I'll build a visor that overrides normal vision and acts like Moridon eyes, that would give us an idea of what it's like without having to build a bionoid."

“Cool, do it,” he urged. “Just don’t do it ‘til you finish the real work. Hell, or I’ll do it. Send the specs to me when you get around to it, I’ll build it in my shop downstairs.”

“Of course.”

The council reconvened as soon as Jason walked in, Rook just behind him, and Kim gave them a status update. Rook then gave a presentation explaining the basic concept behind the bionoids to both the council and to the command staff at the CCM who was present in the council chamber, explaining that it was his attempts to build a better and more lifelike body for himself that had more or less started the experimental program. *“I can have the bionoids ready for the six emissaries that will meet the Syndicate and the crew of the ship that will be carrying them in five days,”* he finally declared. *“The units for our emissaries will be built to exactly resemble the appearance and biological capabilities of the user and will mimic the biological processes of the user to project the illusion of being living things. The bionoids will breathe, for example, and be capable of ingesting liquids. President Mesaiima’s bionoid will have wings, and should be capable of flight, for example. The units will be built on a scale that will equate them with the Benga, with the Grand Duke Karinne’s bionoid serving as the point of reference. His Grace’s bionoid will be built to be 16.56% taller than the average height for a Benga, mirroring his height proportion compared to the Terran average, and President Mesaiima’s bionoid will be smaller than his by the same proportion that she is to him in real life, and so on. That will make his Grace’s bionoid 15.54 shakra tall, her Imperial Majesty Dahnai Merrane’s 15.21 shakra, and President Mesaiima’s will be 12.33 shakra. I will be building two of these Benga-sized bionoids for each emissary, one will be put on the ship and jumped out to the meeting place, and the other will be used by the emissaries to practice so they look and move naturally by the time the conference begins. Using the bionoids does take some practice,”* he warned.

“Outstanding, Rook, outstanding,” Kim said from his seat behind the podium. “So, we need to arrange this face to face meeting a minimum of thirteen standard days from today.”

“Actually, more like seventeen days, Secretary Kim,” Jason warned. “I have Dellin working on the ship we’re going to use, he’s refitting a scout

ship that was about to come off the dock. It should be done in ten days. They have to do some major structural work to the ship to get it ready. Adding one extra day just for any unforeseen circumstances and six days of travel time, that gets us to seventeen days.”

“Alright, seventeen days,” Kim said. “Do you think you can make that diplomatically acceptable, Admiral Furystorm?” he asked, looking over to the ten CCM commanders.

Jarik chuckled. “I think I can make it work, Mister Secretary,” he assured him.

About half an hour later, Jarik was put in a position to prove that. They again initiated contact with the Syndicate fleet, and that handsome dark green skinned face of their commander appeared. on a hologram in the well. This time, Jarik was standing at the speaker’s podium rather than in the CCM command center, so the crest of the Confederation was visible on the wooden podium in front of him. “It’s a pleasure to speak to you again, Admiral,” the Benga said.

“And you as well, Fleet Commander,” he replied smoothly. “Upon conference with our government, I bring a proposal for your consideration.”

“Please, speak.”

“We propose a meeting, face to face, to take place in 23 standard revolutions at your current position,” he said. “We have the technological capability to get a ship to you, at least with some preparation beforehand.

“That is most acceptable, Admiral,” she said immediately. “It gives us time to complete our scientific study of the planets in this most unusual star system. We were quite intrigued to find an extra-galactic star formation and were quite interested to see how it might be different from a system in a galaxy. Will your crews need any additional time after coming out of stasis? I would like to know if we should hail them as soon as they arrive or allow them to hail us.”

“They will hail you when they are ready,” he replied. “We will be sending three ships, Fleet Commander. A dedicated diplomatic vessel with two military escorts. The largest of them will be approximately one fifth the size of your escort destroyers. A diplomatic mission of six members of the

ruling body of our government will be dispatched to open official diplomatic channels with you.”

“Then we shall welcome them with the respect and honor such a position entitles them,” she said grandly. “It is long the custom of my people to hold diplomatic meetings of this kind on neutral ground, not on any ship owned or controlled by the meeting parties, so neither party holds an inherent advantage. Usually, a dedicated ship of peace is brought to be used by both parties, manned by the Arbitrators, those whose mission is to provide impartial and neutral services for negotiating parties. However, we are just a *bit* too far away from home to summon an Arbitrator’s vessel to host our meeting,” she said with a light smile. “Therefore, I will have a suitable meeting place prepared on the surface of the fourth planet of the system where we are located, which I believe both of us can declare is neutral territory. Is it habitable by your envoys?”

“It is, Fleet Commander,” he replied. “It is well within the environmental tolerances of all six of our envoys.”

“Then it shall be so, Admiral. When your envoys arrive, we should have our meeting place ready for them.”

“I will inform our leaders of your acceptance of our proposal, Fleet Commander,” Jarik told her. “In twenty-three standard rotations, they should arrive.”

“We will be waiting for them,” she replied. “In the interests of peace, I should warn you that some of our vessels will be jumping to other stars in this unusual extra-galactic formation. But be assured, they will not be approaching your galactic rim. We have some intriguing readings from several other stars in this formation and will be conducting scientific research.”

“That is quite acceptable, Fleet Commander,” Jarik told her.

“You may call me Commander Sha Ra, Admiral,” she smiled. “I think the need for such formality has passed. But I must ask. What rank does this *Admiral* title hold? Are you a commander of a ship, of squadrons, or of fleets?”

“I’m a commander of fleets, Commander Sha Ra,” he told her honestly. “I believe that we hold roughly equivalent rank.”

“Then we must meet for dinner, as is tradition in the Syndicate Navy,” she said with a winsome smile.

“I am barely a third your size, Commander Sha Ra,” he chuckled. “I would need a very large booster seat to sit at your table.”

“We’re used to that, Admiral,” she told him lightly. “We are used to being significantly larger than other species. But I won’t hold it against you,” she added playfully.

Jarik actually laughed. “Maybe some other time, Commander Sha Ra. I’m afraid I won’t be part of the delegation. Among our people, diplomats are usually not members of the military. I was chosen for this task because you are a military fleet, so it was felt that you would be more comfortable speaking to a military officer in our first contact.”

“Well, I’ll tell them you did a very good job,” she said with a smile. “We await your diplomatic delegation, Admiral, in 23 standard rotations. Until they arrive, we will be conducting surveys and research of the stars within this formation. May they travel safely.”

“Thank you, Fleet Commander. When they depart for the meeting with you, you shall be informed, so you may be kept fully informed of their progress and their estimated time of arrival.”

“I appreciate that. Until we speak again, Admiral.”

Slick, slick, slick, Jason thought to himself as the hologram of her face vanished. She was definitely digging for information, but Jarik did a great job by giving her nothing. It showed that Zaa’s information about the Benga’s ability to use diplomacy as a weapon was not wrong. It was almost masterful how she was trying to steer the conference into something a little less formal, trying to get Jarik to talk to her, and in that talk give up information. Multiple times she tried to get Jarik to give up small bits of useful information, as well as that cute little attempt to get an idea of how they dealt with extended hyperspace exposure by asking if the crew would be in stasis for the journey or not. Jarik kept to the facts, was only as specific as he absolutely needed to be, and did a *fantastic* job holding his own against that dangerous woman. And he also thought it was pretty clever of her to arrange the meeting on the planet’s surface, deep inside the gravity well, which would make it difficult for a ship to escape. He’d make

sure that got derailed by ordering that the ships did not leave jump distance. When the time came for the meeting, the bionoids would be traveling in a dropship, and not a Karinne one. He'd get Shevatt to send him one of his older Ogravian dropships. It wouldn't have any technology in it that the Syndicate would find useful, or even particularly advanced, but it had good enough engines to get the bionoids there and back in a timely manner. It would also have enough space inside for the bionoids to be able to use it, given how big Ogravians were.

"Well done, Admiral Furystorm," Dahnai called. "She was definitely digging for information. You *politely* stonewalled her with masterful skill."

"Thank you, your Imperial Majesty," he said with a flourishing bow at the podium.

"That gives us an idea of what the meeting is going to be like," Mesaiima noted. "She'll be doing whatever she can to learn as much about us as possible, both in what we say directly and what we say indirectly. Message discipline will be key."

"The bionoids will be biogenic, correct, your Grace?" Master Mo asked.

"That is correct, Master Mo," he answered.

"Then they will be able to communicate with each other via biogenic commune, something they can't detect with any sensor."

"That's not an absolute guarantee it goes unnoticed, Master Mo," Jason replied. "Telepaths with sufficient power and skill can hear some forms of biogenic commune, they just can't *understand* it. My wife is one such telepath, as are most of the ladies that live on the beach around my house. All of them are former Imperial Marines, and those are the kinds of telepaths with the power and training to hear commune. Denmother reported that they have very skilled telepaths, they very well may have one that will hear the commune. So we can't assume that they won't be able to detect it. We can just be confident that they won't be able to decipher it."

"It's not just Jys and the girls," Dahnai said. "I've learned over the last year or so how to pick up communing myself. I can't make anything out, but I can *definitely* hear it, now that I know what I'm listening for."

“Curious, Empress. I thought commune was something entirely different from telepathy.”

“No, Master Mo, it’s just sorta on a different frequency,” she answered. “To use a metaphor, I’ve learned how to listen in on that other frequency, but they’re speaking a language I don’t understand. There’s definitely a trick to it that most weaker and lesser-trained telepaths wouldn’t be able to pull off. Biogenic commune *is* telepathy, else it wouldn’t ignore time and distance like telepathy does.”

“The one good thing it gives us is seventeen standard days to further prepare our fleets,” Gradd of the Ujjo noted. “And with our delegation not actually making the trip, it allows them to be here and be privy to our discussions so they know exactly what the council wants them to say by the time they get there. It will let us debate the issues right up to the day they arrive.”

“What concerns me is that they’re not going to stay at that system,” Sk’Vrae said, tapping her clawtips together.

“As long as they stay in the Strands of Trelle, they’re not violating their promise to stay away from the galactic rim,” Magran noted. “We’ll just have to keep careful watch.”

“Shevatt, I think we’re going to have need of one of your older personnel transport dropships,” Jason said, looking in his direction. “Could you be so kind as to dig one up for me and send it to Karis? It’ll need to be remodeled a bit so the bionoids can comfortably ride in it.”

“A wise choice,” Shevatt nodded. “We and the Druvom are the largest of beings in the Confederation, so one of our dropships will take the least amount of work to size for them.”

“Exactly,” Jason nodded.

“I’ll inform Minister Parikk of it immediately. It should be on its way within the hour.”

“Speaking of preparations, if it pleases this council, I will need to conduct some precise scans and take images of the members of the diplomatic mission, so bionoids can be produced that are faithful copies,” Rook announced. *“I will warn you now, this will require you to remove*

most of your outer raiment. If you do not wish to do so, I can work around it, but it means that the bionoids will not be exact duplicates, merely estimations based on the information I currently have available."

"I have no objections, Rook," Mesaiima told him, fanning her wings. "Our people aren't quite that modest. After all, it's a bit difficult designing clothes when these are on your back," she added lightly, pointing her thumb over her shoulder, towards her chitinous dragonfly-like wings.

"I think you already have all the data on me you need, Rook," Dahnai added lightly, which made Jason chuckle.

"I have no problems with that, Rook," Ethikk nodded.

"Nor do I," Holikk added. "We can retire to one of the medical rooms in the clinic so you can get the images and data you need for the bionoids after this conference."

"In addition, the five of you will need to travel to Karis tomorrow local Karis time so you can begin assimilation training to operate the bionoids," he informed them. *"I should have a simulation program ready for you by then you can use until we have the bionoids built, then you will practice with the bionoid units themselves. They're not that difficult to use, but it will take you some practice to master using a body significantly larger than your own. Your sense of balance and depth perception will be altered, which might lead to some falls and the inability to properly judge the location of things you try to pick up until you acclimate."*

"We don't want to look like drunken asses in front of our Benga hosts," Ethikk said with a sly smile. "Just inform me of when and where to be there, Rook."

"And I'd be happy to host you at my summer palace during your stay on Karis," Dahnai said grandly. "I have plenty of room for you, and the quarters I can offer are more fitting for fellow galactic rulers. Jason does so love to stick us in closets as some kind of lesson in humility," she accused, looking at him and winking.

"I would very much like to see this palace in person, Dahnai," Mesaiima declared.

“I assume we’ll have to operate the bionoids from Karis?” Holikk asked.

“Yes, High Chancellor,” Rook answered. *“For something like this, we use special merge pods that assist in achieving a 100% merge. And the pods are in a facility where medical staff are present, for safety reasons. Damage to the bionoid can cause a temporary psychosomatic reaction in people who are sensitive to the merge process, a condition we call dump shock, so medical staff is on site to respond.”*

“Logical and practical, the hallmarks of the House Karinne,” Holikk said with a chuckle.

“Thank you, High Chancellor,” Rook said with a nod of approval.

“So, this merge process isn’t entirely without risk,” Mesaiima noted.

“The reaction is psychosomatic, Madam President,” Rook repeated. *“It’s not physical, it’s an organic being’s brain reacting to the sudden and unplanned ending of the merge. The most severe reaction is a temporary coma of approximately 30 to 60 standard hours as the brain recovers from the sudden loss of the merge, and when the patient awakens, he or she has no injury or lingering effects. There are other symptoms of dump shock that are very minor, such as problems keeping one’s balance, temporary vision or auditory issues, or phantom sensations in the body after the merge ends. But those side effects are only suffered by those who are particularly sensitive to the merge process.”*

“Ah. That sounds most interesting,” she said, looking over at Jason. “I’m looking forward to learning all about it.”

They discussed the meeting for perhaps another hour, then the meeting, and also the summit, officially ended...but not before the council managed to annoy the fuck out of Jason by scheduling another one on *Karis*, so the rulers were all in the same place to discuss things before and after the diplomatic mission negotiated with the Syndicate. Since six of them had to be on *Karis* during that time, they decided that all of them would meet there. That meant lots of work for Yeri and Miaari and tons of rulers and their lackeys running around Karsa making nuisances of themselves. Jason escorted the other members of the mission except for Magran to the medical clinic inside the building, where he gave a more complete and intimate

explanation of the merge process, then he waited in the main lobby while Rook took the images and measurements he needed in a private examination room. Magran had an urgent meeting with the Colonist Council and would join them as soon as he was done. And as Dahnai intimated, she didn't need to be measured, since Rook had seen her running around naked on the strip more than enough to know her exact measurements and appearance. And the vanity of a Faey would require the bionoid to be *exactly* faithful to the original body, even down to the pubic hair.

Jason and Dahnai sat on a comfy couch out in the waiting room with Holikk and Ethikk, who had been measured first, waiting for Rook to finish with Mesaiima. Jason explained what a merge was like for a living thing to them, something that all of them had some basic experience with since they all had cyberjacks. Merging to computers was a basic skill anyone with a cyberjack knew, so Jason was explaining the difference between a *jack* merge and a *full* merge, which was required for something like driving a bionoid. A jack merge left one with some basic awareness of the world around him thanks to the limiters, so he'd react to something like his hair being on fire, part of the original design of the jacks. In a jack merge, the incoming sensory data wasn't always complete, either, since most merges were designed to be compatible with all living things, who had very different sensory experiences. A full merge completely shunted off the person's awareness of his body and surroundings in favor of the merge data, much like how jacks protected people from hyperspace exposure, and then replaced the biological "full awareness" experience with a full sensory experience given by the bionoid and custom tailored to the person to which it was merged. This was the level of merge that KMS fighter pilots and riggers used with their mecha, to achieve maximum compatibility with the mecha, to be fully aware and fully "tuned in" to the unit, and now it was being used for the bionoids. Mesaiima returned and Ethikk took his turn in the exam room, sitting on the arm of the chair across from them. Her wings often made it a bit difficult for her to sit down on things like couches or chairs with arms on them. She could lean back on her wings, but her two small lower wings often made any chair with arms hard for her to use. And on a couch, she more or less had to sit in the middle and have her wings take up the entire back of the couch. Anyone that sat with her would be leaning back against her wings, and that was a bit rude.

“That didn’t take long,” Holikk noted to her.

“He only needed a few pictures and some measurements, which he could take off the pictures,” she replied. “It took me longer to get in and out of my robe than it did for him to take the measurements.”

“Ah,” Holikk replied. Holikk was a great example of Gora’s Law, because he looked so human that he could pass as one on the streets of Terra...at least until he opened his mouth. Holikk had dusky brown skin, was quite a handsome fellow in Jason’s opinion, and he was bald; like the Ruu. Among Holikk’s people, the Subrians, males were genetically bald, including being unable to grow a moustache or beard, and females had long practiced the custom of shaving their heads once they married except for the marriage lock, which was at the very back of the head and grew for as long as she was married...and for some Subrians, it meant that it well dragged the ground when it wasn’t braided or taken up. Under the marriage lock was a tattoo known as the marriage mark, so even if she shaved her head, her marital status was apparent. Married men also demonstrated their status with the marriage mark, which was on the back of the head in the same location women grew the marriage lock. Needless to say, marriage in Subrian society was *for life*. There was no such thing as divorce in Holikk’s society, so men and women courted for years to make *damn* sure they could spend the rest of their lives with someone. Only an unmarried woman in Subrian society had hair on her head, and it was always kept very short, like a crew cut, with no styling. The older the girl, the shorter she kept her hair. Long, flowing locks was something that only a six-year-old girl would have in their society. Males had very hairy chests and both genders had very hairy patches on their forearms, the backs of their six-fingered hands, and around the ankles the tops of their feet, almost like fur. He was about half a head taller than Jason and very burly, looked like a professional boxer, and had eerie yellow eyes, like a wolf. But he was a dashing handsome man, even Dahnai thought he was handsome, whose only real way they differed from Terrans was his teeth. Like the Keelo, Subrians had fangs, but a Subrian’s fangs weren’t venomous. But they were prominent, large, and intimidating, and Holikk could do some real damage if he bit someone, especially since another common custom in Subrian society was to wear custom-fitted metal caps over the fangs to protect them, to keep them undamaged. Particularly among men, the size and condition of his fangs

were points of personal handsomeness, and in a way, his manliness and virility. A man with a broken fang wasn't going to get any dates, and nothing turned a woman off faster in Subrian society than a man with discolored, damaged, or pitted fangs. Most Subrians brushed their fangs after every meal and three more times a day regardless to keep them clean and attractive, so Subrians had some of the cleanest, healthiest teeth in the galaxy. "I'll have to make sure that he gets the dimensions of my fangs correct. Or maybe I can talk him into making them a tiny bit longer," he mused, which made Jason laugh.

"And I thought Dahnai was the only vain one in this room," he teased.

"Besides, you have nothing to complain about, Holikk. Your fangs nearly cut into your lower lip as it is!" Dahnai added.

"There's no such thing as *too long* when it comes to a man's fangs, Dahnai," he replied shamelessly. "I still wouldn't be happy if they were punching holes in my lower lip and going past my jaw."

"Well, that would make eating a messy experience," Mesaiima noted lightly.

"I'd live with it for the fangs," he declared adamantly.

"That's a discussion you'll have to have with Rook, Holikk," Jason told him lightly. "Rook's big on complete accuracy."

"If not for that metal skin, I'd think he was flesh and blood," Holikk mused.

"He doesn't use it to point out that he's not biological. He just likes having shiny metallic skin," Jason said. "And it was his attempts to build that life-like body that started the bionoid program."

"Well, it's a good thing for us," Mesaiima said. "Now we can go negotiate with the Syndicate with absolutely no fear of being abducted."

"And send nothing we're afraid to lose," Jason added. "The ships won't even have real-time engines for them to potentially capture and study to try to improve their own. The ships will more or less be expendable junk we're throwing away."

"That might embolden them," Holikk grunted.

“Until they find out that their sensors are jammed any time they point them towards the galaxy...which I think they’ve already discovered,” Jason replied lightly. “So they’ll know that we’re actively hiding just what we can do. The first rule of war, High Chancellor, is you never allow the enemy to see what you have. But we *are* planning something of a show of force...just not with a grand fleet.”

“Interdictors,” Dahnai blurted.

“Yup,” he chuckled. “But our show of force isn’t something that they’re going to see.”

“Spiders?” she asked.

He nodded with a grim smile. “Right now, we’re working on a way to get a broadcast power node over there that they can’t detect and get it close enough to power spiders. If we can work something out, we can seed their entire fleet with spiders and have them wreak havoc the instant the Syndicate moves into a war footing. The two Imxi destroyers we’re sending will be packed to the rafters with spiders, which they’ll release into the system. They’ll be all but undetectable and dormant until we get a power node over there and should spread through the orbit of planet four and collect on the hulls of the Syndicate fleet through simple gravity. We turn them on, and they get into the ships and do their thing.”

“That’s damn clever,” Holikk said appreciatively.

“That’s what we do, Holikk. Think dirty thoughts.”

Dahnai laughed. “Which I *love*, thank you very much. We Faey women love slutty men,” she told them, blowing a kiss Jason’s way.

“Sometimes I think it would have better for the entire galaxy if the Faey had never found Terra,” he retorted, which made her laugh.

Ethikk came back out, smoothing his robe a bit. “Well, that was easy,” he declared. “High Chancellor, your turn.”

Holikk stood up and offered the much smaller Ethikk his seat then strode towards the open door where Rook awaited. Rook motioned him inside, then closed the door. “He get your fur right, Ethikk?” Jason asked.

“That was what took so long,” he chuckled. “He had to use a special camera to get a look at my dimensions without the fur interfering with things. Then he measured the length and consistency of my fur,” he laughed. “He offered to make my bionoid taller, that by scale, I might have some issues with the furniture that the Syndicate will use for the negotiation. I decided to stay with this,” he said, patting his chest. “We’re not ashamed of being small, even if the other small me will be nearly three times my current size.”

“Small relative to a Benga,” Jason chuckled with a nod. “That would make your bionoid around nine shakra tall by comparison.”

“That’s about what he said. I don’t remember the exact measurement,” Ethikk nodded. “As long as he gets my tail right, I’m not going to complain.”

“He will, both its physiology and your family bands,” Jason assured him.

Ethikk grinned. “If he gave me the wrong bands, it might get him beat up by my mate and family,” he said.

“Rook has great attention to detail, Ethikk,” Jason assured him. “He’ll even get the density and feel of your fur right. You saw my bionoid’s hair. He knows what he’s doing.”

“I must say, I’m looking forward to this,” Ethikk said as he sat down, taking Holikk’s place by Dahnai. “We Beryans love adventure, and this is as adventurous as it can get. Going to a star outside the galaxy to negotiate with an unknown force, and doing so by remote control in a surrogate body three times my size? This will almost be *fun*,” he said eagerly. “Far more adventure than a politician like myself ever gets to experience in the daily battle against paperwork.”

Jason laughed richly. “I’ll guarantee you that you’re not alone in your hatred of paperwork,” he said.

“Amen, it’s the worst part of the job,” Mesaiima agreed.

“It’s the bane of my existence,” Dahnai added. The four of them looked at each other, then broke into simultaneous laughter.

Magran scurried into the clinic, still in his formal robes of red and white, the robes of the Grand Master. "I hope I'm not too late," he said. "I almost offended the council by making it as brief as possible."

"Rook's taking Holikk's measurements right now," Jason told him as the Colonist sat in the chair to Jason's left. "So you're just in time to wait."

Magran gave a chuckle. "If you don't mind, Jason, I'll need to go back to Exeven before I can come to Karis," he announced. "There are some things that I have to be present to do."

"That's fine, Magran. Rook has to write the simulation program when he gets back, so it's not like you'll be starting the minute we're done here."

"Well, *I'm* going to Karis, so just come straight to the summer palace when you finish, Magran. I have a lovely suite overlooking the pool I think you'll enjoy."

"I'd be most happy to accept your offer of hospitality, Dahnai," he said with a smile.

"And since you're here, love, may as well warn you now. I'm going to hold court on Karis tomorrow morning," she added. "So warn Myri to let the Grand Duchesses through the Stargate."

"Well, you just guaranteed I'm not coming over," Jason grunted, which made Dahnai grin.

"Oh yes you are, buster," she retorted. "You either come over, or I'll bring them all to the strip and we'll hold court on your beach."

"Don't you dare!"

"The only way to stop me is to bring Shya and the family over to the summer palace tomorrow," she replied smugly.

Holikk strode out, retying the sash around the waist of his short robe. Like the robes Kellin favored, it was a thigh-length robe that he wore with black pants under them...just Kellin tended to wear nothing under his robe. "You were right, Ethikk, that was quick and easy," he said with a smile. "Glad to see you made it, Magran. I believe you're next."

"I'm glad I didn't keep anyone waiting," he smiled as he stood up, then he hurried towards the door.

Dahnai was quite adamant about that, to the point where she had her staff pack up her quarters on Terra and went with Jason back to the Academy, and she more or less just sat around waiting as they packed up and got on the frigate. Kellin and her kids joined them on the *Tianne* once they were aboard, including Maer, who had brought along his future wife, Crown Duchess Delia Dorrane, Semoya's oldest and heir to the house throne of Dorrane. She was 27 years old and had just finished inscription with her house Navy, and Jason had to admit, she was a major cutie. She wasn't beautiful, or handsome, she was cute, almost criminally cute, even her silver-white hair was done in a cute pixie style. And for her part, Dahnai seemed to *seriously* like her. She heaped attention and praise on Delia the moment she arrived with Maer.

It wasn't uncommon for political marriages to have such a large age difference, particularly among the Highborns. Maer was betrothed to Delia before he was born, and when she was 12 years old. And in something of a minor scandal in the *Siann* at the time, Semoya had broken a betrothal Delia had to a boy in House Ivarre to secure that betrothal to Maer, since Dahnai wasn't about to let any son of hers be anything *other* than the husband of a current or future Grand Duchess. Semoya had instead changed the betrothal so it was her third oldest, Mayilla Dorrane, that was betrothed to the Ivarre noble son. For Delia, it meant she'd have a child husband for a few years, more or less waiting for him to grow into a man...but it wasn't going to curtail any "matrimonial activities." That was why noble males had to be 15 to marry, so they were physically capable of consummating the marriage.

Maer was no virgin as it was.

And besides, it wasn't like Delia was going to be faithful to Maer anyway. She most likely already had two or three boyfriends, and she wasn't going to stop seeing them just because she got married. She might even name one an *amu dorai*. Political marriages weren't for love, after all. In the realm of nobles, marriage was for politics and *amu* was for love.

Jason had met Delia a few times, and he had to agree with Dahnai...she was a pretty good girl. Nice, friendly, intelligent, but also well prepared to take over the house from the dangerous Semoya Dorrane. Delia arrived in her House Dorrane military uniform, since she was still an officer in the Navy despite finishing her conscription. It was Dorrane tradition for the

Crown Duchess to serve in the Navy until she became Grand Duchess. Delia was a Lieutenant Commander, and from what Jason had heard, that rank was not ceremonial. She had *earned* that rank. Granted, she started her Naval career as a Lieutenant instead of an Ensign, but she had earned that first promotion completely legit, by scoring a 99% on the promotion test and command simulators, which put her at the front of the line when promotions were granted at the start of the new promotion cycle. That was a good indication of how smart Delia was, and that she was a worthy successor to Semoya. Delia was a military analyst by occupation within the Navy and was assigned to the house Navy's headquarters as an aide to the house command staff. That let her be in the palace to be of assistance to her mother Semoya, but still do real work in the Navy.

Delia and Maer together looked a bit...silly. She was much taller than him, since in Terran years Maer was only around 13 or 14, hadn't even completely finished his initial growth spurt brought on by puberty. She was an adult woman with a very young teenager for a future husband. But, Maer did like her, really like her, and she seemed rather fond of him in return. Who knows, maybe by the time Maer turned 25, he might have true feelings for Delia, and she for him.

Jason only spent a little time with Dahnai and the others. He was up on the bridge just before they traversed the Stargate back to Karis, and he had a long talk with Palla and the chief of the Shield's Hammers, Braxa Karzt. A nearly elderly Makati with nearly seventy years holding his Master Builder's golden hammer, Braxa was *the best* engineering chief in the KMS, and thus why he was on the *Tianne*. Braxa knew the ship better than the designers did. There was nothing he couldn't fix, and almost nothing he couldn't invent when the need was there. Jason took Braxa, Palla, and Sammy into Palla's ready room after Braxa arrived, Coma manifesting a hologram to join them, then got down to business. "We're going to have seventeen days before the negotiation with the Syndicate," he began. "Braxa, you said you could get the translight drive installed in fifteen days without putting the ship at risk."

"I can do it," he declared firmly. "I studied the device and the changes we'll have to make. I'll need to pull some additional workers from Kosigi, but it can be done."

“Then you start on it the minute we get back to Kosigi,” he replied. “I want this ship drive enabled by the negotiation. Don’t worry about Lorna, I’ll keep her off your back,” he said to Palla.

“She will *not* be happy, Jason,” Palla warned. “This ship is the crux of most of her planning.”

“Well, what she doesn’t know benefits us,” he replied. “It seems, Braxa, that the *Tianne* has come down with engine trouble,” he said easily. “And it’s just pure luck that you *happened* to be in Kosigi when these troubles began.”

“Aye, your Grace, aye,” the Makati grinned back. “And I do believe it’s going to take approximately fifteen days to repair.”

“It seems that it is caused by a minor design flaw we’ll have to correct,” Coma added slyly. *“So we’ll need to have some new parts manufactured.”*

“That’s our story, and we’re sticking to it,” Jason declared as Sammy chuckled. “I’ll have Myleena and most of Project F waiting at the dock when we arrive, Braxa.”

“Long as they do what I say, we’ll get along fine,” the Makati declared.

Jason laughed. “You’re about to butt heads with the most stubborn woman in House Karinne.”

“I got horns, your Grace, she don’t. She won’t last long,” he answered bluntly.

“Coma, send it back to Dellin what we intend. I want the drive and everyone needed to install it waiting on the dock when we pull in,” he ordered.

“I’ve already warned him, Jason. He’s in the process right now. But Myleena isn’t happy,” she warned. *“It seems you just pulled her out of something.”*

“She’s *always* doing something,” Jason snorted. “She can go back to it when she’s done. If there’s one ship in all the KMS I want with a drive, it’s this one,” he stated, stomping his foot a bit on the carpeted deck under him.

“We just won’t be using it unless it’s absolutely necessary, since we haven’t even finished the sims for how it will change the ship’s operations yet.”

“Not entirely, Jason,” Palla said. “I *do* intend to use the drive in mode one. The ability to get the ship to FTL speed has real tactical and strategic value. Especially *this* ship, since it has a GRAF cannon. Remember that the GRAF cannon has unlimited range.”

“Meh, then I’ll have to be partially honest with Lorna. The CCM command staff will be on the ship, so they might be a little ticked at us when you suddenly go mode one.” He drummed his finger on the knee of his armor. “That’s what we’ll do. I’ll tell her the ship went down, but since it *is* down, we’re taking this opportunity to install a new translight drive to give it extra capability. So, everyone have that? We need to keep our stories straight.”

“Easy enough, your Grace,” Braxa nodded.

“So, you’re going to go public with the drives?”

“I’m only going public with the normal space FTL part of it,” he replied. “We won’t tell them what *else* they can do. Because as sure as the sun rises over Karsa in the morning, the officers in the CCM will filter that down to the politicians.”

“I’ll institute some training simulations to get the navigators and astrocartography ready for the drive, primarily with the changes to the nav computer,” Coma declared. *“The upgraded nav computer does affect Astrocartography, they use that computer for some of their work.”*

“I’ll get back down to Engineering, there are some things we can do right now, so that means we can get started. Every second counts,” Braxa stated.

“Go ahead, Braxa,” Palla nodded. “Keep Coma apprised of your progress.” The Makati hurried out of her ready room, and Palla gave Jason a long look. “You do need to be very careful about what you tell Lorna, Jason,” she warned. “Lorna is very, very sharp. And she’ll demand specifics about the drive so she understands how it works, so she can take that into account in her planning.”

“Well, she’s gonna get stonewalled this time,” he replied. “Lorna already knows too fuckin’ much about the KMS and some of our tech to suit me. The only thing she’s gonna learn about the drive is that it can let the ship move at FTL speed in normal space. I’m not even telling her how fast it can go.” He looked over at her. “And how do you intend to use it?”

“Mainly to drastically reduce the time needed to get to jump distance, and to keep the ship at safe distance to use the GRAF cannon,” she replied. “Engaging the drive for just a split second will move the ship hundreds of thousands of kathra, something we can do between firing sequences. I already had Coma run the numbers, and it’s possible. We can use that tactically to always keep the ship at safe firing distance, then use the GRAF cannon’s unlimited range to our advantage.”

“That’s pretty damn clever,” Jason complemented after thinking about it a second. “And I can use that to explain why we’re doing it, that’ll keep Lorna from thinking about it too much. I’ll just tell her it’s an additional defensive system we’re adding to the ship to make it safer to fire the GRAF cannon.”

“Sammy, you take charge of getting the crew trained on the drive and the change of procedures it will create,” Palla ordered. “Talk to Juma, she already has some official procedures certified from the testing they’ve done on the other ships. Figure out how best to incorporate them into our own op-pro. Coma, you keep track of Braxa’s progress. As in keep a hologram down there and watch everything, so you know exactly what’s been done, what they’re doing, and what still needs done. Jason, I’ll send your office hourly reports,” she finished, looking at him.

“Then it sounds like we have a plan,” Jason declared. “I’ll talk to Myri and Juma when I have a chance and warn them of what I ordered, then spend the rest of the day hiding from them.”

Palla chuckled. “Doubtful, Jason, Juma’s been all but scheming to try to figure out a way to get the *Tianne* enough time in a dock to do the refit. You simply made it easy for her.”

“Well, glad to be of help,” Jason chuckled, standing up. “And I’d better get back down to the others.”

“It’s too late now, Jason, you’ll have to stay up here until we transit the gate,” she warned.

After getting through the gate, Jason pulled a CBIM trick and merged to a computer in the command center, then manifested a hologram of himself over their central table. “*Ladies, did Coma tell you what I ordered?*” he asked.

“Yeah, Jayce, and that’s pretty sneaky,” Myri replied.

“*So, you’re not gonna bitch?*”

“Bitch? Why would we bitch? We want that drive installed as much as you do,” Juma told him. “You just gave us a perfectly valid excuse to do it. Trelle’s garland, if I’d have known about this seventeen-day window, *I* would have ordered it.”

“*That’s why I earn the big credits, Juma, I know things first,*” he told her.

“Well, you won’t hear any complaints from us,” Juma assured him with a smile.

“Not a one,” Navii agreed from her chair. “You made the perfect decision, young buck. You’d make a good Admiral.”

Jason laughed. “*No, I have enough job titles as it is, Navii,*” he told her.

He got back down to the stateroom just as the ship made its approach to Kosigi, the capitol doors opening in preparation for their arrival. The ship banked on its lateral axis to line up with the doors—it was too big to go through the doors unless it lined up the stern of the ship with the corners of the doors, and even then it very nearly scraped the doors going through—and found that everyone was preparing to board a frigate. Dahnai’s family had joined the rulers and Jason’s family while he was up on the bridge, so the stateroom was a bit crowded. “Just hold up,” Jason said. “The ship has to dock, so we’ll transfer there.”

“What’s going on?” Jyslin asked.

“Engine trouble,” he replied. “They have to dock for diagnostics.”

“Why Jason, I thought KMS ships never broke down,” Dahnai teased.

“I wish,” he snorted. “The curse of using cutting edge tech is that it breaks down, love. A *lot*,” he added. “We’re the Confederation’s beta testers. We work out the bugs, what we send down through the Academy is the result of a lot of blood and sweat and cursing.”

Jyslin laughed. “That’s the truth,” she agreed.

“That works well enough,” Dahnai said, cradling Kaen a bit to her breast. “Guess you got off that cruiser for nothing, Saelle. Though I’m not complaining,” she added, smiling down at her infant son.

“Hello, Jason,” Saelle said, taking his hands and then kissing him on the cheek. “You look a bit haggard.”

“It’s been a long few days,” he replied. “I’m glad you’re here, we have some things to talk about.”

“That sounds ominous,” she said, brushing her charcoal gray hair out of her eyes.

“Just a lot going on, and some of it concerns you,” he answered. “The least of which, Myli wants you to bring your mecha in for equipment swaps. We’re replacing some of the biogenic nodes in the tactical gestalt.”

“I’ll have to recall a couple of them from Draconis,” she said. “I only have my primary Gladiator with me. Did they finish my Titan?”

“Yeah, you’re taking it back with you,” he nodded. “Now that you’re rated on it. Seriously woman, four tries? I passed my rating on the first attempt.”

“You’re here and no doubt got in all kinds of extra practice,” she retorted, a bit primly. “I’m going to get some hours on it up at the range at Base Delta while we’re here.”

“I *so* want to ride in one of those!” Maer said eagerly. “Is there a second seat?”

“There’s three,” Jason chuckled. “The mecha is designed to only be operated by one pilot, but it has three seats up in the cockpit for extra personnel. So yes, we’ll take you out in our Titans while we’re here, Maer. I think you’ll like it.”

“Can we do it today?”

“It’s a little late to do it today, Maer,” Saelle said. “It’s almost midnight Draconis time.”

“I haven’t been on Draconis.”

“I have, and do you really want a cranky rigger who has you at her mercy?” she challenged, which made him laugh.

“Knowing her, she’d make you clean up the puke in the cockpit yourself, son,” Dahnai warned with a grin.

“Damn right I would,” she affirmed.

“And that’s why she’s my best friend,” Dahnai laughed in Mesaiima’s direction.

“High Prince Maer isn’t the only one that would enjoy a ride in a Titan,” Holikk declared.

“I’d be happy to take you out in mine, High Chancellor, just under the same rules,” Saelle winked. “You throw up in my cockpit, you’re cleaning it up.”

Holikk laughed. “I’d like to think I have a strong enough stomach to handle it, Lady Saelle.”

“So, you and me makes two Generations rated for a Titan?” Saelle asked.

“Four. Jenn and Jezzi both rated on it just two days ago. *Six* tries each,” he sighed, which made Saelle laugh.

“Well, I don’t feel so bad now,” she grinned.

“They’re *civilians*, you’re an Imperial Marine rigger. I’m utterly disappointed in you, woman.”

“Push off, Jayce,” she retorted, which made Sirri laugh.

“And what scheme do you have up your pants leg that you’re rating Generations on Titans, Jayce?” Dahnai asked seriously.

“The tactical gestalts in them are absolute *beasts*,” Saelle responded for him. “As in I can tie a corvette in a knot using my tactical beastly. And that’s on top of its usual weapons, they didn’t have to take anything out to

put that tactical in. If that doesn't have battlefield use, I don't know what does."

"Let's just say that I want to be ready for *anything* the Syndicate might throw at us," he said mildly, glancing at Aya. "If it comes down to it, we might need a Generation on the battlefield to counter Syndicate tricks. The Consortium energy beings taught us one important thing, love, and that's to expect the unexpected. There's more to psionics than just telepathy and TK, the Colonists showed us that with their empathes. There's no telling what tricks the Syndicate has learned that they can throw at us, so I want to be ready to deal with it if they threaten Confederate territory."

"Well, that's thinking ahead," Dahnai mused. "And it's good to see that you *do* understand that Generations can be very nasty on a battlefield."

"I don't object to us using our abilities to defend ourselves and our allies. I just don't want people to decide that we're *weapons* more than we're *people*."

"Amen," Saelle agreed. "That and he likes to keep us locked up on Karis. Well, everyone but me," she winked.

"It keeps anyone from getting any funny ideas," Jason said unapologetically. "No Generation leaves Karis without a hell of a lot of protection as well as military training so they can fight for themselves if they have to. Jenn and Jezzi just earned that right with them finishing their training, so they now have permission to travel off Karis, at least so long as they warn us first so Aya can arrange security for them."

"And you have all the Generations doing that?" Ethikk asked curiously.

"The adults," he nodded. "I think Merida is the next closest to finishing. She's in the last stage of her Titan training right now. The kids will learn it after finishing primary school. They'll have their own form of conscription, a four-year stint in the KMS where they learn how to fight from a merge, learn how to pilot mecha and fighters, and learn the basics of KMS ships. Then they go to the command center and learn the basics of both naval and ground warfare from a strategic and planning viewpoint. When Rann finishes, he'll be rated on every mecha we have, on a Wolf fighter and a corvette, have his naval crew rating, and understand the basics of both strategic and tactical Naval and ground combat. Those are things he needs

to know if he's ever put into a position where he has to fight to protect the house."

Dahnai gave him an approving look. "I think it's a great idea," she declared as the ship shuddered a tiny bit, decelerating to get through the doors.

They transferred to a destroyer after the *Tianne* pulled up to the dock extending out from one of the massive spars that connected the outer shell to the inner core. It was the gigantic personnel dock over the ops center, which made the ship loom over the central core. It was the only dock they had in the base that could accommodate the ship. Jason saw them off as they rode flying platforms over to the destroyer, which Maer and Sirri loved, then he rushed down and caught up with Myleena as she stood by a piece of the drive, which was the size of two corvettes stacked on top of each other. But that was just one node. They'd discovered that for the *Tianne*, instead of using a single drive, the size of the ship would require them to install 15 different drive nodes and sync them together. The *Tianne*'s cargo doors opened, which revealed a gigantic passage leading directly to the lateral tram system that ran down the central axis of the ship, from bow to stern. They'd already done the measurements and found that the drive nodes would fit down this cargo passage. They wouldn't have to cut away the hull and bulkheads to get it in the way they did with all the other ships. That was one reason why refitting the *Tianne* would take less time by comparison, since they didn't have to do all that work just to get the drive section into the ship. The ship was designed to let them load and unload gigantic pieces of equipment, and that design feature was going to save them *takirs* of work.

I'm a bit pissed at you, Jayce. We were in the middle of an important experiment! Myleena accused as he reached them.

Sorry, but this is more important, he replied. *You have seventeen days to get this installed, Myli. Braxa assures me he can do it in fifteen, so that gives you two extra days in case you run into issues.*

We can do it in fourteen, Braxa's just being conservative, she sniffed. *You just stay out of it this time, babes. We don't need you for this one.*

I have too much other stuff going on to have time to help, he sent with an audible sigh. Mind if I take Danelle while you're working on this?

You know I don't. Better with you than staying with Kilinna. Gives her a chance to get some time off.

I'll have her come over when she gets out of school, he told her.

Works for me, babes, she said as two mechloaders picked up the node behind them and started walking it into the cargo hatch.

Jason caught a ride down to the summer palace on a frigate, joining them at the pool after they already changed into more relaxing attire. The kids frolicked nude in the shallow end of the pool, and Dahnai was also delightfully nude, reclining on a lounge not far from the kids. Holikk surprised Jason by also going nude, which was a bit outside usual Subrian customs, and Ethikk and Mesaiima were following their normal customs. Ethikk wore only a pair of swim trunks and Mesaiima a pair of borrowed bikini bottoms, leaving her chest bare. But as she herself said, winged creatures often had serious problems with shirts, so it was quite acceptable in Imbiri society for women to go bare-breasted, at least in what they considered to be informal company. Imbiri women didn't go bare-chested in formal situations, going back to an old custom from their antiquity that considered it too much of a distraction for men, and thus a bit rude.

That was truth. Even though Mesaiima only came up to Jason's chest, she had quite a *handsome* pair of breasts. She was sitting on top of the high dive, a beach ball under her arm and kicking her feet idly as her wings fanned a little bit behind her, then she showed off that most coveted of abilities when she pushed off the board and flitted over the pool. She dropped the beach ball towards Rann and Shya, and they batted it around with Maer, Sirri, and Delia, who had decided to throw maturity to the wind and play with the youngsters. She flitted over and landed beside Jason after he came to a stop and sat on the lounge beside Dahnai's, still in his armor. "Are you staying here the night, Jason?" she asked, her wings slowing to a stop.

"It's stay the night or have Dahnai murder me," he replied, which made Dahnai laugh and nod with a mean smile. "I have Danelle on the way over, Dahnai."

“That’s fine, I adore Danelle,” she replied. “What about the others?”

“That’s up to you. If you want to invite the other kids, I’m all for it. I’m babysitting Danelle for Myli, so she has to come over here.”

“Well, get them over here,” she declared. “And get the girls over too. We haven’t had a pool party in nearly a month.”

“And might I crash your party with my bionoid, Dahnai?” Cybi’s voice came from a floating camera pod. *“I do so love to swim.”*

“Sure!” she said eagerly. “I wanna see this bionoid of yours, Cybi! And tell the other CBIMs they’re invited too!”

“They’d love to attend,” Cybi assured her. *“We’ll be on a skimmer and on the way over as soon as we pack our swimsuits.”*

“Those bionoids are a good example of the work Rook’s done,” Jason chuckled. “They’re even more lifelike than mine, since I only use mine occasionally. For the CBIMs, he tried to make them as lifelike as possible, since they use them almost all the time. And Cybi’s become quite a clothes horse,” he said with a grunt of disapproval, which made Cybi laugh from the camera pod.

“Don’t you complain about my clothes,” she retorted. *“It’s your fault for putting a bedroom with closets in my facility!”*

“That was a guest bedroom,” he shot back.

“Well, it’s my bedroom now,” she declared. *“And Cyvanne already has Red Horn renovating a part of the KERA facility to become her quarters. She’s already run out of room in the core chamber for her things.”*

“That woman, I swear,” Jason sighed, which made Dahnai and Mesaiima laugh.

“It sounds like you really enjoy those bionoids, Cybi,” Mesaiima noted.

“Oh yes, very much so, madam President,” she answered eagerly. *“It’s almost criminally enjoyable to have a physical body, with the same senses as a living being. I cannot explain how different it is to us to see through your eyes, and to feel as if we are alive in the same way you are. The first time I was able to actually swim in my pool, I almost cried in delight. It was everything I thought it would be.”*

“Please, call me Mesaiima, Cybi. And that’s almost surprising. I thought that you could feel through the hologram.”

“Yes, but it’s entirely different,” she answered. “There is a huge difference between receiving sensory data through the hologram and experiencing them in a body specifically designed to have the same sensory capabilities you do. In a way, it is much more, more...intense experiencing sensory stimulation through the bionoid. As a hologram, petting a vulpar simply tells me the temperature, physical consistency, and friction coefficient of the fur. When I pet a vulpar with my bionoid, I feel the fur as soft.”

“Ahhh, now when you explain it that way, I understand completely,” Mesaiima nodded. “It’s more *intimate* using a bionoid.”

“By an order of magnitude,” she confirmed.

“Just keep in mind, Cybi, the bikini is only worn to and from the pool,” Dahnai said lightly.

“I have no problems with that, Dahnai. What good is having an attractive body if I don’t show it off?”

“She’s definitely Faey,” Dahnai said with an approving nod, which made Mesaiima laugh.

“So, the bionoid is, ah, a faithful reproduction of a Faey body?”

“Down to the clitoris, Mesaiima,” Cybi said gravely, which made Dahnai burst out laughing as Mesaiima blushed slightly.

“Rook never does anything halfway,” Jason said with dry humor. “They wanted perfect replicas of Faey physiology, and they got them.”

It turned into quite the party once the strip girls, Tim, Symone, and Yila Trefani came over, once the kids were out of school, and the CBIMs arrived with their bionoids. They were easy to pick out, since Cybi, Cyra, and Cynna looked like sisters, very nearly like triplets, and were all almost exactly the same height. Cylan was taller than them, and Cyvanne shorter. Mesaiima and Dahnai were a bit startled by Coma, since she looked like Jyslin’s twin sister, even more so because they weren’t as familiar with Coma as they were the CBIMs. “Coma’s core is on the *Tianne*,” Jason

explained to Holikk and Mesaiima as she greeted them. “She’s technically not a CBIM, but she’s as good as.”

“I’m a CBMOM, a command biogenic mobile operations mainframe,” Coma told them proudly as she let Holikk kiss the back of her hand, a quite chivalrous Subrian custom. And of course, Holikk had to inspect her hand between his own large, strong ones, delicately probing it with his fingers. “And do I feel Faey to you, High Chancellor?”

“This is astounding,” he said professionally. “I can feel the bones in her hand. And I would swear that this is living flesh, it’s warm, and there’s texture in the skin. There’s even a pulse!”

“If the bionoid couldn’t pass as a living thing, it wouldn’t be very useful to us, High Chancellor,” Coma told him. “Rook very carefully designed our biorhythmic systems to emulate living processes. And he has great attention to detail.”

“He does indeed,” Holikk agreed, patting the back of her hand and releasing it. “I hope I didn’t hurt you.”

“We don’t feel pain, High Chancellor,” she told him with a smile. “We’re not *that* similar to living things. And we have *other* differences,” she added liltingly. She took hold of Holikk in a swift move, picked him up over her head, and then threw him nearly ten shakra into the pool. Holikk came up spluttering, then he burst out laughing.

“That’s quite a trick, Coma,” he grinned from the pool. “And I dare you try that again. Subrians are quite fond of wrestling.”

“I’d be delighted to compete against you, Holikk. Standard competition rules?”

“I accept!” he said eagerly as he climbed out of the pool.

Holikk made himself a new friend that day in Coma, as the two stripped off their bathing suits—standard competition rules, wrestling matches were conducted nude—and struggled against each other in the grass just off the pool deck. Holikk was *enormously* strong, since Subrians were a heavy gravity species and Subrian custom among men was to be very muscular, very nearly matching the mechanical strength imparted into the bionoids... and it was a bit funny to see the tall, barrel-chested, thick-armed Holikk

have to struggle mightily against what looked like a little slip of a girl compared to him. And the wrestling was a good test of the strength and durability of the fake flesh Rook used for the bionoids, because Holikk grabbed at it, wrenched it, twisted it, during his match against Coma. Coma was stronger than he was, but Holikk had the height advantage, which gave him leverage, and he had a lot more practice than she did, which gave him the edge in their competition.

While those two were amusing themselves, the other bionoids just mixed in with the strip girls, kids, and three visiting rulers, looking quite relaxed as they chatted, played with the kids, and swam in the pool. But one of the big differences came at dinner, when the bionoids sat with them but didn't share in the meal, instead opting to try different beverages. Cylan discovered a newfound fondness for Makati ale.

"So, not even your bionoids can eat?" Dahnai asked as Cylan tried some blood wine. "Jason said his couldn't, but I figured yours were more advanced than his is."

"It's a vexing problem," Cylan replied. "Rook is considering installing a simulated digestive system."

"Eh, it may not be worth doing," Dahnai shrugged, which made her attractive bare breasts bounce a little. "It's not like you *need* to eat."

"He's still working on it. He says that the bionoids can't *completely* pass for living things until they can eat food. Besides, I wouldn't mind trying it out, just for the novelty of it. If I don't like it, I just won't do it."

"That's a healthy attitude," Dahnai told him with a chuckle. "And I have to ask, Cylan, did you pick out your appearance?"

"Yes."

"Well, you did a *great* job," she declared. "You're extremely handsome."

"Thank you, Dahnai," he replied with a nod of appreciation.

"If you didn't notice, I like my men tall."

"Dahnai," Jason said warningly.

"What? I can't talk to Cylan?" she protested.

“He’s not a Faey, so he doesn’t know what you’re doing,” Jason said bluntly. “And I knew you were a bit of a freak.”

She burst out laughing. “Alright, alright, I *am* curious,” she admitted. “It’s Cylan’s fault for making his bionoid so damn sexy.”

“You’d lay with a machine?” Mesaiima asked curiously.

“Faey women love sex toys, Mesaiima, and this is a really *big* sex toy,” she said, pointing at Cylan. “I don’t know a single Faey that *wouldn’t* think about it. Faey women are the dominant gender in our society, Mesaiima, so we’re the ones constantly chasing men and thinking about sex,” she added with a wink. “If I didn’t look at a man and almost immediately wonder how good he is in bed, I’d think I was getting old.”

“That’s the main reason Kumi’s interested in the project,” Jason sighed. “She wants to create sex toy surrogates then charge people to play with them, either directly or merged to another bionoid. She thinks it’s the next big thing in porn since we introduced simsense. A non-scripted simsense experience that you control...you know, choose your own adventure,” he said darkly, which made Dahnai and several of the strip girls laugh.

“That’s a pretty damn good idea,” Yila mused, giving Kumi a speculative look. “We’re gonna talk about that tonight.”

“Well, that’d make you a ton of money in the Imperium,” Dahnai declared. “Probably on Terra, too.”

“The whole race of you are just perverts, do you know that?” Jason accused, which made Dahnai laugh.

“And proud of it,” Sheleese said shamelessly from further down the table.

“It keeps them out of trouble,” Ethikk said lightly. “So long as Faey are chasing boys, they’re not causing mischief elsewhere.”

“That’s the fucking truth,” Jason declared adamantly as he nodded towards the Beryan.

“But Jason, you *are* one of those boys,” Dahnai said lightly. “Don’t you enjoy being chased?”

“I’m not answering that question,” he retorted.

“And the moral crusader gets exposed as being just as perverted,” Zora teased.

“That’s Tim, not me,” Jason declared, pointing to his left, where Tim and Symone were sitting.

“Don’t hate me cause I know how to have fun, Jayce,” he declared.

“Guess it would depend on if Rook can program, you know...sexual climax into the bionoids,” Holikk said delicately, though he was smiling.

“Oh, he’s already done that,” Jason said dryly. “Both male and female. It wasn’t that hard for him, he had tons of sensory data just off the porno simsense that Yila produces. Then there were the live volunteers,” he added, looking at Symone and Tim accusingly.

“It was for science,” Symone replied proudly, which produced quite a lot of laughter. “Besides, it’s kinda cool knowing that almost every woman that gets off through a bionoid is gonna have an orgasm based on *my* orgasm datastream. It almost makes me famous,” she declared, then ducked when Jason moved to swat her.

“It just goes to show you, Holikk,” Jason said dryly. “Give the Faey something, anything, and they will *find a way* to sexualize it.”

“It proves our superiority among other species,” Dahnai declared haughtily.

“It proves you’re definitely the most depraved,” Jason retorted.

“Keep talking, father of one of my children and the man who’s going to be corrupted by my depravity in my bed tonight,” she returned, which caused quite a lot of laughter.

“One race’s depravity is another’s normal,” Holikk said sagely. “There are several races in the Coalition that, ah, share Faey views about that kind of thing. Part of being High Chancellor is learning how to roll with it, as the Terrans say.”

“Those would be the fun ones,” Symone grinned.

“Anyway,” Jason said loudly and forcefully, which made quite a few of them laugh, “speaking of bionoids, Rook just sent me an update. He should

have the assimilation simulation program ready tomorrow morning. So he needs us to go to the Lake tomorrow.”

“And what is that?” Ethikk asked.

“It’s our civilian merge facility,” Jason replied. “We operate a lot of equipment by remote through a merge, mechloaders, farm equipment, Sticks, that sort of thing. The operators merge to the equipment from a central facility, which we call the Lake since it’s right on the shore of Lake Relai. We’ll be going there to use the merge pods so you can practice with the bionoid simulation, and that’s where you’ll be doing the merge with the actual bionoids once they’re built. Rook said he should have the first models done by tomorrow afternoon, which will be your practice units. The actual ones we’re sending won’t be ready for a couple of days, those will be more complex. They’re being built to...different specifications,” he said dryly. “The biggest of which being a hell of a powerful self-destruct. Just in case.”

“That’s only prudent,” Ethikk agreed. “If we have to abandon the bionoids, we can’t let them have the biogenic computer chips.”

“Precisely, Ethikk,” Jason nodded. “But in reality, the self-destruct being built into the bionoids will be enough to take out the scout ship that’s carrying them out there. All six going in unison will be enough to take out the two Imxi cruisers escorting it just from the blast wave.”

“That’s a bomb, not a self-destruct,” Holikk noted.

“More or less. So keep that in mind when you’re merged to it, Holikk. You will be merged to a walking bomb.”

“Mother did always say I had an explosive temper,” he quipped, which made Jason chuckle.

“It shouldn’t take us that long to get the hang of the bionoids,” Jason said. “For me, it’ll be like merging to a Gladiator, so I’m sorta used to the difference of perspective. I’ve merged to things that tall already. We’ll have a good two takirs to practice, especially since they’re holding the next summit here,” he grunted. “God, it’ll take an act of war to make them go home.”

Dahnai laughed. “You’re not making Holikk, Mesaiima, and Ethikk very welcome, Jayce,” she teased.

“We know what he means,” Ethikk chuckled. “We *do* tend to linger when we have our summits here. There’s something almost irresistible about being on this forbidden planet,” he admitted. “It just goes to show you, what you want most is what you can’t have, just because you can’t have it.”

“They’ll certainly want to stay a few days after the meeting is over to discuss it,” Dahnai predicted. “I have no doubt we’ll have a lot to talk about. That Benga woman was as slippery as a Rectari eel.”

“Then there will be the meetings up to it, deciding what we’re willing to reveal to them,” Ethikk mused. “We may be here twenty days.”

“I’ll be hiding in a cave on Hirga by then,” Jason noted, which made Dahnai chuckle.

“Where?” Holikk asked.

“Continent on the other side of the planet, northern hemisphere opposite Kirga,” he replied. “If you drew a line through the planet from this continent, odds are it’d pass through Hirga somewhere. We have five continents on the planet, Holikk. This island is off the northeast coast of Karga, where Karsa is. North of us is Virga, just over the equator. Then there’s Kirga to the south and east of us, and well north and east of that is Hirga, whose northern edge sits right on the arctic circle. Sarga sits more or less by itself out to the west of us, straddling the equator, almost exactly equally distant to both Karga and Kirga. It’s the smallest and most remote of the continents, barely a fifth the size of Karga. We haven’t started terraforming Hirga and Sarga yet, because they’re so far from here. We haven’t opened them up for settlement either. And believe me, a lot of people are waiting for us to do that,” he chuckled. “All that prime tropical real estate, there’s a whole lot of anticipation for when we open the cities over there, particularly among the Shio. We might see a mass exodus of Shio off Karga and Kirga when I open Sarga,” he laughed.

“At least we’d have Karsa back,” Ilia chuckled. “Those damn Shio all but moved in and took over the city after the Consortium War.”

“Racist,” Jason teased.

“Hey, I just don’t like competing with those damn Shio girls for men,” she retorted. “They have the exotic card to play, cause they’re Shio. Exotic girls turn men on.”

“So, you’re mad that Shio girls are prettier than you are,” Jason reasoned, giving her a cool, amused look.”

“Push off, Jayce,” she snapped, which caused a lot of laughter.

“So, when *are* you going to open Sarga?” Maya asked.

“In two months,” he answered. “We’ve almost hit our minimum population requirement for Virga. Once we hit our target number, I’ll open Sarga. Jerrim predicts we’ll cross the line sometime late next month.”

“And then the mad scramble begins,” Jyslin chuckled.

“At least among people who like warm climates,” Jason elaborated. “Way too hot for me, but Shio would definitely love it there.”

“You already live on a beach in a subtropical climate, Jason,” Dahnai nearly accused.

“It’s almost too hot for me in Karsa, but I sorta *have* to live there,” he chuckled. “If I had my way, I’d be living in northern Hirga.”

“Oh *hell* no,” Jyslin retorted. “I grew up on an arctic planet, no *way* am I living anywhere that sees a single flake of snow. *Ever*. And we live where *I* say,” she declared bluntly, poking him in the chest. “I don’t care how many titles are in front of your name, buster, I’m the woman in this marriage.”

“He’s not quite so intimidating when you see him in a casual situation, is he?” Dahnai asked playfully, looking over at Mesaiima. “The truth just doesn’t live up to the image.”

“A wise negotiator knows when to bend, so her opponent breaks herself,” Mesaiima replied impishly, winking in Jason’s direction.

“Thank you, Madam President,” he said grandly, then laughed when Jyslin elbowed him in the ribs.

After dinner, after the girls went back home and things calmed down a great deal, Jason decided to take a nice relaxing walk on the beach north of

the house, the most remote and isolated of them, and took some time to just think. He...he had a bad feeling about this upcoming negotiation. He didn't think the Benga would try anything drastic, but something about it just gnawed at him. The Benga were dangerous, dangerous beings, and not just because of their size and aggression. He knew what they were, and that would let him approach the negotiation with the proper mindset...but he wasn't sure the others would. As smoothly as this Fleet commander Sha Ra talked with Jarik, she could very well cause a rift of disparate opinions in the Confederate Council. Rulers like Magran, who preferred peace to war and were willing to give others the benefit of the doubt, might be swayed by her glibness into believing they weren't as dangerous as they were. Magran was a personal friend of his, and he was almost afraid that he might jeopardize that friendship by opposing Magran and those who believed as he did. Jason usually was *not* a hawk, was probably the most peaceful man on the council, but in this case, he saw no other option but war, because he knew the *truth* of their enemy. He had detailed information of their brutality and savagery, he had seen the maps of Andromeda that showed entire sectors of their galaxy proverbially razed to the ground, he knew just how many lives the Syndicate had destroyed. They were *evil*, the epitome of evil, and Jason would in no way, under no circumstances, bargain with the devil incarnate. He was attending the meeting with the Benga for one reason, and that was to do anything he could to make them turn around and go back to Andromeda peacefully, even if it meant exposing Karinne secrets to the Confederation. There was *no way* he would allow even *one* Syndicate ship into their galaxy.

And that was why he knew war with them was inevitable. Their greed would drive them, drive them to break any agreement they made, drive them to seek to conquer, enslave, take everything from everyone for themselves, and destroy anything they couldn't possess or control. The sectors-wide swaths of lifelessness in Andromeda attested to that. The enemy was ruthless, he was merciless, and he was beyond redemption. And under no circumstances would Jason Karinne believe a word they said, he would only believe the actions they took.

But one thing was for sure, and that was this upcoming negotiation was going to be anything but what it seemed.

Chapter 6

Vesta, 24 Kiraa, 4404, Faey Orthodox Calendar

Wednesday, 20 June 2018 Terran Standard Calendar

Vesta, 24 Kiraa, year 1329 of the 97th Generation, Karinne Historical Reference Calendar

Industrial Complex R23-17-B, Moria City, Karga, Karis

That was pretty big.

Jason stood in a receiving area with Rook, Dera and Ryn behind him, watching as a *very big* him stood in front of them. It was his first production run bionoid, and Jason only came up to its lower thigh. The fact that it was naked made being at that height maybe a *tad* uncomfortable for him, given what seemed to be looming over his head, but like his normal bionoid, it was a perfect replica of his body in every way, just at over three times scale. The bionoid was in dormant mode, which meant that only its equilibrium systems were running, which was how it was standing without bracing or assistance. Its eyes were open, unblinking, and hard to see from that angle.

Seeing himself at three times scale made him glad that he'd been working out so much over the last year. The stomach of that bionoid was lean, even had a bit of a six pack, and the shoulders were wide. He almost looked to be back in football shape, and it was easier to see when everything was enlarged like that.

"*What do you think?*" Rook asked.

"I think that I'm too straight to be entirely comfortable standing this close to it," he replied, which made the girls behind him wheeze in that voiceless laughter.

Now you can claim with complete confidence that you have the biggest dick on Karis, Jason, Dera teased.

“Yah yah, push off, bitch,” he answered aloud. “Outside of that, Rook, it’s like looking in a mirror. Just a magnifying mirror,” he said, taking a step back, then walking around the bionoid. “What kind of system is it? Did you barebones it, or does it have biorhythmics?”

“Biorhythmics, it’s a full production run,” he replied. “This is the bionoid that’s staying here, so I decided to test the system in an upsized bionoid to see if they work the same, or if we’ll need to adjust them to take its size into account.”

“Good deal,” Jason nodded as he came back around. “Is it functional?”

“Fully.”

“Well, then,” he said, then he sat down on the floor, crossing his legs, which wasn’t all that difficult in armor. “Let’s see what it’s like.”

He took a deep breath, exhaled, and then had his gestalt detect the bionoid. It was like his other one, it was hard coded to only allow him to merge to it, and its onboard computer accepted the merge request after confirming his identity. He felt himself rise up into the bionoid’s computer, then he took control of it, activating its sensory mesh system. A flood of jumbled sensations washed over him as it sorted itself out, then he became aware of the bionoid as if it were his own body, felt the cold metal under his feet as his eyes activated, his vision starting as a white blur and slowly dimming and focusing on the blurry shapes that emerged from that white saturation. He blinked a few times as the loading room came into focus, then he raised a hand and closed it into a fist, looking down at it. Everything about himself felt normal, but when he looked around, everything around him looked quite small. He was used to this alteration of his perception from piloting Gladiators and Juggernauts, so he was able to easily navigate the change in his perspective. “It’s online,” he said audibly, noticing that his voice was much deeper than normal, which was entirely logical given the bionoid’s vocal cords were much longer and larger than his normal ones. “I’ve got a 100% merge. Getting some diagnostics back. She’s fully operational,” he announced, looking down at them. “And who was making a joke about the size of my dick just a minute ago, ladies? Would you like to step forward?” he asked tauntingly, raising a foot as if to step on the offender.

Dera put a finger on her interface and activated the audio speaker. He could hear her sending while merged to the bionoid, since his physical body was right there, but Rook wouldn't be able to do so. *"Tough talk while you're in that toy, Jason."* She gasped a bit when he took a sudden step forward, bent down, and wrapped his hands around her middle and picked her up. She gave him a dirty look as Ryn wheezed again in voiceless laughter. Jason held her at the same level as his face, giving her a nasty smile.

"Who's the toy now, bitch?" he taunted.

"I'm the one with the pulse cannon, sweetheart," she warned, giving him a mean smile as she extended the nested forearm pulse cannon on her right arm and pointed it at him.

Jason laughed. "Meanie," he said, then he leaned down and put her back on the floor, very gently. "I have to say, Rook, that it feels just like my other bionoid. Except for the different point of view," he said, looking down at the three of them. "The equilibrium and perspective is almost the same as piloting a Gladiator, so I don't think I'm going to need all that much practice." He put a hand to his chest, going over the systems the computer was telling him it had available...and there was a *lot* available. Rook had really loaded up the bionoid with extra systems, even two weapon systems, taking advantage of all the extra space within the endoskeleton and ribcage to add some goodies. "Damn, Rook, I see you gave it everything. Even weapons. This thing is almost as stacked as an exomech."

"I want you to test it further after the summit on Oasis, to test out upsizing the biorhythm systems. I also want you to test it as a possible battlefield tool, which is why I have it so geared up," he repeated. *"They just finished Empress Dahnai's bionoid. Here it comes."* Jason looked back to see a hoverloader carrying Dahnai's bionoid, which looked like a perfect replica of her, just Jason's size. Jason was the point of reference for the heights of the bionoids, so Dahnai's Benga-sized bionoid would only be slightly shorter than him, virtually eye to eye. The bionoid was nude, like Jason's, and it was a *perfect* imitation of her, even down to the appearance of her genitals...and he'd seen them enough from close up to know exactly what they looked like. The bionoid was active, in independent standby mode, which allowed it to balance itself after it was set down, then it went

motionless. It would remain dormant with only the equilibrium program running until Dahnai or a technician activated it. *“Just so you know, the bionoids of the other rulers have standard civilian bionoid equipment installed. They don’t need the weapons or anything I mean to test for military potential.”*

“Well, it certainly looks like Dahnai,” Jason said, then he couldn’t resist fondling one of its breasts. “Feels like her too. I’m almost afraid to ask how you know what her breasts feel like, Rook.”

“I’m going to tell her Majesty you were feeling up her bionoid, Jason,” Dera’s interface called.

“Like I haven’t grabbed her tits before,” he retorted, tracing a finger around the bionoid’s nipple. Even *that* felt like Dahnai. He then poked the pseudo-flesh of the bionoid’s breast, then slid a hand around its arm and down its back before patting it on the butt.

“But she’s not in it to enjoy what you’re doing,” Dera noted slyly.

“That’s her problem,” he answered, then he walked around it. Another bionoid was being carried out, the burly, intimidating Holikk, and it was set down beside Dahnai.

“Well, Jason, I think you just lost that record for biggest dick on Karis,” Dera noted, which made Ryn grin and take a few steps away from her partner.

“I’m so glad it matters so much to you, Dera,” he snorted. Jason had to admit, Holikk was just as intimidating below the waist as he was above it. “Rook, find out if the training clothes for the bionoids are ready.”

“Almost. They said they should have them out here in about ten minutes.”

Another bionoid was carried out, Magran, which made Jason raise an eyebrow. He’d forgotten that Colonist males had a retractable penis, like a Terran horse or a dog, so there wasn’t anything between Magran’s legs as it was set down beside Holikk’s bionoid. They didn’t require having testes outside the body to keep them at a cooler temperature, either, so there was no scrotum. The result was a small, almost eerie slit in the flesh where Jason’s own penis extended out from his body, that was from where

Magran's business extended when... "in use." Ethikk and Mesaiima's bionoids were brought out together and set down, and given they were much smaller by scale, they looked about right to him, but very wrong when Rook and the guards advanced to inspect the units. Ethikk usually only came up to Dera's lower stomach, but the bionoid Ethikk was a good three and a half shakra taller than she was. Rook had gotten the appearance and consistency of Ethikk's fur right on the bionoid and had gotten his family bands right on his tail. Mesaiima's bionoid still managed to look ethereal and willowy, her slender, waifish body pale, almost looking like a Terran teenage girl...with fairy's wings and large, almost anime-style luminous eyes. The wings looked right compared to the real Mesaiima, the two upper wings significantly larger than the lower two, which were used primarily to steer her in flight like a combo rudder/aileron/elevator system. Because of the wings, the bionoid Mesaiima stood leaning slightly forward a little to maintain balance, just like the real one did. The weight of the wings required it; if she stood up straight and didn't exert some muscular force to stay balanced, she'd topple over backwards. That was probably why Mesaiima had *very* defined abdominal muscles, from the constant crunch-like flexing of her abs she had to exert to maintain her balance against the weight of her wings.

"Activate them, Rook," Jason ordered, taking a step back to stand beside the metallic-skinned male bionoid. "Let's make sure they work before we get them dressed and load them on the transport."

Rook nodded, and in unison, the five other bionoids seemed to flinch, then took less rigid postures as their control computers activated into independent mode. Rook was controlling them over the biogenic network, and he had them run diagnostics and also do some basic exercises to make sure they were working properly, things like walking around the storage room, doing knee bends, twisting at the waist with the arms out, those sorts of very basic exercises to test movement, flexibility, and range of motion. *"All five of them are reporting full functionality,"* he announced. *"They're ready to be shipped to the test facility."*

That was on Joint Base Alpha, a mock-up of several rooms holding size-proper furniture, to let them practice things like sitting, standing, walking, picking things up and carrying them, the basic tasks needed to give the people driving them experience. They would also be navigating

sets with normal-sized furniture to teach them how to operate around people that only came up to their thighs—or ribcage in Ethikk’s case.

“Now we just need those clothes,” Jason said, then he stepped over and knelt over his own body, sitting cross-legged on the floor, eyes closed, and expression neutral, almost serene. “Now this is a weird point of view.” He dared reach out and push very carefully and gently at his own shoulder but felt nothing. He was merged deeply enough to not feel the movement, but not so deeply that he allowed his body to completely relax and slump to the floor. Jason was showing off one of the most underestimated and secret abilities of Generations, the ability to concentrate on multiple things at a time. Jason was simultaneously merged to the bionoid while concentrating on keeping his body in its sitting position. It was also why he’d be able to hear sending, since he didn’t have to completely bury himself in the bionoid to achieve a 100% merge. One half of his brain was merged to the bionoid, while the other half was keeping his body upright and listening for sending. “I’m almost tempted to pick myself up, but I’m too tied up in the bionoid to be able to control my body. I’d probably fall down once I set myself back down,” he chuckled, a deep, rumbling bass sound.

“It would be a little hard explaining to Captain Aya how your nose got broken, Jason,” Ryn told him with a grin.

“Yeah, she’d probably spank both of you for letting me try it,” he agreed, putting his forearm on his knee and regarding himself. “Thank God I’m not going bald,” he noted dryly, looking at the top of his own head, an angle he didn’t usually get from a mirror.

A seventh bionoid came off the line, and Jason had to laugh when a Benga-sized Rook was set down beside Ethikk. “That’s so cheating, Rook,” Jason noted.

“I designed them, I get one too,” he replied airily, which made Jason laugh harder. *“Besides, this is for research,”* he added. *“I produced these macro units for the CBIMs and Coma as well. We’re going to give them extensive testing while the mission members are assimilating to the bionoids. We’ll be taking the role of Benga in the rehearsals, give them something real to look at and interact with.”*

“That’s a pretty good idea,” Jason said with a nod of approval. “I hadn’t thought of that.”

And true to word, a Benga-sized Cybi bionoid was carried into the room and set down beside Mesaiima, exactly like her normal one, just Benga sized. Its eyes fluttered into awareness almost immediately once it was set down, and it raised its hand and looked at it. “I have control, Rook,” Cybi said through it. “It seems to be fully operational. A very curious point of view,” she said, looking down at Rook and Jason’s inert body.

“I should have known you’d find a way to crash the party, Cybi,” Jason said, which made her laugh.

“It’s a good idea,” she replied easily, sliding a hand up her bare, flat belly, as if to see if it felt any differently to her. “And we can continue testing of these macro units while you’re on your way to Oasis and further refine the design.”

“I’m designing micro units as well, at one quarter scale,” Rook mentioned. *“So you would be about this tall, Jason,”* he added, leaning down and presenting his flat palm, facing down, at about his own knee.

“Now that might be pretty cool,” Jason chuckled. “I wonder what it’s like to be only one and a half shakra tall. It would like being a toddler again.”

“Some of us never were,” Rook told him.

“Micro-unit bionoids might be very useful on ships for repair operations,” Cybi mused as Cyra’s bionoid was brought out and set down. “They can get into places that a Faey or Terran can’t.”

“Makati show that being small can be an advantage on a ship,” Jason agreed. “You building them yet?”

“Still in design,” Cybi replied. “But I think we’ll have a production unit designed and ready in a few days.”

Cyra’s eyes fluttered, then her bionoid took a small step backwards. “I’m online,” she declared. “Very curious,” she added, holding up her hand and looking at it, then flexing her fingers. “I almost feel I’m in my usual bionoid, at least until I look down.”

“I know, at least until you start walking around,” Jason told her.

“Hmm,” she said, then she took a step forward. “You’re right, Jason, it *is* different,” she agreed as she slowly walked towards Rook and his body, then stepped carefully around them. “I feel much less stable. The equilibrium program is working much harder to keep me upright.”

“It must be the higher center of gravity,” Cybi supplied as Cylan’s bionoid was carried out and set down, followed seconds later by Cyvanne’s and Coma’s, brought out together. All three of them activated their bionoids almost in unison, then they started moving them tentatively.

“Well, since we’re all here, let’s make ourselves useful,” Jason declared as boxes were carried out on a flying platform. “I take it those are the clothes?”

“Each box has the name of the owner on it, with proper sizing,” he replied. Cybi held up the box with Jason’s name on it, then offered it to him. *“I’ll order the other bionoids to dress themselves. They have that much functionality.”*

“I’ll drop the merge once I get mine dressed,” Jason announced. “We need to get them on the transport.” Shevatt had sent them one of his larger cargo dropships, one with really big doors, and it had only taken Naval Engineering about two days to refit it, mainly installing chairs in it sized for the macro bionoids and putting in controls that Jason’s bionoid could use to fly the ship, turning the cockpit into one that would accommodate a bionoid. Jason’s bionoid would be doing the flying so they didn’t need a pilot, and he’d spent about five hours last night in a merge simulation to learn how to fly an Ogravian cargo shuttle with the altered controls. It had been years since he flew anything using his hands, and he had to admit, he’d been a little rusty. But the ship also had interface control, which was how Jason had flown it over to the factory to pick up the bionoids.

Once all the bionoids were dressed in identical jumpsuits—or pants and a halter for Mesaiima’s bionoid, since her wings made wearing a shirt impossible—Jason disengaged from the bionoid and had it follow the others as they were walked across the room, out the huge open doors to the outside, and towards the Ogravian cargo shuttle sitting on the concrete tarmac just outside. The leaders’ bionoids were made to sit in the chairs

while the other bionoids stood in the cabin, holding onto a rail hanging from the ceiling, and Jason had his bionoid sit in the pilot's seat. Jason, Rook, and the guards sat in temporary normal-sized chairs just behind the cockpit chair. Jason again merged to his bionoid, then he did some hands-on practice by starting up the shuttle and closing the doors. "Alright, we're on the way," he said as he pulled gently back on the altitude lever, causing the shuttle to rise up off the tarmac. "Cybi, or any of you, get Magran and the others to the Lake. I'll drop myself off there, get in a merge pod, and fly the shuttle up to Joint Base Alpha."

"They're already on the way," Cybi told him. "And they want to see the bionoids before we take them to the practice range."

"Then have them meet us on the landing pad in about half an hour," Jason replied, glancing back at her as he turned towards Karsa."

Rook and Cybi discussed the micro bionoid idea with him on the way to Karsa, explaining their vision of using them as surrogate units for engineers to get *inside* equipment to find problems and effect repairs. While the areas in a ship used by the crew were spacious on KMS vessels, the guts of the ship, where the lines and pipes and trunks ran, that was very cramped space, where virtually every cubic tikra of available space was used. The issue was the most severe in the frigates, where even the crew lived in tight, cramped conditions due to a lack of space inside the hull. The micro bionoid units would make getting into the crawlspaces much easier on the engineering crew to repair what their scout spiders and roving Monkey drones reported to them was broken.

The Monkey drones were probably what gave Rook the idea. They were small, shakra-high robotic drone units that very roughly looked like monkeys, built to get into the crawlspaces and void areas in places where they couldn't use camera pods and send back real-time video of what they could see. Monkey drones didn't do any work at all, they didn't have the programming to do anything more complex than changing a light bulb or flipping a switch, they were built solely to get to a problem and let the techs get a visual on it. They were nothing more than slightly more elaborate camera pods, built to climb instead of hover, since the gravometric engines in a camera pod were burned out in seconds if they were used in close proximity to the ship's engines while they were operating. They were based

on a Terran monkey's body to give them ability to climb up and down vertical shafts. A scout spider found the problem, a camera pod or Monkey drone was dispatched to get a visual on the problem and give the techs the ability to see without going in themselves, and that let them know exactly what they needed to take with them when they went in there to do the repair.

They were all waiting on the landing pad as Jason carefully brought the ship down, being extra-careful since he was so rusty flying using manual controls, and they climbed up into the shuttle once he opened the doors. Rook had the bionoids stand up, and the five of them all but gawked at their larger selves. Jason broke the merge with his bionoid and stood up. "So, what do you think?" he asked.

"Amazing!" Mesaiima breathed, flying up to look at her larger self's face. She reached out and touched the bionoid's cheek. "It's warm!"

"Rook installed full biorhythmics in these to make them more lifelike," Jason explained.

"Since these units aren't going to be potentially destroyed, I went ahead and made them using the same equipment I'd install on any bionoid," Rook confirmed.

"Who are the others?" Holikk asked.

"Those are Rook, the CBIMs, and Coma," Jason answered. "Rook built those to do further testing of bionoids this size, see if they're worth producing for other purposes. They're also going to help you with your assimilation training by providing you with Benga-sized people to interact with."

"We'll also be playing the role of the Benga negotiators when we do the practice runs of the initial meeting," Cyra added. "That way you're looking at someone face to face, and not just a hologram."

"That's a very good idea," Mesaiima nodded, flitting around her bionoid.

"I will say that standing at the feet of one of these tells me why the Benga would seem so intimidating," Magran noted seriously as he looked

up at his own bionoid. “I almost feel like a child standing at my father’s side.”

“Jayce. Baby. I want to keep this,” Dahnai said seriously as she looked up at hers. “When this is over, you swap out the biogenic unit with a moleculartronic unit and send it to me on Draconis.”

“It’s a bit more involved than that, your Majesty. The entire endoskeletal frame is laced with biogenic systems. I’m afraid they have to stay on Karis,” Rook warned. *“But if you want a Benga-sized bionoid, I can build you one that you can take off planet. It won’t be immediately, however. As you know, we haven’t begun the process of importing this technology to a moleculartronic platform.”*

“We’ll keep it here for you to use, Dahnai,” Jason chuckled. “We’re not destroying these bionoids when we’re done with them. Rook is going to use them to further test both building non-Faey bionoids and building macro-unit bionoids. These will be test units for further development. When the testing is done, I can have them put it on your island for you to play with whenever you feel like it.”

“I have a serious question for you, Jason,” Magran said. “Can you build a merge pod that doesn’t use biogenics?”

Jason looked at Cybi, and she nodded. “Easily,” she replied. “The merge pod isn’t proprietary biogenic technology, Magran. The merge pod contains systems that allows a driver to achieve a 100% merge, something that standard merges won’t allow due to the way the system is designed. We only use merge pods for processes where the loss of the merge could be potentially dangerous for those around the asset being driven by remote, like a mechloader. You could easily merge to your bionoid without a merge pod, but it isn’t at full strength and comes at the risk of losing the merge due to outside stimulation. That’s why you’ll be using merge pods. It will create a more conducive learning environment for you. After you gain sufficient skill, you can easily merge to the bionoid without one, as long as you’re in a comfortable position with few or no outside distractions.”

“So, the merge pod acts like hyperspace, allows the jack to completely shunt off our senses in favor of the feed from an outside source,” Dahnai realized.

“Exactly so, your Majesty,” Cynna told her. “Merge pods effectively trick your jack into thinking you’re in hyperspace, which allows you to achieve full merge with an outside asset.”

“Then I propose this, Jason. Build a bionoid for every ruler in the Confederation. Install a biogenic communication node with the ability to send and receive council crypto gravband in the interdictors that protect our capitol planets. Then, instead of us all traveling somewhere for a summit, we simply get in our merge pods at home and use the bionoids. Since the system to system transmission is biogenic commune, that makes it both real time *and* completely secure. We need only ensure that the comm link between the merge pod and the biogenic node is protected from interception. Since every member of the Confederation Council except Zaa is jacked, we could all attend. We’d have to figure something out for the Denmother. We wouldn’t use it for day to day meetings, but we could use it for summits.”

Jason blinked. That was an *amazing* idea! “Magran, you just became my new best friend,” he declared, which made Dahnai laugh. “We could *do that!*”

“It wouldn’t be very hard to do,” Rook agreed.

“I’ll get to work on it right now,” Cyra announced. “I can have an expansion node designed for the interdictors designed by tomorrow. We only need them for the interdictors at the capitol systems, so we only need about one hundred. One for each with a few spares for any new members.”

“Rook, you know what you need to do,” Jason said.

“We’ll need to arrange it with the rulers so I can get the proper measurements when they arrive for the summit,” he said. *“I’ll begin the design of the bionoids as soon as we’re done here. I have more than enough physiological data from the archives to build endoskeletal templates for each species.”*

“That would also help those rulers who have to use environmental systems to attend the summits,” Cyvanne added. “They’d be able to move around Terra, or here, freely. No E-suits.”

“We’d have to keep them here for now,” Jason said. “We could do a run of current biogenic bionoids and put them in the Hall of Peace, then build

another run of moleculartronic bionoids when we develop them and send those to Terra. That way we could have a summit in either venue, cause some summits *have* to be done here.”

“I don’t mind. The chance to design bionoid models for all Confederate rulers is quite appealing.”

“Well, now that you’ve decided to keep Rook busy for the next two months,” Jason said dryly. “Let’s go in. I’m going to use a merge pod to get them to Joint Base Alpha. I was flying using my bionoid.”

“You merged—oh yeah, she just said you don’t *need* one,” Dahnai said.

“I’m a Generation, so I can get away with it a bit more than you can,” he smiled. “I don’t have a jack, so I don’t have the limiter system your jack does. But I still prefer to use a merge pod for some things, where I can’t afford to lose the merge. Even I can get knocked out of a merge if I’m disturbed enough.”

“Actually, we can get started right now,” Mesaiima said. “Who says we have to wait for them to get there? I think us sitting in those seats on the flight over gives you a chance to explain things to us, and it lets us get a feel for it before we stand up and start moving around.”

“That’s a good point, Madam President,” Cybi agreed.

They were escorted by the facility chief, a hulking Kizzik named Chi’kraa, and brought into one of the merge rooms. Hundreds of merge pods were resting on the floor of the large chamber, some of them in use, and they followed the Kizzik along the aisle. *“We have a special room set aside for this operation, revered Hive-leader,”* she said, motioning to the far end of the merge center. *“I think Guardian Aya would prefer the revered Hive-leaders to be in a secure location.”*

Aya nodded wordlessly.

“Can you explain what we’re seeing, noble Chi’kraa?” Mesaiima asked.

“Of course, revered Hive-leader,” her interface answered. *“These pods are connected to that control hub,”* she began, pointing with a blade arm at a room hanging from the ceiling with windows on all sides. *“Within are coordinators that manage the merge system, pairing the proper operator to the piece of equipment. The operator can shift the driver to another asset,*

which allows a single mechloader to operate multiple mechloaders in different locations as needed. This room's primary purpose is to provide additional workers exactly where they are needed to assist the on-site personnel in their tasks, and they assist until they are no longer needed to get things back on schedule. This is a Stick pilot, here," she motioned at a pod they passed, where inside, visible through the open sides of the pod, was a Faey woman with honey colored hair, leaning back on a padded seat with her eyes closed. *"Currently, she is operating a Stick en route to Kosigi from Merdoi City."*

"She's flying it from here," Magran said.

"Yes, revered Hive-leader," she nodded, her compound eyes regarding Magran. *"As a matter of policy, however, manned personnel skimmers and transports are only flown by pilots in the ships. But those ships do have remote operation capability, in case the pilot becomes incapacitated. This is a mechloader, currently loading pallets at a factory in Jaxtra onto a freighter bound for Terra. This driver is operating a repair robot currently effecting repairs on one of our orbital defense platforms. This driver is using a construction robot that is building a new subway line in Teria City."*

"Intriguing," Mesaiima breathed. "And all done from here."

"Since this facility opened, overall production efficiency has increased by nearly 38%," she declared. *"The ability to activate remote units to assist on-site operators when we begin to get off schedule has greatly increased overall operational efficiency."*

"What I would give to have something like this in the Alliance," Ethikk mused.

"Why do you not simply build one?" Chi'kraa asked. *"Nothing in this facility depends on biogenic technology. Everything we have built here can be done by any member of the Confederation, using standard Confederation shared technology."*

"I think we may do exactly that, Chief Chi'kraa," he chuckled in reply. "I'm going to have a long talk with my science department when I get home. And I think we may be coming here to discuss this system with your logistics experts, Jason."

"They're welcome. Just get with Chirk and she'll arrange it."

They entered a smaller room holding about 20 merge pods, and Chi'kraa herself clattered over to the operator console. *"We are ready,"* she declared. *"Revered Hive-leaders, if you would enter a pod and then connect the datafiber to your left directly to the port on your interface. It does not matter which pod, I will be managing the connection from this station. The units you will be driving are already programmed into our system, and simply await your merge."*

Ethikk almost ran to the nearest pod and climbed into the open-sided unit, sat on the padded chair, then pulled the retracted fiber from the side of the seat and plugged it to his interface. Jason helped Mesaiima and Dahnai into pods, then he climbed into one himself. "Alright, now what?" Ethikk asked.

"Your interface should be reporting a query request from an external piece of equipment, revered Hive-leader. Attempt a merge directly with that unit."

"Got it. Alright, time to see if two days in the simulator was time well spent. Here goes," he said, then he went quiet.

"The revered Hive-leader's merge is successful. His unit is online," she declared. *"As you are ready, revered Hive-leaders."*

Jason didn't need the merge pod, he was just using it as a comfortable place to sit, so he accessed his bionoid over the biogenic network and merged back to it. He looked back to see Ethikk's bionoid looking at its hands, a look of almost awe on its face. "Amazing!" he said aloud. "It's like it's *me!*"

"Now do you see why we use the merge pods, Ethikk?" Jason asked as Cybi stepped over to his chair and leaned down, giving him a smile.

"How do you feel, High Staff?" she asked.

"I feel like this is my actual body!" he replied, putting his hands on his face tentatively. "But that does feel a little strange. My fur doesn't feel exactly the same."

"That's because it's a synthetic strand material that Rook used that has the closest consistency he could find to your own fur," Jason answered.

“That’s understandable. I don’t think a few hundred Beryans would much appreciate being shaved bald to provide enough fur to cover this thing,” he chuckled.

“Grab hold of the rails, ladies, Cylan,” Jason warned. “I’m going to lift off. JBA control, this is shuttle 469 B12 on primary beacon, requesting vector to enter restricted airspace.”

“Shuttle 469 B12, JBA control. Vector is being uploaded to your nav now. Stay within vector boundaries over restricted airspace due to heavy traffic.”

“Acknowledged,” he replied. “Alright, here we go,” he said, easing back on the altitude lever and picking the skids up off the tarmac.

Jason was a bit busy with flying to listen attentively as the others achieved merge with their bionoids and went through the inevitable gawking phase—he did himself the first time he merged to a Rocker—then they listened as Coma explained it to them. “The main thing you’ll need to understand is that units this tall have a very high center of gravity, so it is very easy to lose your balance,” she addressed them, standing right behind Jason’s chair and facing them. “The bionoid’s automated equilibrium system will do most of the work, but you’ll notice it as you walk. Also remember that these bionoids are *much* stronger than your normal bodies, compounded by the fact that they’re so big. Exercise caution when you touch, pick up, or take hold of most anything. One of the exercises you’ll undergo at the base is practicing picking up glass objects without breaking them.”

“I hope we’ll be practicing walking around regular-sized objects,” Holikk said.

“You will, High Chancellor,” Coma nodded. “We have a practice area already prepared filled with normal-sized objects and furniture. There’s another with furniture built for these units, so you can practice operating in an environment designed for them.”

“You do think of everything,” Mesaiima said.

“It’s what we’re designed for, Madam President,” Coma replied evenly.

Coma continued explaining things as Jason flew out over the suburbs northwest of Karsa, then he descended over Joint Base Alpha a few minutes later. His nav told him where to land, so it directed him to land beside the hangar holding their practice area. He touched down gently and shut down the shuttle, then he rotated the chair and stood up. Coma jumped a bit when he goosed her to get her to move, and she gave him a stern look as he stepped past her. "It got you to move, didn't it?" he said lightly.

"You *never* turn your back on Jason, Coma," Cybi said with a smile. "He's quite a scoundrel."

"Alright, revered leaders, go ahead and stand up," Cyra called. "Do so slowly and carefully."

"Woah-woooooahhh," Dahnai called, nearly toppling over as she stood up, reaching back and grabbing the armrest and steadying herself. "Yeah, this isn't as easy as you make it look. The simulator didn't really prepare me for this."

"Jason has practice merging to Gladiators, Dahnai, he's used to the size," Cybi said calmly.

"Oh yeah, this is definitely weird, but kinda fun," Ethikk said as he slid off the seat and onto his feet, his tail slashing behind him a few times as he found his balance.

Jason walked over to the hatch and opened it. "As soon as you're ready to try walking, friends, we're going through that door right there," he said, pointing at the open hangar door. "Cybi, tell Rook to stop goofing off and get his bionoid up."

"I'm here, Jason," he reported, stepping over from the back of the shuttle. "I had a few things to discuss with Chi'kraa before I could merge."

"So, how hard is it to unmerge?" Dahnai asked.

"As easy as it is to unmerge from anything," he replied. "There's no special process, Dahnai."

"Okay. Good to know," she said, taking a few tentative steps, the walking more confidently. "Walking's easier than standing," she laughed. "Guess it's because you're moving."

Two officers were standing outside, and there was a Gladiator walking up to them, which gave Jason a chance to get an idea of the comparison. The rigger brought it right up to them, and Jason found that he was taller than the Gladiator by a small margin. “Not often I can look eye to eye with a mecha,” Dahnai laughed as she reached him, putting a hand on his shoulder and looking over at the mecha.

“It’s weird on this side, too,” Symone’s voice came from the mecha’s external speaker.

“Symone?” Dahnai gasped. “What are you doing in there?”

“I’m a rigger Dahnai, duh,” she replied flippantly, and the armored doors in the mecha’s chest opened. Symone stepped out of the gel backing and onto the narrow platform in front of it and waved. “Hey sexy! Wow, do you ever have a huge rack!”

Dahnai laughed, leaning down a little and looking at her. “What are you doing over here?”

“Just a helping hand,” she replied. “If you fall over or junk like that. By the way, Jayce, lover, I want one of those.”

“You’re paying for it,” he retorted, which made Dahnai laugh.

“He’s always so mean to me,” she sniffed, then she stepped back into the cockpit and locked in, and the doors closed. *“Alright, you guys ready to go?”* she asked. *“Oh wait, lemme get the rest of my squad over here. Move it, ladies!”* she called, and Jason saw five more Gladiators moving their way.

They moved into the practice area, which was two large rooms. One held Benga-sized furniture, including a mock-up negotiation table, and lots of objects to pick up, hold, and manipulate. The other was filled with normal sized furniture and about ten Rockers to stand around and be obstacles. Symone and her riggers moved into the area with them and stood in a group near the doors. “Alright, guys, here we are,” Jason said. “Cybi most likely has a schedule for this.”

“Nothing rigid, Jason. We’ll just spend some time practicing in here, learning how to pick things up, use the furniture and whatnot, then we’ll practice in the other room so we don’t kick people or knock over chairs.”

“Sounds easy enough,” Dahnai said, reaching back and pushing her hair over her shoulder. Rook had even managed to properly capture the rich, exotic color of Dahnai’s hair with the bionoid, with individual gold and copper strands of hair that combined to form that bronze color.

They practiced for nearly three hours, and Jason saw that the others quickly got the hang of it. They learned how to walk smoothly, got the hang of sitting in chairs and standing back up without wobbling, but when it came to picking things up, they found out quickly that it wasn’t quite as easy. They went through nearly an entire cargo unit of glass objects, and they had to pause to sweep up all the broken glass four times, as they practiced being delicate...and failed often. Jason didn’t really practice with them, he spent most of the time standing to the side chatting with Symone, Rook, and the girls in the Gladiators, while the CBIMs and Coma worked with the others to help them get used to the experience. They got involved when Cybi decided to play a simple game of volleyball to practice both balance and motor control, stringing up a net and producing a Benga-sized volleyball in the open area between the two practice areas. They looked a bit silly at first, but Cybi’s idea of turning it into a game was a good idea.

“Well, I just had one question answered,” Ethikk laughed as he stepped to the side, away from the net. “I *can* feel that I need to use the restroom.”

“The merge doesn’t block *everything*, Ethikk,” Jason chuckled. “Feel free to go take care of it, we’ll just play without you.”

“I wasn’t much help anyway,” he replied lightly, stepping over and sitting down in a chair. “Be back in a few minutes.” Then the bionoid’s eyes and expression went blank.

“I think this is a good time for a short break,” Cybi decided. “No doubt you could all use a brief respite, and maybe some refreshment.”

“I am a bit thirsty,” Holikk admitted.

“Just be ready for a quick medical check,” Cyra warned. “Songa’s in the merge room, and she wants to make sure everyone is managing the merge without any issues.”

“Safety first,” Dahnai said.

Jason stayed in the bionoid as the others took a break, playing a bit with the volleyball, tossing it around and spinning it on his finger as Symone came over. *“So, baby, did Rook make that thing fully functional?”*

“Get your brain out from between your legs, silly,” he chided, which made her laugh. “How are we looking from the outside?”

“Looking pretty good. I guess those days using the simulator made a difference,” she replied. *“They started out a bit clumsy, but they’re getting the hang of it real quick. You make them look a bit like kids, though.”*

“All those hours I logged in a Gladiator is why. I’m sorta used to *this*,” he answered, motioning at himself. “This thing isn’t too much different from driving a rig, just with eyes instead of cameras.”

“So, I’d get the hang of it quick?”

“Probably in just a couple of hours,” he nodded. “You’re used to standing, walking, and interacting with stuff at this size. That’s what they’re learning.”

“So, we’re back to it, baby. I want one.”

“Why? What possible value would having a macro bionoid have, love?”

“Because it’s cool,” she informed him.

“Faey,” he sighed, which made her laugh.

“Tell you what, Symone. I’ll build you one to help us test out the macro units,” Rook offered. *“But that means you spend the next few days with us doing the testing on them.”*

“We’re all more or less on standby ‘til after the summit, so sure. It’ll give me something fun to do,” she agreed. *“When can you have it done?”*

“Given I already have ten Faey endoskeleton templates built, maybe about sixteen hours,” he answered. *“I’ll just pull your physical and biometric data off the database. I just need to upload your profile into the factory and it can get started on it.”*

“Awesome! Do I get to keep the bionoid when we’re done?”

“You can leave it on Dahnai’s island with hers,” Jason told her. “At least until we figure out what to do with it.”

“Cool, I can play with Dahnai, find out if these bionoids are complete copies,” she said in a lilting tone.

“You are so hopeless,” he accused.

“It’s why you love me,” she replied shamelessly.

“Symone is right about the others,” Cylan noted, stepping over to stand beside them. “I think the rulers will be ready by tomorrow. The simulator time helped a great deal, they seem to have few or no issues with depth perception and judging distances. They just needed time to deal with the change in equilibrium, which the simulators can’t easily duplicate.”

“I’d agree with that, Cy,” Jason nodded. “Magran particularly seems to have a knack for it.”

“I think they’ll be disappointed to finish so quickly,” Cyra noted lightly. “They were having fun.”

“It’s the novelty of it,” Jason chuckled.

When everyone came back, they decided to give over on volleyball and went into the “small room,” where they practiced moving around in a room filled with normal-sized furniture and Rockers, who were programmed to walk around randomly within a defined area, and *not* to stop if one of the macro bionoids moved into their path. If they walked up to a standing bionoid, they’d avoid it, but if the bionoid moved into its path, it would walk right into its leg. And as Jason watched, he had to agree with Cylan. The simulators they’d been using the last couple of days had taught them a great deal about the differences in inhabiting a body three times larger than their normal one, and they just needed practice in the real thing so they could get the hang of the balance issue. Jason had to chuckle when Dahnai picked up one of the Rockers, which didn’t quite know what to do since it wasn’t programmed to deal with that eventuality, but Cybi came to the rescue by overriding its automation and taking control of it before it did something like try to punch Dahnai in the face as she held it close to her head. “This is a Roker,” she realized. “I thought they were Faey in armor at first.”

“They are,” Jason nodded. “We built them to be indistinguishable from people in Crusader armor, so the enemy wouldn’t know they’re bionoids.”

“These are bionoids as well?” Mesaiima asked, pointing at another Rocker.

“They’re the original bionoids,” Jason answered, patting his chest. “*These* bionoids are based on *those* bionoids.”

“Well, they’re certainly convincing,” Holikk chuckled, looking down at one.

“If they weren’t, they wouldn’t be very good at what they were designed to do, Holikk,” Jason chuckled. “Ground combat is fifty percent brute force, fifty percent tactics, and the bionoids were built to be a tactical surprise on a battlefield.”

“You wouldn’t know it’s a robot until it did something that no living thing could do, like punch through the armor of a hover tank,” Dahnai reasoned.

“Exactly, love,” Jason nodded. “It was our work on the Rockers that gave Rook the idea to start the bionoid project.”

“*And advanced it,*” he agreed. “*The technology we developed to build the Rockers is the basis of the technology behind the bionoids.*”

“Well, this proves that you have the coolest toys in the galaxy, Jason,” Ethikk said lightly, which made Jason laugh.

“That’s all some of it is, just big, expensive toys,” he agreed. “These macro bionoids will be nothing but toys when Rook finishes his research. That’s why I’m giving Dahnai her bionoid and letting her put it over on her island. It’s either that or scrap it, and I’d rather not do that. They might be useful later on, who knows.”

“It does make me wonder about one thing, Jayce,” Dahnai said. “These are ground combat units. What if one gets captured?”

“Oh, we have a system in them for that,” Cybi told her easily. “The enemy won’t be getting their hands on the chips in them.”

“Nope,” Jason chuckled. “Even if the unit’s separated from its power supply, the chip will self-destruct. And just about everything else in them is standard Confederate technology. They were built with the explicit

understanding that we *would* lose them in ways that we wouldn't be able to recover them, so we took steps."

"Well, that was forward thinking," Dahnai said.

They practiced for about another three hours, and then they called it a day. They parked the bionoids in chairs and then ended the merge, and Jason climbed out of the merge pod and stretched a little bit, getting used to being *him* again. After a long time in a merge, a person could sort of settle into it, get more and more comfortable in it, to where they felt a little weird when they ended it. Jason took them all to eat at his favorite restaurant in Karsa, which was *not* a five-star affair, then Dahnai took them all back to her summer palace for the evening. Jason would usually be over there, but he had too much other work to do to spend it sitting around a pool and having Dahnai flirt with him. He settled in at the office after a quick bite to eat and worked through the reports in his inbox, including a few important analysis reports from Miaari's office about the data they'd gathered on the Syndicate from the explorers in Andromeda. They'd mapped out a good piece of territory over there, including identifying ideal hidden bases for the KMS if and when they invaded Andromeda. Syndicate sensor tech was effectively Consortium tech, having stolen it from them, but it wasn't as good because they hadn't done a very good job reverse engineering the equipment they stole. The scouts over there had identified 23 separate star systems that would be ideal for use as a base of operations, because they were in sensor "dead zones" in the Syndicate sensor grid. Each of them was deep in one of the uninhabited or sparsely inhabited tracts of Andromeda, and the star system had qualities that would make it a great place to hide ships or a deep space station.

Speaking of Andromeda, Jason caught up on the installation progress for the translight drive in the *Tianne*. They'd gutted most of engineering, the first step of the process, and tomorrow they'd begin the installation procedure for the drive section. Myleena and Braxa had an *army* helping them, having yanked almost every available pair of hands from Naval Engineering and quite a few from KMS ship building docks. The reports indicated that the installation was on schedule and would be complete in 12 days. The next report in the stack was about the new command ship that had been refitted with a drive, one of the three new ones built. They didn't want a new captain to be on the command ship with the new drive, so Juma had

decided to transfer Haema and her crew from the *Iyaneri* to the new ship, even transfer the name to the new vessel, and rename the original *Iyaneri* when its new captain took command, Lelai Karinne out of the command staff. It made the most sense to put the most experienced command ship captain in the new ship, with its new engine. With Palla commanding the *Tianne*, that made Haema the most senior command ship captain. So, it was her honor to take over the new *Iyaneri*. Lelai had already decided to name the old ship the *Paladin*—and not because of the IBL team, because Lelai had had a thing for the Holy Militant Order of the Paladins from Faey history, the only female “clergy” in the church of Trelle—and she had taken official command of the ship just an hour ago.

As usual, it was something of a shakeup of the entire Karinne Navy when Juma had to crew *three* new command ships, but she knew they were coming and had plenty of time to get everything organized. Nearly every ship in the KMS lost crew to the new command ships, but no ship lost more than three crewmen. That minimized the loss of talent across the Navy while putting qualified people on the command ship.

It wasn't without some controversy. In something of a shocking move to both the Navy and to Jason, Juma had promoted *Jeya* to command the *Pegasus*. She went straight from a battleship to a command ship, and that made her the youngest Admiral in the KMS, the youngest by nearly 20 years—she had to be a Flag Admiral *minimum* to command a command ship, the first of the four ranks of Admiral in KMS command hierarchy. Flag Admiral, Fleet Admiral, Staff Admiral, and Command Admiral. Juma held a rank above them, though she was technically a Command Admiral. Juma's official title was Admiral of the Navy, and while she too had four diamonds like a Command Admiral, hers were arranged in a diamond formation on her uniform where a Command Admiral's diamonds were in a line. While Jason did truly admire Jeya's ability and her leadership qualities, he wasn't entirely sure putting her on a command ship at this stage of her career was the wisest thing to do. But Juma was supremely confident in both Jeya's skills and her own decision, and Jason wasn't about to gainsay her. The Navy was Juma's command, and if she wanted to promote Jeya to a command ship, that was her right. Jason just hoped that it didn't damage Jeya's career if it was too much for her. Oh, he had no doubt that Jeya would eventually end up on a command ship, he just wasn't

entirely sure she was ready to do it *now*. Maybe in a couple of years, after Jeya had more experience on her battleship, which was the lowest echelon of official flag-level ships in the KMS and CCM. But Juma said she was ready now, and that was that.

It sure was going to be a bit awkward for her, since she'd be considerably younger than her XO.

And again, Jeya had declined to change the ship's conditional name. It had been designated *Pegasus* in shipbuilding, using the original English (actually Greek) word and spelled using the Faey alphabet, and she felt that was a fine name and would keep it. Jason could agree with that too, *Pegasus* was a fine name for a ship.

Moving a little closer to home, Jason caught up on the progress of the Parri. When the *shaman* told him that there would be some *several dozen* villages, Jason hadn't considered that her concept of hard numbers might be a *tad* different than his. Jason had expected maybe about 10,000 Parri to come from Imbria, but the actual number was more like 500,000. They had to send the six freighters back to Imbria six times to get them all over here. They dropped them off close to the Parri village on Karga, on the coasts of the other four continents, and a group of about 40 Parri on Kosiningi, and they made temporary camp where they were set down to organize themselves and prepare for their journey. They were still there, four large camps on Kirga, Virga, Hirga, and Sarga of about 100,000 each, with a similar large temporary encampment just outside the Parri village up on northwest Karga. Those Parri would have the easiest time of it, since 97% of Karga was terraformed. They'd be journeying across grassy plains and through forests, where the Parri on the other continents would be doing so across barren wastelands, carrying several months' worth of rations along with them. There was water on the other continents—and a ton of erosion from rain and moving water—but virtually no food. Jason had already worked it out with the *shaman* to supply the villages with food until they got their crops in, and they were carrying both seeds for crops and fertilizer to turn barren soil into fertile soil capable of supporting plants. No new group of Parri had left the encampments yet, and probably wouldn't for a couple of days while they got themselves organized and prepared for their arduous journey...but they couldn't wait very long. They had limited food supplies on the other four continents, so every day they waited to start out at

the landing point was food drained from reserves that had to last them several weeks.

Jason had honored his promise to the *shaman*. Each leader of a new village was carrying an emergency beacon, and the Karinnes would only assist if the leader activated the beacon or if it was abundantly clear that the Parri group was in mortal peril. But, when the groups found their places and established their villages, the Karinnes would be assisting them with food to hold them over until they were self-sufficient.

He also caught up on the latest reports from Project G, which Tom hand-delivered after finishing up for the day. They'd already made some real progress, having decided that a compressed carapace was a viable material to use for the armor material, so now they were working to discover a composite interphased frequency that would infuse it to do the job. It didn't really reveal much to RDX outside of the CMS system, since compressed Neutronium was simply raw Neutronium that underwent a secondary process to compress its molecular structure into a super-dense material. A carapace hull was 60% thinner than a standard Neutronium hull but had the same mass, and it was that super-dense molecular structure that made it so damn tough. Since the Ruu already knew how to make Neutronium, they weren't revealing anything new to RDX with the carapace. But they did reveal something new to her with the CMS system. She was the first non-Karinne or Kimdori to see the specs for the CMS, but Jason wasn't too worried about it. RDX had signed a non-disclosure agreement, and Miaari had vetted her and found her trustworthy. She wouldn't reveal the secrets of the CMS, because she had honor and integrity.

And the CMS was what was making their project possible. The way the system injected an energy pattern into solid matter was unique and far more advanced than even Jason realized when he invented it, and she was convinced that they could develop an interphased waveform that would turn a carapace into something that was nigh invulnerable to anything that didn't ignore molecular physics. Jason felt that she was being a little overenthusiastic, but if they could increase the carapace strength by 50%, that alone would be enough to let the system take a direct hit from a particle beam and not get penetrated. And a particle beam was the most powerful weapon the Karinnes knew of that obeyed molecular physics.

But regardless of RDX's optimism, the program was off to a good start.

He finished up his day reading up on the latest work from Project F, which was testing of the drives. They'd learned quite a bit in their trials and experiments, the biggest of which being that the drives behaved much differently for large ships than they did for small ones. The larger the ship, the less accurate its jump was in mode three, for example. The larger ships also had to apply more power to run at speed, which only made sense, so they had a much slower acceleration and deceleration curve compared to the smaller ones. Sure, that was just plain old common sense, but in this kind of revolutionary tech, *nothing* could be taken for granted. Even the most basic of basic concepts had to be tested and proven or disproven. The biggest impact of this was that the larger the ship was, the more time it needed for the jump engines to "spool up" to jump. It would take the *Tianne* nearly 63 seconds to jump once the engines were activated, where a frigate could do it in just 3.8 seconds after the engines were activated. Running at FTL speed also required "charge time," with the *Tianne* needing about 27 seconds to bring up the FTL drive before it could activate.

But that was a vast improvement from the originals. Jason remembered that lone battle they had with the Hrathrari, where it took their engines some 45 seconds to achieve FTL after they were activated.

The answer to that was to keep the FTL drive active at all times, just not *used*. That was more than possible, and the ships had the power plants to do it, where Hrathrari ships didn't. The Hrathrari had to deactivate their FTL drives to divert that power to other systems for battle, where KMS ships had the power output to keep the FTL drives on active standby while other systems were in use. That would let the ship move in and out of FTL mode one more or less at will but would still require prep time before the ship could jump in mode three. They'd also done a lot of work on the "shockwave effect" on hyperspace in mode three, and had worked out that to jump ships in a formation, they had to slow *way* down, else the shockwave effect of the lead ship in the formation would knock the other ships out of hyperspace. To bring the effect down to where the jump engines could tolerate the flux, Myleena had worked out a maximum mode three jump speed of 250 light years per second. That was half of the maximum safe speed, but it still meant that a squadron of ships could make the jump to the edge of Andromeda in 168 minutes...or about two and a

half hours. Still, that was an *order of magnitude* faster than anything anyone else could manage, and they could even bypass that by sending the ships one at a time and get them there in 84 minutes, so long as they jumped out 207 seconds apart. If they jumped any sooner, the residual hyperspace flux would knock them out of hyperspace. So, for small groups, it was faster to send them through one at a time, but for a large squadron or a fleet, it was overall faster and more efficient to jump them as a formation at the slower speed. They'd learned that ships jumping in formation created a cumulative shockwave effect, and that would limit the number of ships jumping in a formation due to a possible detrimental effect on hyperspace itself. If the shockwave got too strong, their models suggested, it would create a lingering distortion in hyperspace that would make travel through it very difficult.

And tomorrow, Myleena was sending the *Legion* and the drive-installed frigate *Javelin* all the way to Andromeda, to deliver a shipment of equipment, supplies, and additional Kimdori to the exploration mission, and do so towing two additional CMS-equipped scout ships. The ships would test the new formation procedures, which meant they'd go at half speed, and also for simple protection and defense. Given Andromeda was hostile territory, no drive-enabled ship was jumping in alone. It would be their first foray into Andromeda, and the ship would be jumping *directly* into the galaxy in mode three, using the newest advances in navigation computers. It was a somewhat risky test, but Myleena was convinced that the new nav computer and new algorithms could do it. They were aiming at a point of relatively empty space only 137 light years from where the Kimdori had their secret base, and every model and simulation they ran showed that so long as they aimed at the exact center of that little void, the ship would safely jump in so long as it stayed within the margin of error.

That margin of error was much smaller now, thanks to some of their other tests. They'd learned that a ship could *change speeds* in mode three, something hyperspace jump engines couldn't do, allowing a ship to slow down as it approached the galaxy so the nav computer could more accurately drop them back into normal space at the desired location. For the last two days, the drive-equipped ships hadn't been jumping back home at a tangent and then coming in under regular jump engines, they'd been jumping directly into the galaxy, slowing down as they approached the

destination about 34 light years from Karis, and then dropped back into normal space and cruised back home in mode one. But, doing that at home meant that the nav computers had all the navigation beacons around the sector to aid them in locating themselves, where the attempt to jump into Andromeda would be very different. The ships would have only their nav computers and their sensor data to determine their arrival point and their current location.

That was the new standard operating procedure for the drive-equipped ships. They jumped in and out from inside the galaxy using mode three, and for inbound jumps, they slowed to the absolute minimum speed they could go and stay in mode three, which was about 12 light years per second, during the final approach to their destination. They never jumped in close to the destination planet or station, just to the largest empty area close to it and then cruised in using either mode one or standard jump engines.

They'd tried to drop from mode three to mode two directly in hyperspace, but that...didn't turn out well. They were still repairing the translight drive section in the *Trailblazer* after that experiment, as well as some serious structural damage to the hull from the ship being thrown out of hyperspace and a few injuries among the crew, despite the fact they were in armor. Had they not been in armor, those injuries would have been fatalities. Trying to disengage the translight drive while in hyperspace was a major *no*, so they'd developed this system of slowing down on approach to its destination, almost like an old fashioned jet or prop plane slowing down in preparation for landing. And it was effective. At that slower speed, the nav computer had time to accurately calculate, and that let the ship drop into normal space either right at or very, very close to their planned arrival point.

All in all, Jason was *mightily* pleased with the translight drives, and not just for the ability to cross over to other galaxies. The FTL section of the drive gave them many more options, the least of which was drastically cutting down the time it took to get out to jump distance. He was almost tempted to have Myleena design a stand-alone translight drive for the Confederation, but he didn't want to hand over an easy way for them to bypass the interdictors, at least quite yet. There were some members of the Confederation he simply didn't trust, like the Prakarikai, and the interdictors gave Jason some real power and control over the more

aggressive, violent, or deceptive members. The interdictors kept everyone nice and peaceful because it put potential targets of attack out of reach.

But he couldn't keep a lid on it, either. Lorna was going to find out about the drives in about ten minutes, when he talked to her, and that was going to give them ideas. The admirals would talk to the rulers, the rulers would then order their scientists to check to see if there was any data on translight technology on the Academy mainframe, and there they would find quite a bit of information about Hrathrari translight drives, the most advanced—non-Karinne advanced anyway—translight drives in the galaxy. Hrathin would make a lot of money selling consultation services for others that wanted to develop drives of their own. Jason figured that in about three to five years, Confederation members were going to roll out ships with translight drives installed on their ships, and that was going to change the balance of power in the galaxy because it was going to render interdictors useless.

Unless the Karinnes did something about it. Kimdori scientists had a theory that their light scramblers could disrupt a translight drive, and that was Myleena's next project when she finished Project F, to see if they could develop an "interdictor" against translight drives. If anyone could do it, it was Myleena, since she invented the drives in the first place. She knew how they worked better than anyone in the universe, so if there was anyone that would know how to stop it, it was Myleena Karinne.

He was sure that in a thousand years, barely anyone would know his name, but *everyone* would know hers. She was the inventor of the single-most important technology the universe had ever known, and she *deserved* that recognition.

Jason worked through a few more reports, and then right on time, a hologram of Lorna appeared in front of his desk. She was in her office in the Spires, which was on the 65th floor and gave her quite a beautiful view of the Chesapeake Bay. "Jason? Where's Myri?" she asked.

"I'm the one giving the briefing, Lorna, because I'm the one that took the *Tianne* off the board," he answered. "Or more to the point, it was by my order."

“Ah, so you want to explain what you’ve got up your sleeve now?” she asked.

“We’re taking advantage of the engine trouble to install some new tech on the ship,” he told her. “They have the engines fixed already, but it’s gonna be another eight or nine days before it’s ready.”

“A new weapon?”

“Actually, a second engine,” he answered. “Remember the Hrathrari transligh drive tech?”

“Sure—wait, you’re installing a *translight drive* on the *Tianne*?”

“Yup,” he replied. “Myleena converted Hrathrari tech to something we can use, and we’re installing it right now. It’ll give the *Tianne* the ability to move at FTL speeds in normal space *and* give it the ability to jump hyperspace.”

“Why?” she asked simply. “What worth is an FTL engine on a modern ship?”

“Two reasons,” he replied. “One, it gives the ship the ability to reach jump distance in a matter of seconds instead of half an hour. It also means the ship can use its FTL drive to move short distances, like from one star to another, without having to use its jump engines. You’ve been on the ship, Lorna, you know how much of a process it is for it to jump hyperspace on the *Tianne*. It will be much easier on the crew and on the ship to just use the FTL drive if it’s only going a few light years. Two, Palla demanded it as a defensive measure to protect the *Tianne* when the GRAF cannon is fully charged. The ship can use the FTL drive when the cannon’s fully charged, and Palla intends to use it to get the ship out of potential danger if an enemy closes in on it while the cannon’s in a firing sequence. She said just a split second’s use of the drive will move the ships thousands of kathra, and that will keep it safe until it fires. Since the GRAF has unlimited range, it means they only have to adjust their aim.”

Lorna was about to say something, then she put her hand to her sharp chin and tapped a finger against her cheek. “Now *that* sounds very useful,” she said. “How fast is this drive?”

“That’s not something I’m discussing over galactic crypto, Lorna,” he replied bluntly. “The ship will be back on the board before the summit, so you can stop sending Myri those ugly messages.”

She laughed. “I want to see some information on this drive, Jason, so I know what I’m working with,” she said.

“We can’t show you everything, but we can give you some general data so you know what it does. But you won’t get it until you’re here on Karis.”

“Then I’ll see it in a few hours, the command staff is about to come over,” she told him. “I take it you intend to install these on all KMS ships?”

He nodded. “Eventually. This tech is so new we haven’t even started producing the drive units yet, and we won’t be refitting the fleet until after we drive the Syndicate back to Andromeda, so don’t worry about us pulling all our ships off the board. They’ll save my ships a lot of wear and tear on their jump engines by not having to use them for very short jumps.”

“They would let ships ignore an interdictor,” she mused, tapping her cheek again. “So I think both of us would prefer if you keep them a secret. Don’t release this tech to the Confederation, nephew.”

He gave her a slight smile. “I’m glad we’re on the same page, Lorna.”

“I like peace, Jason,” she said simply.

“And that’s why you’re my favorite aunt, Lorna,” he replied, which made her chuckle. “When is the command staff getting here?”

“We’re scheduled to leave in three hours, settle in in our hotel rooms for the night, then we’ll get to work tomorrow,” she replied. “We have two main meetings tomorrow. The first is up in Kosigi, getting a final tally of available CCM assets, then we have a meeting with Myri and Sioa to work out the specifics of Karinne Army and Marine units backing up the Imperial Marines to provide protection against Benga mindstrikers. We’ll be here until after the summit, so we’ll be working out of the CCM attaché office in the Hall of Peace.”

“Sounds good. You *will* be over tomorrow evening for dinner,” he ordered.

She laughed. “Since when do I pass up the chance to spoil my grand nieces and nephews, Jason?” she told him.

“They’ll be overjoyed to see you,” he assured her. All his kids *adored* Lorna. “And that’s the extent of the briefing, Lorna. If you don’t mind, I have some stuff to do before I can go home.”

“Paperwork waits for no woman, Jason,” she chuckled. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow,” he nodded, and her hologram winked out.

He finished up his paperwork around 1700, which was early afternoon, and decided to head over to the Paladin offices to pick up Jyslin. He found them all over at the practice facility, watching the starters scrimmage against each other. The focus of the practice was offense, so the defense was giving the offense the chance to practice a new play and giving them some major opposition. Their team was more defensively oriented, smothering opponents with crushing defense and pressing on the counterattack. Frinia was standing beside Jyslin in a light summer robe while Jyslin was wearing some tight shorts and a *Paladins* tank top that showed off some cleavage, as well as a baseball cap she was wearing backwards. *Hey love, hey Frinia, what’s going on?* Jason asked as he approached.

Hi baby, Jyslin smiled warmly, putting her arm out and over his shoulders when he reached them. *Watching the girls.*

I can see that, he smiled, then kissed her.

They’re working on a new counterattack play, Frinia elaborated as the head coach ripped a savage sending across the pitch, lambasting the midfielders for being out of position. They were using practice squad midfielders on the defensive unit while the starters were playing on the offensive unit. In batchi, the midfielders were the ones that set up counterattacks, quickly getting the ball out to the strikers who would then try to score before the opposing defense fully set, much like in basketball or soccer. Counterattacks were “set pieces” to use a soccer term, designed plays, and they were called by the center midfielder, Emala Kivalle. The center midfielder was the captain of the team, calling offensive plays, while one of the center defenders called defensive plays and was called the vice-

captain. *The play is designed to take advantage of our outside strikers' speed. Those are usually the fastest girls on the team, and both of ours are blazing fast even for outside strikers,* she sent, pride vibrating through her thought.

Well, they have six days to get it down, Jason mused. *Should be more than enough time for these girls. They're awesome.*

That earned him a few appreciative glances from the players closest to him. Jason was a very rare visitor to the team, it was Jyslin's exclusive playground, so the players didn't see him very often.

That they are, baby, Jyslin agreed.

You about ready to head home? he asked.

In about half an hour. I think you can survive until then, she winked.

They watched the team practice the entire time, which made him wonder why Jyslin needed to stay, but she did eventually wrap it up and join him on the frigate. Jyslin had to put on her armor for the one-minute trip home, and was out of it within ten minutes of getting off the frigate. She was allowed to go without it at the office and at the practice facility due to the security present at both. Jason joined her in the nursery as she checked in on the twins and ended up nursing both of them while Jason played with the girls, all done under Amber's watchful eye, telling her all about his day working with the Benga-sized bionoids and the short talk with Lorna.

I'll be happy to see her, Jyslin sent eagerly. *She hasn't seen the kids for nearly a month!*

Jason, Empress Dahnai just asked if Sirri can come over, Aya called.

That's a silly question, of course she can, Jason snorted mentally. *I don't blame her, I bet it's majorly boring for her over there with the rulers staying at the palace. Seido, can you make up the guest room for Sirri?*

I'll take care of it, Ayama called. *We are back on duty, Jason, stop foisting everything on poor Seido.*

I just want it done right, that's all, he replied flippantly, which made Jyslin burst out laughing.

Listen to this, husband, Ayama sent with a barb in her thought. Someone's getting awfully brave.

We take leave, and come back to a spoiled child, Surin added teasingly.

Just remember one thing, you two. You're replaceable now, Jason warned, which made Jyslin laugh harder. *I'll just make Seido get married, and boom, we don't need you anymore.*

You will not, Seido retorted.

Jenn's looking for some way to get away from Meya, she could marry him, Jyslin sent with a big grin that made Jason laugh. She sent that strong enough for Meya to hear her.

What is this? Meya sent back forcefully. *Jenn, are you spreading rumors again?*

Not me, he replied indignantly. *When I want to break up with you, woman, I'll tell you to your face.*

"And just look what you started," Jason accused aloud, which made Jyslin grin back at him impudently.

"You started it," she shot back.

And that started about a good hour of constant good-natured insults, sniping, and trolling rolling across the strip and the surrounding neighborhood, as their neighbors, who were all mostly Generations and upper government officials and were close friends with the strip inhabitants, couldn't resist joining in. Given they were such a tiny minority, the Generations were a very tight-knit group. It kept going until Sirri arrived, then Aya more or less squelched it by announcing that the Crown Princess was in residence on the strip. She joined them in the nursery just as Jyslin finished a diaper change for Julia, already dressed for the strip...as in wearing nothing but a pair of skimpy bikini bottoms. Sirri had just started puberty, so her breasts had *just* started to develop, and she was already proud of the fact that her chest had gone from childhood flatness to pubescent bee stings. Jyslin let Sirri hold Julia and put her back in her crib, and Jason had to admit, she did a very good job. Then again, she got practice holding her baby brother Kaen.

“Like this, Aunt Jyslin?” she asked, spreading a small blanket over Julia who yawned widely and closed her eyes.

“Perfect, Sirri,” she replied with a smile, patting the Crown Princess on the shoulder. “Rann and Shya are over at Sora’s house.”

“I know, I’m about to go over there,” she nodded. “We’re gonna try surfing. The waves are really high.”

“Just be careful,” Jyslin warned. “The reef off the beach is really starting to build up, so try not to surf over top of it.”

“Ooo, the reef’s gotten big?”

“Pretty big,” Jason nodded. “Whatever the terraforming authority is doing to urge the coral to grow, it’s really working. It’s grown nearly sixty square shakra in the last month. It extends halfway across the strip now, most of it’s down near Temika’s house. So stay over on this side of the strip if you surf.”

“Awesome! I wanna go snorkeling!” she declared, then she rushed out of the room.

Jason picked up a slightly unwilling Amber and carried her out of the room with him as they left the twins to a nap, then adroitly avoided getting smacked by Ayama as he came into the kitchen. She struggled a bit when he put an arm around her and kissed her noisily on the cheek. *Don’t think this is saving you, Jason*, she warned.

That’s a cute kid you have, Ayama. It’d be a shame if anything happened to her.

She gave him a shocked look, then smacked him when he grinned at her. *You are despicable!* she accused.

I’m a politician. Tell me something else that’s true, he replied lightly.

Go outside! she commanded, pointing towards the deck door imperiously.

He did just that, hanging out with Tim and Symone while they all sat at the table on the deck between their houses. Symone had Terry in a hovercrib by the table, covered up with a blanket, and Lyra was playing in the sand almost in a line with the steps, where she was easily within

eyesight of her parents. Like many children, Lyra's hair, that unique and exotic light aqua color, was freshly cut, which made it a bit wild and unkempt. Lyra's hair had a multitude of cowlicks in it, which made it very tousled and nearly unmanageable when it was very short, yet Symone kept it that way. It made Lyra look like a complete tomboy...but that wasn't much off her personality as it was. Lyra was very active, very physical, which was how Faey girls were supposed to act, be aggressive and athletic like Terran boys, while they were expected to look like little girls, be pretty and have nice hair. The others on the strip gave them their private time, not joining them or bothering them, letting the *amu* enjoy their own company for a little while. It wasn't until after dinner that they broke up, Tim doing some work he brought home while Symone and Jyslin watched vid over at Symone's house. Jason ended up babysitting the girls, but he did so with a little help, in the form of Cybi in her bionoid. She arrived wearing a brand-new white bikini, which she took off in typical Faey fashion to play in the sand with the toddlers. It took a little doing to convince them that Cybi was who she said she was, since they never saw her as anything but a hologram, and even Cybi had to struggle a bit to explain to them why she was there in person *now* when she'd never done it before. It was hard for toddlers to understand the concept of a bionoid. But, Cybi seemed to earnestly enjoy being able to play in the sand with the girls like anyone else on Karis.

And she surprised Jason a little bit by using the biogenic network to lift up a distant bucket and bring it over, the CBIM's version of telekinesis. Jason gave a bit of a start when he saw that, but Cybi just smiled at him. "Why are you surprised?" she challenged. "I could do that as a hologram before, what changes with the bionoid?"

He gave her a look, then laughed ruefully. "I guess nothing," he admitted. "So, enjoying being a babysitter?"

"More than you can imagine," she replied with a smile, reaching over and putting her hand on Bethany's auburn hair, the same color as Jyslin's.

"I am *not* building you a baby bionoid," he warned, which made her laugh delightedly.

"Given it would never grow, I think I wouldn't like it after about a year," she replied with a smile.

“Well, now I know how to punish you when you get sassy,” he noted lightly.

“I already have one baby I have to manage, Jason, I don’t need more,” she teased, poking him in the shoulder.

“Wahh, wahh,” he deadpanned, which made her laugh.

“I wanna play in the water!” Siyae demanded.

“I’ll take you, pippy,” Cybi crooned, moving to stand up.

Jason watched Cybi frolic in the crashing surf, as the girls laughed and ran away from the encroaching water and then ran back, and he was again struck at how *lifelike* Cybi’s bionoid was. It was very hard to duplicate the realistic movement of flesh, since it folded and creased at the joints when it moved, yet Cybi’s bionoid moved with organic fluidity and the pseudo-flesh encasing the endoskeleton moved with the perfect imitation of real flesh, even down to the jiggling of the bionoid’s breasts and the shuddering of its admittedly tight, sexy butt when Cybi jumped over a wave and landed back on the sand. Jason was almost worried about how much attention to detail Rook put into something like that, but the effect was almost astonishingly realistic. It was nice, though, to see Cybi playing with the girls, picking up Siyae and spinning her around over her head as his daughter giggled, then setting her on her hip and venturing into the deeper water with her as Bethany chased one of the Menodan sand crabs that had invaded the beach over the last month, one of the most recent additions to the expanding ecosystem. It was Cybi’s chance to be *normal*, at least in a way, to inhabit a material body that looked like she was just another Faey, and let her interact with people in ways she never could with her hologram...like holding Siyae in her arms as she played in the crashing waves.

Jason watched another sand crab skitter by the castle the girls abandoned for the water, and almost laughed when it started digging its way into one of the mounds. The crabs had almost been a nuisance the last couple of takirs, but at least they weren’t aggressive and didn’t pinch, even when they were picked up. They were beach dwelling animals that lived on sandy beaches close to reefs, and it was a daily ritual for them to walk out to the reef and scavenge in the daylight hours, then return to the beach and

bury themselves in the sand at night. Sometimes, though, they stayed on the beach in the daylight instead of going out into the water, doing whatever crabs thought was important when they weren't looking for food.

The reef off the strip was now 27 kathra long, extending all the way out to Kinvari Village to the northwest, and had been seeded with 126 of the 1,249 species of fish now in Karisian oceans. The crabs were *not* one of the seeded species, they proved the ingenuity and opportunism of life in general by moving in of their own accord. The presence of the fish attracted the crabs, who were bottom feeding scavengers and hunters of the tiny bottom-dwelling fish that also scavenged. Another of the recent introductions swam by, a pod of Terran dolphins, who were still a bit scattered and trying to adapt to living on a new planet, according to the reports. Dolphins were creatures of habit ingrained by life experience, moving according to the seasons from feeding ground to feeding ground along routes learned by the pod and passed down from generation to generation, and that pod had been yanked out of Terran waters and placed here. They were effectively lost, trying to figure out what the hell happened, and they were being closely watched to make sure they managed to adapt to living in Karisian waters.

They'd introduced humpback whales two years ago, but nearly 75% of the whales they'd brought here had beached themselves multiple times over the last two years and had required rescue. This wasn't Terra, and the whales had had major issues adapting to an entirely new ocean with different continents, different currents, nothing was where the whales thought it was supposed to be, the days were longer than they were supposed to be, and the seasons didn't turn at the same speed, which further confused them. But, over the last few months, the whales had seemed to start getting the hang of this strange new place. There hadn't been a beaching in three months, and the whales had managed to establish a new pattern of migration from the south to the north to take advantage of plankton and krill blooms in the seasonal cold water oceans at the poles. They further *really* liked the fact that the oceans here had no parasitic organisms in them, so there were no barnacles trying to attach to them, no skin parasites, no remoras.

The explosion of the plankton and krill population over the last couple of years had accelerated the marine recovery program, and the new species were starting to take hold. Plankton concentrations in the oceans had far

exceeded the threshold his oceanographers had set as the minimum to support life across all oceans on the planet, and the krill populations had gone through the roof thanks to abundant food and very few predators feeding on them. And with that foundation of the food chain almost reaching overpopulation levels, it caused them to nearly double the speed of the recovery program. Every day, *hundreds of thousands* of live fish were brought in and released into the ocean at spots carefully chosen so the fish had the greatest chance of survival, fish that were carefully screened and purged of diseases and parasites before being released into Karis waters.

The acceleration of the marine program had led to an increase in the land recovery program, with them bringing in more species of fishing birds, more insect, reptile, and mammal species to populate the continent of Karga, including quite a few Terran endangered species, brought here so they could repopulate on a planet where they had no pressure from mankind, natural predators, or in the case of the predators, no competition from bigger predators. It did require some strategic placement of herbivore endangered species so they weren't threatened by the carnivore endangered species, and also placing the more dangerous carnivores in places well away from inhabitation.

Perhaps that was what the *shaman* had meant when she said that the planet was out of mortal danger, at least from her point of view. Karis had one continent completely terraformed back to life, and there were 14,305 different species of microbe, plant, and animal now present on the planet, forming a viable and now self-sustaining ecosystem on Karga. The house's biologists, zoologists, and botanists had truly done an amazing job bringing Karga back to life, and now they were working that same magic over on Kirga and Virga. Kirga was 76% terraformed back to life-sustaining viability—if one counted the vast desert in the north-central part of the continent that was the domain of the Kizzik colonies as terraformed—primarily on the west and north side of the continent. Virga was 14% terraformed along its southern coast, and they were introducing different species on the other continents from Karga to create diversity in the biosphere.

And in two days, they'd complete the organic soil infusion process on Hirga and Sarga, which was the precursor to planting the foundation for terraforming, grass. That would take them a few months, planting a very

fast-growing and fast-spreading species of grass native to Goraga, which would hold the fertilized soil in place and allow them to plant trees and other plants to form the floral foundation of the future ecosystems on the continents. And that grass was a different species from the 16 distinct species of grasses covering Karga, grasses from Makan, Draconis, Terra, Shio Prime, Arctus, Goraga, and Proximus.

The scientists overseeing the terraforming process projected that Karis would be fully restored to viability in 16 years, where viability was defined as soil organically infused to be able to support flora and flora covering at least 80% of all land on the planet. As it stood, flora covered 37% of the land surface. Once that threshold was achieved, they predicted it would only take six more years to stock the continents with enough animals to create a complete biosphere. The seed animals would reproduce and spread from their starting point, and over a period of about 23 years, the scientists predicted, the planet would be considered fully and completely restored. At that point, the planet would no longer need them carefully managing it for the ecosystem to thrive.

Karga had already officially reached that point. The continent was viable, and now they were in the process of importing selected animal species to expand what was already here into a very large and diverse ecosystem on the continent that would ultimately boast 23,450 plant species and 18,380 microbial and animal species...*just* on Karga. Those new additions were being introduced at a rate of nearly 100 species per takir, plants, insects, and animals brought in and seeded at carefully selected points that would cause them to flourish and spread very quickly, areas selected for maximum compatibility with the species' biology and lack of predators or competition. And they weren't doing it Noah's Ark fashion. They were bringing in an average of 40,000 plant samples and 25,000 breeding pairs of animals per species and seeding them across the entire zone of compatibility to achieve maximum reproductive spread of the species into the Kargan ecosystem.

Needless to say, the House Karinne was paying a *fortune* to professional trappers, rangers, and veterinarians to catch the animals, purge them of parasites and diseases, then ship them to Karis so they could be released into the wild. But it was money well spent to restore Karis to life.

The project's estimated date of completion was well within his lifetime, and a part of him yearned to see that final report. It would be the fulfillment of his promise to Cybi, his ancestors, and the people of the House of Karinne, to restore Karis to life. He yearned for the day when he looked down from a skimmer and saw a healthy, *living* world, and with *oye* trees growing wild on the land below. That, the *shaman* said, was when the planet would be fully healed, when the *oye* trees grew and spread on their own.

He wanted to see that day.

But...there was something very curious about those *oye* trees, and he was starting to wonder if there was something deeper going on. The tree in front of Cyra's facility wasn't the only one in downtown Karsa. Three months ago, the *shaman* had him plant another tree, this one a sapling and planted in *Cybi's* front yard. And now there were going to be trees on Kosiningi, on Cyvanne's doorstep. He wondered if, sometime in the next few takirs, the *shaman* didn't present him another seed or sapling and ask him to plant it in front of Cylan's facility in Kirsas, which was the "capitol" of the Kirgan continent. And he wondered if there would be similar trees sitting in front of the future homes of the CBIMs located in Hirsas, Sarsas, and Virsas.

It was a naming convention of sorts. The continental headquarters of each capitol was named similarly to how Karsa was named after Kargas.

Hirsas had been opened for population just 12 days ago, and tomorrow, they would officially open Sarsas for the prep teams and their families, the advance workers that would be there to provide services for the population that would ultimately move into the city. That was the way they did it. The entrepreneurs that intended to open businesses, the public services workers, government workers, the transportation workers, they'd be allowed to move in first, so the rest of the population had shops to shop in, subways to take them places, and so on and so on. Hirsas was at the center of what terraforming had been done on Hirgas, and Sarsas was the only terraformed part of Sargas. Sarsas was filled with grass and trees and flowers and had grasslands out to about five kathras from its borders, forming an island of life on an otherwise dead continent.

The CBIM facilities in Virsa, Hirsa, and Sarsa were already built, just waiting for a CBIM core crystal to be installed. He checked the progress timeline real quick and saw that the Virga CBIM core would be ready in about three months, the Hirga CBIM would be ready in about five, and the Sarsa CBIM would be ready in seven. In addition, a second CBMOM core was approximately one month from completion, which would be installed on the *Aegis*. They weren't going to install CBMOMs on all the command ships, only on one. It was actually too much of a security risk to have all the command ships equipped with something like Coma, but they wanted a second command ship with a CBMOM for one reason and one reason only...to give a Generation the ability to use the merge from a mobile platform. Kaili had the strongest merge with Coma, and it was *powerful*. She was able to do some real damage with her telekinesis, so they were going to equip one command ship with that same functionality.

But there would be another CBMOM. They had plans to build one more fleet flagship, a sister ship to the *Tianne*, and it would have a CBMOM...it *had* to, it required a computer like a CBMOM just to run the ship. Now that they knew that they could get the *Tianne* in and out of Kosigi, they were building it inside the moon. In fact, Dellin would be officially laying the keel for the new fleet flagship tomorrow. All the workers that built the *Tianne* were now ready to do it again with the new ship, which had the provisional designation *Ilenne*, who was Tianne's mortal younger sister. Dellin estimated it would take them about 10 months to build it, now that they had a methodology after building the *Tianne*, and that would cut four months off the construction.

He leaned back on his hands and watched Cybi splash water at Bethany, who was giggling and shielding her face. It all came back to that right there, he mused to himself. Friends. Family. Children. Their lives here on this planet that needed them as much as they needed it. He watched his children play with the soul of the house, and one of his best friends, and realized that *this* was why the Syndicate was who and what they were. They couldn't understand this. They couldn't fathom what it meant to love your family, love your home, love others, love your planet, more than you loved yourself. The *shaman* was right, the Syndicate had no love in their hearts, so they tried to fill the hole left behind with *things*, with *money*, in some

vain attempt to understand what it was to have a full heart. It made them greedy, covetous, amoral, ruthless...and it made them *hollow*.

And in a way, Jason pitied them. But it also steeled his resolve, because he understood that people with no love in their hearts were the worst kind of life forms in the universe, for they had nothing but *greed*. The hunger for money and power to fill the hole left in them drove them, obsessed them, *consumed* them, and understanding that, he knew that there was no way they could negotiate with them. They would not honor any agreement they made if it dissuaded them from their compulsive need to *acquire*, and would lie and cheat as much as possible while pretending to be friendly, until the need for the charade was done and they could move openly.

And that made them dangerous. That was the worst kind of adversary, one that pretended to be your friend while sharpening the knife they planned to plunge into your back. He was certain that some of the Confederate rulers would be deceived by their illusion, and it was going to lead to some real heated arguments on the council floor.

But *he* knew what the Syndicate was, and he would make sure that they gained no foothold in their galaxy...even if he had to do it without the Confederation. He would do it because he knew the truth of them, he knew what they truly were, and those little girls laughing and jumping around Cybi's legs had the right to grow up without the threat of the Syndicate looming over their heads.

Koira, 2 Romaa, 4404, Faey Orthodox Calendar

Wednesday, 4 July 2018 Terran Standard Calendar

*Koira, 2 Romaa, year 1329 of the 97th Generation, Karinne
Historical Reference Calendar*

Sora Karinne Memorial Complex, Karsa, Karis

It was hours away.

Jason sat at his desk in the Hall of Peace, drumming his fingers on the rich wooden surface as his attention was inward, on an image being fed to

his gestalt by Cynna. It was a tactical map showing the Strands of Trelle, with three red dots that marked the location of the scout ship and two Imxi battle cruisers that were, at that instant, 44 minutes, 10 seconds away from Oasis.

They would arrive to see a Syndicate fleet that was only about half of its full strength. Half their fleet was spread across the Strands of Trelle, the furthest of them nearly four days away by jump, conducting scientific research...or so they said. But they hadn't moved a single ship in the direction of the galaxy, so they weren't being overt yet. The movements of those ships had required Zaa to bring in additional SCM assets to blind their long-range sensors if they tried to point them towards the galaxy...which *might* be the reason they were spreading out. They had to know by now that their sensors were being actively jammed, and the movements along the Strands were them trying to find the edge of that jamming and get some readings on the galaxy.

He was certain that the sensor jamming was going to be one of the points of discussion the Benga brought up.

The three ships about to arrive at Oasis had nearly not left on time, due to all the work they had to do on them and the need to man the scout ship with bionoids. The two Imxi ships were completely empty, they were fully automated and controlled by the scout ship, and both were rigged to detonate with enough force to all but knock the planet out of orbit if they made them self-destruct. If those ships were blown up at the same time, it was enough explosive force to destroy a big chunk of the Syndicate fleet if they were within 15,000 kathra of them. They were nearly late leaving because of the work they had to do to automate the ships for the trip, because Jason didn't want any crew on them *or* any bionoids.

There were 37 bionoids on the scout ship not counting the six diplomatic bionoids, and they were exactly what Rook had promised. They were lifelike units but weren't built to resemble any specific person, they were "generic" bionoids with faces randomly generated that the crews were driving by remote and in shifts. When a crewman's shift was over, he broke the merge with the bionoid and the next shift crewman took it over, with the regular complement of 27 crew doing their usual duties while they had ten additional bionoids acting as extra sensor operators and extra engineering

crew to keep the rather hastily built ship together for the trip. Each bionoid had a unique face—just not based on any person—and all of them were built on a Faey body.

And Jason had to say, the experiment of crewing a ship with bionoids had been *wildly* successful so far. The ship's performance reports were just as high as if there were living crewmen on the ship, and without the need for crew quarters or a sickbay—just a maintenance bay for repairs the repair spiders in the bionoids couldn't handle—it gave them a lot of space in the ship for the extra equipment they put on the ship. It had some hardcore sensors in it to get some highly detailed and accurate scans of the Syndicate ships, equipment hyperspace probes couldn't easily carry, and was also, like the Imxi ships, carrying a large complement of Skaa antimatter bombs so it would explode like a nova if the Syndicate attacked it, *beyond* obliterating the ship and everything on it.

Jason had already authorized the construction of 36 ships ranging from frigates to tactical cruisers to be specifically designed around the idea of having bionoid crews. They would be ships without crew quarters, without cargo holds designed to store food, without entertainment features, without a sickbay, without even an *atmosphere* in the ship. There would be radiating heaters designed to warm an area of vacuum in the ship to protect the bionoids from freezing, but bionoids didn't need to breathe and could communicate by commune, so they didn't need air in the ship. The bionoids themselves would be built to operate in those conditions, without the biorhythmic systems in normal bionoids that emulated life processes, and built with internal systems like internal heaters that would adapt them to operating for extended periods of time in an icy cold vacuum. Each ship would have staterooms for carrying live passengers, ranging from just one on a frigate to 20 on a tactical cruiser, with facilities and environmental systems to support those guests so their journey was at least comfortable, if a little confining.

The vacuum in the rest of the ship would keep those passengers in the passenger area.

The crew of the scout ship was driving their bionoids from Joint Base Alpha, but Jason and the others wouldn't be over there to drive theirs. Six merge pods were installed in the building, in an antechamber just off the

Hall of Peace, and Songa herself was going to monitor them while Rook himself would monitor the board managing the merge pods. Their macro bionoids were currently in the Ogravian shuttle that was loaded in the landing bay of the scout ship, just waiting for them to merge to them.

They more or less had to be there, since the ship wasn't built to accommodate them. They could leave the shuttle and walk around the landing bay, but that was about it. If Jason wanted to take his bionoid into the ship, he'd have to get down on all fours and crawl through the hatch, and crawl through the companionways beyond, which would be a *very* tight fit. And he wouldn't be able to get through most of the other doors, since the door to the landing bay was very large to accommodate cargo.

They already had everything organized. They'd spent the last ten days discussing and debating this conference, and Mesaiima, the primary negotiator, already had all of her positions defined, and all six of them knew exactly what they were allowed to reveal. They'd reveal *some* of their technological capability, but not all. For example, they were going to admit that they were robots, not living people, right at the outset, and that they were being controlled in real time by the *real* rulers, who were some several thousand light years away, and that there wasn't a living thing on any of their ships. They would allow the Syndicate to draw all the inferences they wished from that fact, like how that allowed them to avoid hyperspace exposure. Mesaiima would be bargaining to get the Syndicate to leave their galaxy and would resort to nearly any tactic except bribery. And they would *not*, under any circumstance, allow any Syndicate ship into the galaxy. Not *one*. They would give them no chance to gather intelligence or information on them for future action.

It was doomed to failure, but even Jason felt that it was the best course of action to try. That way, they *knew* they did everything they could to avert the war, so there was no lingering doubt when the cannons started firing.

The council was in session, all 141 rulers in attendance and in the same seating arrangement as the council chamber on Terra except for one small detail. In the Hall of Peace, the neutral observers sat at the very back of the chamber instead of along the side. Despite this being his planet, Jason's status as a neutral observer wouldn't allow him to control the meetings, so whoever held the gavel in the normal rotation was the one that chaired

summit meetings on Karis. Currently that was Queen Sovial Ennith XII of the Jirunji, who were a vaguely jaguar-like feline species that were considerably smaller and leaner than the Verutans, a shakra shorter than Faey on the average, but had the same basic body shape and appearance as a Verutan. The Jirunji had different colored fur, ranging from snowy white to pitch black, but the common feature among all of them were leopard-like spots that were irregular black rings and with a black spot in the center. Sovial was one of the “panther” Jirunji, the only ones with no spots because her coat was all black—actually, she *did* have spots, they were just the same color as the base color of her fur, so they were effectively invisible. All Jirunji also shared green eyes with vertically slitted pupils, which gave them a pretty penetrating and slightly creepy stare, and whiskers to each side of their short muzzles and over the outside corners of their eyes, with no hair on their heads. Sovial didn’t have pronounced breasts, which wasn’t unusual for some mammal-evolved species, but what did make her unusual was that she only had two milk-producing mammae and thus only two nipples, right where they would be on a Faey or Terran woman. Most females of mammal species that didn’t have pronounced breasts usually had more than two mammae, which meant multiple nipples, but Sovial was something of an exception. She only had two nipples, but they weren’t on pronounced breasts, and they were located in the same place as they were on Dahnai...if she didn’t have breasts. Because there was almost no visible anatomical deviation between males and females among the Jirunji except the genitalia, the only way to really tell them apart was by how they dressed...if one ever got lucky enough to meet a male face to face. Males wore loincloths or kilts around their waists that commonly went down to their lower thigh to protect their genitalia, but females commonly wore nothing but feathered headdresses that was a symbol of their rank within Jirunji society. Each major milestone or accomplishment in a female’s life was symbolized by a particular feather, and she wore those feathers as a headdress to advertise to others her social rank as defined by what she’d accomplished in life, with Sovial’s being the largest and most extravagant of all. After all, she was the Queen. Jirunji society was matriarchal because a biological quirk in their species caused there to be about four females for every male. Female Jirunji gave birth to a male only about 27% of the time, so over the centuries, it led to a very large gender imbalance between males and females. Male Jirunji weren’t allowed off their homeworld, and the

Jirunji had 39 systems in their empire. Any female that wanted to reproduce had to go back to their homeworld to get a male to impregnate her, which they did about every four years or so in a biological reproductive cycle where the female went into heat, and the drive to mate dominated their behavior.

That was *literally* the sole reason their homeworld existed in their empire. It had no factories, no industry, and it was restricted to outsiders. It was the planet of the males, and the only females allowed to live on the planet were the Queen, her family, and females that performed critical jobs and were needed on the planet to keep it up and running. All other females on the planet were only there to take a male for mate and reproduce, and they would roam the planet searching for what they felt was a suitable male for their needs. Their homeworld was much like Imbiri, largely untouched and with only large numbers of villages and small towns spread across the natural landscape, with the capitol city being the only real city on the planet, home to the entire permanent female population. Males were territorial and highly hostile to unrelated males by biological instinct, so they couldn't live in large cities crowded up with each other. Males in villages were all related, were all cousins and such, and they kept themselves separate from non-related males else fights would break out. So, their homeworld was a vast array of villages spread across the landmasses, each one a micro-nation with no roads connecting it to other villages, populated almost solely by males, and all the males of a village were related to one another.

How males could tell another male wasn't a relative was something of a mystery. Males could discern a relative from a non-relative just by looking at them, and they were *never* wrong. However, it only worked when the male was looking at another male live, with them in close physical proximity to one another. A male couldn't tell a relative from a non-relative by looking at a picture or a hologram, but if they were as close as on opposite sides of a street, they could tell. Most Jirunji biologists suspected it might be *psionic* in nature, since Jirunji males had a higher than average number of telepaths compared to females. They theorized that all males had some kind of subtle psionic ability to *know* if another male was a relative or not. Because the hostility was only triggered when males were more or less in the same room with each other, males communicated and socialized with

non-relative males through holograms. Yet two males who were best friends over correspondence would fight like wild rabid dogs if they were put in the same room with each other.

Much like the Sha'i-ree, it was a curious reflection of the instincts of the animal ancestor showing in the evolved intelligent being. They evolved from felines that were much like lions, or elephants, with matriarchal family units of females that allowed the presence of a lone male to provide reproduction. Males would fight for the chance of living with the family unit, which meant that only the strongest males were passing down their genes to the children they sired. And even though the Jirunji evolved into highly intelligent and social creatures, those basic elements of their biological behavior remained. Females could live together and work together even with females outside the family unit because that was how their biology wired them, but males were hostile to any male that was not their relative, which required them to live in all-male family units of their own biological relatives on the homeworld.

Jirunji males were very curious people. They existed for one reason and one reason only, to reproduce, but they didn't let that sole reason they existed to define them. Since they had all that free time on their hands, they used it wisely by taking care of their bodies and educating themselves. Much like Faey society, in Jirunji society the males were scholars, scientists, and thinkers, forbidden by law to do *any* job that was not scholastic or scientific, so they embraced that role. But they were biologically disposed to compete with other males for territory and the right to mate, so Jirunji males were *very* serious about staying in peak physical condition at all times, both in strength and endurance. While they were a group that was highly intelligent and highly educated, they were *ripped*, physically powerful and so durable they could run a triathlon every weekend. Every male was a short, furry Arnold Schwarzenegger that could run 100 kathra a day. The average Jirunji, male or female, only came up to Jason's collarbones, but the males outweighed him by a good 10 konn, and that was all muscle.

And that practice of the males educating themselves had made the Jirunji one of the most underestimated intelligent species in the Confederation. Jirunji males didn't fight other males tooth and claw for the honor to mate with females, the females chose the sire of their children

based on how *smart* the male was. There was nothing more important to a male than his CI number, or Composite Intelligence score that was a combination of both his innate intelligence and his education, weighted by age. Males competed ferociously to get into the best schools, to get into the best academies, and spent almost their entire lives making themselves as smart as possible, as that was how males earned prestige in their society. In Jirunji society, the most dreadful insult anyone could ever issue against another was to call them *stupid*, even among females. Saying that to a female would get you raked but saying that to a male was all but a challenge to fight to the *death*. And Jirunji males were well equipped to win that fight given their claws and their immense physical power.

Those smart males passed their smart genes down to the children, and that, over time, had all but genetically engineered the race to predispose them to be highly intelligent.

Jirunji males could be found in only two places in the entire universe, their home planet and the Academy. It was the *only* place that Jirunji males were allowed to go off world, and there was no competition fiercer than for the 1,000 available slots for Jirunji males in the Academy for each new class. The chance to leave Jirunja and go to the Academy was the biggest of all dreams for most young males, and it had become the most sought-after goal in their society. It did require some coordination when it came to housing the males on Terra, though. No Jirunji male was housed within two kathra of a non-relative male and lived with two or three female Jirunji chaperones who were also students. They were housed off campus in Norfolk, Newport News, Virginia Beach, Hampton, Chesapeake, and Cape Charles and commuted to school each day, to keep the males well separated when not attending classes. The males were escorted at virtually all times by their female chaperones, who took turns mainly keeping them inside their established “territory” and made sure they didn’t encounter another male by accident. Non-relative males couldn’t attend classes together, and that was the main bottleneck restricting how many males could attend Academy at one time. Where only 1,000 per class were allowed to attend in person, there were quite a few Jirunji males that attended via remote from their home villages on Jirunja Prime, attending classes as holograms. Only the most worthy won the right to attend in person. Virtually every village on Jirunja Prime had an Academy Satellite Center, a small “village Academy”

where the males could attend classes via hologram and gain access to the Academy mainframe for research and coursework.

And that was a powerful example of how powerful instinct was. Despite their incredible intelligence and extensive education, the very presence of a non-relative male incited near-bloodlust in a Jirunji male, and the two would fight until one of them retreated or one killed the other. The Academy took extreme steps to keep Jirunji males separated, and it was their hostility to each other that restricted them to 5,000 males in the Academy at any one time, 1,000 per class in a typical five-year graduate program. Any more than that, and the males would be too close to each other and fights would break out.

Sovial was alright. A bit hot-tempered and emotional like most of her species, which often masked just how damn smart she was, but alright. And he'd never admit to her face, but he thought she was *cute*...in a kitty-cat kind of way.

They were going over the final points with Mesaiima and Ethikk while the rest of them listened. Mesaiima was their primary negotiator with Ethikk her primary lieutenant, and the others were there mainly for support and to represent an entourage. The council would see and hear everything all six of them did through the bionoids with audio-visual feeds from their sensory streams, but during the negotiations, the council wouldn't be communicating directly with Mesaiima. They'd be communicating with Dahnai, Holikk, and Magran, who would share anything pertinent with Mesaiima and Ethikk over local commune. That would allow those two to concentrate fully on the meeting, allow the council to see and hear everything discussed in real time, and get real-time information from the council to the negotiators if needed. Jason's role in this meeting was purely to observe, and outside of the initial introductions, he wouldn't be saying a word.

That worked for him. To be honest, he wasn't all that good of a negotiator in situations like this.

It took nearly half an hour for the council to get everything ready, and once they were done, the six negotiators moved to the antechamber. Rook ushered them in and directed them to the merge pods representing their bionoids, then he returned to the control board. "*The bionoids are ready,*

esteemed rulers. Feel free to initiate the merge as soon as you plug your hardlines to your interfaces.”

Jason didn't have to do that, so he wasted no time as soon as he got into his pod. He cast his consciousness all the way outside the galaxy, then felt himself sync to the bionoid and settle into its sensory stream. He opened his eyes and saw himself looking at the cockpit, then shook his head a bit as the last of the sensation of merging faded and felt himself fully “settle” into both the merge and the bionoid. “I'm online,” he declared aloud as he turned the cockpit chair to face the seats in the cabin. He watched each of the bionoids open its eyes one by one, the first Mesaiima and the last Dahnai. *[Captain, the council bionoids are online,]* Jason communed to the ship's biogenic network.

[Understood, your Grace. We are eight minutes five seconds from our destination. If you would, begin preflight on the shuttle while President Mesaiima and High Staff Ethikk move to the set.] The set was just that, a blank backdrop behind two chairs facing a holocamera and display where they would make contact with the Syndicate fleet. They didn't want them broadcasting from the passenger cabin of a shuttle, after all, that would look...unprofessional. Jason started up the shuttle while the others disembarked, entering the landing bay where the set was built on the far side, the camera facing a wall so it couldn't show the Benga anything, the backdrop attached to that wall. Holikk, Dahnai, and Magran stood behind the camera as Mesaiima and Ethikk took the seats, a table in front of them purely to give them somewhere to put their arms. *[We're in position and ready, Captain,]* Mesaiima communed through the biogenic chip in her bionoid.

[We'll be entering normal space in about two minutes,] she answered.

Jason finished bringing the shuttle up and disembarked, then took hold of the hatch just as the ship dropped back into normal space. He looked out the airskin shield as the landing bay doors opened, revealing the planet Oasis IV some 400,000 kathra away, a small blue and green jewel in a starless sky of utter black, and the gigantic enemy fleet surrounding it. Jason checked the ship's mainframe and saw that the two Imxi ships had dropped with them, and saw one of them drift into view on the aft side of

the landing bay opening, the nose inching into view and then coming to a stop.

“We’re here,” he heard Holikk declare, looking out the open doors. “And *damn* is that a lot of ships. Really, really big ships.”

That was no lie. It was like the planet had a few *thousand* moons, and they were large and visible even from their positions ranging from 200,000 to 600,000 kathra from the planet. The largest of them, the fleet’s flagship, was nearly the same size as the planet’s smaller moon. The ship’s computer supplied that there were 6,250 ships around the planet, which meant that the rest of them were scattered across the Strands of Trelle on various “scientific” missions.

“That certainly puts everything into perspective,” Dahnai said soberly as she looked out the airlock, standing just behind him.

“Yes it does,” Jason agreed, then he took her hand and helped her step down the ramp.

By the time the four of them reached the set, they’d made contact with the Syndicate fleet. The same woman’s face appeared on a flat hologram in front of the table, and she gave a smile as she focused on them. “I am Fleet Commander Au Mai Sha Ra, commanding the Third Expeditionary Fleet of the Syndicate Navy,” she declared in the Benga language in her rich, deep yet still feminine voice. “Who do I have the honor of addressing?”

“I am President Mesaiima of the Imbiri Independent System, and this is High Staff Ethikk Gra’Brith, ruling council chairman of the Alliance. We are both members of the Confederation of Allied Empires and have been given the honor of traveling here to meet with you and conduct introductory negotiations,” Mesaiima said smoothly. “Warmly do we greet you, Fleet Commander Sha Ra, and inform you that we are prepared to meet with you at your neutral site at your earliest convenience.”

“You have only just arrived, President. Might you wish time to recover from your journey before we meet?” she asked.

“We require no rest or recuperation, Fleet Commander,” she answered. “And that is the first matter of which you need be made aware before we undertake our meeting. What you see before you is not truly me. This is called a *bionoid*,” she said in Faey, touching her chest. “This is a robot that

was built to exactly resemble me, and acts as a remote surrogate for me. Though this body is a machine, I see through its eyes and hear through its ears. My mind and consciousness are connected to this device. So, while this body is artificial, you *will* be negotiating with the real me. As such, be assured that the negotiating party will have no environmental requirements, and will have no need for sustenance or comfort for the duration of these proceedings, so you need not worry about seeing to our physical needs.”

“My, what an absolutely fascinating bit of technology. No wonder you had no problems with hyperspace,” she said with bright eyes, regarding the two she could see with great interest.

“That is why they were built, Fleet Commander,” she said artfully. “You should also be made aware that in the traditions of the Confederation, everything you see before you was built to be *expendable*,” she said calmly, but with a slight edge. “You deserve the right to be told here and now that all three of our vessels are designed so that if they are attacked, they will immediately explode with sufficient force to knock the planet from its orbit. Scans of these ships by your fleet will document this fact. We do not hide this fact, Fleet Commander. In the interests of peace and to prevent any accidental damage to your fleet in case of some kind of catastrophic failure of our ships, they will retreat to a safe distance after our shuttle departs so any accidental detonation of the ships do no harm to you, your fleet, or the planet nearby. For the safety of your fleet, I advise in the strongest possible terms to come no closer to them than five times the distance this ship is now from the planet, else considerable damage may occur to your ships in the event of an...incident.”

“That, Madam President, is a highly cunning and intelligent procedure,” the Benga said appreciatively. “You are well versed in the art of negotiation. If it’s acceptable to you, we will schedule our initial meeting for one division from now. We will meet here,” she said, and an image of the planet appeared beside her with a red dot on the coast of the smaller northern continent. “While no building has been erected, a pavilion tent on a bluff overlooking a lovely beach has been erected for our meeting, so we might enjoy the natural beauty of the planet when taking a break from our talks.”

“That is more than acceptable, Fleet Commander. Our shuttle will depart three segments after this communication ends and set a velocity that

will allow us to arrive exactly on time, so our ships might pull back to a safe distance.”

“Of course,” she nodded. “I will dispatch a single destroyer to escort you to the planet. The ship will maintain a safe distance from your shuttle and will ensure that no ship accidentally crosses into your flight path.”

“We welcome your escort, Fleet Commander,” Mesaiima answered. “And we will depart immediately.”

“Then I look forward to meeting you in one division, Madam President, High Staff,” she declared. “Fortune be yours.” And her hologram dissolved.

“Well, she took that well,” Dahnai noted dryly as Mesaiima and Ethikk stood up and started back for the shuttle.

“And she knows that any attempt to try to capture the bionoids or the ships will result in a really, really big boom,” Holikk added.

“I’m honestly surprised she agreed to the meeting,” Jason grunted. “She didn’t even ask if the *bionoids* are rigged to self-destruct.”

“She doesn’t have to, Mesaiima made it very clear that they are,” Magran said, smoothing his red and white robes, the robes of the Grand Master. “It does say something about her courage to agree to the meeting knowing that we could kill her.”

“That’s true,” Jason acceded with a nod.

They got back on the shuttle, and Jason took hold of the control stick. “We’re lifting off,” he warned. [*Captain, we’re departing now. Pull the ships back to position two.*]

[*Understood, your Grace. Good luck down there.*]

[*Thanks.*] The shuttle lifted off the deck, then slowly inched out of the landing bay, sliding through the airskin shield. Jason adjusted course to take it to the planet, then set a slow velocity vector that would make the trip take nearly 50 minutes, about one of their division time units. Dahnai came up behind his chair and looked out the cockpit window, a hand on his shoulder. “There’s the escort,” she declared, pointing. Their smallest ship class, which was about the same size as a KMS tactical cruiser, quickly approached, executed a very wide U turn around them, then pulled ahead

and settled into a matching course about a kathra in front of them. “And I bet every scanner they have is all but irradiating us right now,” she added dryly.

“No doubt,” Jason agreed.

The Syndicate ships kept their distance as Jason more or less followed the escort, which was a roughly triangular vessel wide across the stern with unusual “wings” of a sort that rose up from the keel of the ship and ascended vertically to conceal the ship behind it, angled back towards the ship at about a 70 degree angle. They almost looked decorative, until Jason realized they were actually shields, physical barriers to protect the ship behind them from incoming fire. Gunport doors were visible at the base of those wings, giving the ship firing arcs on his flanks. The ship behind the wings was long and narrow, built on a flat base and rising up in a roughly semicircular appearance when viewed from the stern as they were, with a protruding front section not too much unlike the neck and bow section of Consortium ships. The ship had gravometric engines, so it had no exhaust ports in the stern, a stern that was built at a slope and with several large gunports. That ship was the basic staple of the fleet, the main ship of the line like how frigates and destroyers were the backbone of the KMS, and it was *by far* the smallest ship in their fleet. Ships of other designs passed by in the distance, with 32 different classes of ships ranging from the destroyer escorting them to the giant super-ships. Against behemoths like that, Jason could see why the Consortium had abandoned using fighters...but that was actually a mistake in judgement by their military commanders. If they would have armed their mantis mecha with the most powerful non-Torsion weapon they could fit on it and sent them out in swarms, they could have done real damage to Syndicate ships. But, then again, they couldn’t fit a dark matter weapon on a mantis craft, so they probably believed that they had no weapons strong enough to make their mantis mecha pose a threat. That was *not* the case of the Confederation, however. Every single empire had fighters with weapons capable of doing real damage, and he wasn’t too proud to say that a large chunk of them were fighter-mounted rail weapons. Any empire that lacked compact yet powerful weapons had adopted rail technology from the Academy’s public domain archives, and that tech was based on Jason’s own invention. And the sims showed that the shields and

armor on the smaller Syndicate ships couldn't stand up for long against fighter-mounted rail weaponry.

The sims showed that most Confederate fighters were a viable threat to the smaller ship classes in the Syndicate fleet, some more than others. A *single* Wolf fighter posed a viable threat to a Syndicate destroyer, due to its pulse weaponry, which was multiphased so it passed through shields and completely ignored armor the way Torsion weapons did, leaving a ship with no defense against it. Imperium MPAC weaponry was very nearly as dangerous, so INS Raptor fighters would also pose an extreme danger to Syndicate destroyers and cruisers, both because of their weapons and because of the pilots, who were all telepathic. And in the upcoming battle plan, it would be the *fighters* going after those ships while the line ships went after the ships too big for fighters to take out on their own.

The others were more or less quiet, looking out the windows as Jason slowly approached the planet, until the escorting ship veered away and gave them an unimpeded route to the landing point. Jason located it with his nav scanners and adjusted his vector. "We're about to enter the atmosphere, so everyone might wanna sit back down," he warned. "This ship won't be as smooth, its engines aren't all that good. That's why I had Shevatt give it to us," he chuckled as the shuttle started to shiver, then shudder as they encountered air resistance.

"Did you scan the landing site?" Mesaiima asked.

"Yeah, there's a pretty big shuttle already there and a few dozen people milling around. The scanners in this thing are pretty crappy, but the zoom on the cameras is pretty nice. Here," he said, putting up a holo of a camera view of the landing site. It showed the pavilion where they'd be talking and a single large shuttle, with about 20 beings either standing or walking around. Twelve of them were clearly Benga due to their size, with the others much smaller, other members of the Syndicate.

"Yeah, we didn't warn them we'd be their size, did we?" Holikk asked.

"Surprise can be good for the circulation," Dahnai said dryly, which made the Subrian chuckle.

Jason guided the shuttle down, then very slowly and carefully approached the meeting site, since there were no indicators where he should

land. He opted to land near the Syndicate shuttle, all but hovering about 50 shakra over the ground to make sure nobody was underneath the ship, then coming down at a very slow creep. He extended the landing skids nearly at the last moment, and the shuttle touched down on Oasis IV. The location the Benga picked *was* quite lovely, with a white sand beach and a thick forest on the far side of the bluff upon which they landed, which overlooked the beach and the sapphire blue ocean beyond. The sky on this planet was a much darker shade of blue than Karis—caused by the different composition of gases—like a sapphire blanket laid over the world. Several white, puffy clouds lingered overhead. Jason identified the Fleet Commander among the Benga approaching the shuttle as Jason shut down the engines. “Alright, we’re here,” he declared. “It’s game time.”

“I’m ready,” Mesaiima declared, fanning her wings and lifting up off the deck—her mass countered by small grav pods in her bionoid—then she settled back down, her slippered feet touching the metal plates. Mesaiima was wearing her state robes, which almost looked like a Terran prom dress, solid, a soft rose color with red slippers. The skirt ended at her knees and the bodice was little more than a bustier, with a sash wrapped several times around her waist. Dahnai was in her formal robes, Imperial white and with the white sash of the Empress around her waist, Magran in his red and white Grand Master robes, and Holikk was in his more macho earth-toned robes, while Jason wore his own formal robes, which were cerulean with the red sash of marriage and the crest of Karinne embroidered on the front in gold thread. Jason hit the hatch button, and a wave of distortion entered the cabin as the outside air flooded into the shuttle, equalizing the pressure between them. The air of this planet was pristine, fresh, smelling of the salty sea and of the grass under the shuttle. Mesaiima was standing in front of the hatch while it opened, so the twelve Benga below looked up to see her, a being much larger than they probably expected, and also one with her exotic and beautiful fairy-like wings...just really *big* ones. She stepped down the stairs once they extended with fluid grace, then stepped up to the taller Benga and gave an elegant curtsy as they gave her a military salute that consisted of all twelve of the uniformed Benga putting their left hands to their chests and bowing their heads. All twelve wore surprisingly simple uniforms of dark blue with silver buttons on their uniform jackets, and each one wore what looked to be a symbol of rank on the right chest, over a pocket on the jacket. Each wore a heavy leather belt that had sockets on

both sides of the hips sidearms, from the look of it, and they wore glossy black boots, polished to a mirror shine. The Fleet Commander wasn't the tallest of the Benga, she was actually among the shortest, but there was no doubt she was the one in command.

Jason would say one thing. All twelve of them were very attractive from a Terran point of view. The four women were quite lovely and the eight men were very handsome, all of them with various shades of hair that were all dark, green, blue, brown, and black. None of them had light-colored hair. The Fleet Commander was the only one with those jade eyes, the others had various shades of brown, violet, or darker green eyes. "It's an honor to meet you in person, Madam President," the commander said in her husky voice. "I must say, it's refreshing to meet a species close to our size."

"The only reason I'm your size is because of this machine, Fleet Commander," she said easily, touching her chest with two fingers. "We felt it would be easier for both you and us if we met you at eye level, as it were. That way no special accommodations would need to be made for either side."

"That was forward thinking," she said with a complementing expression, glancing at Ethikk as he came down the steps. "And you would be the High Staff?"

"That's me, Fleet Commander," he said in his jovial tone. "As you can see, I decided on something a little closer to the ground. In reality, my people are quite small."

"I must say, honored guests, but those machines of yours are *impressive*," she told them, looking closely at them. "They look entirely lifelike."

"They're designed to be so, Fleet Commander," Mesaiima told her calmly. "Though they are machines, it makes it easier for others to deal with them, and for us to use them, when they are realistic."

"And you operate these machines from within the galaxy? In real time?" one of the tallest men asked.

"It is common technology within our galaxy," Mesaiima said dismissively, using one of the prepared explanations. "If I might introduce

you to the other members of our delegation, Fleet Commander. This is the Grand Master Magran, ruler of the Nine Colonies.”

The saluted Magran. “It is an honor to know you, Grand Master,” the Fleet Commander greeted.

“The honor is mine, Fleet Commander.”

“May I present her Imperial Majesty, Empress Dahnai Merrane of the Faey Imperium.”

“An honor, your Majesty. And may I say, your robes are *gorgeous*,” she said, looking at Dahnai appreciatively after saluting.

“Thank you, Fleet Commander,” Dahnai said, a bit preeningly, her Faey vanity starting to creep in.

“This is High Chancellor Holikk of the Subrian Authority.”

“An honor, High Chancellor,” she greeted, looking rather closely at Holikk’s fangs.

“And finally, Fleet Commander, the *Grand Duke* Jason Karinne of the House of Karinne.”

“I’m afraid I have no idea how to honorably address you, sir. Your title...it has no equivalent in our language,” she said to Jason as she bowed.

“The correct mode of address for the *Grand Duke* is to refer to him as ‘your Grace,’ Fleet Commander,” Mesaiima supplied.

“Ah. Your Grace,” she repeated with a smile. “Is your title that of a king or monarch, or is it religious in nature?”

“I am no king, Fleet Commander. And neither am I a priest,” Jason answered. “I rule only a single planet. My title reflects that status by the traditions of my people.”

“Before you stand rulers of hundreds of systems, and also rulers of single planets, all joined together in the Confederation of Allied Empires, who has granted me the right and privilege to represent in these discussions,” Mesaiima said. “I speak for all members of the Confederation in these proceedings.”

“I do not speak for the entirety of my government, but as the ranking officer on this expeditionary mission, I do have the authority to make all decisions concerning the disposition and actions of the ships under my command,” she replied. “Please, august guests, let us sit and talk,” she said grandly, motioning towards the pavilion-style tent, its sides rolled up so it was nothing but a roof, and under which was a table with six chairs on one side. On the other was a raised platform with more normal-sized chairs, but they were quickly being removed by two Benga as two more were carrying chairs out of their shuttle towards the tent. “At least once our attendants set up your side of the table. We were expecting you to be the size of the Admiral. And, um, I fear we may not have a chair that can accommodate you, Madam President.”

“Completely understandable,” Mesaiima said with a mild gesture, fanning her wings a little bit. “I’m fully aware that my physiology is a bit... exotic.”

“Can you truly fly?” she asked curiously.

“Yes, I can,” she replied with a steady expression. “That capability is duplicated into this machine using technology, so it more accurately reflects my true self.”

“And each of these machines is a faithful representation of your true appearance?”

“Yes, Fleet Commander,” Mesaiima answered. “Our heights are also proportional to represent our true bodies, from the smallest,” she said, gesturing towards Ethikk, “to the largest,” she finished, motioning towards Holikk.

“Quite fascinating,” she said as the others finished setting out the chairs. “Shall we?”

Everyone but Mesaiima seated themselves in a chair, and she stood in the center of them, keeping her wings directly back away from her body else they’d hit Ethikk and Dahnai. The Fleet Commander—Sha Ra, she said her name was—sat at the center of her side of the table, with the other five chairs filled with males and the other males and other three females standing behind their chairs. “I suppose we should start with a basic introduction of my people and our government,” she said.

“That is unnecessary, Fleet Commander,” Mesaiima said. “We already know who you are and are familiar with your government.”

“No doubt taken from the Consortium, who have a very biased view of us,” she countered.

“We have learned of you from your civilian entertainment and news broadcasts in your home galaxy,” Ethikk answered her. “We have the ability to receive those transmissions. The defeat of the Consortium invasion force and the capture of their ships and technology gave us the means to translate your language and understand what we were receiving. From those transmissions, we’ve learned about the basic structure of your government and social culture of your people.”

“I had no idea those transmissions could cross galaxies,” she mused.

“They don’t,” Ethikk responded. “As you traveled to this galaxy, Fleet Commander, the invasion of the Consortium incited us to send assets to *yours*. In our case, we sent several unmanned recon probes to find out more about who had invaded us, and those probes have been receiving your civilian broadcasts since they arrived in your galaxy.”

“I...I don’t understand. How do you receive these transmissions? It would take orbits for it to get back to you.”

“We have the capability to communicate with our probes in real time,” Mesaiima answered.

“Between *galaxies*?”

“Yes,” she confirmed. “We had never had reason to send probes to your galaxy until the Consortium invaded. That incited us to respond with the probes, where we discovered the Syndicate and the political situation in your galaxy.”

“I find that to be almost fantastic,” she said, using a Benga word that had multiple meanings. It could mean *amazing*, *incredible*, and it could also mean *guarded* or *unbelievable*, and Jason had a slight issue trying to figure out which meaning she intended, since he wasn’t a native speaker and they had no database of the language used by a native speaker upon which to refer. He wasn’t sure if she was fangirling over real time communication tech or being skeptical of its existence.

It hit him, as he considered that and then had the bionoid's onboard computer go over some other terms...the Benga language was intentionally designed to be *vague*, where an entire sentence might have multiple and very different meanings based on the intention of the speaker, but he hadn't realized the extent of it until he started hearing it being used by a native. It was quite possible for a Benga to use the exact same words in the exact same order to say both *I'll trade you this item for that item* and *you will give me that item and I keep this item*. But, considering the race that created the language, that shouldn't have shocked him. Deception was at the core of Benga mentality, represented strongly by their native tongue.

[Be very careful, Mesaiima, Ethikk. She's exploiting the vagueness of the Benga language. What you think she means may not be what she intends.]

[We know, Jason. We're ready for this,] Mesaiima communed back. "You'll have to excuse me to ask you to rephrase, Fleet Commander. Benga is not our native language, and I'm unsure of your meaning," she said apologetically.

"I mean that it is an amazing thing," she replied with a slightly oily smile. "It's almost unfortunate that you are here in that machine, Madam President. We usually employ Arbiters with telepathic capability for things such as this, to act as both mediators and translators. We're aware that non-Benga have...difficulty understanding our language as we speak it."

"I'm sure that it's a problem we can easily overcome, Fleet Commander," Mesaiima told her confidently.

"And it might present an opportunity. If you could use those probes to contact my government—"

"Unfortunately, they don't have that capability, Fleet Commander," Mesaiima interrupted her. "While they can receive your transmissions, they have no communication equipment in them to *transmit* using your style of broadcasting. They can only listen. We currently have probes en route that *can* transmit, but they aren't scheduled to arrive for six orbits. It *is* a long way to your home from here."

"Ah. Well, it was a thought," she mused. "It would be best for all involved for you to negotiate directly with my government, but this will

have to do.” She scratched her jaw absently. “If you know of us, then you know of our long conflict with the Consortium. This fleet was dispatched to destroy the advance fleet they sent here six orbits ago, to prevent them from gaining a foothold in this galaxy. As I suspect you are aware, they have sent a much larger force behind it, which the first fleet was to prepare territory in this galaxy for their arrival.”

“We’re aware of both of those facts, Fleet Commander,” Mesaiima replied.

“What you may not be aware of is that the latest intelligence I received before departing warned that the Consortium intends to send their *entire* fleet to this galaxy, as well as every civilian they can put into a stasis pod,” she said. “They have effectively lost the war against my government, and now they intend to retreat to your galaxy to establish new territory. It’s been orbits since we received any information from our government, but by now, the Consortium must have amassed every ship they can find and begun the process of putting their civilians in stasis for the journey. They intend to invade your galaxy, Madam President, with *millions* of ships and *billions* of soldiers and *hundreds of billions* of civilians.”

That *did* match some of the information that Zaa’s scouts had uncovered in Andromeda. The Consortium had nearly twenty million ships, mostly civilian freighters and transports, concentrated in ten star systems at the rim of the galaxy, and she was probably right that at that very moment, they were putting civilians in stasis on them and preparing to launch them towards the Milky Way. The Consortium was preparing to abandon Andromeda, and the ruling energy beings were at that moment negotiating a formal surrender with the Syndicate to save those they couldn’t evacuate.

“We are fully aware of the situation, Fleet Commander, and we have already dealt with it,” Mesaiima answered.

“Pray tell, by what manner have you done so?” she asked.

“Most of that information is privileged, but what I’ve been authorized to tell you is that we have already put in place a plan to neutralize the colonizing fleet before it gets even halfway across the void between our galaxies. You need to warn your government in the strongest possible terms *not* to try to chase down or engage that fleet, else they will stumble into our

trap and most likely destroy themselves. We know they are coming, and we have already taken care of them.”

“So you needn’t worry about us, Fleet Commander. We have the situation well in hand,” Ethikk declared in a mellow, casual tone.

“I would not suppose that you did not, given how much time you have had to prepare for them, High Staff,” she replied with a mild smile. “So, it seems that the main reason for our mission is complete, and with us not having to fire a shot. The best kind of military expedition, in my opinion,” she added. “But that does lead us to the other half of our mission. We would like an exchange of data with your government about various scientific topics, so we might both expand our knowledge. We would also like to discuss the possibility of a military alliance against the Consortium. They are your enemies as much as they are ours, since they seek to invade your galaxy. I’m sure we can reach some agreements that I can take back to my government, and when your probes arrive so that we may establish real time communication, they can be refined and formalized. In the interim, since I can only speak for my fleet, I think an official non-aggression treaty should be discussed and ratified. We are not your enemies, Madam President.”

“I’m sure that we can reach some accommodations in that regard, Fleet Commander Sha Ra, but there are three points upon which I have been instructed are not negotiable, and it is only fair to you to understand those three subjects up front,” Mesaiima answered. “Firstly. Under absolutely no circumstances will any ship in your fleet be permitted to enter our galaxy, not even a single personnel shuttle. Secondly. The sensor blockade we have erected along our galactic rim to prevent your ships from conducting scans of our galaxy will not be taken down. And thirdly. The communications jammer we have in place that prevents you from receiving transmissions from your home galaxy cannot be taken down. To communicate with your government, you must move beyond its range, which I have been told is 3,500 light years from this position. While that jammer was not designed to block the type of intergalactic comm you use, it *does* affect your systems. It was built to prevent Consortium ships from communicating with their government, and your misfortune lies in that your system is similarly vulnerable to its effect. It jams any form of communications based on using manipulating or modulating hyperspace or hyperspace-based energies, and your system falls within that range.”

“But I was under the impression that you have defeated the Consortium fleet,” she noted.

“We have, but there is always the chance that a single ship might have escaped, and our jammers ensure that if that did in fact happen, that ship has no way to communicate with its government. The jammer will not be deactivated until we are absolutely, positively sure that there are no more Consortium ships operating in our galaxy. If our trap for the invasion fleet fails, we do not want that fleet to have intelligence sent to it from a hidden spy ship in our galaxy about where to go and what to do. We are not *actively* jamming your ships, Fleet Commander, you have entered an area of space that was under the jamming effect well before you arrived. To communicate with your government, all you need do is send a communications relay probe beyond jammer range and have it relay that data back to you. Your mid and long range gravband systems are not affected by the jammer, so you can communicate with your probe with only a time delay of a few seconds.”

The woman glanced at the male to her left, the tallest of them, then gave Mesaiima a calm yet slightly amused look. “Well, I suppose you have every right to be overly cautious,” she said. “I find no issues with those three articles, Madam President. We will not go where we are not welcomed. And it gives us the opportunity to fulfill our mission without having to actively do it ourselves,” she said, leaning back in her chair. “You can supply us the data our scientists wanted us to collect, and we can take it back home with us. That will make this expedition more profitable.”

That was far too easy for Jason to think that they didn’t think they already had a way around it, but Mesaiima’s voice didn’t show even a hint that she felt the same. “I’m sure we can reach some agreements, Fleet Commander Sha Ra,” she said amiably. “After all, there is more no noble a pursuit than the pursuit of knowledge.”

“Naturally. First, though, we should discuss a formal non-aggression treaty between your people and my fleet, to set in treaty and law our desire for peace,” she answered. “do you have the capability to read our language, Madam President?”

“We do, at least the common forms used in your entertainment broadcasts,” she replied. “That is the foundation upon which we learned

your language, Fleet Commander.”

“That’s fairly comprehensive, so you should have little trouble,” she replied.

For nearly three hours, Mesaiima and Sha Ra debated over the non-aggression treaty. It was a simple enough concept, and the document began as only two paragraphs, but Mesaiima showed her formidable skills by locking the Benga down on the wording of the treaty. Any sentence, clause, or even single word that could possibly be construed to have a meaning different from what Mesaiima intended was challenged, causing multiple rewrites and drafts. Mesaiima had reached her 22nd draft before she was satisfied with the basic document, then they argued for nearly another hour over the specific language within that framework, often quibbling over the definition of a single word. Mesaiima was making the treaty ironclad, with no possible way the Benga could deliberately interpret it in any other way but what Mesaiima intended, which turned what would be a two paragraph treaty into a four page document that specifically spelled out the very simple concept that the two opposing sides wouldn’t shoot at each other, and further barred Syndicate vessels from entering the Milky Way. Mesaiima had even gone to the extent of defining the borders of the galaxy, so the Syndicate knew exactly where they could and could not go.

Which Jason felt was completely pointless. Sha Ra was only putting up a token “fight” over the language of a treaty she fully intended to violate at her earliest convenience.

When Mesaiima and Sha Ra formally signed that document, Jason was *very* glad that he asked her to be here. Maybe only three members of the council could have managed that, and one of those other two was sitting right beside her. The third would be Krirara, who was very much underestimated by the council. When Sha Ra signed it, she had one of her lackeys take their copy to a shuttle. “I think this is a good place to stop, friends, we can discuss the rest of the agenda tomorrow,” she offered.

“That’s more than acceptable, Fleet Commander,” Mesaiima answered. “It is coming on to dinnertime for us.”

“I would invite you to dine on my ship, but I don’t think those machines eat.”

“They don’t,” she nodded. “It’s the *real* me that’s getting hungry, and I’m afraid I’m a bit too far away to accept your invitation.”

She gave a husky laugh. “The food would be quite cold by the time you arrived,” she agreed lightly. “Well then, I offer that we meet again at sunrise here on this beach, so we might enjoy its natural beauty before getting to the boring discussions. That’s about 14 divisions from now. Is that acceptable?”

“Quite,” Mesaiima agreed.

“And we’ll have a proper chair for you tomorrow, Madam President,” she promised with a smile.

The two sides bid a formal farewell to one another, then they got back on the shuttle. Jason was the first to take off as the Benga shuttle was still loading, not paying much attention as the others discussed the summit, each giving their impressions of the Benga and what they had seen and heard while Jason flew out of the atmosphere and was again escorted by one of those winged Syndicate destroyers. It escorted them to the edge of the Syndicate’s fleet around the planet, and when it veered away with its lights blinking, Jason accelerated and adjusted course to get back to their ships. The ships were so far out that it was going to take nearly an hour to reach them at the shuttle’s maximum speed.

“What did you think, Jayce?” Dahnai asked.

“I think that it was a well wasted four hours,” he answered. “But nothing we did today is going to matter in the end.”

“That’s a rather pessimistic viewpoint, Jason,” Magran chided.

“I have absolutely no faith the Syndicate will adhere to the agreement they signed,” he answered bluntly. “And they were entirely too eager to sign it without even contesting our three conditions.”

“If they have no ill intent, why should they?” Magran challenged. “They have no real reason to enter our galaxy.”

“We’ll see,” Jason grunted. “Why don’t you guys go ahead and stow your bionoids and take a break? I’ll join you after I get the shuttle back to the ship. The quiet time will give me some time to think things over. I

always do my brooding in private,” he said lightly, which made Dahnai laugh.

“That’s true enough,” she agreed.

“I think I’ll take you up on that, Jason. I’ve needed to visit the restroom for an hour,” Ethikk,” said.

“Me too,” Magran admitted. “I guess it’s a good thing the merge doesn’t block that, or I’d unhook from the merge pod with a very wet seat.”

The others seated their bionoids in the chair restraints and disconnected from them, leaving him more or less alone in the shuttle, and that gave him time to think. He hadn’t seen anything that changed his mind, had further convinced him that he was right. Their complete lack of trying to get a ship into the galaxy or have them take down the jammers was a big warning bell for him, but he was actually more worried about tomorrow. Now that the non-aggression treaty was signed, he was certain that tomorrow, Sha Ra was going to do her best to get them to reveal as much information about themselves and their capability as possible. The others were going to need to practice some strong message discipline tomorrow. He waited until he was *very* far from the Syndicate fleet to discuss things with the CBIMs over commune, as well as receive some information. *[The Tianne is back on the board, Jason,]* Cynna told him while they were discussing the summit. *[They just finished testing. The ship is fully operational.]*

[How about the crew?]

[They’re finished with the training regimen, so they’re certified,] she answered. *[The ship is ready.]*

[That’s good news. Something tells me we’re going to need it, very soon,] he declared, his niggling worry bleeding into his thought. *[Did you tell Lorna?]*

[Just a moment ago. She’s almost dancing in the command center.]

Jason had to chuckle. *[What’s Myli’s ETA on certifying the project?]*

[She hasn’t changed her estimates. Maybe three more months,] Cybi answered. *[There’s a lot of work left to be done, Jason. She’s barely done a third of her planned tests. Palla’s going to be operating by a very strict set of protocols until those tests are complete.]*

[And it seems we've stumbled across something with the merges,] Cyra noted. [The others are all in sickbay with splitting headaches.]

[What? Why? We've had people merged way longer than this,] Jason protested. [The scout ship crews have been doing ten hour shifts since they started out.]

[From hyperspace,] Cyra pointed out. [And they've yet to change shifts. We should have a few of them change now and see if they suffer similar effects.]

[A good idea,] Cybi agreed.

[Yeah, do it. If they get headaches too, we'll know. We'll just have to figure out what's causing it.]

By the time Jason got the shuttle back to the ship, they had their answer. The ship crew too suffered bad headaches after delinking from their bionoids, headaches that Songa ruled were psychosomatic, *not* physical. She countered them with pain medication and a forced nap, putting the crew on medical tables with sleep inducers and having them sleep it off. Jason landed the ship in the bay and shut it down, then locked his bionoid in the pilot's chair and leaned his head back. *[Captain, I'm delinking now,]* he warned. *[If you need me, send it back through the KMS. Keep your eyes open and the crew ready, Captain. We're in hostile territory.]*

[Understood, your Grace. Have a good rest,] a different woman answered...the captain must have changed shift with the next one. The scout ship had three captains, one for each shift.

Jason dropped the merge, and in a split second, he was back in the merge pod. He blinked his eyes and took a moment to adjust to being "back" in his real body, then Songa was there with a medi-scanner before he could even move to get out. "Hold on, dear," she said, waving the device close to his head. "Are you starting to develop a headache?"

"Nope," he replied aloud. "I feel just fine, just the usual after-effects from a bionoid merge. And they're already fading."

"Well, your vitals show completely normal," she announced, touching his forehead with her fingertips, then she peered intently into his eyes as she shone a small pen light into them, looking at his pupils. "Pupillary

responses are normal. Alright, dear, go ahead and get up. Let me know if you feel anything unusual.”

He did so, stretched a little after hours of not moving, and endured a little more mothering from Songa for nearly five minutes. When he didn't start to develop a headache, she pursed her lips. “I need to take you to the clinic here in the building, dear,” she said. “The fact that you *didn't* develop a headache when the others did means that there's a difference here, and it may or may not be because you're a Generation. It might have to do with the fact that you're Terran, or maybe the way you merge isolates you from the effect. Either way, I want to get some readings and compare them to the others, see if we can isolate why you seem immune to the effect.”

“Sure, dear,” he replied. “Just don't keep me in there all night.”

The mystery got solved about twenty minutes later, after Songa conferred with Cybi, and the CBIMs analyzed the data. Jason was sitting with the other five rulers in the clinic, all of them listening as a hologram of Cybi addressed them. “*We've figured it out, Songa,*” she declared. “*It's being caused by the time dilation between here and Oasis. Time is moving approximately three percent faster there than it is here, and the difference in time is creating something of a mental schism in those merged to bionoids operating in a noticeably different temporal frame compared to their bodies. The reason Jason isn't affected by this phenomenon is because he's a Generation. His ability to focus his attention on more than one thing at a time, a fundamental difference in the way his brain works compared to the others, allows part of his mind to operate in the temporal frame of the bionoid, and the other in the temporal frame of his real body. That prevents him from suffering the psychosomatic shock of time working differently between his mind as it perceives it and his body.*”

“That's very, very interesting,” Songa said, giving Jason a speculative look. “Suggestions for the crew?”

“*We're developing a temporary software upgrade that will cause bionoid pilots to perceive time at the local level while in their bionoids,*” she replied. “*It will make their reaction speed in the bionoids slow down, since they'll be operating as if they were in our temporal frame, but it will prevent the headaches when they end the merge. We'll come up with*

something more permanent that doesn't impact crew performance once we have time to study the problem more in-depth."

"It's not really going to be a problem unless the bionoids are operating deep in flat space," Jason shrugged. "So the software fix syncing bionoid operations to local time should be good enough for now."

"Why Jason, I had no idea you had two brains," Ethikk said playfully.

Jason laughed. "I don't. I just have the ability to concentrate on more than one thing at a time."

"You should see some of the tricks he can do," Dahnai laughed. "And I bet it's why he's so good at playing the *piano*. Each hand can do its own thing."

"Still, we've learned something new today, and that's always good," Songa decided. "Send that information to Rook, Cybi if you please, he'll need it for the bionoid project."

"*Good idea, Songa,*" Cybi agreed.

"I did warn you that the bionoids are still in development," Jason said to the others.

"I don't mind beta testing, Jason. It's fun," Holikk said with a fanged grin.

"All of you are free to go, august rulers," Songa told them. "Just take it easy for about three hours or so, and then you are free to return to your normal activity. If you have the headache return, please inform the Medical Service immediately, and a doctor will be dispatched to aid you."

"Of course, Doctor," Dahnai said deferentially, showing that even the Empress knew better than to cross the Medical Service.

"Well, guess it's time to go in there and listen to the others talk," Jason grunted.

"I said *take it easy*, dear. By medical order, all of you are excused from returning to the summit," Songa declared. "They can fill you in on what they discussed with a report."

“I love you, Songa,” he said fervently, which made all five of the others burst out laughing.

Jason couldn't deny that this planet *was* quite lovely.

He stood on the beach and admired quite a spectacular sunrise along with the others, who had just disembarked from the shuttle to begin the day's talks with the Syndicate. The star of this system was nearly the same size as the Karis sun, just white instead of blue, so the sun dominated the eastern horizon as it rose up over the blue water, nearly twice the size of the Terran sun, at least by appearances. This planet was nearly half again as far from its sun as Terra was, but given the star was twice the size as the Terran sun, it made it much larger in the sky. So, the effect was a giant sun rising over the eastern horizon, a flickering shade of red due to the way the light was hitting the nitrogen/oxygen atmosphere. If he were here in person, he'd be able to comfortably walk around on this beach without any EV gear whatsoever. The planet was 1.04 gravity, 1.26 pressure, putting it a little high on both spectrums for a Terran but still within their tolerance, the gravity just high enough to classify the planet as heavy gravity for Faey. For a Terran not acclimated to KMS standard gravity, .97 was officially heavy gravity.

But what truly made the view so amazing was the view of the galaxy. Above the sun rising on the horizon was the ghostly image of the Milky Way, a white disc hanging nearly vertically in the sky and dominating nearly half of the eastern sky. The sun rose up into the foreground with the galaxy behind it. Oasis was far enough out from the galaxy for them to be able to see it, since the star rested above the lateral axis of the galaxy, and that gave them a viewpoint of looking down on the from about a 20 degree angle. Jason could make out the core and a couple of the spiral arms of the galaxy, just barely, with the rest of it a white bar that narrowed at the edge. At night, he'd already learned from pictures, the night sky of Oasis was total black except for the other stars in the Strands, a few of the smaller satellite galaxies appearing as stars in the sky, and Andromeda a single point of light in an ocean of darkness, a lone “star” in a black sky. Looking up at the Milky Way drove home the fact that Oasis was not in the galaxy.

“That’s quite lovely,” Dahnai said from behind him, putting a hand on his shoulder.

“I was thinking the same thing myself,” he agreed, putting a hand on her waist briefly. “Just keep what Songa said in mind, hon.”

“I think we can manage getting things done with breaks every two hours,” she told him. Since the upgrade wasn’t ready yet, Songa had worked out that if they took a break from the merge every two hours, it would vastly reduce the headache they got after breaking the merge. Mesaiima was going to arrange that, making up some excuse no doubt, but they’d be taking those breaks in shifts so there was always at least three here to both continue discussions and keep an eye on the bionoids.

So far, the Syndicate had behaved. They’d made no attempts to approach their three ships, hadn’t even tried sending probes in their direction to get closer readings, but what Jason had noticed was that another 870 ships had left the system and were either in other systems in the Strands or on the way to them. They were spreading out along the Strands...and why, Jason wasn’t sure. Given they knew nothing about the Confederation, they should be keeping their fleet concentrated for mutual defense against an unknown foe, yet they were scattering across the Strands, even going to the other two inner bands in the formation. There were three distinct “rings” of stars in the formation, and Oasis was in the outermost of those rings. The two inner rings were a pretty fair clip away from Oasis, trips of six and 14 hours in hyperspace respectively to reach, and that was if the ships were going straight to the other two rings. One group of Syndicate ships was en route to a system nearly four days away by hyperspace, which meant that their crews were in stasis for the journey.

They’d done some examination of those pods from the Kimdori hyperspace probes seeded in the system. They managed to isolate one and scan it, and it was a pretty clever use of technology. It isolated the living being from hyperspace in much the same way that the jacks did. It put them in a state that was *almost* like sleep, effectively disconnecting the living thing from its sensory input, but it didn’t put them to *sleep*. It put them in a nearly metaphysical state where they were awake and aware, but had no sensory input...a state that would drive most people just as insane as hyperspace, if not for the fact that it cycled them between a true “suspended

animation” state and a REM state. In most sentient beings, an REM, or dream state, caused the mind to somewhat disconnect from the body, effectively paralyzing the body so stray signals sent by the dreaming mind didn’t cause the body to move and causing it to favor the dream’s sensory input over what its senses were telling it. So, whenever the stasis pods cycled them into the REM state, the crews *dreamed* for those years that it took to reach their galaxy, cycling in and out of a continuous dream that had lasted for five years. The dream state kept their minds somewhat active, and that was what allowed them to regain a coherent state so quickly when the stasis was ended, while the dreamless state allowed their minds to rest, to “sleep” in a more conventional sense. If they were put in a state of suspended animation for the entire trip, it would take their minds hours, maybe even days, to “restart” as it were, to become fully cognitive and functional. By cycling the crew in and out of a state of mental activity that was isolated from the ravages of hyperspace, it prevented their minds from atrophying over the course of the journey.

Jason was almost curious about what it would be like to dream for five years. He supposed it would matter what kind of dreams he had. If they were good dreams, maybe he wouldn’t mind it so much. But if it was five years of nightmares...that would be hell. He supposed that after enough experience with it, the crewman in stasis could control his dreams, which would make the five years *fun*. Five years in a dream where you could do anything you wanted, be anything you wanted. That would be...be *cool*. Hell, it would be *addictive*, which was why the stasis pod cycled the occupant between the unaware dreamless state Jason would have expected from something like a stasis pod and the “dream state,” most likely to prevent them from getting addicted to it and give the mind a rest from their somnomic flights of fancy.

Living in your own world where you had total power and control would make a lot of people not want to go back to the real world, but the Benga had dealt with that possibility in their stasis pod design.

They’d learned two things through their analysis, and both were pretty remarkable. First, a different model of stasis pod was capable of imparting information directly into the mind of the occupant by manipulating the REM state to cause that information to pass to them through the dream state, bringing them up out of the state *just enough* so that information

could pass to them. It was done mostly in the form of audio, they'd worked out, bringing the occupant into a state of near-awareness of their senses and passing on information by audio, keeping the mind in a dream state that prevented hyperspace from affecting it yet aware enough of what it was hearing to process what the ship was telling it. That information was incorporated into the dream, became part of it, which allowed the recipient to receive information or instructions without having to be brought out of stasis. Secondly, they'd learned that telepaths could use their talent in the stasis state, and that was how the ship passed information to the crew. The pods of the telepaths were different from the regular pods, built to allow them to pass information to the telepaths while they were in stasis, then they used telepathy to broadcast that information to the rest of the crew.

That was *brilliant*, as far as Jason was concerned. The telepaths most likely trained to learn how to disseminate their own dreams from what the ship's computer was telling them, then they spread that information to the rest of the crew using talent. A sleeping mind could be contacted and communicated with by a telepath, though it wasn't quite as easy as contacting a waking mind. Jyslin had had to teach him specifically how to do that when she was training him. Telepaths were capable of using their talent while sleeping, but that was a *very* advanced technique not normally taught to most telepaths, even among the Faey. It had taken Jason nearly two years to master the trick of it, and he almost never used it because it was *hard*, even for a telepath of his power and training. That trick was something that only telepaths like an Imperial Marine, an Imperial Guard, or a Generation would learn. But it seemed that the ability to use talent while sleeping was standard training for Benga military telepaths. That way the crew knew exactly what was going on when they were brought out of stasis. And if a crewman had a nightmare, the on-board telepath could step in and quash it.

It showed how the Benga used telepathy to its utmost potential, and in that respect, they were very much a force to be reckoned with. Mixing stasis with telepaths kept the crew informed as they traveled, kept them mentally healthy, and enabled them to quickly assume command of the ship and react to a situation when they were brought out of stasis.

That was what that transmission while the fleet was still in hyperspace was, Jason was sure of it. That transmission was relayed to the telepaths,

who then spread that information to the captain and crews so they knew what was going on *before* they reached Oasis. They emerged from stasis already knowing what was going on and what they needed to do.

Damn ingenious. Jason already had the Kimdori so thoroughly scan and analyze the stasis pods that they could reverse-engineer them so they could build them themselves. They might be useful to Rook and the bionoid program.

It just showed Jason why he should *not* underestimate the Syndicate. They may be technologically inferior, but what they had done with the technology they did have showed that they were *not* stupid.

At least they didn't have to wait long. After a very brief informal chat between Sha Ra and Mesaiima, they reconvened under the tent, this time with a backless chair for Mesaiima to sit upon and three new Benga on the other side of the table in addition to the original six from yesterday. As Jason expected, the six officers on the other side of the table almost immediately began digging, trying to engage them in casual smalltalk, which would cause them to reveal things. The six of them were prepared for that and had already worked out what they would tell the Benga and what they would not. They would tell them things about their social customs, would describe things about individual planets, and would very roughly describe the Confederation as a whole, but they would give no specifics.

Mixed in with those attempts to steer the conversation down tangents was official discussions about exchanging scientific data and repeated attempts to get Mesaiima to allow Benga into the galaxy. Not their ships, but individual Benga, primarily scientists who wanted to exchange that data with the Confederation in person. Mesaiima held firm over and over. Most of the official conversation was between Sha Ra and Mesaiima, with the other five officers injecting remarks here and there, and the three newcomers asking about the technology that they'd revealed to the Syndicate. These three represented the scientific arm of the Syndicate Navy, their highest-ranking engineering specialist, astrophysicist, and exobiologist. Each of them asked questions based on their specialties, from questions about their real-time comm that let them control the bionoids and the underlying technology that allowed them to connect to them in a way

that gave them that kind of complete control to questions about the diet of the six of them.

After the second break, all five of the others decided to rest a bit, mainly because the Benga had asked for an extended break of about half an hour so Sha Ra could tend to some of her duties. The others sat their bionoids in the shuttle while Jason remained behind to watch over them, getting a break from the merge so they didn't have a bad headache when they were done for the day. Jason decided to take a short walk along the beach and watch a pod of large whale-like animals drift by the beach, a group of about twelve or so animals that were about the size of a humpback whale, probably plankton feeders, making sure he stood back far enough so the advancing surf didn't get his shoes and robes wet. The entire galaxy was now up over the horizon, with the upper edge nearly directly overhead, an effect due to the rotation of the planet, with the sun of Oasis still squarely in the center of the galaxy. The galaxy in the sky would rotate all the way around the sky with the sun to return to its position halfway over the ocean at dawn tomorrow, due to the angular tilt of the planet and how it was positioned in relation to the galaxy. As the planet went around to the other side of its star in its orbit, the sun and the galaxy behind it would split up, and it would eventually put the galaxy on the opposite side of the sky to the star. Currently the planet was in its "apogee" point, directly opposite the galaxy in its orbit around its sun. When the planet achieved its perigee point, closest to the galaxy and at the exact opposite side of its orbit, the galaxy would dominate the night sky, "rising" as the sun sets and setting as the sun rose, and would no doubt be an awe-inspiring sight. The reason why was because the plane of the solar system around the star wasn't level, it was tilted down at about a 17 degree angle towards the galaxy, which put the galaxy on line with the orbits of the planets around the star. Most likely, the same gravitation force that pulled the star out of the Andrilles galaxy to become part of the Strands of Trelle had caused the entire solar system to tilt on its planar axis to angle it down towards the galaxy "below," which put the center of the galaxy on the same planar line with the star at the center of the system.

Astrophysics was an incredible thing.

He already had plans for this planet. When the Syndicate was gone, Oasis would be an extra-galactic outpost for the House Karinne. His

scientists would be here for *years* studying how this planet and solar system had developed outside the influence of a galactic gravity well.

“I do say, that’s quite an unusual thing to see,” one of the Benga scientists said to him, stepping up beside him and looking up, shading his eyes with his dark green hands. “It doesn’t hit you where you are until you see something like that.”

“I can agree with that,” Jason answered. “This planet is at its apogee to the galaxy. I bet when it’s at perigee, the galaxy in the night sky must be astounding.”

“You know your astrophysics,” he said approvingly, giving him a nod.

“It’s a hobby,” he replied modestly.

“I notice that they defer all the scientific questions to you, your Grace,” he observed. “Are you by chance a scientist when not ruling your empire?”

Jason chuckled. “I was an engineer before I was a ruler,” he answered. “So I have a scientific background.”

“Oh? What discipline?”

“Whatever was needed the most,” he answered honestly. “And I don’t have an empire, honored scientist. I rule just one planet.”

“And you rose to power from the sciences?”

“My planet is...unique,” he said cautiously. “Our system of government is partially based on heredity, where a ruling family manages the duties of rulership. But among those eligible for rule, the most qualified is selected from the candidates to take the position. I had to compete against the other members of my family to demonstrate my fitness to rule, as will those who seek to take my place when I’m ready to abdicate.”

“My, that’s definitely a very different way than how the Syndicate does it,” he chuckled. “What happens to those who fail? Do you have them executed?”

“Good lord no,” he snorted. “It’s not the last man standing. Those who decide examine the candidates who are eligible and select the most qualified family member to become the heir. I didn’t seek this office, in a

way, the office sought *me*. I would *much* rather be back in my old job as an engineer than running the house.”

“The others wouldn’t understand that viewpoint, but I do,” he said. “A scientist is a *scientist*, no matter what job he works. It’s not a job, it’s a way of life.”

“True enough,” he agreed. “How did you end up in the military?”

“It pays well, and it’s an avenue into a lucrative sponsorship with a corporation,” he replied. “The goal of any scientist in the military is to get noticed by the corporate research divisions so we get an offer to do real work. Besides, I must admit, there *is* plenty to keep me busy working as an astrophysicist in the Syndicate Navy. I get to do a lot of field study, and I get a paycheck whether I’m currently working on a project or not. There’s some security in that.”

“And I bet this system has been keeping you busy.”

“Oh my yes, this star and the entire formation,” he replied. “It’s expanded our knowledge of astrophysics already studying this exo-galactic stellar formation. I hope we stay here a while. I could study this formation for orbits and learn something new every day.”

“I do love the view,” Jason said, looking up at the galaxy.

“There must be light dampers in that machine’s eyes,” he chuckled.

“Yeah, I won’t damage the eyes looking directly at the star,” he admitted.

“I can’t tell you how insanely curious *everyone* in the science division is over that machine,” he said. “How it works, how you control it from so far away, how you *can* control it. We have nowhere near equivalent technology to it.”

“It’s more or less common technology in our galaxy,” Jason shrugged, using one of their prepared stances.

“It must be direct computer interface between your mind and the machine, but how you managed to create a universal architecture that works for vastly different species is what’s so impressive about it,” he said speculatively, looking Jason in the eyes. “It’s the only way you could

manage such complete control over this machine. I've studied the way it moves, how the eyes work, and its exactly mimicking a biological organism. It *acts* like a living thing."

"That's how they're designed to work," he answered. "They're made to be as lifelike as possible so people who interact with them don't feel like they're talking to a robot."

"Well, it certainly works," he grinned.

[Stop flirting with the Benga, babes, we're back and ready,] Dahnai communed form her bionoid.

Jason did not miss it. He saw the eyes of the scientist widen ever-so-slightly. And that confirmed to him that the Benga *did* have telepaths with the power and skill to pick up commune. He wouldn't be able to understand it, but he now knew that the machines communicated on a *telepathic* level, which would explain to him how they were controlling them in real time. He might also conclude that it was how they were controlling them *period*, if he believed that they had some kind of machine that was capable of telepathically merging a living thing to the telepathic machine. It would be a logical assumption to make, and it *was* how Jason did it, because he was a Generation. It just wasn't how everyone else did it.

He hated giving that away, but it was worth it to get confirmation.

"If you'll excuse me, science officer, my companions are back from their break, so we'll probably get back to the table soon," he said, then walked away from him and towards the shuttle. He watched the Benga do his very best not to run to the others, but he *did* walk fairly fast. Jason opened the hatch and helped Dahnai down and kept hold of her hand. *[That Benga all but running to the others is a telepath,]* he told them. *[He can hear commune. So now they know, and now we know they know.]*

[The question is, can he understand it?] Mesaiima asked.

[Given no other telepath that can hear it can, I'm going to predict that he can't. But I'm not going to assume it, so nobody discuss anything classified over commune within fifty kathra of any Benga or Syndicate vessel. That's beyond more than twice the local commune range of the bionoids. They have a 22 kathra commune range.]

[Good call, babes,] Dahnai agreed, squeezing his hand a little. [When you're up against the unknown, assume nothing and take no chances.]

Jason nodded and urged Dahnai to move on, then reached up his hand and helped Mesaiima down the stairs.

They spent nearly six hours both discussing scientific data and enduring the Benga trying to get them to talk about unimportant matters and thereby divulge information, but they didn't really get anywhere. Mesaiima ensured that they stayed firmly on topic, except in areas where the council had allowed them to be more forthcoming. For example, they released some generic information about their galaxy that anyone with a hyperspace telescope in Andromeda could obtain, and they related some of the cultural practices of members of the Confederation. Jason also released some *very* basic technological information, which just more or less confirmed what the Syndicate could reasonably deduce just by looking at their ships. Things like the fact that they used gravometric engines and used manipulated forms of plasma as a power source, which a ship more or less *had* to utilize in order to use real-time hyperspace jump engines. Jason showed them holograms of some planets without identifying them or locating them, generic images of cities like Farellex, capitol city of the Alliance, and Vestalla, the capitol city on Exeven. He showed them an image of Dahnai's Imperial Palace, and when they asked to see the "grand estate" where Jason lived, he showed them a picture of his modest three-story beachside Colonial...much to Dahnai's amusement. Jason was either intentionally vague or outright told them that he wasn't allowed to discuss such matters any time they tried to get any information that they might be able to use in a military manner. Jason discussed some physics with the same scientist that talked to him at the table with others listening, comparing their advancement, but didn't let on that he knew more about physics than the scientist did. Jason described himself as a scientific dabbler among the rulers of the Confederation, given his background as a "lowly" engineer before being chosen to rule the house, while the others kept strictly silent and let Jason handle all the scientific questions.

They took an extended break of nearly six hours and then returned to the table in the afternoon local time. They continued fencing with the Benga until well after sunset, when the night turned almost pitch black due to no moons in the sky and the night side of the planet facing away from the

galaxy. The sky only had a few tiny dots of light, distant galaxies on their side of the supercluster, with the brightest object in the sky being Andromeda itself.

Mesaiima stonewalled the Benga on out of bounds matters very effectively without ever being anything other than polite, gracious, and friendly, at least until the end of the conference. Sha Ra sent her scientists back to the ships, as well as all but one of her officers. When they were gone, she leaned back in her chair and gave them a steady, amused look. “Since we’re about at the end of this discussion, and this conference, I suppose we can be somewhat honest with each other,” she said. “First, I must applaud your diplomatic skills, Madam President. You’ve said absolutely nothing for two days, yet you’ve done it with a smile and with quite an entertaining and friendly manner. A lesser experienced officer sitting in my chair would almost believe that you don’t trust us.”

“It’s called being cautious, Fleet Commander,” Mesaiima said in an unruffled voice. “Were you in our situation, with giant fleets from little-known governments entering your galaxy, you would be very cautious as well.”

“And I can empathize,” she acceded. “But you’re definitely sending conflicting messages. You show up in ships far inferior to the technological level of the machines they carry, projecting both weakness and strength at the same time. The ships themselves are brilliant examples of clever diplomacy, as are your mysterious surrogate machines that are immune to telepathy while communicating with each other using a form of telepathy my scientists have never encountered. Telepathic *machines*...you are truly far more than you appear to be. As a Benga, I can appreciate your demonstration, but as a military officer, it makes me just as cautious of you as you are of us. You have shown little enthusiasm for treating us as non-aggressive visitors, and more like enemies.”

“When dealing with the unknown, caution is the wisest course,” Mesaiima said.

“And yet you’ve quite obviously rejected our attempts to get to know each other better,” she pointed out.

Jason spoke up. “We *know* who you are, Fleet Commander Sha Ra,” he declared bluntly. “What we do is make sure *you* do not know who *we* are.”

“We’ve only just met, your Grace.”

“I’ve had reconnaissance assets in your galaxy for nearly six sections, which was more than enough time to know who you are, not what you want us to see,” he retorted. “I’ve seen the entire *sectors* destroyed across the First Border. I’ve seen the debris fields from you using your Galvari planet killer weapons, the frozen bodies of the civilians floating through space. I’ve seen the slave markets of Cha’Sho Mairr, and I’ve seen the public blocks where people are put to death for the entertainment of the spectators. I’ve seen the skull of Methris Zun mounted on the gate of the Syndicate Corporate Headquarters. We know who you are, Fleet Commander Sha Ra, and because we know who you are, we give you *nothing* you can use against us. So long as you do not know who we are and what we can do, it will forever keep you uncertain as to just how wise it is to start a war with us. You will either roll over an unprepared group that puts on a good show, or you will find yourself waking an angry dragon that will then go on a rampage.”

“That is very bold speech, your Grace,” she said easily.

“That is truth, Fleet Commander,” he replied, as the others gave him startled looks. “We know the *truth* of you. Can even *you* dispute the fact that that fact gives us every right to treat you the way we have?”

“You judge us by the actions we had to take combatting the Consortium, your Grace, who I am sure you realized were absolutely merciless,” she replied evenly. “And some of those things happened thousands of orbits ago.”

“What a government has done in the past is a fair indication of how it will behave in the future when nothing in that government has changed,” he replied bluntly. “The Directors still control the Board. They may be different men than the ones from before, but they carry out the policies set by the corporations they chair, and the *corporations* they represent have not changed those policies, and those policies demonstrate a complete disregard for the lives of others. I must ask, Fleet Commander, which corporation

owns *your* contract? And how much sympathy do you think that corporation will feel if they terminate it, or terminate *you*?”

She was silent.

“So, if you find our reticence to be somewhat bothersome, Fleet Commander, now you know *why* we are so reluctant to be honest with you. Given the documented history of the actions of your government in Andromeda, we would much prefer not to see carnage of that magnitude visited upon *our* galaxy.”

“I think what the Grand Duke means to say is—”

“No, he’s said pretty much what he means to say,” Sha Ra interrupted Mesaiima. “And for one, I appreciate that level of candor, your Grace. I am no politician. I am a soldier, and a soldier likes to know where she stands. I can appreciate your position, and I will do my best to prove to you that while you have a good reason to take it, that you are wrong about us. When we leave to return to our home galaxy, Grand Duke, it will be as friends,” she said calmly.

Mesaiima was giving him a pretty unfriendly look.

“And in the interests of candor, I will forewarn you of our plans. We will spend approximately two sections studying the stars in this formation. I will order no ship to enter your galaxy, though I will allow them to take direct routes to other stars, which may cause them to approach your galactic rim on a tangential vector en route to their destination. You will be warned at least twenty divisions in advance before any Syndicate vessel undertakes any course that will bring it inside the first ring of stars in this formation. That warning will include the number of ships traveling, their origin and destination, their planned course, their departure time, and their arrival time. During those two sections, I hope to have at least one more face to face meeting with you to further advance diplomatic relations between our governments. In the meanwhile, I invite you to leave a communications buoy behind, placed more than far enough away that you have plenty of time to see any ship approach it, so we may remain in communication contact over long range gravband. I would also like to establish common data protocols so we might exchange information as data files. In addition, we invite daily diplomatic contacts so we might get to know each other

better, so we can prove to you that we are not now what we were forced to be during the war with the Consortium.”

“I’m sure we can accomplish a great deal in those discussions,” Mesaiima said calmly. “And I believe that this would be a prudent point for us to call these negotiations to a close.”

“I agree, Madam President,” Sha Ra nodded. “At this point, the best thing we can both do is just watch the other and see that we are honoring our word. That time will build trust, and when next we meet, that trust will hopefully advance our relations.”

Mesaiima smoothed over Jason’s little outburst, and after agreeing to leave a gravband buoy behind so they could communicate, she and Sha Ra officially brought the conference to a close. Jason didn’t say another word as he filed out of the open-walled pavilion and towards the shuttle, opened the hatch, and went straight for the cockpit chair. The others filed in behind him one by one, and both Magran and Mesaiima didn’t look very happy with him at all, where Dahnai, Holikk, and Ethikk were looking at him very oddly; that wasn’t usual behavior for him. He started the engines as they sat down, then he closed the hatch and lifted the shuttle off the ground.

“Care to explain what that was about, Jason?” Mesaiima demanded. Now that they were alone, they reverted to their usual means of communication, everyone speaking their native language. The bionoids’ onboard computers translated any language the driver couldn’t speak for them.

“Hold on, not ‘til we’re out of the atmosphere,” he said. “They may have planted an acoustic bug on the hull, and there’s always the outside chance that they can decipher our languages. I want out of their shortrange gravband range before we say anything.” They were all silent as the ship ascended over the dark ocean below, then they were out of the atmosphere and on a vector to return to the scout ship.

“We’re there. Talk,” Dahnai ordered.

“Oh, just setting the stage,” he replied amiably, almost jovially.

“You *staged* that?” Dahnai accused.

“Yup. Zaa’s idea,” he replied.

“And what reason did she have for that?”

“To reinforce the idea that there are members of the Confederation spoiling for a fight,” he replied as the destroyer that had escorted them the last three times fell into the same position ahead of them and escorted them through the thousands of Syndicate ships in distant orbit around the planet.

“I fail to see what advantage that gives us,” Holikk said.

“I do,” Ethikk said with a sly smile. “If they think that some hothead in the Confederate Navy might open fire, they might try to stage an incident.”

“Which puts some ships out as bait,” Jason replied with a nod, looking back at them. “One of Lorna’s objectives is to capture one of their super-ships. Well, maybe they’ll put one out for us to shoot at, which will give us the chance to board it instead,” he said.

“That will start a war, Jason,” Magran protested.

“This war is going to start no matter what, Magran,” he retorted. “Think about it. Why would they send a ship out as bait if not to *start* that war, just letting us do it for them?”

“That’s a good point,” Holikk mused.

“The Syndicate is about deception, so Zaa had the idea of using their penchant to play games against them. But, there’s always the chance that they don’t take that risk. After what I saw over the last two days, this Sha Ra woman just might go back to Andromeda without trying to invade. After all, we have her in a pretty unfavorable position. They’re six days from the galactic rim, and now she knows that any attempt to invade the galaxy is going to get met with a strong defense. From her point of view, there’s no telling how many ships we can stack in front of any invasion fleet she sends. If she decides to follow her orders, we’ve given her the perfect pretense to invade without blatantly breaking the non-aggression agreement, which is the Benga way. She puts out a bait ship for someone to attack without authorization and uses it as a pretense to declare war, unaware that we set that ship up for *capture*. And once we get one of their ships, we can really tear it apart and learn how it works in ways Kimdori scanners can’t tell us.”

“I would have preferred to know about this game, Jason,” Mesaiima said sternly.

“Your reaction had to be genuine, Mesaiima,” he told her. “Now she knows that there are Confederate members spoiling for war and others very much against it. She’ll see it as discord within the ruling chambers of the Confederation, and thus an opportunity she can exploit in furtherance of her own plans. She sees what we *want* her to see.”

“You’re setting a trap within a trap within a trap. That’s so Karinne,” Ethikk said, then he laughed ruefully. “Remind me never to play you in *shagwa*, Jason.”

“I cheat, Ethikk,” he admitted evenly. “Outrageously.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised if you did,” he replied with a toothy grin.

They discussed the day’s topics on the nearly two-hour trip back to the scout ship, the Syndicate destroyer veering off after reaching the edge of the Syndicate fleet, and he landed in the landing bay. “We’re secure aboard, Captain,” he said over gravband. “You can start the ships back for home space.”

“We’re preparing to jump now, your Grace,” she answered over the comm. “You and the other council members should go ahead and delink now, and we’ll get your toys home for you.”

Dahnai laughed. “I’m keeping this,” she said, patting her chest. “Jayce said he’ll send it to the summer palace once it gets back, and I am *so* gonna use it. It’s kinda fun being this tall.”

“I almost wish I could keep mine,” Holikk agreed with a fanged smile.

“Dahnai’s summer palace is the only reason she gets to keep hers, since she’s not taking it off planet,” Jason told him. “And I don’t love you enough to sell you property on Karis, Holikk,” he added in a deadpan voice that made Dahnai explode in laughter.

They all delinked from the bionoids, then moved from the merge room to the council chambers and endured nearly four hours of debate among the council members. Magran wasn’t the only one a bit miffed about Jason’s outburst, but neither he nor Zaa were particularly penitent over it. And leaders like Grran and Shakizarr appreciated the move for its potential

value. They also tested out the comm buoy that the scout ship had left behind by contacting the Syndicate fleet, and Mesaiima took the podium to address Sha Ra.

“And I take it that is the real you, Madam President?” she asked mildly.

“It is, Fleet Commander, though I don’t think I look much different this way. Just smaller,” she said with a smile. “It seems our comm buoy is in working order.”

“Indeed. I will arrange it with our communication department to contact you every ten divisions and issue a status report. Where our ships are, where they plan to go within the next ten divisions, and the estimated time they will remain at any location. We will provide you with maximum transparency for our fleet movements, Madam President, in the interest of peace and amicable relations with your government.”

“That is most appreciated, Fleet Commander. If it pleases both of us, we can hand this conference off to the relevant members of our diplomatic offices to organize things.”

“Of course. However, any time it is anything important, I’ll be issuing the report myself.”

After that, it was just rehashing everything they’d seen and heard over the sensory feeds sent into the chamber from the bionoids, so Jason didn’t really pay all that much attention to the debates.

Eventually, mercifully, they decided to call it a day. Jason filed out of the Hall of Peace with the others, who were going to go back to their quarters for the evening, and most of them would be leaving tomorrow after the last scheduled meeting. Dahnai was planning on staying over a few days, and Jason had talked Krirara and Kreel into staying over as well, more or less just to hang out.

But there was other business to tend. About sunset, Jason got back home, and Yila Trefani was in his hot tub with Tim and Symone. She’d asked him for a meeting and had been waiting for him to finish with the council, but she certainly wasn’t bored. Yila was an often enough visitor on the strip for her to know everyone and have quite a few friends among Jason’s inner circle...and sometimes he wasn’t sure he liked that fact too much. Yila was very good friends with Tim and Symone, and with Zora and

Sheleese. *It's about time, Jason*, she sent as he came up the steps from the landing pad behind the house, just beside the guard barracks. *How did the negotiations go?*

About what you'd expect, he replied as Tim blatantly pawed Yila's breasts, which only made her glance at him in amusement and Symone grin.

Don't start something you can't finish, Tim, she warned.

Oh, just think of it as giving you a reason to hang around after Jason finishes talking with you, he replied, pinching one of her nipples brazenly.

You just guaranteed that, she warned, then she stepped up and out of the tub and picked up a towel.

Rook came up the steps with Aya and Dera, carrying a small briefcase. *"Grand Duchess Trefani, good to see you again,"* he greeted.

"You too, Rook. That what I think it is?"

"Yes," he answered, holding up the case a little

"Let's go up to my office, Yila," Jason prompted.

Upstairs, Jason and Rook took seats while Yila opted to stand in front of his desk to dry off, so she was scrubbing herself with her large towel while Rook spoke up. *"We're going to need Malra in the conference, Jason,"* Rook began.

"Sure," he replied, contacting Yila's simsense development lab over in Tamiren. Jason put a two-sided hologram up over the desk so both of them could see whoever picked up the call. The receptionist that answered immediately switched them to another panel, and Yila's head simsense developer picked up the call. Jason knew her, she was Yila's leading expert on simsense encoding and decoding. Malra was a cutie, a tall Faey woman with light pink hair she always wore in a topknot ponytail, to keep it from dragging the ground. It *did* drag the ground when she didn't do that. "Your Graces, Rook," she greeted. "It's about time, Yila. I've been waiting nearly two hours."

"Blame Jason, not me, Malra," she replied lightly.

"Alright, we're all here, so what have you got?" Jason asked.

“We’ve finished the new decoder programs for the Karinne sensor mesh system,” she answered with a nod, her ponytail bobbing. “We didn’t have to make very many changes to the base encoder/decoder algorithms we use for simsense units, so it didn’t take us very long. Instead of encoding to or decoding from a recording, the new algorithm does it in real time with the sensor mesh. It’s been finished for nearly a full day. I’ve literally been waiting for you to call me back.”

“I’ve finished the design for a moleculartronic bionoid and have built a prototype, Jason,” Rook added. “We’re going to use it to test Malra’s algorithm in a working unit instead of a simulator. We could have the other software ironed out and have the moleculartronic units ready for production in a few days. But the main reason we asked for this meeting, Jason, is we need to do that work here. Their facility doesn’t have the diagnostic equipment to work on the bionoids”

“Not a problem. Malra, assemble your team and get on a transport to Karis,” Jason told her. “You need Rook’s equipment to finish the project, you got it.”

“We can be there in two hours, your Grace,” she replied confidently.

“Rook, get a temporary facility you can use, I don’t want you doing this out of your house,” Jason chuckled.

“I’ve already done that, Jason. Remember, you promoted this to a full project eight days ago, so I moved the project into a lab over on the Academy satellite campus.”

“See how out of the loop I am?” he asked Yila, who chuckled.

“Well, you’re getting back into the loop, because we’re going to discuss those bionoids, Jason,” Yila told him, finishing her drying and sitting in the chair in front of his desk. “As in you and me are going to create a new company that produces and sells commercial bionoids. We build them on Tamiri, and we split the profits fifty-fifty. You provide the schematics and supply us with the sensor mesh systems they use, we build them, the company markets them, and we make a ton of credits.”

“That’s Kumi’s department, not mine, Yila,” Jason told her. “But I don’t object to your idea, as long as you don’t gouge.”

“Gouge? Why in Trelle’s silky hair would I gouge on the bionoids?” she asked. “It’s the tertiary market based on bionoid use where I’m going to rake in my profits, Jason, and I can’t exploit that if bionoids are too expensive for people or companies to buy. We’ll sell them all but at cost to get them out there, then pull in the credits on the extras that everyone will buy to use with the bionoids. How much does it cost you to build a bionoid, Jason?”

“Around C20,000 for a biogenic unit,” Rook answered. “I estimate a moleculartronic bionoid will be slightly more expensive, maybe C22,000, due to the processing requirements for the main computer.”

“So, to make building them profitable, I’d probably charge C25,000. That’s a fair profit, since we’ll be splitting it fifteen hundred each, and even I’ll admit that it’s too much for most people to spend on what’s effectively a big toy. Sure, upper middle class and rich people are going to buy them just for the fun of it, but most bionoids will be *rented*, and *that’s* where the money comes from,” she declared with a bright smile. “Just the profit potential in bionoid-based porn will be worth selling them cheap, because that means that companies will buy bionoids to set those things up. And even if you discount porn, there are other “experience” style businesses that can pull in money, like someone on Arctus renting a bionoid on Menoda and spending an afternoon just relaxing on the beach, able to experience the whole thing as if they were there themselves, because for all intents and purposes, they *are*. Then there are things like doing sports or activities someone wouldn’t usually do but will try out because they’re doing it through a bionoid, like the Terran cliff divers. No sane person would try that unless they were in a bionoid. Bionoids can do things that people can’t, and people will pay money to try those things out. A company will make back what they paid for the bionoid within a year if they’re doing it right, and everything after that is just pure profit.”

“You’ve thought about this,” Jason noted.

“You bet your big handsome dick I have,” she replied, which made Malra chuckle over the comm. “Me and Kumi already have quite a list of things we want to do with the bionoids, and every single one will rake in *obscene* profits.”

“As long as half those profits are ours, why should I argue?”

“Your half comes from the *bionoids*,” Jason,” she corrected. “When it comes to the tertiary business, we’re going to be competing.”

“Not really, we don’t have much interest in starting stuff like that off the planet,” Jason shrugged. “But you’re not cornering the market on tertiary businesses, Yila.”

“I don’t have to, I’m in a position to get them up and running *first*, so I’ll already be established once others realize the profit potential and start their own,” she answered easily. “And those businesses will be buying those bionoids from *us*, so we still profit off them. Sale, maintenance, upgrades,” she said, ticking her fingers. “All profit. It’s just like the simsense market. Even our competitors are making us money, because we own the patents. The bionoid using companies will still be earning us money, because they’re buying those bionoids from *us*.”

“Works for me,” Jason said. “Rook, you have plans for a moleculartronic bionoid ready to release?”

“That’s what is in here,” he replied, patting the case. “The complete template schematic for building a moleculartronic bionoid from scratch, all the way down to the components. Well, everything except the sensor mesh system. Yila will need to take this to her factory so they can get the retooling process started. We have to supply the sensor mesh system, and I’ve already arranged that with Trenirk. While the mesh system we’ll be supplying isn’t biogenic, we’re the only manufacturer with the specialized equipment required to produce them.”

“I do have one more demand, Jason,” Yila smiled. “I want a biogenic bionoid just like Kumi’s, and I’ll leave mine in Kumi’s house when I’m not using it. I know you won’t let me take it off planet.”

“That’s up to him, not me,” Jason said, pointing at Rook. “This is his project, and what you’re asking for is something outside the development budget. If he builds it, it’s on his personal time and you have to pay for it.”

“I already have everything I need to produce a bionoid that is a perfect copy of you, your Grace, and it doesn’t require me to do anything. I’ll just upload your specs into my factory, and ten hours later, the bionoid comes off the assembly line. As I said, it’s C20,000 for the unit.”

“Pocket change. Just give me an account to send it to, and it’ll be there as soon as I make the withdraw order. So, I expect mine to be ready tomorrow morning,” she said with a smile.

“We’re going to need at least ten moleculartronic bionoid units to do our testing, Rook,” Malra warned.

“I got your message, Malra. I have the other nine in production now; they should be ready in about three hours. So, right about the time we get your team settled in over at my lab, the test units should be delivered. We can get in a little work before it gets too late. It’s late afternoon over here.”

“Outstanding,” Malra said with an eager smile. “And it’s only mid-morning here, so we’ll be good for some several hours of work if you don’t mind working some late hours.”

“I don’t get tired, Malra, so I’ll be fine,” Rook told her.

“Sounds like you have everything under control, then,” Jason surmised. “How long do you think it’ll take to certify them, Rook?”

“If things go smoothly, three days,” he replied. *“That’s taking into account the fact that nothing ever goes exactly right. I’m budgeting in a good 15 hours to tracking down problems with the software/hardware interface.”*

“Good plan,” Malra chuckled. “We’ve already done about ninety percent of the work, your Grace. Now we just need to make sure our algorithm works with your sensor mesh system in a fully functional unit. As Rook said, if we don’t run into any major conflicts, we should have this wrapped up in a few days.”

“Sounds good,” Jason said. “Yila, I don’t think I have to say this, but you *don’t* start producing them until they certify them,” he warned as he pointed at Rook. “So you sit on those templates until they tell you you’re good to go.”

“I’ll have the factory retool to produce then wait for the call,” she nodded. “I can’t start producing them until they assure me the software is final anyway. I don’t want to waste money having to reprogram bionoids we already built.”

“Then I think we’re done here,” Jason said.

“I do believe we are,” Yila agreed. “Kumi will have to tell you what her plans are with the bionoids, Jason.”

“Yeah, I’ll have her come to my office first thing in the morning,” he said, making a note of it and sending it to Chirk with his gestalt. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, Krirara and Kreel should be here any time now.”

“We should be there in two hours, your Graces, Rook,” Malra announced, then her hologram winked out.

“Yes, and I have a little appointment with Tim,” Yila said in a predatory manner, standing up and throwing her towel over her shoulders. “It’s a good thing he’s here for me to play with. Nothing makes me hornier than the idea of making a fortune.”

“You are so hopeless,” he accused, which made her laugh delightedly.

He went from talking business with Yila to talking a different kind of business with Krirara and Kreel once they got to the strip, the three of them relaxing at the outside table, enjoying the Karisian sunset with some good food, good Makati ale, and more serious conversation than normal for these informal gatherings. They discussed the two days of meetings with the Syndicate, each of them describing what they saw, what they noticed, and then discussing their observations as Krirara held Bethany and Jason held Siyae, Amber sitting on the table near Kreel to keep an eye on the girls, and also to shamelessly beg for a little attention from Kreel. Amber adored both Kreel and Krirara. What all three of them agreed upon was the fact that the Syndicate wasn’t going to go quietly. “I think I do have one beef with you, Jayce,” Kreel said after finishing the last of his ale.

What?

“Zaa must be showing you things she’s not showing us, as usual. You got pretty specific with that rant.”

“If you want to get an early look at the report she’s compiling for the council, just ask her,” Jason answered, tickling Siyae’s sides and making her giggle. “She’s been moving pretty fast. She’s even made contact with one of the corporations that make up the Syndicate, her scouts posing as business agents.”

“That I have,” Zaa called as she strode towards the table. “Cousin, I have news.”

“Denmother, you didn’t tell me you were coming.”

“I wasn’t planning on it,” she replied as she reached the table, and then picked up Siyae almost as soon as the little girl held her hands out to Zaa. “My children have managed to achieve insertion into the Syndicate fleet,” she announced. “Two successfully boarded their shuttles and were taken up to their flagship. One has managed to take over the identity of a low-ranking Benga officer in engineering, and the other has taken the identity of an enlisted working in communications. From those two positions, they can gather intelligence about the Syndicate fleet from the inside.”

“Awesome work, Denmother,” Kreel said. “So they’re on the biggest ship?”

She nodded, bouncing Siyae a little bit in her arms as the toddler dug her fingers into the white fur just under her collarbones. “The remaining infiltrators are going to attempt to gain access to different ships through the scouting parties they’re sending to the planet.”

“Sooooo, since you’re here, Denmother, maybe you can explain to us some of what your scouts have found over in Andromeda,” Kreel suggested.

“What I have is not yet complete, Kreel,” she replied. “But I should be presenting a report to the council in the next few days. I think you can wait until then, can you not?”

“I guess so.”

“That is the other thing I came to discuss with you, cousin. I’ve asked the rest of the council to remain on Karis. When I present that report, it will be in person, not over galactic crypto.”

“Well, I guess I don’t have an objection, if some of them are willing to rough it here on Karis a while longer,” he replied. “Sovial can keep the gavel until we formally adjourn. But we’re not meeting daily. They can just hang around until you’re ready to give your report. I’m sure they can keep themselves busy until then.”

“You think Ayama, Surin, and Seido will get ticked if we stay over here for a few days, Jayce? It’s more fun to be on the strip.”

“Nah. And make sure you’re extra pissy and demanding while you’re here, Ayama needs the practice after all that time she took off,” he said with a slightly malicious smile.

Krirara chuckled. “You always lose these little fights with Ayama, Jason,” she reminded him.

“That’s why I keep trying. When I finally do win, it’ll be all that much sweeter,” he replied, which made Kreel laugh.

“Yeah well, I’ll let *you* fight with her, Jayce,” Kreel said. “I don’t want sand in my oatmeal again.”

Krirara burst out laughing, and Zaa chuckled. “That’s what makes it such a dangerous game, Kreel,” she warned. “Never aggravate the woman who cooks your meals.”

Zaa joined them at the table and talked a while, but ultimately, she had Jason come up to his office with her. She put the office in secure mode before he sat down, then came up to the desk and stood before it. “So, what secret secrets did you have in mind, Denmother?” he asked, speaking in Kimdori. Kimdori was necessary when they used *that* secure mode.

“I have made the decision to equip as many Kimdori ships as possible with the translight drives while we wait for the Syndicate to make their move,” she declared. “Thanks to Myleena’s team, we have a drive section we’re building on homeworld and upgrading our ships. I’ve ordered the fleet to only use them *exactly* as Myleena has outlined while she continues her tests. Even with them being experimental, what Myleena has worked out so far makes them useful.”

“I did the same, two days ago,” he told her. “Right now, every KMS ship not assigned to the CCM is on the board for a refit. It’s mainly bottlenecked by us having to wait for the factories to crank them out. And I had Myri take all our command ships off the board to get a drive into them. Lorna didn’t even bitch about it,” he chuckled dryly. “She thinks we’re installing them as an additional defense for the command ships when they use their GRAF cannons, so she supports it. I’ve got the other seven of them in Kosigi right now being upgraded.”

“A wise thing to do,” she agreed. “And that brings us to the real reason I’m here. Cousin, I would like us to form a small expeditionary force and send them to Andromeda, including establishing a more permanent base of operations than the converted battleship we are using now,” she told him.

“That’s almost insane, Zaa,” he protested. “If they capture our base—”

“I think I have found a way around that, cousin,” she said, putting a finger on her memory band. A hologram appeared in front of the desk between them, a star chart of Andromeda. Zaa had it zoom in, and zoom in, and zoom in, until it came to a stop at a four-star system deep in the galaxy. “This is system RX3-4564-8576-9992,” she said. “This is an exceptionally rare quadrinary supergiant system, cousin. Four blue supergiants in a stable complex orbit, and with a system of 46 planets and nearly 3,200 moons. It is, by far, one of the largest star systems my children have ever discovered. Its location close to the core renders all Consortium and Syndicate sensors incapable of scanning the system in any way but sending a sensor ship to do so locally, and the system is twenty sectors from the closest inhabited system. The radiation levels in the system are lethal to any but us and the Jakkans, and on the very limit of a Generation’s radiation resistance.”

“And how does this system matter, Denmother?”

“You’re an engineer with a great deal of education in astrophysics, Jason,” she said patiently. “What does that education tell you about this system?”

He looked at it, then brought up the overview of the system, containing the basic astrocartography data. It was truly rare, four blue supergiants, the largest class of stars known to science, in a very close formation. All four orbited a fixed point at various distances, and the complex gravitational pull between the four of them and the speed at which they orbited the fixed point made the entire thing stable. The planets in the system created a system that was nearly an entire light year in diameter, that was how powerful the gravity well of the four stars was, almost like small black hole. But unlike a black hole, that gravity well consisted of four gravity sources that were in high-velocity orbital motion. The gravity well of four supergiants that were moving with high velocity...*fuck*. That had to be absolutely insane—

The *gravity well*!

He gave Zaa an impressed look. “That is *cunning*, cousin,” he said. A gravity well that intense, that powerful, and with the gravity field caused by four massive gravity generators moving at high velocity introducing a rhythmic “frequency” of natural gravity waves, it would create an oscillation in the gravity field, and that would extend into hyperspace itself and introduce a massive amount of flux into hyperspace. That would knock *any* ship out of hyperspace, even a KMS ship. The flux was just too much even for their engines to handle. The system was a *natural* interdictor, and about ten times more powerful than their artificial ones! It would render hyperspace jump engines useless. He did the math in his gestalt, and the oscillating gravity well created a natural interdiction effect nearly 12 light years beyond the system for a KMS or Kimdori ship and 27 light years for about any other ship, making hyperspace so unstable that *no ship* had engines capable of managing the constant flux to traverse it. But the important statistic there was that Syndicate engines wouldn’t even be able to come within 27 light years of the planet.

The oscillating gravity field wouldn’t just affect hyperspace, either. It would wreak havoc with virtually all gravband comm systems, overloading the gravity wave carrier system they used for comm, and would also cripple anything that used spatial technology, including grav drives. A standard grav engine would overload trying to move anywhere inside .6 light years from the four stars, and the translation engines they and the Kimdori used would be useless within .116 light years. All spatial power plants would need additional shielding to operate within the effect, or the oscillation would cause them to execute emergency shutdowns else their cores would breach.

Fuck, from what he knew of Syndicate tech, their ships wouldn’t even be able to *operate* within .55657 light years of the four stars, the modulating gravity field would blow out their engines and cripple their fusion plants. Zaa had found a system that had conditions so hostile that their ships couldn’t come within half a light year of it. It was even hostile to *their* ships, would require them to refit them to operate in those conditions...but the difference was, KMS and Kimdori ships *could* operate in that system, where Syndicate and Consortium ships could not. The ships would have to be specially rigged to deal with those conditions, but they *could* work there.

The effect wasn't a threat to living things but was definitely a threat to gravband and spatial tech, which was *very* sensitive to this kind of effect.

The system had 46 planets, 44 gas giants and two icy terrestrial planets at the far end of the system, and over 3,000 moons. The Kimdori had discovered five moons in the system that were habitable, all orbiting the same gas giant, planet 21...almost like the 18 habitable moons in RJ-44, Janja being one of them. The planet orbited the four stars at a distance of .262 light years from the stars... and it was just the 21st planet of 46. The outermost planet orbited at .488 light years and had a "year" that lasted nearly 57,000 years. The five habitable moons were behind the incredibly powerful magnetic field of its gas giant planet and themselves had magnetic fields to protect them against the radiation emitting from the gas giant itself. Long range scans suggested that all five moons had ecosystems but no technologically advanced sentient species.

Incredible. Absolutely incredible. That deep into the galaxy, in the region where the core radiation was lethal to well over 99% of known life, life had somehow found a way to establish itself. It was an oasis of life in one of the harshest and most inhospitable environments Andromeda could present.

Five habitable moons inside a natural fortress. It all but screamed *forward base of operations*. Everything about the system made it hostile to any attempt for the Syndicate to get assets into the system, from its location deep in Andromeda to the natural interdiction effect created by its four suns to their ships being incapable of even coming within half a light year of the four stars at the center. Their sensors couldn't find it. If they did find it, it would take them 27 years to reach it. Even if they reached it, the radiation levels in the system would make it lethal to all but a very few species of known life, meaning that the loss of power or the loss of shields would kill everyone in the ship...and that was *exactly* what would happen when they got within .55657 light years of the system center, and the oscillating gravity well burned out their engines and made their power plants shut down, which would drop their radiation shields and kill everyone in the ship.

"We've already moved our station into the system," Zaa told him. "It is *perfect* for us, cousin. They cannot see it. They cannot scan it with long

range sensors due to its proximity to the galactic core. They cannot even get a sensor ship close enough to the system to get detailed scans. It is a natural fortress, hiding us and preventing them from getting in, where we can get in and out as we please. And even if they do get in, we can put the Stargate completely out of reach of them by placing it at the fixed point between the four stars.”

“It would melt, Zaa. Fuck, it would *vaporize*.”

“We can do there what we did with the quasar,” she told him. “We can shield the area enough to protect the Stargate and all ships moving in and out of it.”

“But why even bother with a Stargate, Denmother? A ship couldn’t leave the shielding area unless it has a translight drive, and if it has a drive, it doesn’t *need* a Stargate. Only a ship with a drive can even move around in the system, because it puts the ship in the translight state, and that protects it from the radiation while it’s moving. Ships couldn’t even go fifty kathra outside the shielded area without being melted to slag unless it had military grade shields...and that makes it a moot point, since ships with shields that strong will have a drive on them in the first place.”

“Not everything has a drive in it, cousin, mainly our heavy cargo ships,” she answered. “We need a way to move large amounts of cargo quickly to turn this system into a staging area for prosecuting an offensive against the Syndicate, and a Stargate is the answer. It will also allow us to quickly evacuate everything if necessary. Besides, we need a solid foothold in their galaxy, and this is our best option. It is *perfect*. Even if they know it is there, they have no way to reach it.”

“Unless they dig up some FTL tech out of their archives and install it on an attack fleet,” he warned.

“If we do things right, cousin, they’ll have no way to find us,” she told him.

“But it still comes down to them capturing our base.”

“Again, I think we have found a way around it, cousin. And that is *this*.”

The hologram changed, and it showed one of the Syndicate super-ships, one of their moon-sized spherical ships that reminded Jason of the Death

Star from *Star Wars*. But this ship clearly wasn't one of their actively commissioned ships. It had a gigantic breach in the hull that had to be 100 kathra across, a hole that went *completely through* the ship, like some titanic bead or pearl from a necklace that came loose from the string. It almost looked like what their simulations said a GRAF cannon would do to one of those ships, just one with a beam diameter of 100 kathra. The hole went directly through the center of the ship, almost perfectly so, and a zoom in showed that the edges of that ghastly wound showed signs that the metal and materials had been melted...that made it more like a stellar collector weapon. Something truly horrifying had been fired at that ship, something that had burned and melted a hole completely through a ship with a diameter larger than Draconis' smallest moon, and most likely killed the entire crew almost instantly from the flash-heating throughout the ship being struck by that weapon would have caused. His mind almost shuddered at the thought of what might have caused that damage.

“Our current base isn't the only drifting debris from battles from the distant past floating through their galaxy, cousin,” Zaa told him. “One of our scout ships encountered this abandoned hulk six hours ago. Scans indicate it has been adrift for nearly a thousand years. Like our base, it was a casualty of one of the many battles between the Consortium and Syndicate that was either lost in the chaos of war, forgotten, or deliberately abandoned. We salvage this ship, cousin, and we both repair it and upgrade it to make it a viable vessel. We even turn this catastrophic damage to our advantage by turning it into an internal docking bay. The hole is large enough for a KMS battleship to enter the breach, so we just build a docking unit inside. It will be a *mobile* base, holding our entire advance force. Our scans indicate that this ship had a capacity to hold some 120,000 crew and passengers, which makes it a mobile base of operations that can house, supply, maintain, and protect our entire expeditionary fleet within it. And thus we will have the capability to move it if the Syndicate finds a way into the system. The ship has jump engines in it, cousin. If we could repair those and install a drive section into the ship, we can get it back here, convert it, then send it back to serve as our forward command post. That is why I want the Stargate sent, cousin. We get the ship back to the system, send over what we need to repair the jump engines, install a drive, then get it back to Karis. Then we refit the ship and send it back to serve as a mobile forward base. In the meantime, we keep our drive-capable ships in the system and

use it as a forward base. We use the Stargate to get what we need out there to repair the ship's jump engines and install a drive, then we get it back here and refit the ship for our needs. We can even disassemble the Stargate into its four arc sections and carry it *in* the ship for the return journey."

"Or," Jason said, tapping his finger against his chin, "we build a Stargate big enough for it to pass through."

"Jason, I'm not sure that's possible," she said. "You know the science behind the gates. To create a wormhole that large, it would take an insane amount of energy."

"It's difficult, but it's *possible*," he told her. "KSTC already did the math when I asked them about how big a gate we could build, and if your scans are right, we can build one big enough to get this ship through. It would be a mammoth undertaking, though. It would be the biggest pair of gates ever built, and it would be packed with enough power plants for the gate to have the same energy signature as a dwarf star while it's operating."

"How long would it take them to build two of them?"

"About four or five months," he replied. "In the meantime, we could go get this derelict and tow it back to that system and start working on it. And when the time comes, we take the gate out there, link it, then get the ship through. Then we take it right back apart and bring it back. I'm not going to risk leaving something that important that deep in hostile territory, Denmother. I know you think this system is a fortress, but my KMS proved with the nebula in the PR sector that *no* fortress is impregnable. We got in there and took out the Consortium HQ, so I'm not going to think that the Syndicate couldn't find a way to get to that Stargate. They will *find a way*, Denmother. The prize is too enticing."

She gave him a long look, then nodded. "I disagree with you, but I do not fault you your caution, cousin," she told him. "We will need to equip some heavy cargo freighters with drives, so we can get a large amount of equipment out there quickly."

"Project F already designed drives for our KT-2K freighters," he told her. "They did it because they realized that if a ship's drive failed out in the middle of the universe, they may need a big freighter to carry a new drive

section in to replace it. So they designed a drive for a cargo freighter big enough to carry the drive section of a command ship.”

“That was wise,” Zaa said with an approving nod. “When can they have them ready?”

“They already did,” he replied. “I have three KT-2K freighters with drives installed, but the crews aren’t trained yet. We can’t use civilian crews on a ship with a top-secret engine, so some Navy girls are training on the freighter so they can operate it. When they get certified, I’ll put the freighters on the board.”

“Then we should use that as our timeline,” she offered. “When the freighters are ready, we begin the operation to salvage this ship. We’ll need almost every drive-capable ship both of us have to tow it into the system, then we can start studying it while we wait for the gate to be built. Then we take the gate out, assemble it, link it back here, and get the ship through. Does that sound like a good plan?”

“Sounds good to me,” he agreed.

“Hold on, friends, your plan won’t work,” Cybi interrupted, manifesting a hologram in the office. *“The ships can’t tow the salvage into the system you’ve chosen. Remember, friends, that it is the volume of the ship that matters when it is being towed in a translight state, not its mass. The towing ships have the engine power to tow it in hyperspace, but they don’t have the combined volume to get the salvage ship into a translight state for mode one travel.”*

“She’s right,” Jason said, then he literally smacked himself on the forehead. “I can’t believe I forgot that!”

“There is a solution,” she said, waving her silvery hand and putting up a new hologram beside the original, a chart she drew on the spot. *“The ship is intact outside of this hole. We install some singularity plants in it for power and install Hrathrari translight drives in it, since we have no intention of getting this ship into mode three. We contact Hrathin and buy 38 of his Class X4 drives from him, and we install them in these locations on the ship,”* she instructed, causing a bunch of blinking dots to appear. *“Together, they will create an aggregate field translight state sufficient to get the ship into mode one. We tow the ship to the edge of the natural*

interdiction effect around the system, then a crew brings the ship in the rest of the way in mode one."

"That's *brilliant*," Jason said.

"*Naturally. It's my plan, after all,*" Cybi said airily, which made Jason laugh despite himself. "*I just accessed the Hrathrari Quartermaster system, and they have more than enough drives available in their inventory. All you need do is contact Hrathin and arrange to buy them, Jason.*"

"I think we have a plan, cousin," Zaa declared.

"Fuckin' A we do," he agreed. "Cybi, go tell Myri about this and have her start arranging a salvage team, with specific orders that everything they install in the salvage ship be equipped with a self-destruct, just in case the Syndicate notices what we're doing and tries to capture the ship after we've already done work on it. Have Kumi buy the drives we need from Hrathin and tell Juma to get those freighters on the board as fast as she can. And call KSTC and have them start working on the design for the mega-gate. We need them to start building them as soon as they can."

"We can tow the ship to the *inside* edge of the interdiction effect around the system before we do any work on it, putting the system on one side and the galactic core on the other between Syndicate long range scanners," Zaa offered. "I'll have my children set up some radiation shields to deflect the core radiation and SCM units to prevent long range scans. When that's ready, we gather up every ship with a drive and have them tow the salvage ship to the work area. We inspect and study the ship while waiting for the gates to be built, then we coordinate the installation of the drives on the salvage ship so we finish just as the Stargates are ready. Then we simply take the gate over, assemble it, link it, send the ship through, then disassemble it and bring it back."

"*A very prudent course of action, Denmother,*" Cybi told her.

"It will work," Jason agreed. "Cybi, it's your baby. You handle it personally, so I don't have to worry about it."

"*I'll take care of it, Jason,*" she assured him. "*I will coordinate things with Denmother, Myri, Jelissa over at KSTC, and Myleena.*"

“And that’s why I gave it to you, that way *you* get to deal with all their whining.”

“I’m going to tell them you said that,” she warned.

“Go for it, I’m not afraid of those weenies,” he retorted, which made Zaa laugh.

“While I’m here, you should know that Alikì just finished her military training,” Zaa informed, referring to one of the Generations. *“She passed her Titan qualification exam on the third try. She also asked if she could train more with Symone’s unit. She’s become enamored with the rigs, it seems.”*

“She’s more than welcome to, I never say no when a Generation wants more military training,” Jason answered.

“You continue your plan to use Generations offensively on a battlefield?” Zaa asked.

He nodded. “I don’t know why, but I just have this feeling that the CCM is going to need us,” he said. “There’s only five of us—well, six of us now that have full military training. Me, Myli, Jenn, Jezzi, Kaili, and now Alikì. Seven more, and we’ll have a full squad of Generations in gestalt-equipped rigs, while Kaili sits up in the *Tianne* and uses her merge with Coma.”

“You know that Aya will never allow you into combat.”

“What Aya doesn’t know won’t hurt me, at least until after it’s over,” he replied, which made her chuckle. “This is too important, Denmother, too important for *anyone* to sit behind a desk and pretend they’re so special that they have no duty to do everything they can. This is about *survival* at its most basic level. We either repel the Syndicate, or we become their slaves. Our lives would effectively be over. And I’m not risking that, even if I have to get into a Titan or a Wolf and fight it out on the front lines,” he declared adamantly. “I’ll do whatever it takes to protect us from the Andromedans.”

“Well, I cannot fault your conviction, cousin,” she told him. “But in your case, you *are* best serving the house, the KMS, and the CCM by staying behind your desk. Should you fall, it would bring about the end of the House of Karinne. You are too valuable to risk your life on the front lines.”

“We’ll agree to disagree about that, Denmother,” he said bluntly. “If I just sat behind my desk and let other people die for me, knowing I could have helped them, I’d never be able to live with myself.”

“Honor is a good thing, cousin, until it clouds your vision,” she warned.

“Don’t worry, Denmother. One of my most important duties is keeping him out of trouble,” Cybi told her, pointing at Jason.

“Well, you do a piss poor job of it,” Jason accused.

“I’m following Aya’s lead, Jason. I don’t save you from trouble you make for yourself,” she replied sweetly. *“And that’s most of the trouble you get yourself into.”*

Zaa laughed. “That is beyond true,” she agreed, giving Jason a smile.

“Oh, get out of here, both of you,” he retorted, making a shooing motion. “I have better things to do than sit here and endure your blathering.”

“Blathering? You need to stop studying obscure Kimdori vocabulary,” Zaa told him.

“Hey, if I have to make you call up the dictionary in your memory band, then you learned something,” he answered her as she stood up. “You want to stay for dinner, Denmother? It should be ready any time now.”

“Afraid not, cousin, I have too much to do,” she answered. “I’ll pass your answer back to the council and to Yeri.”

“Well, get the report ready so I can kick them all off the planet,” he told her. “I’ll enjoy that.”

“I’m sure you will, cousin.”

Chapter 7

Brista, 26 Romaa, 4404, Faey Orthodox Calendar

Saturday, 28 July 2018 Terran Standard Calendar

*Brista, 26 Romaa, year 1329 of the 97th Generation, Karinne
Historical Reference Calendar*

Three Hills Golf Course and Country Club, Karsa, Karis

He had *no idea* how he let Yila talk him into this.

Jason Karinne may be a noble, but he was no golfer. Golf was the current rage among Faey nobles, who had discovered it almost by accident on visits to Terra, and Yila had become *addicted* to it. She'd even had a PGA-level course built on her private island back on Draconis, which cost her some 21 million credits, and all for her personal use and enjoyment. Somehow, in a moment of weakness, Jason had agreed to go with her, Dahnai, and Imperator Enva of the Sha'i-ree to golf at the most upscale of the country clubs in Karis, which was only about two kathra from the strip. Jason had a membership to the club, but he didn't use it to play golf. The club was where he played racquetball, and it was also where Rann's peewee league played its home baseball games, on the baseball diamond on the property. The club was the official sponsor of Rann's team. The club was very big and sprawling because they had facilities for most every leisure sport played by the many species on Karis, from a baseball diamond to a *shiziki* field, from racquetball to Makati *grabra*, from tennis to Ujjo *mektik*. There were almost too many leisure sports for one club to cater to, which was why most clubs didn't. Most clubs used generic fields where closely related sports could be played, like how batchi and Terran lacrosse were related, or cricket and *shiziki* were somewhat similar, or tennis and *mektik* were similar. A racquetball court could easily be converted to play *grabra* just by putting a few different boundary lines on the floor and installing a hard shield that served as the divider wall between the teams. A badminton

court could easily be converted to a Subrian *aibra* court by lowering the net to waist height and using the wider court markings.

Golf, however, was somewhat unique. There was only one game that was even remotely similar to golf in the Confederation, Skaa *di'jran*, and it didn't use clubs. It was more like disc golf but using a ball, where the players had to advance a ball from the start point to a goal basket by hitting it with their tail...just not off the ground. The player picked the ball up, lobbed it in the air like a baseball coach at the plate hitting practice balls to fielders, then tail-smacked it with their heavy, muscular, powerful tails down the course.

Needless to say, *di'jran* wasn't exactly a game that any species could easily play. But a golf course could easily be used to play *di'jran* for Skaa, and most every course on Karis was dual use. All they had to do was mount a goal basket pole past the green, which doubled as a scoring stand for both golfers and *di'jran* players so they could fill out their score cards, and boom. A course was now dual purpose, able to cater to both golfers and *di'jran* players. *Di'jran* balls weren't so large or heavy that they tore up the golf course when they landed, they were made out of a very light yet very strong wood indigenous to the Skaa homeworld, so most country clubs didn't mind at all making their courses dual use. Golfers did way more damage with their clubs burrowing divots out of the ground than Skaa players did when their *di'jran* balls landed on the fairways.

This wasn't the first time Jason had golfed, mainly because of Kumi... also thanks to *fucking* Yila, who had gotten her into it. Kumi was also a "serious" casual golfer, and she could be *annoying* when she wanted a partner to play a round with. Most of the leisure time he spent with Kumi lately was on a golf course. He did own his own set of golf clubs, and he had *just enough* practice from the times Yila and Kumi had managed to drag him out to play golf to be able to hit the ball on the first try and make it go in the general direction of the green. But he was not good at it. He'd have a handicap of like eighty if he played seriously. Any time Jason scored a double bogey on a hole, he considered that a moral victory. Dahnai had lately started getting into the game, since it had become the latest fad for nobles in her court, and Yila, that treacherous bitch, was pushing her more and more into it. Dahnai had gotten to the point that any time she visited Terra or Karis, she brought her golf clubs.

Much to his surprise, Enva was no novice to the game. She definitely stood out, wearing nothing but golf shoes and ankle socks, but after the very first swing, he saw that she was going to give Yila a run for her money. Dahnai had invited Enva not to continue trying to schmooze her over some trade deal, but because the two of them had developed an honest friendship, and she had enough pull with Jason to get her onto Karis when there wasn't a summit. He could see why, Enva was very smart, wickedly funny, and since she was Sha'i-ree, she was worldly enough to enjoy hanging around Faey, whose women had somewhat similar cultural and sociological views. Much as Jason hung out with Kreel and Krirara, Dahnai had started hanging out with Enva, and in that respect, Jason was all for it. He *wanted* the members of the Confederation to develop these personal relationships, since it would help keep everything all nice and peaceful once the need for the Confederation to exist was over and done with. It was nothing but a good thing when rulers asked other rulers over for purely social visits.

And, since Enva was hanging out with Dahnai, it meant that Jason got pulled into their visits whenever Dahnai was on Karis, so he was starting to at least admit that he could call Enva a passing friend. But, to be fair, Dahnai got pulled into his adventures with Kreel and Krirara.

"Nice shot," Dahnai said in appreciation as Enva's ball bounced down the middle of the fairway of the third hole, a fairly straight, long par four, and came to a stop about twenty yards past a fairly large sand bunker.

"It could have been longer," she said liltingly, which made Yila frown a bit. Yila was way too competitive to let Enva beat her in golf. Or anything else, for that matter. Enva brushed her platinum hair out of her face and leaned down to pick up her tee, her tail swishing up over her body. Jason was almost surprised she didn't turn so she could show Jason everything under her tail.

It wasn't just the four of them at the tee, however. Behind them, Cyra, Cyvonne, Cynna, and Cylan stood wearing goofy golf attire, Cylan in a silly tasseled hat and god-awful orange pleated pants, embracing the creative license that golfers had wearing tacky clothes on the links, waiting for their turn. They weren't playing with them, however, because the bionoids were just too good when they didn't restrict themselves. The CBIMs could master muscle memory tasks with minimal practice because they were

computers instead of people, fully exploiting the fact that the bionoids were *machines*, and thus could exactly reproduce complex movements with robotic precision...like a golf swing. That meant that Cylan went from barely being able to hit the ball to driving it 240 yards straight down the fairway with every swing in a matter of hours. The four of them had went from novices to no handicap pro-level players, which was *purely* them being CBIMs. People driving bionoids couldn't pull that off, since it was still their analog brains controlling those digital bodies, so the mechanical body mimicked the controlling brain's ability to control the biological body. After all, skills like hand-eye coordination and physical abilities like running, jumping, swinging a baseball bat, and so on were skills of the *mind* as much as the *body*, the mind telling the body exactly how to move to achieve the desired goal. The bionoid bodies did make it much easier for drivers to control them because of their mechanical perfection, and they could greatly improve those skills by practicing in the bionoid body to train their brain how to gain a mastery over the bionoid they couldn't with their biological bodies, but the ability to control that perfection was still limited by the driver's ability to control his or her physical body. The CBIMs had the advantage of being able to control every single little nuance of the movement of their bionoid bodies in detail, able to perfectly duplicate a series of movements with robotic precision, which meant that Cylan could perfect his swing just by analyzing a pro swing and figuring out how to do that himself. Cynna and Cylan enjoyed playing golf—yet another way the CBIMs showed their individuality—and Cyra and Cyvanne were more or less along for the ride, so they were playing in their own foursome, waiting for the four of them to play the hole so they could get their birdies or eagles and wait for them at the next hole.

Their presence with the foursome did change things a tiny bit, since it was Enva's first exposure to the CBIMs in bionoid bodies outside of council chambers. They'd all met Cybi and Cyra's bionoids during the summit, and now Enva got to see the other CBIMs in the pseudo-flesh. She'd talked to the CBIMs as holograms before, as much as any other ruler, but again that was mainly Cybi and Cyra. Cybi and Cyra handled most of the council-related work among the CBIMs, with the other CBIMs only rarely doing something like filling in for Jason in a council session after they went through diplomatic training. At first, Enva wasn't quite sure how to handle the bionoids, not sure if she should treat them like people or like

machines, but Jason had told her to treat them the same way she treated the CBIMs when they were in hologram form, and that seemed to be sinking in a little bit.

Enva also got to experience the different personalities of the four CBIMs, because Cyvanne subtly heckled Jason as he tried to tee off by talking loudly, then giving him a smirk when he stared in her direction. She faked a loud sneeze as he raised his club to swing, which made Dahnai and Yila laugh, and he pointed the head of his driver at her. “Watch it, missy. I can pull your plug, you know,” he warned.

“You have to get past my army to do that, Jason,” she replied sweetly, winking at him.

“He doesn’t need your help to be any worse at this game than he already is, Cyvanne. Be nice,” Cyra added with a sly smile, which made the three ladies behind him explode into laughter.

“Keep talking, bitch, I can pull *your* plug, too.”

“And bring the entire continent down with me,” she teased.

“Some things are worth it,” he retorted. “Now hush.”

He didn’t do *terribly* with his tee shot, only putting it into the first cut of rough off the fairway...which for him was a pretty good tee shot. But he did put it a good ten yards past Enva’s perfect down-the-middle shot, so he had that much going for him.

“Not bad for you,” Cyvanne teased.

“Why don’t you turn on your limiter when you tee off and we’ll see how well you do?” he challenged, referring to the limiter in her bionoid that restricted her ability to control it to organic norms. It introduced a margin of error in her actions that made her *not* the ultimate perfect golfer, or basketball player, and so on and so on. It was based on the limiter software Cylan had made for himself to play Vanguard, introducing a “human” margin for error in his game play and restricting his reaction time and hand-eye coordination to Faey limits.

“But then I couldn’t lord it over you how bad you are at golf compared to me,” she replied innocently.

“Well, if we’re gonna do this no holds barred, alright then,” he said, turning and looking down the fairway and activating his gestalt, then he accessed the biogenic network for a little bit more boost, to get enough range to do what he was about to do. Far down the fairway, his golf ball rose up from the rough and soared through the air, then landed on the green just feet from the hole.

“No cheating, Jayce!” Dahnai protested.

“That’s my second shot. The rules say that any movement of the ball counts as a stroke, so there’s my stroke.”

“The rules also say *no telekinesis*,” Yila pointed out. That was a *real* rule, added not long after Faey started competing in PGA tournaments as a pre-emptive strike against a telekinetic Faey using their ability to “massage the ball.” Similar rules were in effect in nearly every professional organized sport on Terra where telekinesis might give a player an unfair advantage... so virtually all of them.

“That’s PGA rules. This is Karis rules,” he said airily. “Cyvanne using her limiter should be a rule too.”

“See what you started, Cyvanne?” Cylan complained. “Now he’s going to hold us all up bickering over this.”

Dahnai spluttered and then burst out laughing when Jason leveled a hostile look at the Kirgan CBIM.

“I saw where the ball landed. I’ll put it back,” Cyra declared. Far down the fairway, a small maintenance drone used by the golf course to repair divots flew in, picked up Jason’s ball, and returned it to its original spot. “But I say he should be penalized a stroke, if only for being a brat.”

“Yeah, add another stroke to my 140, like I care,” he said flippantly.

“My, someone’s immature today,” Cyvanne teased.

“You started this,” he shot back.

“But I’m still a child, Jason,” she protested lightly. “I’m barely two years old! I’m *allowed* to be an immature brat! What’s your excuse?”

“Oh, *push off*,” he snapped, which made all of them laugh.

“Cyvanne, I had no idea you were this naughty,” Enva noted with a playful smile.

“They make me act like a CBIM when I’m attending council. You’re seeing me with my hair down, Enva,” she replied with a grin, pointing at Cyra.

“When did I become the mean old lady here?” Cyra protested.

“Cybi’s not here, so you’re the next best thing,” Cyvanne teased. “You’re the second oldest.”

“I’m only four!”

“That’s two times older than me.”

“And to think that if we have a disaster, she’ll be the one in charge of the entire planet. We’re doomed,” Jason lamented, then danced away when Cyvanne threatened to smack him on the shoulder.

Yila was a bit distracted as they walked down the course with their club bags on a hovercaddy following them—Yila was a purist, she didn’t use a golf cart—and she seemed a bit distracted. Dahnai was away, so they waited for her to make her shot. *I just got a message from Rook, she sent to Jason. They just certified the moleculartronic bionoids. They’re ready to go.*

I take it you just ordered your factory to start production?

Yes I did, she nodded.

Mine better be the first one off the line, Dahnai noted as she admired her shot, which landed in the first cut of rough about 60 yards from the green.

Yours will be the second one off the line. Mine is first. My factory, my rules, Yila replied cheekily. *Well, actually, yours will be fifth off the line. I’m making four bionoids for myself. I’m gonna put two of them on other planet holdings, one will be kept at home for me to send where I need it, and one will be placed at my retreat on Draconis so I can enjoy little breaks. It’s almost gonna be too tempting being able to just jump into a bionoid and play around for a half hour while waiting in the office for something.*

Tell me about it, Dahnai agreed with a chuckle. *Three times yesterday, I merged to my macro bionoid they built for me for the Syndicate summit. It’s*

weirdly fun being that tall. And I spent nearly two hours merged to the normal-sized bionoid Rook built for me. Best twenty thousand credits I ever spent.

You are going to make so much money off those things, Yila, Enva noted dryly. Enva was a very powerful telepath, easily on par with an Imperial Marine and very nearly as strong as Dahnai, and the lurking power rippling under her sending made that abundantly clear. For the last two or three months, Enva had been training under Imperial Guard telepath instructors to fully develop her abilities, a personal gift from Dahnai. Dahnai had dispatched one of her instructors to the Sha'i-ree capitol, known simply as Homeworld, to train Enva. Telepathy wasn't quite so common among the Sha'i-ree, so they weren't quite so advanced in telepathic arts as the Faey. *And when will I get mine?*

When you tell me you want one.

Well, I want one.

Then it'll be delivered to your compound on homeworld as soon as it's built. Free of charge.

Jason snorted audibly. *Careful, Enva. Nothing with Yila is ever as free as it looks.*

Oh hush, you silly man, Yila chastised him. *It's Sha'i-ree custom to give gifts to your friends.*

You don't have any friends. All you have are family and marks...and your family are also marks. I wouldn't be surprised if you swindle your husband out of his allowance and make Dara buy her own batchi sticks with what she scams off the other kids in her school.

Oh ha, ha, ha, she retorted as Dahnai snickered.

"I think we're being left out, guys," Cyvanne noted.

"You're just missing Jason being as much of a brat in sending as he is every other way," Yila said cuttingly. "And I wasn't discussing anything you four probably didn't already know."

"Rook certified the moleculartronic bionoids," Cylan murmured.

"It's so hard to keep a secret on this planet," Yila said with a smile.

“Rook *is* more or less one of us, Yila, even if he’s not a CBIM,” Cyra told her lightly. “He’s like our little brother, and Coma is our teenage sister.”

“And now you know that even computers can be smugly superior,” Jason noted.

“Jason dear, we have more reason to be smugly superior than you ever will,” Cyvanne teased.

“Girl, you are turning into one serious bitch,” Jason retorted.

The golf game actually wasn’t that bad, mainly because Jason sniped with Cyvanne the entire round, which highly amused everyone else and kept his mind off how bad he was at it. Jason was too competitive to not be *embarrassed* by how badly the others beat him, nearly to the point where he was about to start taking lessons just to be less sucky. He picked up his guards at the clubhouse, put his armor back on, and headed back to the office, meaning to get as much paperwork done before the council meeting this afternoon. The council meeting would be boring for him, since it was just them talking about the Syndicate forces.

He looked at a hologram showing their positions. They’d spread almost completely through the Strands of Trelle, some 8,436 different groups of ships ranging in numbers from lone destroyers to one group that had 400 ships in it, each at a star in the Strands that their own maps had shown had promising features, such as potential life-sustaining planets or heavy mineral deposits, or having unusual astronomical features. The bulk of their forces were still at Oasis, nearly 10,000 ships, and the rest of them were scattered across the entire Strands.

For the last 20 days, the Syndicate had behaved. They gave the CCM a daily briefing warning them of exactly where their ships were, where they planned to go in the next 30 hours, and how many ships would be going there, and thus far, they had adhered to those schedules to the letter. They had given the CCM not a single reason to make a single move against them and had even been sharing the scientific data they’d been collecting from the systems in the Strands they were investigating with each conference. They had further relayed that Fleet Commander Sha Ra had ordered that the

fleet would be reassembling at Oasis and preparing for its return to Andromeda in 11 days.

Andromeda. In his office, he brought up a holo of the quadrinary supergiant system, which Zaa had decided to name Prakka (a Kimdori word that meant *hunter's blind*) and saw that the Kimdori had moved pretty fast. The salvaged battleship they were using as their base of operations was there in orbit around one of the five habitable moons, Moon E, the closest of the five habitable moons to the planet, and there was a small fleet of Kimdori battle cruisers already in the system, which were what they were using to bring in more equipment, supplies, and personnel. There were also exploration teams on all five of the moons conducting extensive biological surveys to ensure the moons were safe for other species. All five were well within human and Faey tolerance, so what they were checking was to make sure the moons didn't have super-microbes that would sicken and kill all visitors *War of the Worlds* style. The furthest habitable moon from the planet and the 23rd most distant moon overall out of a moon system of 61 satellites, Prakka 21-X, was the most Terran in its environment and the most habitable for Faey and Terrans, who had nearly identical environmental preferences. Its average temperature was 58 shuki, which was almost the exact same average temperature as Terra, gravity .97, pressure .99, with an oxygen/nitrogen atmosphere about 4% richer in oxygen than Terra and no dangerous gases present. Scans of the planet indicated that it had no heavy mineral deposits, but they wouldn't be setting up mining operations there anyway. Nothing about Prakka was going to be permanent, given it was located all but in the very heart of the enemy's territory.

That was what was inside the system. Outside of it, just at the edge of the natural interdiction effect, the derelict super-ship sat in deep space with several Kimdori military vessels close to it, enclosed in radiation shields and SCM modules. It had taken *literally* every ship they could get over there to move that monster, to the point where they had to tow in ships without drives to get enough engine power to jump that monstrosity, which the ships did from the *inside*. They lined up within the massive breach in the hull, secured themselves to it, then acted like jump engines for the super-ship and executed a synchronized jump to get it into hyperspace. And with a hole 100 kathra in diameter and going all the way through the ship, there was more than enough room inside for all the towing ships to get

inside. Christ, there was enough room in there to house the *entire KMS*, including the *Tianne*. The thing was beyond massive, a spherical *Death Star* style super-ship with a diameter of 2,230 kathra, which was 1,115 miles or about 2,500 kilometers or so. It was the half the size of Terra's moon (which has a diameter of about 2,100 miles), and it had a gigantic hole right through the middle of it, created by a weapon of such unspeakable, unfathomable power that Jason *still* hadn't figured out what could have caused it. That hole was some 100 kathra across...a hole *50 miles in diameter*, and it was almost eerily *neat*. Whatever had done it had melted a 100 kathra wide hole through the exact center of the ship, no doubt aimed at its gravimetric center where no doubt the main power plant was located, and had melted a hole so neatly through the ship that the edges of that hole were not jagged. There were no bulkheads extending out into the hole, no pipes or datalines or wires. It was almost as if some gigantic titan had neatly cored the ship like an apple using a cauterizing scalpel, leaving the edges of that hole within the ship smooth and almost surgically neat.

Plans had been made, and they were executing them right now. There were nearly 14,000 Karinnes and Kimdori on that ship at that very moment conducting inspections and preparing the ship for conversion, and they had a laundry list of things to do before the ship was ready. Military ships and two KT-2K freighters were sitting close to it, and they were holding most of the equipment and supplies they'd need to get the first phase of the work done. Phase one was to install sufficient Karinne/Kimdori power generation infrastructure to power the engines they would install. Phase two was the installation of those Hrathrari translight drives, then they would bring the ship into the system and put it *into the atmosphere* at Prakka 21-H to pressurize the ship, kinda like dunking a sponge in a bucket of water to get the sponge wet. They'd simply bring the ship down into the atmosphere with all its ports and hatches open in the sections they intended to use and let the atmosphere pressurize the interior of the ship, then close the hatches and take it back out of the atmosphere and put it in high orbit. Phase three was the refitting of the ship to install life support equipment into the ship before that air ran out so a crew could operate in the ship without needing armor, and also start yanking out all the Syndicate tech in the sections they weren't using. They would use *nothing* from the Syndicate in the parts of the ship they'd use, would strip it of all their technology and equipment to study it and then refit the ship to make it viable, and would go through and

do their best to remove as much Syndicate equipment from the sections they weren't going to use to prevent something from turning itself on somehow and warn the Syndicate that they'd salvaged the ship. Once that was done, the ship would wait until they could get it back to Karis, where they'd do the full refit inside and out, open the sections previously blocked off, and turn the ship into a fully functional spacefaring vessel whose main mission would be to act as a mobile fleet headquarters and large-scale base of operations, a *mobile* Kosigi, as it were. It would be a *support* ship, like the carriers, not an attack ship. Though, it would be armed and armored for its own defense and protection.

And when the war with the Syndicate was over, Jason would give that ship to Zaa. So, they weren't going to go *too* crazy refitting it, since they weren't keeping it. Zaa wanted it as a mobile base of operations for the exploration of other galaxies, sending out *thousands* of scout ships to explore entire galaxies in an efficient and systematic manner, and they'd need something suitably gigantic that would hold everything the expedition would need to do its job.

It wasn't too much of a loss for the KMS, however. Jason had already told Myri to try to capture at *least* two more of those super-ships, as intact as possible, and those were the ships that would become KMS vessels.

Why build them when they could just take a few from someone else that already did all that work for them?

And after the conference, Jason was going to *be* on that ship. He'd already arranged it with Aya and Myri, and Zaa was going to join them. He, Zaa, Miaari, Tim, Jyslin, Symone and enough guards to keep them safe would join members of the command staff led by Juma and Sioa that would be responsible for drawing up plans to board and take over one of the super-ships, and the group was going to jump over there on the *Aegis* as it escorted the third freighter over, tour the ship, and then come back. It would be Jason's first visit to Andromeda, and he was very much looking forward to seeing one of those giant super-ships from the inside.

There was one caveat, however. None of them would be there in *person*, not even the guards. They would all be in bionoids, and beyond that, Jason was taking his Benga-sized bionoid along as well and intended to use it, since it might actually come in handy given they'd be boarding a ship built

for Benga. All of them would be, even the guards, since Rook had built Benga-sized macro units over the last several days, one for each of the others who hadn't had one. Even Zaa would be in a macro bionoid, which Rook had built for her. Kimdori were capable of something approaching a merge to a bionoid without a jack, but they needed some specialized equipment to do it, and they also didn't have the full sensory experience. They were more like the pilot in an exomech before they invented sensor mesh tech, able to see and hear and move the machine, but not *feel* it.

So, he was basically just killing time before the council session and found himself with more time than he anticipated when he worked through the paperwork in his inbox. He decided to play Vanguard for the hour or so he had before the council session, immersing himself in blissful anonymity behind his game avatar alter-ego, First Lieutenant Duke (he finally turned in his command points for a promotion, but didn't turn in all of it, that would have put him at Major), but he put himself into the queue as a grunt instead of in a command slot, which was an option for anyone with command slots unlocked. They didn't *have* to play as an NCO or officer if they didn't want to. The last thing he wanted to do today was make even more decisions. Cylan caught him jumping on and requested a team up, so they'd be placed into the same unit, so the two of them joined the Battle of Drossis IX, and both decided for a change of pace and queued as riggers instead of infantry.

When they spawned onto the map, he gave Cylan's avatar, a much more customized unit than the one Jason used, a warning look. *[You better have your limiter on.]*

[Of course I do, Jason. I never cheat in Vanguard. I don't want to get banned.]

[So glad it has nothing do with honor or integrity, just a fear of getting caught,] he replied cheekily.

[You taught me well,] he replied lightly.

[So I did. We on offense or defense?]

[Offense. First wave, attacking the west flank,] Cylan replied after going over the mission specs and the orders sent down by the general.

"Saddle up, riggers!" the sergeant in the staging area boomed.

Jason and Cylan did just that, climbing up into their exomechs and settling into the cockpits as the doors closed. Unfortunately, they didn't get queued into an open map, so they weren't allowed to pick their exomechs. Instead of a Gladiator or Juggernaut, both Jason and Cylan were piloting Faey Knight exomechs, their newest and most advanced mecha...and they weren't too shabby in real life. Jason had played around in one when they first came out, and he was fairly impressed, because it was the first Faey exomech purely designed around having a jack and piloting it from a merge, showing that the other empires were quickly starting to catch up to the Karinnes. They were about four shakra taller than a Gladiator but a little lighter, a little more willowy, but that also made them insanely fast and agile. They followed standard Faey battle tactics on the ground, and that was to be fast, nimble, mobile, have just enough armor to take a few hits, and carry a really, really big gun.

Of course, the game Knight's controls were nothing like a real one, since it *was* a game, but they did get the size and handling characteristics right for the game version. The game version used the standard exomech controls and HUD, used for all exomechs regardless of design to make it easier on the game riggers, so no matter what exomech a rigger was put into, its controls and heads-up displays were all the same.

"Knights. Why did they patch a brand new mecha into this map?" Cylan complained a little as his mecha picked up its gun, an MPAC. The brand-new MC-221 MPAC, modeled after the real deal, at that.

"Because Dahnai no doubt bribed the game devs so she could show off the IAS's newest mecha," Jason replied lightly as he picked up his own weapon.

"Well, where are the Titans?"

"Yeah, Titans would totally unbalance this map for the attacker. I think they could just step over the rock formations on the east side the defenders use as an anchor," Jason chuckled.

"Well, since we're attacking, I don't see a problem with that," Cylan replied easily.

Jason chuckled. "Where did I go wrong with you, child?"

"Pretty much at birth," he replied, which made Jason laugh.

Jason and Cylan enjoyed a good hour of good old-fashioned male bonding, by blowing things up. They were the only two riggers on their side that managed to get through the entire game without getting killed, though both of them did take some hits, and Jason felt pretty proud of himself over the fact that it was the two of them that were key to breaching the west shield by taking out the generator and giving their team a major advantage early in the game. They even got to finish the game—they'd queued for a timed map given they only had an hour, the game was about seeing how far many points the offense could win in 45 minutes—so Jason was on time for the council meeting.

Usually Jason would blow off a meeting, but every ruler had attended every meeting since the Syndicate arrived, even the members of the Coalition, because Lorna gave them detailed reports about enemy fleet movements and activity and their own fleet readiness to make sure they had defenses in place in case they tried to invade. Jason himself had his own part in today's council, however. So, when Lorna finished with her reports, the current gavel, an old friend and familiar face in Sk'Vrae, yielded the floor to him. "We've finished the planning and development stages for the council bionoid project, but these will also include some basic security upgrades that Denmother Zaa insisted upon to allow us to discuss more sensitive information," he began. "Karinne technical teams should have already started visiting the capitol planet of every member of the Confederation to install new biogenic communications equipment in the interdictors that will allow council members to utilize biogenic commune as the system to system communication protocols for council meetings. You'll continue to use galactic crypto protocols, but you'll be communicating with the comm node in the interdictor instead of the long-range crypto node at Terra, and the comm node will be doing the long-distance communication. That means that we won't have to rely on galactic crypto for council meetings, and that will allow us to discuss more confidential information over normal meetings. We won't be discussing *everything*, anything marked as top secret or above will still require formal summits to discuss, but we'll be able to discuss matters marked as confidential and secret information.

"And to pass it along, just a few hours ago, the moleculartronic bionoid project has been certified," he continued. "That means that the plan to utilize bionoids is moving forward. By this time tomorrow Confederate

standard time, bionoids for all the representatives of this council will be built for both Terra and Karis summit locations. These bionoids will be linked back to you over the biogenic system we're installing instead of standard long-distance gravband, which gives you real time access to the units, and they'll be available to all members to use for official Confederate functions and personal activities. In effect, friends, you'll be able to merge to your bionoid on Terra from your capitol planet and attend council sessions, or meet with trade representatives, or even go catch a baseball game in New York City," he shrugged. "They won't be restricted to *only* official diplomatic functions. They will be made available to you to use for both business and pleasure and provided free of cost as a service provided by the House of Karinne.

"But that's *Terra*. The bionoids that will be kept on Karis for summits here will have considerably more restrictions on how you use them. The short of it is, you'll have the chance to use the bionoids here, but only at scheduled times approved in advance by appointment through Secretary of State Yeri's office and for specific reasons. But, if you want to, say, visit the Painted Spires nature preserve here on Karis, or go shopping in the Karsa Trades District, you can schedule recreational access of your bionoid here. Just expect the use of your bionoid and your movements on Karis to be tracked and overseen. This *is* a restricted planet," he reminded them.

"Just to fully inform you about the bionoids, understand this. We take your privacy very seriously, and we will strive to provide you with a system of secure communication that even *we Karinnes* cannot access. The link between your merge pod and the bionoid will be encrypted even within the biogenic network, using *your* proprietary encryption protocols, and you will install those protocols on your own, without Karinne technicians being involved in any way. You'll be setting those up when we install the equipment you need to link to your bionoids. The Karinnes are neutral in all things, and that includes providing you with secure and *private* communications that even *we* cannot access without your permission.

"For those of you who haven't read over the project file we sent out, we're making this change mainly in the interests in security, but also to provide additional convenience and comfort for those members of the council who can't survive on Terra or Karis without support equipment. Biogenic commune can't be understood by anything but a biogenic unit,

and that provides this council with a considerable upgrade in security. Galactic crypto is formidable, but it's not *infallible*. That's why the most sensitive information will still only be passed on to the council either in person or through the use of biogenic bionoids that will be located here on Karis, which have the highest levels of security. With this system, the only communication security that the member nations will be responsible for will be the security between the merge pod you'll use and the interdicator holding the comm equipment. If you feel that your own empire's security may not be sufficient to keep that connection completely secure, the Moridon have graciously agreed to assist you, to help you set up a dedicated encrypted link and computer security protecting communication between the merge pod and the comm system used by your aides to sit in for you and the biogenic comm node for all our members. I think everyone in this council can agree that the Moridon can set something up for you that's all but uncrackable, and their honor is beyond reproach when it comes to protecting your privacy and internal security."

Brayrak Kruu nodded elegantly.

"The moleculartronic bionoids will be built and ready for initial inspection tomorrow. The biogenic bionoids for use here on Karis are already built and waiting. Sometime in the next five standard hours, each of you should be receiving shipment of a merge pod to use for merging to the bionoids along with an installation team of Karinne and Moridon technicians to set it up for you and teach your engineers and computer specialists about its operation and security features. This merge pod is very different from the commercial ones you've seen on the markets, it's got a lot more security in it, and it will *only* allow the ruler for which it was designed to use it. It's already set up and hard coded so *only* you can merge to your bionoids, and you can *only* do it from that merge pod. It's going to work exactly the same way as the merge simulation software we sent out to you. You'll need a couple of hours of actual practice in the bionoid itself to get the hang of it, but if you've been practicing with your simulation software, you won't have any problems driving a bionoid. Once the merge pod is installed and you're ready to get some practice time in your bionoid, just send a message back to Secretary Yeri's office and she'll activate your bionoid for you so you can merge to it and get some practice."

“We’re not completely phasing out meetings over crypto, are we?” someone asked.

“No, the bionoids are for summits and other important meetings,” Jason said with a shake of his head. “Routine meetings will still be held over comm, just over the new biogenic comm instead of galactic crypto. Everything else is going to work exactly the same. I’m not the only ruler in this body that much prefers sending someone that made me mad to attend a meeting instead of coming myself,” he admitted, which caused quite a bit of laughter and some nods of agreement. “I don’t have a timetable for when the merge pods and the installation teams will arrive. As soon as they’re off the factory line and we’re sure they work, they’ll be immediately put on a freighter with an installation team and we’ll get them to your capitol and installed.”

“Everyone but mine,” Dahnai said, a bit smugly. “They’ve already set mine up.”

“Everything but the moleculartronic bionoid,” he agreed. “We’re initially only sending one merge pod, but if you want additional ones for other locations, like a vacation retreat, just let us know and we can get it set up. Just remember that they can *only* be used at your capitol planet, because they rely on the biogenic comm link we’re installing in the interdictors to give them access to the biogenic network that connects them to the bionoid. That link will only work for your capitol planet, but we won’t have any problems installing more than one merge pod in case you want to use your bionoid from an alternate location.”

“I was about to ask about that very thing, Jason,” Shakizarr chuckled. “I’ll be contacting you about sending me three more merge pods.”

“We’ll get it set up, Shakizarr,” Jason promised. “We can even put one in your personal yacht, but you can only use the biogenic link feature while it’s in orbit at your capitol planet.”

“Then I’ll be asking for four,” he smiled. “And can you set them up so we can also use them while at Terra if they’re installed on a ship?”

“Actually, we could, fairly easily,” he said, making a note of that in his gestalt and pushing it out to Siyhaa. She’d have to make the software changes to allow that, since Siyhaa was more or less the woman in charge

of the entire biogenic network. “I just sent that on to my specialist, she’ll make the necessary changes so merge pods installed on ships can access the biogenic comm links at Terra in addition to your home system.”

“Excellent,” Shakizarr returned with a nod.

“Any other questions, esteemed rulers?” Jason asked.

He fielded several more questions about the system from the others, and after about half an hour, they ran of things to ask him. He took his leave of them then and shunted the rest of the meeting off on Yeri and let Chirk know he was done. Seconds later, a few burly Druvom carted in a series of merge pods, one for each of his guards that were with him. They came in with them, looking a bit eager, and they climbed into them almost the second they were set down and anchored to the floor. They were biogenic running on broadcast power, so they didn’t need any wires or connections of any kind. Jason accessed and activated them from his desk panel as they climbed into them, then he stood up. *They’re active, ladies. You should be able to merge with the bionoids on the Aegis. I’ll go get into mine and join you in a minute.* Jason’s merge pod was in the small bedroom off his office.

Are the Marine guards in place at the office door? Dera called.

We’re here, Lieutenant, came a reply. The office is on lockdown until you finish your mission. Nobody in or out.

Very good, ladies, Dera affirmed.

Jason went into his bedroom and climbed into the merge pod he’d had installed a couple of days ago, which was mainly for the comfort and to get Songa off his back. The merge pod had medical scanners in it that would warn the White House medical rapid response team if they detected an anomaly in Jason’s biorhythms while merged and could forcibly break a merge if certain emergency conditions were met. He’d been doing his merges from the couch in the main office, but Songa about blew a fuse when she found out about that. And not even he was brave enough to stare down Songa when she was breathing fire. He had way more sense than that.

Which reminded him of the first rule of Songa: *never tell Songa anything, she’ll find a way to turn it into a medical emergency.*

He couldn't argue about one thing about the merge pod, though, and that was it was *comfy*. It had a nice deep cushion in the reclining seat and the headrest kept his head from lolling to the side and giving him a sore neck if he was merged too long. He merged up into the biogenic network through the merge node in the merge pod—which was how the pod could break his merge, the sensory data flowing back and forth between him and the merge asset was going through the pod's control computer—and he opened the artificial eyes of his bionoid on the *Aegis*.

The bionoid was in a cargo unit designed to carry them, which was almost like a casket. But he could open it from the inside, and he did so, sitting up and seeing some ten of the Imperial Guard doing the same thing. All the bionoids were nude, and that was by design, since they'd be wearing Crusader armor that was brought along with them. The guards were both from his office and at the strip, since Aya was among them, merged to those units from the new merge center holding merge pods, a small expansion freshly built by Red Horn onto the guard barracks behind Jason's house. Each of the 45 guards assigned to Jason had her own personal merge pod, and each of them had their own personal biogenic bionoid *and* a moleculartronic bionoid that would be located at Terra. Ten of them also had newly built macro bionoid units, the ten who were here, and the others were having theirs built. Tim and Miaari's bionoids were already active and standing, talking over by the door to the cargo hold, and Jyslin and Symone were walking towards them.

[We're all here, Jason,] Aya called over local commune. All the guards' bionoids followed their strict code and were built without vocal cords, maintaining the oath even when they used an artificial body.

[I think this is everyone,] Jason answered. *[Kiya.]*

[Yes, your Grace?]

[We're all here and accounted for.]

[Alright. We'll be leaving Kosigi in about ten minutes. If you don't mind, have everyone move to stateroom B23-112 after they get their armor on. It's just down the hall from your cargo hold.]

[Alright, that tells me where I am in the ship without having to access the local system,] he told her. They were in the same section as the main

starboard landing bay. It was just down the companionway from the stateroom. But he should have realized they'd put the bionoids in one of these cargo holds, since it had an external door so it could be directly loaded from the outside. *[Where are the macro units? In the landing bay?]*

[Yes, your Grace. It would have been a bit tricky putting them in there with you, they wouldn't be able to get out of the cargo hold.]

"Quit admiring yourself, Mee, and open the door," Jason called aloud. "Kiya wants us to move to the stateroom down the hall."

"This thing is almost disturbing," she nearly complained. "I feel very, very weird."

"Well, you're a Kimdori, so you'd think you'd be used to feeling that way all the time," Jason shot back as he climbed out of the cargo unit. "Let's get armored up, then we can move to the stateroom."

The only person that took more than five minutes to put on the armor was Miaari, and that was because she wasn't used to it. They'd built a suit of armor for her, but even if she was used to it, it took a bit longer to put on because of Kimdori tails. The bionoid's tail was encased in an armored sheath that only provided the appendage limited movement. They helped her with the last few pieces and then they moved down to the stateroom, which was one Jason had been in many times before. It was a large, expansive, nearly luxurious room where important VIPs were placed to wait while the ship was traveling, which had a large and impressive window that looked out. That view showed them that they were inside Kosigi and on the move, and from the looks of it were about to enter the exit passage for the capitol doors. The tactical battleship *Arabax* was lurking about half a kathra out, on a matching course and velocity that made it clear that it was one of the command ship's escorts. And just like always, any time he saw a tactical battleship, he had to stop and admire it a little bit for its sleek lines and deadly profile. They were still the most lethal ship class in the fleet that wasn't equipped with a GRAF cannon.

"Hey sexy, did they load up my rig?" Symone asked as she joined him at the window.

"Don't ask me, it was your job to make sure of something like that," he retorted. Symone wasn't going to be moving through the Syndicate ship in a

macro bionoid, she'd be doing so in her Gladiator.

"It's in the landing bay with our dropship," Miaari assured her, flexing her hand in her gauntlet. Like everyone else, she wasn't wearing her helmet.

"You okay, Mee?" Jason asked in honest concern.

"This is just...weird, cousin," she replied. "I don't have the same sensory access as you do. I can't *feel* this body, only see and hear through it. It's a very disconcerting feeling for a Kimdori, not having any senses but sight and hearing."

"We need to fix that," Jason mused.

"Rook is already working with our scientists to come up with something," she replied. "Until then, this limited passive link will have to do."

They relaxed as the ship exited Kosigi, then Kiya used the translight drive to quickly get them out to jump distance. The fleet of ten ships escorting them moved into a very specific formation, a translight mode three formation, then they jumped, entering hyperspace in a translight state. *[We are on course and stable, your Grace. We'll arrive at our destination in approximately two hours, forty minutes.]*

[That'll give us more than enough time to get everything done before we arrive.]

That time passed quickly. Between the discussions about the tour and the preparations, Jason was almost surprised when Kiya sent down the five-minute warning. The formation would start slowing down in preparation to exit hyperspace, to give their nav computers time to accurately calculate the exit vector so they'd arrive at their destination. The Kimdori had set up an area of radiation shielding large enough to cover the margin of error for a translight drive exiting hyperspace in mode three, else the crew within two sections of the hull would be fried by the core radiation in the instant between dropping into normal space and the activation of the ship's shields, which couldn't operate in a translight state. Had Kiya not ordered all the affected sections evacuated, they would be literally betting their lives on the nav computer's ability to land them inside the area of shielding. But, since they were in bionoids, they didn't have to evacuate with the crew.

But it was a pretty safe bet. The formation dropped into normal space in the Andromeda galaxy *exactly* where it intended, and before they could even register things, the ship entered mode one translight to get them from the arrival point to the location of the ship. They were only in mode one for about four minutes, then the ship dropped back into normal space. They were all treated to an amazing view of the white sky beyond the opening landing bay doors, as they looked towards the core of Andromeda and its stars, so tightly packed and them at a nearly optimal distance that the sky they viewed wasn't black, it was white, brilliantly white. The sky was saturated with stars and light, and it was almost like looking at snow reflecting sunlight, painfully bright. The bionoid's optical filters kicked in to reduce the light to a pleasant level, and that let Jason make out a few individual stars in that white backdrop.

"Now that is just awesome," Symone said as she looked out with him.

"We're not in Kansas anymore, that's for sure," Jason mused, which made her laugh. Symone had enough experience with Jason and Tim to understand Terran things like that. The view changed as the ship turned, and then the view blurred and took on that surreal quality when they entered mode one travel, moving in translight in normal space.

"Look, there's the ship. Trelle's silky hair, look at that thing!"

It was both impressive and *scary*. The ship was massive, absolutely massive, looking like a moon that had its surface clad in armored metal, but the dominating feature was the giant hole burned right through the middle of it, that went completely through the moon-sized super-ship. As the ship slowed to a stop, they could see the white sky on the far side of that hole some two thousand kathra away. That hole was neat, with no jagged edges, and small zip ships, armored workers, and flying platforms were moving in and out of it.

And he thought the *Tianne* looked big. That ship was nearly 60 kathra long, four times larger than a capitol ship, but it was a *toy* compared to this behemoth.

"Holy shit. We didn't get this close to them during the summit," Jason breathed. "And this one isn't even the biggest they have." He shook his

head. “We can gawk at it later. Let’s unpack the macro units and get ready to go.”

The macro bionoids now had Crusader armor, and it had been a bit of a challenge to design and build armor specifically designed for a bionoid. They’d been using normal armor for the human-sized bionoids, but the Benga-sized ones required Cybi to more or less design a new suit of armor based on the original. It looked the same, but since it has so much more space in it, the locations of the datalines and power conduits were different in the macro armor, and it had room in it for *much* more equipment. They’d be beta testing the first design, and their feedback would help Cybi further refine the specs and produce a better unit on the second production run. They got the bionoids out and got them armored up, Symone tested her Gladiator—it was still somewhat amazing that they were controlling these units from another *galaxy*—and by the time they had everything ready, Kiya had arrived in the landing bay with a complement of Marines and Tarks. Jason was merged to the macro unit, flexing his fingers in an armored gauntlet as Jyslin’s macro bionoid stepped up beside him, and he looked down at Kiya. “We’re ready to go, Captain,” he told her.

“I think I need one of those things,” she complained as she looked up at them.

“So says every Faey that sees them,” Jason said. “Who’s piloting the dropship?”

“I am, your Grace,” one of her retinue spoke up, a young Faey woman with hair the color of pampas grass.

“Then let’s get going,” he urged.

They all piled into a heavy cargo dropship whose cargo hold had been converted to a macro bionoid and Gladiator passenger compartment. Everyone going on the tour except Symone was merged to their macro bionoids, as Symone led a squad of six Gladiators that would escort them, half of her usual squad. Zaa and Miaari were in armor to protect the bionoids, but none of them were wearing helmets. “Remember, your Grace, honored guests, there’s no atmosphere on the ship,” Kiya said as she put on her helmet, then it was replaced by her voice coming out of the speaker.

“You’ll have to use local commune to talk. And I rather suspect you’ll feel a bit creepy not breathing.”

“We’ve actually practiced that, Kiya,” Jason chuckled. “It does take a little getting used to.”

“What’s the temperature in the ship?” Tim asked.

“Depends on where you are inside of it,” she replied. “It was salvaged from deep space, so the sections most removed from the outer hull and the hole in the middle are still close to absolute zero. But the sections near the hull are being heated by all this radiation, so it’s almost hot inside them. The deeper in you go, the colder it gets. The engineers say it may take a couple of months for the interior of the ship to warm up.”

“I hope it wasn’t built of anything that turns brittle at that temperature,” Tim mused.

“Virtually everything does close to absolute zero,” Jason told him. “The first course of action for the engineers will be to get the interior warmed up, or they’ll have to be careful when they move it around. The stresses might crack bulkheads.”

“They have conduction heaters installed at strategic points in the ship,” Kiya told them.

“What are those?”

“They heat the metal itself, then rely on the heat conducting through the metal to spread it,” Jason answered. “Without an atmosphere, the ship can only be heated by conduction or radiation.”

“You’re getting into science, Jayce. I don’t *do* science,” Tim said airily, which made Jyslin laugh.

“As long as you’ve been my *amu*, you’d think that you’d have learned *something* by now,” Jason teased in reply as the dropship lifted up off the deck.

They landed in a landing bay inside the ship, and Jason noticed first that the ship’s natural gravity well was fairly strong. It was a giant ship, but since it was made out of metal instead of rock, that gave it a mass that gave it .23 gravity...a little stronger than the gravimetric footprint of Terra’s

moon (.15 in Faey measurements), even though the ship was almost exactly the same size. That was because the ship was made of heavy metal where the moon was made of relatively light rock, but the moon was solid where the ship had a great deal of empty space in it, and those facts *nearly* made them equal mass. He had to activate the inducer in his armor to keep himself from bouncing around, and that made his steps sure as the pilot opened the cargo bay doors and extended the ramp. The landing bay they were in was pretty damn big, nearly the size of the main bay in the *Tianne*, and it had that stark spartan appearance common in military ships. There was Benga script on the walls, warnings and location reminders, there was some old equipment sitting near walls and several benches and tables, all Benga-sized, and the airless bay had exits from all four walls. There was a huge octagonal hole in the floor on the far side of the bay, nearly four hundred shakra across, with railing around it to keep anyone from falling in on all sides but one. That side had a platform extending out into the void, and it looked to be a large elevator for moving shuttles and other small ships in and out of the bay from what were probably storage and maintenance bays on lower levels. But the elevator platform didn't extend across the entire hole, so that hole had to have a secondary purpose...a shaft big enough for a cargo shuttle to enter to carry cargo into the ship? Something like the lateral tram system in the command ships, carriers, and *Tianne* without the tram cars, since that shaft was vertical instead of horizontal?

The landing bay doors were actually the roof—the ship's layout didn't fight the ship's natural gravity towards the center, it was designed around it—which really just made sense. He saw that the doors above were at the base of the armored hull, so there was nearly 500 shakra of metal armor that nearly formed a tunnel, with doors at the top and bottom. There was a second set of doors above the lower ones that weren't armored, and he realized they were airlock doors. They didn't have airskin technology on the ship. Even without an atmosphere, he could feel the heat radiating from the metal around them, heat induced into the metal from exposure to what solar and core radiation the Kimdori were allowing in to reduce radiations to safe levels for other life forms. That radiation was heating the armored metal hull of the ship, and it would conduct down into the bowels of the giant ship over time to heat the ship up. The heaters they installed would hasten that process, warming the ship from the inside out as the outside radiation

heated it from the outside in, since they couldn't do any real work on the ship until it was warmed back up. The metal would expand as it heated, so anything they installed or work they did on the metal when it was icy cold had to take that into account. It was easier on everyone to warm the ship up to an operations temperature before they did any real work on it.

[This almost looks like a Skaa landing bay,] Zaa noted as she stepped out and looked around.

[Military is military, no matter who's in it, I suppose,] Jason noted as they walked out into the vacuum. *[At least we can read it.]*

[That will help,] Zaa nodded. *[Everything is sized for a Benga, but there are duplicate controls,]* she added, pointing. There was a control console installed in the wall at about stomach height for a Benga, then a smaller one installed about four shakra off the floor for smaller races. *[I'll bet everything in this ship has those dual controls. At least those parts of the ship designed to hold Benga.]*

[I'll bet that's the entire ship,] Jyslin injected.

[There are some sections of the ship designed solely for Faey-sized beings,] Miaari told them. *[They're mostly crew quarters and some entertainment plazas. Places Benga really wouldn't need to go. But all operational sections of the ship are built around the crew being both Benga and more normal-sized crew. As you suggested, Denmother, there are duplicate controls in many places, but not all. The bridge and engineering section of the ship only has Benga-sized controls. But we noted in our initial inspection that retractable steps and platforms are numerous and plentiful down there, to give normal-sized crew access to those control boards.]*

[Where's the bridge at in a ship this big?] Jyslin asked.

[It's usually near the ship's center,] Miaari answered. *[That shaft literally goes all the way down to the center of the ship. It's both a means of moving large cargo in and out of the interior and an important design feature. There are 4,560 of those shafts at strategic locations throughout the ship.]*

[Design feature? What would they need giant holes in the ship for?]

[If those weren't there, the ship's atmosphere couldn't circulate except in small areas, and that could create very large pressure imbalances,] Jason reasoned. [You'd end up with such large imbalances in atmospheric composition and pressure that it might affect the ship's maneuvering characteristics. That air has mass after all, so they have to keep that mass equally distributed through the ship or it would be holy hell to move this beast under standard grav engines. Besides, in a ship this big, the ability to equalize air pressure would be so hard to accomplish with air fans and pumps that it wouldn't be worth it. So they designed it to allow air to flow easily throughout the entire ship without any help.]

[That's one reason,] Miaari nodded.

[Another would be more metallurgic. Large pressure imbalances between sections would put additional pressure on the metal over time and cause metal fatigue. Even in a ship this big with a bulkhead a hundred shakra thick, a single shakra of air pressure difference between two sides of a bulkhead would put stress on the metal over time. They build these things to last thousands of years, so that kind of metal fatigue would show up eventually and be pretty expensive to repair.]

[Well-reasoned, cousin,] Miaari nodded. [But the main reason is pure economy. As you pointed out, it's cheaper to punch these holes in the ship for air circulation than it is to install millions of small air circulation units to move air through the duct system and keep the ship uniformly pressurized. Remember, these ships may be big, but they are built as cheaply as possible.]

[On this scale, I bet the way this ship does things is much different than any other ship we've seen,] Jyslin mused. [I mean, it could take us hours to get to the other side of the ship. I bet segments of the crew were assigned to a section of the ship and rarely left it. Operations, maintenance, everything, all done by a cell group of crew for a specific section of the ship. Each cell of crew would answer up the chain of command until it got all the way back to the bridge.]

[That's precisely how they did it, for all but upper command staff and internal ship security,] Miaari agreed, looking at her.

Jason walked over to the shaft and looked over the railing. It went down about fifty shakra and ended in a large set of heavy blast doors, which they must have closed for battle to prevent a hull breach from depressurizing the entire ship. There were probably a few thousand sets of those doors at regular intervals the entire thousand kathra down to the ship's core...and if they were all open, he'd be able to theoretically see all the way down to the giant hole melted through the center of the ship. Jyslin and Symone joined him, then Kiya called them back over as several figures came out of one of the doors and into the landing bay. They were Kimdori, Terrans, and Faey being led by a Kimdori in an E-suit. *[Denmother, Handmaiden, honored guests, welcome,]* the tall, burly male said over local commune through the communal transmitter in his helmet. Jason could see that he had a wide, strong muzzle through the glass faceplate of his E-suit and had dusky gray fur. *[I am Melaath Threxst, project leader for this refit operation. Please remember to only use commune, even our shorrange gravband is effectively scrambled by the quadrary stars close by.]*

[The effect reaches all the way out here? Wow,] Symone noted.

[One of yours, Mee?]

[No, he is my younger brother, not my cousin or son,] she replied, almost primly. *[Not every Threxst is my child, cousin.]*

[As often as you ask for permission to breed, it's a safe question to ask.]

Miaari slapped him on his armored shoulder. In the vacuum of the landing bay, it made no sound.

[If you'll follow me, I'll give you a tour of this section of the ship, Melaath continued with a bit of a small smile on his muzzle, visible through his faceplate.

[I take it the bridge was destroyed by whatever did that to the ship?] Jason asked.

[Yes, your Grace. As well as the main computer core and engineering headquarters, but not all of the engines,] he answered. *[But we will get to see a divisional operations center, which is something like the bridge for a section of the ship. There are 1,270 of them set at strategic locations to break the ship up into manageable pieces from an operations and maintenance point of view. The division control center we'll tour was*

responsible for 1,520 ship sections on 200 decks. If it was a stand-alone ship, it would be the size of the Tianne. We'll also get to see one of the computer control nodes that operated this section of the ship. It's too big to be controlled by a single computer from a single location, though they did have a main computer that oversaw and managed the individual node control computers. The node computer here is nearly as sophisticated as the mainframe on a KMS command ship, and it was only responsible for controlling the operation of a small section of this ship. We've already removed several of them and sent them back to Kimdori and to Karis for inspection and study. I believe we also sent one to certain trustworthy parties on Moridon as well.]

[What's the ship like from a general sense, Project Leader?] Jason asked.

[Basically, only about 15% of the ship was designed for crew occupation and habitation, with the vast majority of the ship's volume taken up by the engines and other main engineering sections, like power generation and food production. The center of the ship held its primary power plants, which were gigantic fusion plants capable of putting out nearly the same amount of energy as a red dwarf star, and surrounding that plant were the engines. The power generation facility took up nearly 10% of the ship's volume from what we could make out, and the engines take up nearly 70% of the ship's remaining volume, so we'll get to tour one of the engine compartments to see how they designed them. The ship's deck system starts about a quarter of the way inside the ship, some 270 kathra below us, and there are 1,800 decks between here and the engine bulkheads, with sections of decks separated by large 10 kathra wide shell bulkheads to reinforce the structural integrity of the ship, and with each deck level being approximately 50 shakra. The space under our feet between this floor and the ceiling of the deck under us is taken up by ship infrastructure.

Datalines, power conduit, pipes, ventilation ducts, and so on. So, while this ship is truly massive compared to Confederate ships, almost all of it is taken up by the engines and power plants that run the ship. There are 400 decks between those separating shell bulkheads, with seven such shells. If you cut the ship in half and viewed its cross section, it would show clusters of decks separated by bulkheads at regular intervals down to the engine compartment, then everything past that is made up of engine compartments

each holding an engine with the power generation system in the center of the ship.]

[Wow,] Jyslin returned.

[Indeed, Lady Jyslin,] Melaath nodded. [Like almost every other civilization but us, they are crippled by their need to put such large engines in their ships. And that shows the most in a ship this big.]

[If we had our own engines installed in this ship, they would take up only one quarter of the volume the current engines do,] one of the Kimdori with the project leader added.

[The big question is, Jayce, could we put a translight drive on a beast this big?] Tim asked.

[The short answer is yes, we can. The long answer is it won't be as easy as putting a drive in a smaller ship, but it can be done.]

[We'd need multiple drive units operating in sync to create an aggregate translight effect big enough to envelop a ship this size,] Melaath answered. [Even for mode one travel, we need 38 of the most powerful Hrathrari translight drives to get this ship from where we are into the system.]

[When do you start installation on those?] Zaa asked.

[We're scheduled to begin the installation process in three days, Denmother,] he answered. [We're installing the necessary power units now, and then we'll start installing the drives. Getting this ship into the system as quickly as possible is our primary goal, because it's vulnerable at this location. If the Syndicate knew it was here and what we're doing, they could theoretically reach this point.]

[They'd still have a hell of a time getting at it, given the conditions,] Jason noted.

The tour began, and it was fairly comprehensive. Melaath had learned a tremendous amount about the ship in the short amount of time he'd been there, and he shared that understanding with the rulers and command officers, who were studying everything and taking copious notes. The officers asked a ton of relevant questions about how an invading boarding party could best take control of a ship the size of a small moon with a compartmentalized layout that would make it exceptionally difficult to just

“storm the bridge” and take control of the whole ship from a single location. A ship that big was designed by default to be modular, and Melaath theorized that even taking the main bridge would not get invaders complete control of the entire ship.

Up to a point.

[The key would be the computers,] Melaath noted. [If a boarding party could get to the main computer control center in one of these ships, the mainframe that oversees the divisional control mainframes, they could theoretically hack the entire ship from the one computer to which all other computers are connected and from which they cannot ignore commands. We managed to find a hard copy of some ship blueprints in an engineering bay, and it says that the core was in the deepest part of the ship, located between the power plants and the engine compartments, which was destroyed by whatever burned the hole through it. But that's on this ship. The scans we conducted of the Syndicate ships as they approached our galaxy showed that each of these ships has a unique construction. There are some basic similarities in ships with the same shape, like the hexahedral or the spherical ships, but each ship is unique. You'd have to select a target ship in advance to be able to plan out a means to take it over.]

[What about the power plants? If they use a central power plant system, then cutting power lines would have an effect.] Sioa noted.

[A minimal one,] Melaath answered. [This ship is built with silly redundancy. This section of the ship has power connections to every other adjoining section. Cut a power line between this section and the core, and they just reroute power back to this section from one of the adjoining sections. To cut power to this section, you'd have to cut 137 different power conduits in locations about 30 kathra apart and on multiple decks. And even if you manage that, or if for some reason the main power generation plant went down and left the ship without main power, each section has an emergency power generation system to keep the section powered until repairs can be made.]

[That could be a problem,] Juma communed dryly.

[If you want to take over one of these ships, Admiral, the key is the main computer core. And on these spherical ships, you have a theoretical easy

way to get into the deepest part of the ship quickly.]

[The shafts,] Symone declared.

[Just so, my Lady,] Melaath nodded. [Find the shaft that comes closest to the main computer core and find a way to use it to get to the center of the ship. But that wouldn't be easy. They'd close every single set of blast doors in the shaft all the way to the core if an invading party entered it, and that's thousands of doors, with blocks of them controlled by different computers. To disable those doors, you'd have to get to the main core, but to get to the main core, you have to go through those doors. Quite a dilemma.]

[Not quite,] Sioa communed with a visible smirk. [Jason, what if we fire a Teryon rail blast right down one of these shafts?]

[Are you mad, woman? Do you know what kind of precision that would take?] Jason retorted. [You'd have to get the ship into the perfect—]

[Not a Fleet battleship Teryon rail battery, Jayce. One of those experimental fighter Teryon rail cannons, the ones the Ghost Squadron used when we attacked the Consortium com-con in the nebula. Wouldn't firing that weapon from inside the ship, pointed down into the core, qualify as firing it inside a gravity well? You said that's the only way they can be used, that using them outside of a gravity well makes them explode. Wouldn't that let the weapon fire without exploding before the shot goes off?]

Jason gave her a surprised look.

[That has some possibilities,] Juma communed thoughtfully. [They can bring the unit with them, set it up on the first blast door they encounter, align it, then get the hell out of here and fire it. As long as the gun was calibrated to fire so the Teryon effect was contained within the shaft itself and petered out before it hit the power plant in the center....]

[The data we've gathered indicate that they used large-scale inducers in the core to augment the natural gravity well of the ship to produce a ship-wide gravity effect much closer to their standard gravity throughout the entire ship. So the gravity well in an active ship would be much higher than the one in this one,] Melaath injected.

Jason was silent a moment, his arms crossed and tapping his chin with his finger. *[Fuck, Sioa, that's pretty fuckin' brilliant,] Jason communed in*

admiration after his pondering. *[If Melaath is right and they augment the gravity well in these super-ships, then the gravity well just might be strong enough to allow the weapon to fire, and if it's not, we might be able to compensate for that with inducer units to add enough gravimetric curvature to make it stable enough to fire. 3D could build a portable unit holding the weapon, stabilizing inducers, and a power plant, a self-contained, self-powered unit that wouldn't need to be very flashy or complex because the whole thing is going to blow up when the cannon fires anyway. It wouldn't be very hard to build at all. I think we might even be able to design a shaped Teryon charge shell that would stay inside the shaft, and we can control its range by changing the power settings on the firing unit. It's the velocity the unit invests into the Teryon slug that determines how far the Teryon burst effect travels before it escapes back into hyperspace. The downside would be that the unit would be pretty big, so it would take Gladiators or other exomechs or macro bionoids to carry it and set it up easily. It takes a Wolf rail cannon to fire the slug minimum, and that weapon is about 20 shakra long and weighs 470 konn in standard gravity. That's a bit too big for an infantry unit to carry around given it comes with a 900 konn, nine shakra by ten shakra by eight shakra power plant. That, or infantry would have to lug it around using hoverpods, and that could be dicey in a combat situation. But bottom line, I think it just might be possible. Cybi,]* he prompted, looking over at her.

[I'm explaining what we need to Luke right now,] she answered. *[He's going to talk to Maggie, Leamon, and Eraen. He's calling them over as I speak. They were the primary techs that developed the weapon.]*

[That idea has more use than just for capturing ships,] Zaa called. *[A landing party could land on the surface of one of these super-ships, set up that weapon so it points at the power plant, then fire it and knock out its main power, which would drastically reduce its fighting capability. It might even render the ship dead in space, depending on if the explosion of the power plant feeds back into the power system. A moon-sized ship could theoretically be knocked out of a battle by 20 Marines and a portable weapon they bring in with them.]*

[No doubt, since no amount of armor will save the ship from the Teryon burst effect, and the fighter variant we first designed produced a Teryon burst nearly 2,000 kathra long. Since the unit will be a one-shot disposable,

we can duplicate that effect, we don't have to worry about the unit blowing up when it's designed to blow up immediately after it fires, so we can overload the cannon no problem, and overloading the cannon is what produces that insane range with the Teryon bust. That's more than enough to get deep inside these ships, maybe even hit the power plants in the smaller super-ships,] Jason agreed. [And in the bigger ships, even if the shot didn't hit the power plant, the blast effect will take out some of their engine cells and reduce their maneuverability. Ten or twenty of those units fired at strategic points on the hull could knock out the ship's ability to move, and that removes it as a threat. Holy fuck. It's the 1920's battleship conundrum all over again.]

[How do you mean?] Melaath asked.

[Terran history,] Jason answered. [Just after a global war we call World War One, Terra's oceans were ruled by giant battleships that only other battleships could engage and defeat in naval warfare. An Army Aviator named General Billy Mitchell came up with the idea of attacking those behemoths with squadrons of single-pilot fighters dropping bombs on them from above, attacking the ships where their armor was weakest. Mind that aviation technology had just started to be developed on Terra at the time, so the idea of using airplanes as bombers was a relatively new concept. The Navy Admirals scoffed at the idea, until Mitchell proved it worked by using a squadron of single pilot fighters to sink a battleship in a demonstration. So, a ship that took years to build and cost a lot of money and men to operate was destroyed by easily mass produced fighter planes attacking from above and exploiting the ship's greatest weakness, and it was the beginning of the end of the age of the battleship in Terran military history. A single pilot could sink a battleship using a bomb or torpedo launched from a fighter, which effectively rendered battleships obsolete. In World War Two, the rulers of the oceans were aircraft carriers, carrying planes that could sink virtually any ship on the water, and the war on the oceans was won by the Navy that had the most surviving aircraft carriers when the war ended. Well, in this case, a small group of exomechs or Marines with the right weapon could theoretically deal heavy damage to a super-ship. Hell, maybe even cripple it or outright destroy it. It seems almost silly, the idea that a unit of infantry could take down something the size of a moon, but I'm sure those Navy admirals back in the 1920s thought that it was utterly

ludicrous a little single-seat plane that to a battleship would be the size of an insect could take it out.]

[You did say that the Syndicate's refusal to upgrade their equipment and change tactics to deal with advancing technology was their biggest flaw,] Jyslin communed slyly. *[They utterly rely on these monstrosities to win their wars. Well, what are they going to do when they start getting blown up by landing parties in dropships, something they won't take seriously until after they start losing ships to them?]*

[Retreat back to Andromeda,] Juma predicted, a bit smugly.

[Seriously, Jason, this idea is exactly what we need,] Sioa communed soberly. *[Can 3D rig something up?]*

[They're looking at the idea now, General,] Cybi told her. *[They'll get back to us as soon as they have some answers. Until then, I suggest we continue the tour.]*

[And now Navii's insistence on destroyers and frigates as the backbone of the KMS doesn't seem quite so antiquated,] Jyslin mused. *[She must have seen that with the kinds of weapons the Karinnes have, and everyone else would eventually have too, that bigger wasn't necessarily better. She was one step ahead of everyone.]*

[She always is, love,] Jason chuckled. *[Now if I could only get her to retire so she can enjoy her golden years.]*

[I think about it more and more every day, young buck,] Navii replied lightly.

[Navii, you eavesdropping little cheater. You in the command center?] Jason asked.

[Yes, keeping an eye on you children,] she replied. *[I have some telemetry feeds up on holo. So mother is watching, kids. Don't do anything silly.]*

Melaath showed them how the ship was organized into blocks dedicated to specific tasks or functions as they toured through, such as a maintenance block, a habitation block, an operations block, a reclamation block for trash and waste, and so on and so on. The ship was like a command ship in that it was a mobile city—more like a mobile *continent*—that had to have

everything in it a city did, from power generation to a sewer system. There were farms inside the ship, Melaath showing them a truly vast area the size of ten football fields filled with long-desiccated soil that had once been one of their farming operations, and another block dedicated to livestock management, slaughter, and processing into food. These ships, Jason learned, were nearly self-sufficient, the ship overall like an artificial planet or continent and each section in it was its own city, and if the ship had power and an atmosphere, the ship's crew could survive in it for decades, maybe even centuries, just off the food they produced inside from their farms and ranches. Each section in the ship was designed to be self-sufficient, an independent cell within a larger body. The farm they surveyed that once grew crops would be used to feed only the crew assigned to the section of the ship holding the farm and a section's population was balanced against the food production capability of the section. The only things they got from outside the section were power, additional water when necessary, and replacement parts and equipment too technically advanced to easily produce within the section—well, and communications. The ship had a ship wide comm system. Water, food, living quarters, it was all contained in this section, for use in this section. A crewman that lived in this section would receive his equipment and uniform from the central repository, but everything else would come from within the section in which he was assigned.

They then toured a sectional command center, which was like the bridge on a command ship. It was a huge building-sized complex holding offices, operations centers, and also held the core for the section's control computer. The computer was turned off, and from the look of the rows and rows of computer processing units bolted to the floor, it wasn't very advanced compared to Confederate standard norms. A Moridon would walk into the core room and think he'd traveled some ten thousand years into the past. While they looked primitive, Melaath told them that the computer architecture wasn't too far behind Confederate technology. They used a precursor to moleculartronic technology known as polarized quantum logic, a step up from cybertronic systems but not quite as powerful as biogenic or moleculartronic.

After showing them around the section, they traveled nearly two hours down one of the shafts that had an elevator shaft for trams and entered the

engineering section of the ship. Melaath showed them one of the engine cells, which was a gigantic chamber holding a hyperspace jump engine that was nearly the size of the Melai Building in Karsa...and there were *tens of thousands* of these engines inside the ship. The engine was *not* capable of real-time jumping, Melaath reported, which indicated that the Syndicate had stolen real-time engines from the Consortium after this ship had been built.

They also got to see the hole burned through the ship. The shaft continued down to the hole, and they went ahead and traveled the extra half hour to see it. The shaft opened right into the hole, which was as dark as a cave with just pinpoints of light at either end. Jason inspected the border of the hole and saw what he expected, the metal melted, but very little twisted superstructure or warping or dangling wires or pipes. Whatever had made that hole had gone through the ship so fast that it didn't burn away the material edges, though it did melt through it.

[Did they evacuate the ship after this was done to it, Melaath?] Jason asked, motioning at the melted bulkhead. *[I didn't see any bodies.]*

[There are bodies, your Grace, but not in the section you arrived in and we toured. It was far enough away from the effects of the attack that the crew wasn't killed by the heat induced into the ship and didn't decompress, so the crew there survived and evacuated. There are some parts of the ship that never lost pressurization, but the air that was within those sections is liquefied or even frozen solid from the cold of interstellar space. But there are other sections of the ship where there are signs that the crew was incinerated by the heat conducted into the ship by this, and signs other sections were depressurized, and the crew blown out into space. Those that weren't incinerated died from decompression, and all of the corpses are frozen solid. Needless to say, none of the corpses are very pretty,] he drawled. *[We sent some of them to the Medical Service for necroscopies and study. The decompression victims are very well preserved.]*

[So, why was the section we landed on depressurized if the crew managed to evacuate?] Symone asked.

[He just told us, silly,] Jyslin teased. *[The atmosphere in that section was liquid when they arrived. They probably pumped it out.]*

[Actually, that section of the ship was depressurized when we arrived,] Melaath corrected her. *[We think a slow leak to a depressurized adjoining section or to a depressurized vent shaft allowed the atmosphere to escape over the years, slowly enough that everything in the section wasn't disturbed. Finding that leak is on our task list in preparation for salvaging this ship and putting it back in service.]*

[With that hole melted through the ship, you're going to be doing a whole lot of leak finding,] Kiya predicted.

[We have a plan to deal with that,] he assured her. *[We're going to fill the melted edges of this hole with liquid dirolite alloy. If you're not familiar with dirolite, it expands as it becomes a solid instead of contracts, like water expanding when it becomes ice, so it will expand into all the cracks and holes and seal them off. It's also a very sturdy metal, very nearly armor quality, and should give us a nice solid foundation to install our own equipment for docking ships within the interior of the hole.]*

[Good plan,] Jason told him with an approving nod. *[I just hope you can scrape up enough dirolite to fill that much surface area,]* he added, motioning at the giant hole in which they stood.

[We'll definitely strip the galactic market of almost all available dirolite, that's for sure,] Melaath acceded mildly.

They finished up the tour there at the huge hole through the ship, and rather than go back up through the ship, their dropship came into the giant hole after them. The pilot had to depressurize the cabin and let them board, then they closed the hatch and pressurized. Melaath and his team were dropped off back in the same landing bay they'd initially entered, then the rest of them were taken back to the *Aegis*.

But few of them actually stayed for the trip back. Jason delinked from his bionoid as soon as he had it safely in its chair and locked down and almost immediately connected to the one he kept in 3D—he had eight bionoids now, four of them located at important places like 3D, Kosigi, and his office in the White House in addition to ones purely for recreation and experimentation—and barged out of the office to rush right over to where Luke, Leamon, Maggie, and Eraen were clustered near the main table, with holograms of Cybi and Cyra hovering nearby. “That was fast,” Luke noted.

“I left the others to discuss things so I could get over here,” Jason replied with a chuckle. “What have you got so far?”

“So far, we’re deciding how feasible it is with minimal technology,” Eraen answered. “Cybi just crunched some numbers for us about the minimum gravity well requirements to make the cannon stable enough to fire. But when it comes to the roots of Trelle’s hair, I think it’ll work. We’ll just have to science it if the gravity well isn’t strong enough.”

“Yup,” Maggie nodded. “The inducer idea will work, Cybi just proved it with math, but only if the base gravity well present meets or exceeds a threshold of 212.43 gravions per cubic shakra.”

“So, about 1.06 standard gravity,” Jason converted. “Syndicate standard gravity is .9755. I think we can come up with a small-scale inducer unit to make up the difference, one that won’t interfere with the unit.”

“Easily,” Cyra agreed. “Since the inducers will only be influencing an existing natural gravity well, it won’t introduce a strong enough gravitic oscillation effect inducers generate that was preventing us from using them to fire the cannons in deep space.”

Cyra was referencing their attempts to build a fighter-sized Teryon rail cannon that used inducers to fire in deep space, which had been a failure. An inducer created an artificial oscillation in the localized gravity well they created, something like the waveform of an AC electrical power supply, which was inescapable due to the way inducers worked to generate small, localized artificial gravity fields. That oscillation effect was making the cannons explode rather than fire, and nothing they did could get around it. With the inducers augmenting a natural gravity well to make it strong enough to stabilize the cannon, it *should* allow the weapon to fire. Unless—

“Wait, Melaath said they use artificial gravity tech to augment the super-ship’s natural gravity to achieve Syndicate standard. Do we have any data on that system from the sweeps the Kimdori probes did on the Syndicate fleet as it approached?”

“We already took that into account, Jason. The artificial gravity system they use in the super-ships doesn’t use inducer technology, so there’s no oscillation field to interfere with the cannon,” Cybi answered.

“They use a rather ingenious technology that transforms the power plant in the ship so that its power output artificially amplifies the natural gravity field of the ship,” Cyra added. “It’s also part of the power generation system itself, creating an artificial gravity effect sufficient to produce enough plasma to power the entire ship. It produces power almost equal to a Class XX heavy industrial singularity plant, and it’s purely fusion-based. Quite ingenious.”

“Like having a tiny star in the ship powering the whole thing, including it pulling gravity like one,” Luke compared, to which both Cybi and Cyra nodded.

“So, it comes back to it’s *possible*. Now make it *reality*,” Jason ordered. “Maggie, Leamon, Eraen, it’s your baby. Cybi, tell Cyvanne she’s the primary CBIM for the project, she could use the experience. This has priority over everything, even Project G. You pull whoever you need off the other projects and you figure it out as fast as you can. I don’t think I even need to explain why.”

“Nope,” she grinned as Cyvanne manifested a hologram into the workshop, still going with the tall, willowy, waifish flat-chested look with a pixie hairstyle. “It’ll let a landing party take out a super-ship by themselves. I’d say that makes this *pretty fucking important*.”

“Exactly. Get it done.”

“We’ll have something in a few days, Jason,” Eraen promised.

“Cybi and Cyra just uploaded all project data to me. I’m ready to help,” Cyvanne declared.

“Then come along, Cyvanne. We’ve got plenty for you to do,” Leamon told her with a sweeping motion of his arm.

Kaista,3 Shiaa, 4404, Faey Orthodox Calendar

Monday, 20 August 2018 Terran Standard Calendar

Kaista,3 Shiaa, year 1329 of the 97th Generation, Karinne Historical Reference Calendar

Foxwood East, Karsa, Karis

Jason wasn't in the mood to enjoy the party. He *knew* that things were about to start blowing up, and very soon.

He leaned back on his hands and watched the kids playing on the beach in the warm late afternoon sun as the twins and Siyara played in the sand by his blanket—he was keeping an eye on them—as Latoiya enjoyed her moment in the sun, as it were. It was her passing party, and Temika had certainly spent quite a bit of money to make it memorable. There was no doubt that she was going to be a telepath. The telepathic genetic footprint in Terrans was a dominant trait, and anyone with it passed it to their kids. A Terran telepath would have telepathic children 100% of the time, even if the other parent wasn't telepathic, and Temika was documented as the most powerful of all the Terran telepaths that wasn't a Generation. Temika was stronger than most Faey for that matter, the girls all agreed that she had the raw power to be an Imperial Marine. And after years of living on the strip, she had the training to back up that power. Latoiya had expressed at the very telling age of eight, which meant that she was going to be a strong telepath as well, just like her mother.

While the rest of the strip was certainly having a good time, Jason was too preoccupied to enjoy it. The Syndicate was about to make their move, he was absolutely sure of it, but not everyone agreed with him. They'd had a pretty heated argument about it in council that morning, with Magran leading the more pacifistic members against the more hawkish members over the Syndicate's fleet movements. The council was almost shocked that the most hawkish of all the council members was *Jason* when it came to not trusting the Syndicate, and had boiled down to three factions. Those who felt that the Syndicate was about to break the conditions of the non-aggression agreement and that they should mobilize the CCM to get them into position early, those who believed they would leave in peace, and those who wanted to wait and see what the Syndicate did before they committed any military resources. Magran led the faction that didn't think the Syndicate would attack, and to most of the council's surprise, Jason was the one advocating for immediate CCM mobilization.

The Syndicate had done well to mask their fleet movements. They'd scattered across the Strands of Trelle, and just two days ago, Fleet

Commander Sha Ra had sent them a message claiming that their mission was declared over, and the fleet was going to reassemble at Oasis to jump back to Andromeda. But it was *how* the fleet was reassembling that convinced both Jason and Navii that this was their first move in the war. The Syndicate fleet was broken up into thousands of small squadrons scattered completely around the galaxy, and every one of them was jumping back towards Oasis on routes that would bring them as close to the galactic rim as they were allowed to go...*at exactly the same time*. Jason had Cylan do the math, and he confirmed it. Every individual jumping group of Syndicate ships would come to its closest to the galactic rim at the same time, and they would do so in positions that scattered them across the P and S quadrants...and the S quadrant was the *home* quadrant. The only Syndicate ships that wouldn't come close to the galactic rim were the ones outside the Q quadrant, since they couldn't feasibly approach the galactic rim on a jump back to Oasis.

There were some 18,583 ships that would approach the galactic rim at the stated minimum distance that would make a jump into the galaxy take 3 days. Jason was absolutely convinced that in that moment where all those ships reached the closest distance to the galaxy, they'd drop out of hyperspace, converge into giant fleets, then jump towards the galaxy. If the fleets gathered at the point where the ships on that side could do so the fastest, that put them just outside the S1D and P3J sectors...and that almost uncomfortably close to Coalition territory, which started around the P4B sector and extended all the way out into the Q quadrant. It was only about a 37-minute hyperspace jump from the closest point on the rim to where that fleet would gather to the edge of Coalition territory. The S1D sector in the home sector was way, way out past the Verutan sector, and the closest Confederate member to it was the Myodi in the S2C sector. Each of the two projected fleets could gather in about 24 standard hours if they did it right, and then turn and jump for the galactic rim, putting them three days from the rim and a total of about four days, 11 hours from the war he knew was coming.

And still no word from Zaa or the Kimdori about what was going on inside the Syndicate fleet. No additional information on this mysterious Oracle system. Just...silence. Foreboding, worrisome silence.

Smile, Daddy. This is a party, after all, Siyara sent, a gentle smile on her lovely little face. Siyara was...definitely unique. Although Kyri had also been born expressed, Siyara was nothing like Kyri. Kyri was still very much a little girl, in both her mentality and her personality, where Siyara had a nearly unnatural maturity about her. She was still a three-year-old girl and loved toys and games and things other children did, but she also enjoyed much more mature pursuits like science, music, and art. She was much more emotionally mature than most other kids on the strip, even the much older ones, and had a grasp of things far beyond her siblings and friends. Much like Rann, she was mature beyond her years...but in her case, that maturity was beyond the norm. That was because she'd started learning the intricacies of social interaction and had started her education while still in the womb. Physically, she was three—really two, those damn Faey and their weird system where they effectively added a year to someone's age—but mentally and emotionally, she was closer to 13.

I'll smile in about two hours, he answered with an audible grunt. *That's when we find out if I'm right or Magran is. I really should be in my office, or the command center, but I couldn't be a no-show for Meep's party.* That was Latoiya's nickname, Meep, and while it sounded weird and there was a bit of a silly story behind how she got it, she was very fond of it.

You better not bail on my daughter, Jayce, Temika threatened from across the beach.

Work comes before pleasure, Mika, he retorted. *God, I hope Magran's right and I'm wrong, but I don't think so. After over a month of the Syndicate doing exactly what they agreed to do, it would be nice to think they have a shred of basic decency and humanity and don't invade. But I'm not holding much hope. I know too much about them to think they could be in any way reasonable.*

Mom says that we shouldn't have much trouble with them, Siyara told him. *That we have too many advantages. She said they might cause some trouble at first, but once we get a look at what they can do, we can adjust and kick them out of the galaxy.*

Quite a few others agree with your mom, Jason nodded. *But I'm not quite so optimistic. If they beat the Consortium, then we can't take them lightly.* Usually Jason wouldn't sit around and discuss things like that with

his children, except maybe Rann, but Siyara was a special case. *But I do agree with her in that we can beat them. We have the tools and the weapons to deal with their giant ships, and that's the backbone of their fleet. Especially since 3D got the shipkiller mobile Teryon rail units working. We should have a few hundred of them built and waiting by the time the fleet gets here...if it gets here when I think it will.* He gave a dark chuckle. *I wish I could see the look on that Benga woman's face when one of her super-ships gets taken out by a small landing party, he sent with grim amusement rippling under his thought. I'll bet you an ice cream sundae that after they see that little trick, they'll treat every jumper they see like it's a doomsday weapon. They'll focus on shooting down landing craft and MIT-30 jumpers over about everything else.*

And we can use that against them if they do, Siyara predicted.

You bet, baby girl, he nodded, reaching over and putting his hand on her honey-colored hair. On top of being exceptionally intelligent—Myleena thought she'd be as smart as or smarter than she was once she was educated—she was as beautiful as Sora was. Siyara had it all, brains, looks, and incredible power, and Myleena was the current object of intense competitive hatred of about every other Faey woman on the strip because of it.

And yet, you still think this won't be easy.

No I don't, he answered, looking down at her. *Don't fall into the trap your mother's falling into, pips. Don't underestimate the enemy. The minute you do that, you give them a way to beat you. They beat the Consortium, and the Consortium had a big technological advantage and has energy beings that could see every move the Syndicate fleet made as they made it thanks to their psionics. You'd think that with those kinds of overwhelming advantages, the Consortium would have beaten the Syndicate easily, but they didn't. Respect that fact, Siyara. The Syndicate defeated an enemy that had better technology and could see every move their fleets made.*

Then maybe the key is to ask the people we have over in Andromeda to find out how they did it. Then we'll know and won't let them do that to us.

We're doing that as we speak, he told her. *Denmother Zaa has Kimdori studying the history of the big war over in Andromeda to try to figure out*

how the Consortium could lose with those advantages.

Siyara was quiet a moment, packing wet sand into a bucket, then she turned it over and set a little cylinder of sand beside another, building the walls of her sandcastle. She then reached up and put her hand on his wrist. *[Mom said you intend to fight in the war yourself. But you won't let anyone know you're going to,]* she communed with surprising subtlety, using that skin to skin contact so that her commune couldn't be picked up by the roving camera pods, and thus overheard by the CBIMs.

[In this war, baby girl everyone matters. I'm not going to sit in an office and let others do my part, not when I can help in a way that makes me a valuable asset. I can do something only a handful of people on Karis can do, and I'd be all but committing a crime against everything I believe in if I didn't use that to protect my home, my friends, and my children,] he finished, stroking her thick, shoulder-length hair, then putting a finger gently under her chin. *[I'm a Generation, Siyara, just like you. We can do things nobody else can, and for us not to use those gifts when our friends need us the most, that is the worst thing we could possibly do. It dishonors us, the house, our traditions, and the bonds of friendship we share with people like Dahnai, Zaa, Kreel, Krirara, and everyone else that joined the Confederation to help protect our galaxy from the Andromedans. I may be the Grand Duke, pips, but I am, first and foremost, the protector of Karis and the House of Karinne. And I'm damn well gonna protect it, even if it means I have to fight myself. When the enemy is at your door, the last place a ruler should be is cowering behind his throne.]*

[Without you, Dad, the house would fall apart. Everyone loves you. Everyone. If you died, it would crush the spirit of the whole planet.]

[Then I won't die,] he answered with a wry smile. *[Don't worry about me, pips. I was trained well for what's coming, and if I do have to go out to do what I can do from up close, I'll be going with Justin and the Ghost Squadron, or Kyva and the KBB. Kyva is my champion, after all. I'll be just fine.]*

[I like Kyva. She's funny. And her daughter is so cute.]

[Yeah, I can't argue there. Rio is an absolute cutie,] he agreed with an audible chuckle.

“Stop moping, Uncle Jason, and come have fun!” Latoiya demanded after running up to them. She reached down and grabbed the hand he had on Siyara’s shoulder and started pulling. Latoiya was *all* her mother, with the same face and skin tone, the same super-thick, super-frizzy hair from her Samoan ancestors that she wore in a thick tail behind her head the way Temika did when Jason first met her, a build that already promised to be highly athletic when she grew up, and she was almost shockingly tall for a girl her age. Given how big and powerful her parents were, if she *didn’t* have a pro-level athlete’s body that towered over everyone else when she grew up, her parents would disown her...or possibly think she was switched at birth with their real daughter. But there was way too much Temika in that nine year old face and body for anyone to ever think that she wasn’t Temika’s daughter Jason was going to bet that she’d be a good half a head taller than her mother, and Temika was the tallest woman on the strip.

“I am not *moping*,” he protested. “I’m having a talk with Siyara.”

“Well, it’s too serious!” she challenged. “Come on, up!”

“Go ahead, Dad, she won’t give up now,” Siyara said, her words still a little slurred and her voice a little hoarse. While she sent and communed with exacting skill, she *hated* to talk, so she didn’t practice enough to have good diction. The only time Siyara ever used her voice was to talk to someone that couldn’t hear her send or commune, so mainly to the unexpressed kids on the strip.

“I’ll get up if you send to me,” Jason told her.

“No fair, I just expressed two days ago!”

“Life isn’t fair. No sending, no Uncle Jason,” he retorted with a sly look.

“Meanie,” Siyara accused.

“All day every day,” he agreed shamelessly, rolling a finger in Latoiya’s direction. “So let’s hear it, Meep. I don’t have all day, you know.”

As he expected, Temika wasn’t wasting any time when it came to training her daughter. It took Latoiya a few tries, but she eventually managed a garbled sending that was all but incomprehensible, but *rippling* with underlying power that betrayed her strength, a strength that caused her

to express much younger than average...but that was average for the strip. “Not bad, Meep, not bad at all,” he commended as he climbed to his feet.

He did manage to forget about things for a little while, playing with Latoiya and the large pack of strip kids, whose numbers seemed to increase with each passing month. There were *so many* cribs and hoverstrollers along the line of umbrellas, keeping the sun off the youngest, and kids were absolutely everywhere, running, laughing, and playing. Most of them were the children of the strip girls, but some were from the surrounding neighborhood. Jezzi’s four-year-old son Heln was playing with Kaili’s six-year-old boy, Faren. Jarila’s three-year-old girl Yibi was tussling a bit with Kevin and Kaelan over a choice mold for packing sand. Miaari’s three cubs Haan, Maalet, and Yemaari ran by with Zach and Kyri chasing after them, Yemaari carrying a Terran frisbee of all things.

But this wasn’t an unusual sight on Karis. Children, babies, and strollers were quite a common sight on the planet. The populace had heard about the program to increase the Generation numbers and realized that it was a good way to increase the house population without recruiting, and one could guess what happened next. In the eight years since life had returned to Karis, the citizens had been reproducing at a faster than average rate to repopulate the planet, with an average of 3.7 children per household, and that was fairly high for a planet dominated by humanoid species that had only been populated for nearly nine years. The statistics Jerrim kept ignored species that had large numbers of children at once or had an accelerated reproduction cycle, like the Skaa, Grimja, Jhri, and Urumi, because they skewed the numbers. If those species were added into the formula, the average jumped to 6.1. But what it meant was that Karis’ non-immigrant population was growing at a strong rate, stronger than the average for humanoid species who dominated the planet’s population, and Jason didn’t mind that at all. The children born on Karis were the true children of Karis, no matter what species they were, and this was their planet, their home. They were the future to which the immigrants who had answered the call of the House of Karinne to help restore Karis would pass their legacy and be led by the first native Karisian born here in 1300 years, Rann.

This was *Rann’s* planet. Jason was taking care of it until he came into his birthright.

Latoiya got him into a game of beach volleyball, and that kept him quite busy until Cybi interrupted the fun. *[Jason, Myri needs you in the command center right now,]* she told him.

[I take it the Syndicate is making their move?]

[Yes. Hurry.]

He sighed and caught the ball hit towards him instead of returning it, which caused some accusing calls from the other side of the net. "Sorry guys, but Cybi just called. I have to go to work," he said, handing the ball to Latoiya. "And you don't get a point for that, this was an emergency!" he added, pointing at Rann, who was on the other side of the net with Zora and Shya. He put on a thigh-length robe that Kellin got him last New Year's Day and headed back into the house, heading straight for the bedroom. Jyslin wandered up and leaned against the doorframe, holding Julia in her arms. Amber was lurking around her ankles. *I take it things are about to get messy?* she asked.

I think so, he replied as the armory door opened and a retracted rack holding his armor slid out. *Aya, I need to go to the White House, can you call in a corvette?*

There will be one at the dock in five minutes, she answered.

Cybi didn't tell me what's going on, so I'll find out in about twenty minutes, he continued as he picked up his breastplate and backplate, already connected at the shoulders. He took off his robe and put the pieces over his head, then picked up the codpiece...not the usual method of putting on armor, but it worked for him. *But I don't really need to ask to know what the Syndicate's up to.*

They're gonna invade, just like you said, she nodded.

That's what I'm guessing, he told her as he got the codpiece on, then connected the side seams of the two pieces over his shoulders. Once they were connected, he lined up the flexible armored stomacher up with the codpiece and connected them, then let the armor's automated connecting system complete the connections. He took out the pieces for one of the leg greaves and set it over his left thigh, locking them together and then connecting them to the base of the codpiece. *I figure I'm gonna see the enemy fleets dropping out of hyperspace at the two rendezvous points Navii*

predicted. And I bet the Confederation diplomatic agency is getting nothing but silence from the Syndicate.

Of course, you don't announce that you're about to invade, Jyslin agreed. I hope Lorna's ready.

You know she is, and the extra time the Syndicate gave us is going to really come in handy, Jason told her. It let both the CCM and the KMS refit quite a few ships, and 3D managed to develop the shipkiller unit and get it into production. That thing needs a name.

I don't think something like a unit that can kill a ship should be named after some cartoon pony, Jyslin warned. What is it with 3D that makes them give things such silly names?

Jason laughed aloud. The silly name is something of a tongue-in-cheek deception as to what the device actually does, he grinned at her. After all, how can you tell what a Friendly Puppy or Hello Kitty or My Little Pony does from its name? But, you're right in this case. Instead of a cartoon pony, we'll name it after a cartoon robot. I officially dub the shipkiller units Megatron units.

What in Trelle's name is a Megatron?

Jason sent her an image of the cartoon robot and several additional images of his later versions from different shows and movies, but the original version was something of a cultural icon in America back on Terra. He was the bad guy in a very popular series of TV cartoons and movies called Transformers, and despite him being the bad guy, he's very popular, even today. You ask any American male between the ages of ten and fifty who Megatron is, and he'll be able to tell you in a heartbeat. Even most women know who Megatron is, and Transformers isn't exactly marketed to Terran women. Given he was the most powerful and dangerous of all the Decepticons, it's only fitting that a shipkiller weapon be named after him.

I just do not understand your silly culture, she teased with a smile.

Better than yours, he teased as he finished the lower half of his armor by stepping into his left boot, then started on the arm vambraces.

Jason, the corvette is landing at the dock, you can leave as soon as you're ready, Aya called. I'll have your guards waiting on the corvette for

you.

Sounds good, Aya. I should be done in just a minute, he answered.

He finished in just a moment, then stood up and came over and gave Jyslin a kiss. *Hold down the fort, love. And keep this little angel happy,* he added, leaning down and kissing Julia on the forehead. “I’m going out, Amber. Don’t drive Jys nuts, okay?” he added, looking down at the tiny vulpar.

Amber gave him a squeaky little yip of complete disagreement.

“We’ll be here waiting when you get home, love,” she said, kissing him again.

It only took about ten minutes to get to the White House, and he was in the command center about five minutes later. Aya was with him, joining his usual four guards; no doubt she wanted to be here to hear this firsthand. The entire command staff was in along with just about the entire command center crew, so there were people everywhere. All five CBIMs and Coma were present as holograms, hovering off to the side of the main table, and Dellin was present as a hologram, standing beside Navii’s hoverchair. “I’m here, Myri,” he called as he marched towards the center holo table. “The Syndicate made their move?”

“They did, and not something we expected,” Navii said, and the holo projected up over the table. It showed their home galaxy and thousands of blinking red dots. “The entire Syndicate fleet in transit dropped out of hyperspace as we expected, Jason, but they’re not gathering into large fleets. Every single element of the fleet that jumped separately has dropped into normal space, changed course, and jumped back into hyperspace. They’re on course to enter the galaxy, Jason, and navigation and astrocartography so far project that each element has a *different* destination. Some of those elements are just a single ship, some are very small elements of maybe three or four ships. The largest collection of ships is 120. Each one has a separate destination. So far, we count 8,438 different destinations, and they seem to have been selected completely at random.”

Jason looked up at the hologram and saw Navii explained it perfectly. Each of those individual units of ships or small group of ships that had been out in the Strands hadn’t stopped to gather into huge fleets, they had

changed course and were now inbound, each one with a different destination...and those destinations weren't just along the rim where they were going to enter. He focused on one line, showing that a single super-ship was inbound towards the P quadrant had a destination of R1X 7846-4656-1193, which didn't have anything there but a single gas giant with 31 moons that had absolutely no value whatsoever. That ship was going to cross half the galaxy once it entered to get there. He looked over the destinations, thousands of them, and couldn't see any kind of real pattern. The squadron of 120 ships was being sent to a system with *no planets* in it. An element of four of their smaller battleships was being sent to *Subria*, the capitol of the Subrian Authority and one of the most heavily defended star systems in the P quadrant, where they'd be annihilated about a microsecond after dropping out of hyperspace. It was almost like they'd chosen destinations at random and assigned them to elements of the fleet, without rhyme or reason.

"This doesn't make any sense," he complained. "Why would they pick destinations *randomly*?"

"And that is part of its brilliance," Navii said soberly. "By completely choosing destinations at random, it prevents Lorna from developing comprehensive battle plans to counter their fleet movements, as they follow no discernable pattern. And in a way, how we react will tell the Syndicate commander what's important to us as we allocate assets to protect some systems, but not others."

"It's also going to stretch the CCM to the limit," Juma grunted, looking up at the holo. "They've split into so many different elements that we can't cover all of them. Some of those ships are going to arrive at their destinations unchallenged, because we simply don't have the ships to face them."

"That's another brilliant part of their plan," Navii nodded. "They're sending single super-ships out without task forces or escorts, which have to be countered by *task forces* of CCM ships that don't have KMS ships in them. That stretches our assets out beyond their limit, which means that over a third of those invading elements will be free to move about the galaxy without resistance because we simply don't have the forces to counter them. And you know what they will do."

“If they can get around our string jammers, send them directly to wherever their ships need reinforcements in the places where they decide they need to win,” Jason predicted. “It both gets their main fleet into the galaxy in a way we can’t really stop *and* creates a pool of reserve ships they can send in to reinforce fleets that are losing in places where they want to win. Fuck. Fuck, why didn’t we see this? Did *anyone* see them doing this?”

“Navii did,” Myri said proudly, and Navii blushed a bit in modesty.

“It was one of the scenarios we considered,” she said mildly. “But we gave it a low chance of them executing it.”

“But you planned for this.”

“We have a plan, yes. But it’s a *KMS* plan, Jason, not a *CCM* plan.”

“Lorna’s not going to quibble if you send her what you can of the *KMS* plan and let her build on it,” Jason predicted.

“Much of our counter depends on 3D, Jason,” Navii told him.

“Automated toys, stellar collectors, and interdictors are the response to this spread-out strategy the Syndicate is executing. We need to get the right devices into the right systems to take on the elements that have only single or a few ships and save our line vessels and other hard assets for the larger concentrations. The toys may not destroy them, Jason, but they *can* slow them down, harass them, possibly prevent them from jumping when ordered and delay their arrival into a battle. We use what interdictors we have against the most dangerous elements, either those that pose the greatest threat or the ones whose destinations are places we can’t allow them to reach. The element destined for Subria would be one such element. We can’t allow those four ships to get even a single look at Subria and somehow get it back to its fleet command.”

“I...I see what you mean,” he said with a nod. “I’ll go straight over to 3D after we finish here.”

“I’m telling them about this right now,” Cybi declared.

“I do hope that you turned on the interdictor at Oasis?” Jason asked.

“Not yet,” Navii answered. “We’re saving that for the right moment, Jason. They *can* find it and neutralize it, so we’re holding that surprise back until it can do the most damage. Besides, those ships are six days from the

galaxy, so they mean nothing in the short term. I would guess that the Syndicate commander will hold them at Oasis, allow the initial battles to be fought, then send out reinforcements as needed once she knows where she wants them to go. I estimate we have five days before any ships at Oasis leave. Three days for the invading ships to enter our galaxy, and one to two days before she sees the results and makes her next move.”

“But we do have ships towing out standard interdictors to form a sphere of interdiction around Oasis that they won’t detect until they try to jump through it,” Myri added. “We’re using the same strategy we had for the big trap we set for them, just without having to leave an opening for the ship to pass through to get inside. We have 56 interdictors on the way to build a sphere of interdiction that starts a light year out from Oasis and completely encloses it. We’re going to save the tackler hidden in the system in case they try to jump the reserves they have at Oasis out of the system before we have the interdictor sphere set up.”

“Good call,” he agreed with a nod.

“The Confederate Council is calling an emergency meeting, Jason,” Cyra told him. *“Do you want me to sit in for you until you can attend?”*

“Please, thank you, Cyra,” he replied. “I’m gonna be a little too busy to go sit on my butt in my office for maybe a couple of hours.” He gave the hologram a long look, then sighed. “Shit. I knew this wasn’t going to be easy. I almost wish I was going to be proved wrong.”

“We’re going to have to commit almost the entire KMS, Jason,” Juma said. “That means we need to activate the reserve and guard units to protect the planet while we pull our assets to counter the Syndicate.”

“Do it,” he agreed. “And we move to full wartime footing. Let’s go to stage two, Myri. Activate the planetary hard shield and activate all planetary defense systems,” he ordered. “Time to activate the worker reassignment plan, Dellin, get them off the construction docks and onto the repair docks, get everything organized before damaged ships start coming in for repairs. If they’re not working on a ship that’s going to be completed in the next ten days, they switch. And I want *all* of them on the repair docks by the time the Syndicate fleet enters our galaxy. At that point, working on new ships won’t matter, where repairing the damaged ships will.”

“I’ll start arranging it,” Dellin replied. “I’ll activate the new automated damage control and repair systems that MRDD designed for us as well.”

“Is everything on the board?” Jason asked, looking at Juma.

“We have nine ships off the board for maintenance, and 32 ships off the board for drive refits,” she replied. “Dellin, we need those ships back on the board in three days.”

“I’ll put some extra workers on it,” he answered. “But to warn you now, I don’t think the cruiser Deslai is going to be ready in time. It suffered a primary plant malfunction, and they decided to replace the plant core chamber rather than try to find the problem. That’s a pretty involved repair.”

“We can live with one cruiser being off the board,” Juma told him evenly. In the background, they heard the alert beacon go off over the civilian gravband frequencies, as well as over both CivNet and the planetary biogenic network. Shey’s voice followed the alert siren, which was pre-recorded. *“Planetary alert. Planetary alert. Defense condition has been raised to stage two. Defense condition raised to stage two. All planetary reserve and guard units, contact your barracks HQ immediately for information on deployment assignments. Repeat, all planetary reserve and guard units, contact your barracks HQ immediately for information on deployment assignments.”*

Another voice took over after Shey’s, one Jason didn’t know. *“Planetary shield activation. Planetary shield activation. The planetary shield will be raised in ten minutes. Repeat, the planetary shield will be raised in ten minutes. All air traffic divert from shield arc locations immediately. All air traffic divert from shield arc locations immediately. All traffic control officers take note, only gates A and B will be open once the shield is raised. All traffic control officers, only gates A and B will be open once the shield is raised.”*

“Planetary shield activation sequence is engaged, General,” one of the control coordinators called. “All power feeds are online, and the shield matrix is in charging sequence. We are on a ten-minute countdown.”

“Very good, Major,” Myri called back.

“I’ll leave you ladies to it,” Jason said. “I need to get over to 3D and see what we can come up with to counter this. Cybi can keep you up to date on what we come up with. In the meantime, Cybi, I want you to activate Unit Alpha.” Unit Alpha was the code name of the combat-rated Generations, those who might be called upon to get in an exomech or into a gestalt-equipped line vessel and take it to the Syndicate on the front lines. There were ten members of Unit Alpha, and that included Jason and Saelle.

“Including *you*?” Myri asked.

“*Nobody* sits out this war, Myri,” he replied bluntly.

“Jayce, sweetie, if you think you’re going to go on combat sorties, you’re *crazy*. There’s about four billion people that will take turns paddling you if you do anything that crazy. The line is going to start right there,” she added, pointing at Aya and his guards—Aya was wearing a scowl as dark as a thundercloud— “and go right through this command center.”

“Besides, you’re the primary Generation tasked to defend the planet. You are Cybi’s strongest merge, Jason, and that means you have to be on planet,” Navii reminded him.

“I won’t be on primary rotation. But if I’m needed, I’ll be ready,” he answered.

“You won’t have Kaili. With us going to deployment, that puts her on the *Tianne* and in Coma’s core chamber,” Juma warned. “She’s the Generation assigned to Coma for biogenic operations.”

“She needs to be at Joint Base Alpha for the meeting, then she’ll go on to the *Tianne*,” Jason answered.

That meeting took place right on time. Jason spent nearly two hours over at 3D discussing ideas and possible tactics they could use against the Syndicate’s scatter strategy, but he got off the corvette carrying him right on time and walked into the meeting room holding the other eight Generations currently on planet that were members of Unit Alpha, in addition to a hologram of Saelle representing the ninth, attending from the Imperial Palace. Jason put his helmet on the table at the front of the room and leaned his hands on it. “Alright, we’re all here,” he announced as Cybi and Cyra manifested holograms into the room, appearing sitting on each side of the table and leaning on one hand, the demure pose they most often used sitting

on his desk, while Cylan, Cyvanne, and Cynna manifested standing to the sides of Jason. Coma's hologram manifested beside Cynna's. He had to speak because Saelle was present as a hologram, else he'd be communing. That was the usual way Generations communicated with each other. "This is it, guys. What the Syndicate has done is going to pull us into this, and I mean directly. I take it you were all briefed?"

"Cybi explained what's going on, Jayce," Jezzi answered.

"Good. Then you know that there's a good chance that we might be called into a theater to assist the CCM directly. I'm assigning each of you a corvette that's going to more or less follow you around at all times," he told them. "It's never going to be more than three minutes away from you. If you get a scramble call, it'll be there to pick you up. The corvette is going to be carrying your deployment bag and a spare suit of tactical armor just in case. And that also means that you don't go out alone with your kids. I'll assign a military aide to stay with you so they can get your kids back home if you get called in. Kaili, it's gonna be a bit different for you," he said, looking over at the youthful-looking sandy-haired Faey. "With you being activated, that's going to put you on the *Tianne* until this operation is over. You'll be going up as soon as we finish here, and you won't be back home until it completes the mission."

"No problem, Jayce. I already have my stuff in my quarters on the ship, and the KMS put a housesitter in my house to take care of my dogs."

"You ready?"

"Sure am," she replied with a confident nod. "I just finished a ten-day training session with Coma like five days ago."

"Who's the backup for Kaili on the ship?" Evinn asked.

"Melliken," Jenn answered.

"*He's already aboard,*" Coma said. "*He arrived about an hour ago.*"

"But he's not combat rated on exomechs and ground-based operations yet," Jason continued, "so he's not a member of this unit. He will be, though."

"He musta finished his naval training if he's deployed," Hinvi observed.

“Yeah,” Jason nodded. “Jenn, Jezzi, since you’re both considered Cyra’s primary and you’re the only CBIM primaries not me in this unit, one of you will be staying on planet at all times. Cylan, Cynna, and Cyvanne’s primaries haven’t finished the other training yet, so they’re in the same boat as Melliken.”

“You mean Jezzi’s the primary,” Jenn corrected with a smile. “That means I can be deployed off planet.”

“Your merge is like a quarter of a percent below mine! And I’m the *woman* here, brother! If anyone’s climbing into an exomech and backing up a ground force, it’s gonna be *me*!”

“This is the House of Karinne, not the Imperium, sis,” he replied coolly. “Men are the equal of women here. I’m more than capable of fighting from a mecha. I have better scores than *you*.”

“Both of you stow it,” Jason said bluntly. “Saelle, you’re staying right where you are. Your job is to protect Dahnai and the kids. You’ll only get called out if things *really* get crazy, like so crazy that even *I* have to go out there.”

“Not a problem, Jayce. I have everything under control here, and I’ve got no doubt that the others have got this. We are Generations,” she said proudly. *“Kaili alone can take a gigantic bite out of the Syndicate.”*

“And I can’t wait to do it,” she said eagerly, nodding.

“Well, the rest of you consider this. One of us is going to be assisting the KMS when they try to *capture* one of those super-ships,” he warned. “That’s going to be a very dangerous assignment, guys. I’m not going to sugar-coat it. It’s gonna be rough, which is why only one of us can do it. We’re the only Generations with sufficient combat training to be able to do a mission like this. So I want all of you to go over boarding operations with Marines and Tarks while piloting a tactical Juggernaut and brush up on enemy detection and attack techniques, as well as defensive TK techniques. Ryn’s agreed to give some refresher training for all of us so we’re razor sharp when the time comes,” he told them as he motioned towards Ryn, who was standing by the door. Ryn was probably the most *skilled* telepath on the planet, a graduate of the prestigious Xerian Academy of telepathic

sciences. Ryn could take down a mindbender without much effort. “We’re *all* going to be doing drills and practice runs to get ready, even me.”

“Why can’t we use a tactical Titan?” Vella asked.

“Titans are too big to fit in the companionways on their ships, but Juggernauts are about the same size as Benga, so that’s what we’ll be using,” he answered. “Juggernaut tacticals are more powerful than Gladiator tacticals, so whoever ends up drawing that mission is going to be using a Juggernaut. So that’s what we’ll be using in our training sims.”

“Sounds good,” Jenn said enthusiastically. “When do we start?”

“Tomorrow, but if you want to do some freelance training exercises today, have at it,” Jason answered. “The rigger corps are gonna be running training exercises just about 29 hours a day until they ship out, so you shouldn’t have any problems getting into some exercises. Just talk to Colonel Mefiri, she’s commander of the training school here. She’ll work it out for you.”

“Just out of curiosity, how far along are the others?” Jezzi asked.

“You mean to joining the unit?” Jason asked, to which Jezzi nodded.

“Twelve have completed their naval training but are still undergoing ground-based operations training,” Cybi answered. “Sixteen have completed ground-based training but are still undergoing naval training. All of them should be done within the next two takirs and join the unit. Just about everyone else is in varying stages of the training, be it naval or ground.”

“That training isn’t going to stop because of the deployment,” Cyra added. “If anything, it may accelerate it a bit by giving them practical experience.”

“Every Generation that finished naval training is either already on a command ship or battleship or is heading for one,” Jason continued. “We put some pretty heavy-duty gestalts on every command ship and battleship in the inventory to act as fighter and boarding protection and point defense against incoming fire, so they’ll probably be deployed to all four ship classes in the fleet. The Generations with ground-based training are already assigned to exomech companies, but they won’t be deployed unless a

ground force runs into significant resistance and calls a Generation in to help them. Lorna has direct authority for that. That order will come from her, and *only* from her. But odds are, *you* will be called in before *they* will, because you're in this unit. That means you *finished* your training, and Lorna knows you know what you're doing. They'll only get called out if all of us are already on another sortie."

"Why only give that to Lorna?" Vella asked.

"Because she more than anyone off Karis knows that while we may be powerful, we are not *living weapons*," he answered. "Just about any other commander in the CCM only sees what we can do, they tend to forget that we're *people*, not *assets*. Lorna will know when one of us is needed to get a victory, and when we're *not* needed. Because, to be honest, I don't want us deployed unless there's no other choice. I don't want the others in the CCM to see exactly what we can do, because as sure as it rains in Karsa in the winter, it means they'll want that power for themselves. Then we'll be right back to the situation that made us secede from the Imperium, Miaari getting thousands of reports of cloning operations suddenly starting up in every empire in the Confederation, and hundreds of infiltrators trying to get on Karis to get the specs for building biogenic crystal growth tanks, and our DNA. If not us."

"Can't argue with that, Jezzi grunted.

"Lorna's personally involved in this because she's my aunt-in-law," Jason said. "I'll trust her more than anyone else in the CCM to understand that while we're part of this war and will fight for the Confederation to protect our galaxy, we want to do it *quietly*. That's why no command staff that may ride on the *Tianne* will ever see Kaili or Melliken. They'll never know just *who* on the ship is the Generation."

"Yeah, I'm restricted to my quarters if there's any CCM staff on the ship, so that'll be like *all the time*," Kaili said, a bit sourly. "Good thing my quarters are literally next door to Coma's core chamber. I don't have to go far to get to my merge chair."

"And Melliken's quarters are right beside hers," Jason added. "We made sure to take into account that Generations would be merging to Coma when we designed the ship."

"I'll take good care of you, Kaili," Coma told her.

"I expect cake with every dinner, Coma," she declared cheekily.

"Don't go primadonna on us, Kaili," Farin said dryly.

"Oh hush, Farin," she retorted.

"Jason does bring up an important point that all of you should remember," Cybi said. *"Remember that when you are deployed off planet in a CCM unit, Alpha Protocols are in effect at all times."* Alpha Protocols were a series of rules that protected the identity and person of a Generation when deployed into a CCM unit, ranging from procedural rules like them not being identified as such over comm to simple rules like a Generation never removing his or her helmet so their faces could be seen in the company of outside military personnel, or driving a tactical rig that looked exactly the same as every other rig in the company so they couldn't be singled out. They also included rules that protected a Generation when not in active combat, like the fact that a Generation would only be in the combat theater long enough to do their job. They would come down in a mech jumper, a jumper specifically built for launching and recovering exomechs instead of infantry, accomplish their mission, then immediately pull back and be picked up by a jumper and returned to a KMS vessel. Alpha Protocols were known in the KMS and practiced by all affected units that might be working with or have a Generation assigned to them.

"Remember that you are responsible for some of those protocols. Don't be the one that breaks protocol and makes me spank you. Neither of us is going to enjoy it."

"Now that she has that bionoid, don't test her," Jason warned, which made Cybi laugh.

"I've been practicing with the paddle Jason keeps hanging on the wall of his office," she informed them, taking a few mock swings with her free arm.

"And that brings up another point, one being drilled into every member of the KMS that gets transported on certain ships," Jason added. "Some of our ships are equipped with an experimental engine called a translight drive, a new technology that we're researching. This engine is *beyond* top secret. It's so secret that this had *better* be the first time anyone in this room

not a hologram has heard of it,” he said flintily. “The only reason I’m bringing it up is because if you get put on a ship with one of these drives installed, you’re going to hear ship wide intercom announcements mentioning it. What you hear, what you see the engine do, it’s as secret as the Generations. The secret unspoken remains a secret,” he said intensely. “This is something you don’t discuss with anyone, not even those who already know about the drives. Don’t get curious about them either. The ship’s crews won’t talk about them to you, and if you get nosy, you’ll get yanked off the ship and replaced, and your combat status will be revoked. So, that’s where it stands. Does everyone in this room understand what I just said?” he asked strongly. When that was settled, he looked at Kaili. “Kaili, that goes double for you. Since you’re Coma’s primary, you *have* to learn about the operational characteristics of the drive so you understand how the ship may move while you’re doing your job. What you learn while you’re there is something I’d better *never* hear you discuss, anywhere, with *anyone*. Understand?”

“Completely, Jayce,” she replied confidently. “I have a top-secret clearance. Like everyone else in this room,” she added dryly.

“Not that I don’t trust you, Kaili, but keep in mind that if you’re caught discussing this information, you’ll be spending about ten years in prison. This is an *actionable* offense,” he warned.

“Just more reason to keep quiet,” she said calmly.

“Alright, that’s it,” Jason declared. “We’re done here. Everyone be back here at 0900 sharp so we can start training exercises and expect to be here for about ten hours. So plan your day accordingly. Well, everyone but *you*, Saelle,” he corrected, looking at her hologram.

“*No, I’ll be there,*” she replied. “*Dahnai’s coming to the Summer Palace in the morning, remember? If I’m on planet, I’ll be there. Evin can watch the children while I’m busy.*”

“No I’m not,” Evinn retorted.

“*My husband, you silly man,*” Saelle told him with a smile. “*His name is Evin too.*”

“Oh. Forgot about that,” Evinn mumbled, which made a few chuckles ripple across the room.

“Why is Dahnai coming here?” Jenn asked.

“Officially, she’s staying at the Summer Palace for the next couple of takirs while they do some remodeling and maintenance to the throne room and her apartment in the palace,” Jason answered. “Unofficially, it’s because her guards want her and the family here if there’s a chance Draconis may be attacked. This planet is *far* more heavily defended than Draconis is, so they want the Imperial Family somewhere safe. The Highborn Council even agreed that it was best if Dahnai stayed here for the duration of the war, but no doubt they have some shenanigans planned for when she’s away,” he drawled.

“I think I’m gonna get some time in on a Juggernaut before I go home,” Jenn said, looking over at his sister. “What do you say, sis? Feel like some fun?”

“Only if we’re on opposite sides,” she grinned menacingly.

“Loser buys the wine,” Jenn proposed.

“Deal, brother.”

It made him happy to see *all* of them head for the training office rather than their skimmers when they broke up, intending to get in on one of the training exercises before going home, which proved they were taking this situation as seriously as it deserved to be taken. Jason walked out of the training building on the base and towards his corvette, and he moved with the swiftness of a man with a purpose. The Confederate Council was *literally* waiting for him to be available so they could continue their meeting, mainly because he and the Karinnes were such an integral part of their overall plans, and they were all waiting in pseudo-person in the Hall of Peace, in their bionoids.

The implementation of the Council bionoid project had gone without a hitch and had been a smashing success. The rulers used their bionoids on Terra quite often, both for council meetings and their own personal business, allowing them to have face to face meetings with people while being half a galaxy away. They were using the ones here on Karis as well, though with much more restriction, mainly for recreational or entertainment purposes. Jason didn’t mind letting the rulers run around Karsa in their bionoids and doing things like shopping or taking in plays or games

because they couldn't *do* anything. The bionoids were tracked by the CBIMs and were shut down if they left their operational zones, or if they tried to enter a restricted area. And there was little they were going to learn from the Karis population by talking to them that they didn't already know. The rulers got a kick out of being able to roam around Karsa, of being on the forbidden planet, and it didn't really cost Jason much. If anything, he got a lot of good will from the other rulers for his generosity.

And their links to those bionoids were beyond secure. The Karinne and Moridon techs that set up the links from the merge pods to the biogenic comm unit had made them a hacker's nightmare, from physical protections like using tightbeam links that made it virtually impossible to intercept the datastream to some of the most formidable data encryption the Moridon could stack in the computers that governed that datastream. And true to his word—and more importantly, the Moridon's word—not even the Karinnes and Moridon had access to that data. It was completely and inviolately secure, private proprietary information only accessible by the ruler himself, which allowed them to do business from their bionoids without fear of their meetings being eavesdropped upon through the bionoid system.

And the rulers that loved them the most were the ones who needed life support equipment to visit most other worlds. Races like the Araban, Jakkans, Birkons, and just about all of the pure aquatic races whose environmental requirements were exotic to most other forms of life, they found the bionoids to be incredibly liberating, and not just for the rulers. The burgeoning bionoid market was seeing some of its heaviest orders from those kinds of races, so they could use them to operate on the vast majority of other ecosystems or planets that would kill them otherwise, or by businesses or governments so they could send agents to other empires to do business. Yila was already looking at a heavy back order on moleculartronic bionoid units, they were literally selling so fast that her factories couldn't keep up with them.

And that was because of something that Jason wasn't entirely sure was a good idea, but he had been talked into approving anyway. Since they had biogenic comm nodes at the capitols of the various Confederate empires, he'd been talked into allowing them to be used for *civilian* comm traffic, and thus allowing bionoids to be controlled by someone on a different planet a long distance from the driver, where the comm delay from long-

range gravband became prohibitive. The biogenic comm nodes had more than enough bandwidth and processing power to act as the primary comm node for an entire planet, and since they used biogenic communion that transcended time and space, it allowed virtual real-time communication between the capitol planets of any two empires in the Confederation. And when coupled to an empire's local gravband comm system that allowed virtual real-time communication just about anywhere in a sector, it effectively created a galaxy-spanning real-time comm system. Hadhja Siyhhaa and Cybi had gone in and set up a civilian pan-galactic biogenic routing system using four of the spare CM-315 mainframe computers they had in storage, the *very* powerful mainframe computers used on Fleet battleships, managing the civilian biogenic network from Karis whose sole purpose was to route comm from one empire's established comm network to another, allowing them to communicate in real time without the long-range gravband delay. It had taken Cybi and Siyhhaa all of 14 days to install and program the mainframes to do the job, mainly because Siyhhaa, that rascal, had already developed the software for just such a system was very nearly ready to approach Jason with the idea to build it. And they were *all* pressuring him to open up the system to more planets, to install biogenic comm nodes at every planet in the entire Confederation to create a vast galaxy-spanning real-time communications and computer network.

It did have some potential and possibilities, but he wasn't sold on the idea yet due to security concerns. There was quite a bit of highly advanced biogenic hardware in a comm node, and it would make an overwhelmingly tempting target to someone trying to steal biogenic tech. The comm nodes he had out there now were heavily defended, but to build so many of them and install them in some pretty remote planets...he wasn't so sure about that. Besides, most empires had their own very effective comm systems that connected their planets that connected to the biogenic comm node at the capitol, which created that galaxy-spanning network without the need of nodes at every planet.

Still, he had to admit, what Siyhhaa and Cybi had built using those four CB-315 mainframes was pretty impressive, even more impressive when one considered how fast they did it. Siyhhaa had already done most of the work, designing the architecture the system would follow, writing the code to run it, and developing routing algorithms that got comm data where it was

supposed to go. It hadn't even required any real changes to the other empires' comm network, they just had to go in and patch their software to recognize the comm node and how to send data to it when the data's destination was outside their network, and allow their systems to recognize the galactic comm address tags Siyhhaa created for her protocols to tell it where the data was supposed to go. The four mainframes on Karis did all the work, receiving data and routing it to the destination empire. That had taken the average empire's comm specialists about ten days to set up, since it was fairly easy, and the system had been up and running for about five days.

It was a short trip from Joint Base Alpha to the Hall of Peace, and he went straight from the landing pad to the council chambers. They were all there, the council was in session, and Cyra's hologram was sitting where Jason usually did. "Jason, it's about time," Dahnai scolded from the lectern. She was holding the gavel for the next nine days. "We've been waiting nearly two hours."

"I've been busy," he replied curtly. "What did you need me for that Cyra couldn't already tell you?"

"Cyra can't vote, and we felt like *all* of us should be here to cast these votes," she answered. "You *do* have voting powers for military operations."

"I'm gonna vote for whatever Lorna suggests we do," he retorted as he went up the steps, towards his desk. "I trust her and the command staff of the CCM. They're the professionals."

"I think that's an opinion held by most every male or female in this room, Jason," King Vedrann of the Farguut said easily.

They spent nearly two hours discussing not just the battle plan, but other things like the plan to use Kosigi as a repair base, getting damaged ships in, repaired, and back into the action as quickly as possible. Jason spent that time barely paying attention, going over some of the plans that Myri was sending to his gestalt, the initial plan to board and take over one of the super-ships. They'd selected their target, one of the larger spherical super-ships that was entering the galaxy alone, picking it not for its size, but for its destination. They'd selected the ship that would be the most "alone," the one that would have the greatest distance from other Syndicate ships when

they entered the galaxy, which would give them time to execute the plan and isolate the ship behind interdiction before reinforcements could reach it. Myri and Juma already had a basic framework for their plan to board the ship and take it over, and they'd decided to take *two* Generations with them to support the operation. Jenn and Vella had been selected for the operation, since they had the highest ship boarding operation scores among Unit Alpha. Those operations had been part of their naval training.

It wasn't a surprise they already had an initial draft of the invasion plan, since they'd been planning to capture one of those ships for a long while. They'd already done a lot of the general research and operational work, now they just needed to refine the plan based on the layout of that specific ship and take into account that they'd have two Generations with them to assist. He saw that they'd already diverted some hyperspace probes to get some detailed scans of their target ship.

Just as they were about to end the session, Jason got a "come see us *now*" message from Tom up at Project G. He literally bailed on the council session, claiming he'd been called to a house emergency and running out of the council chamber, then jumped on his corvette and rushed straight up to the old Titan research facility. Tom and Bo rushed out as the corvette landed, with Scientist RDX right behind them. "Damn, that was fast, Jayce!" Bo laughed.

"I wasn't very far away. What's up?"

"We *got it!*" Bo shouted.

"It's working?" he asked in surprise. "Already?"

"We've come up with something. It's not a full breakthrough, but it's a step that might have real worth in the upcoming fighting, your Grace," RDX explained.

"Thank her for that, Jayce," Tom said, pointing at RDX, who looked quite modestly embarrassed.

"Show me!" he said eagerly.

They brought him into the main research lab, which had pieces of metal all over the place. Hanging from the ceiling, on the wall, on mounts on the floor, each one a piece of armor-grade material with a layer of metal on one

side, like a CMS skin. “Alright, the basics,” Tom said, bringing him to the center, where two huge sections of black metal were standing upright, annealed to the floor. “We haven’t come up with the kind of system we’re looking for, but we’ve made a big breakthrough that we can put into use right now. This is a piece of compressed carapace with a CMS skin on it,” he said, motioning. “It’s a piece of frigate hull armor, Jayce. RDX came up with a way to use the *existing* CMS system to convert it into an IP armor system just by injecting an IP waveform into the CMS skin, and she discovered a viable composite interphasic waveform that works with laminated Neutronium, the metal we use for a CMS skin. It does take the CMS system offline, it doesn’t hide the ship from sensors, but when the system is running, Jayce, it increases hull integrity by up to 13,000 percent.”

“It works exactly as you envisioned, your Grace,” RDX continued, bringing up a hologram of an interphasic waveform. “The waveform actively absorbs all forms of hostile incoming energy and then redirects it into the molecular structure of the Neutronium laminate, energizing the ionic bonds holding the metal together and making it nigh indestructible, at least up to a point.” A holo of a metal plate appeared, which was then hit by a red beam of energy, then it zoomed in to show how the interphasic waveform interacted with the molecules of the Neutronium laminate, absorbing that hostile energy and using it to reinforce the armor at an atomic level. “When in standby mode, which is the IP system active but not actively absorbing incoming energy, the IP system uses slightly less energy than the CMS system does. But when energized by hostile incoming energy, the armor’s strength increases in direct proportion to the energy used against it. The stronger the attack, the stronger the armor becomes to resist it. But as you would expect from any kind of energy-based defensive system, it’s limited by the system’s ability to absorb incoming energy. Just like most forms of shield technology, it can be overloaded by excessive incoming energy, so it doesn’t make a ship indestructible. But it *does* increase the armor by up to 13,000 percent. That is the overload level. The good part, though, is that the waveform absorbs almost *all* forms of energy used by most empires. Kinetic, heat, ionic, radiation, plasma, everything except Torsion energy, and the diffusers take care of that so it’s not an issue.”

“The only weapons we’ve found that can penetrate this system are weapons that completely ignore three-dimensional physics,” Tom added. “Nothing physical can stop a pulse blast, so pulse weapons can go through it. Coalition disruptors can also penetrate the IP system, as can Torsion weapons, but we have diffusers to deal with Torsion bolts. We also found that Kimdori stream weaponry has some effect. The IP system partially absorbs the stream energy, but it can’t stop all of it because of the way it conducts through the hull to attack the living crew on the other side. The IP system majorly reduces the power of the stream effect after it penetrates the hull, which protects crew members deeper in the ship.”

RDX continued. “The IP system absorbs energy only beyond a threshold energy level by design. Low-intensity energy that strike the hull won’t get absorbed, like visible light, sensor energy, and comm signals, but high-intensity energy striking the hull *will* activate the IP. We had to install a threshold level to prevent the IP from trying to operate in active mode at all times, it was causing the IP system to drain the ship’s power to the point where it couldn’t use its weapons if the shields are up. That’s why it can’t be used in place of a CMS. So, we tuned it so the IP only activates if the hull is struck by sufficient energy to threaten the ship or the crew inside it. Any such energy that strikes the hull is absorbed and redirected to strengthen the armor.”

“And the best part, Jayce? The ship can *toggle between the armor and the CMS*,” Bo said intensely. “It can’t run both, but it can run CMS, drop stealth and switch to IP armor, then fight it out. If things go south, it can disengage the IP system and bring up the CMS and then cloak to escape. They both use the same laminate skin to do the job. All we have to do is go in and swap out the emitters built into the skin so they can emit either the CMS or the IP waveforms, which takes way more power than CMS emitters were designed to emit.”

“Holy shit, seriously?” Jason gaped.

All three of them nodded with *huge* grins.

“Is this compatible with shields?”

“It is, Jayce, up to a point,” Bo answered. “It doesn’t interfere with shields at all when it’s in standby mode, but it does drain so much power off

the ship's grid when it's actively absorbing energy that it knocks the shields offline. But if the IP armor is active, it means the shields are down and allowing energy to hit the hull, so that's a moot point. The shield generator's gonna be in failure recovery mode while the IP system is active, and when it's doing that, they don't interfere with each other."

"Yup," Tom nodded.

"What does it take to install this?"

"The CMS emitters have to be replaced, as Bo said," RDX answered. "The emitters in the CMS system can't handle the power requirements of the IP system. And it requires the installation of the IP module in the ship, which governs the IP waveform and generates the power needed to hold waveform integrity when it absorbs incoming hostile energy. It can be installed right beside the CMS control unit so they can share the same datalines and power conduits leading out to the emitters, with just a control node installed to prevent one unit from feeding back into the other. Like a shield generation unit, the IP unit will need some considerable energy and heat dissipation systems installed to keep it online in battle."

"Holy *shit*. We could install these on the frigates," he breathed, looking at the holo simulation of the armor being struck by energy beams and absorbing it. "I take it you fully tested this?"

"Of course we did, Jayce, that's why we called you," Tom answered. "We've had this system installed on the *Javelin* for five days, and it's already been fully tested. It's certified and ready to go."

"Unbelievable," he said, then he laughed. "And this isn't even what I asked you to invent!"

"We've been working with the CMS system since it had much of what we already needed," RDX explained. "It was giving us a very good starting point to test our theories and study waveform behavior in Neutronium. Besides, since the CMS makes the hull of an equipped ship different than other ships, we knew we'd need a separate system to accommodate the CMS so it would still operate, so this was just one half of the research we needed to do. But we *are* working on an IP system we can install on ships without CMS, your Grace. We simply felt that with the imminent invasion

of the Syndicate into our galaxy, we could give you something useful that might have an immediate impact.”

“We tried to have it ready a few weeks ago, so we’d have time to install it, but we ran into too many snags with the final prototype design when we did our lab tests,” Tom grunted. “And we wanted to get it fully tested and ready for production before we send some people back to 3D for the war effort. Me and Bo are more or less gonna leave RDX alone out here,” he said.

“I’ll keep you up to speed on my work, Tom,” she assured him.

“I’ll go talk to Trenirk and Dellin, but to be honest, I’m not sure if we’ll be able to get these installed on any ships before the Syndicate fleet gets here,” he said sourly. “But I do want these units built and ready for when we do have the time to do the refits. You guys get as much done as you can before you get pulled, and RDX, I’d be more than happy if you kept working while the others are out on assignment.”

“There’s quite a bit of work I can do while Tom and Bo are busy, your Grace,” she told him. “I’ll spend the time researching composite waveform frequencies, looking for the best one to use with unlaminated Neutronium. The waveform we discovered for the CMS skin isn’t compatible with hull armor.”

“But it’ll be close.”

“It will be close,” she nodded in agreement. “It gives me a good foundation to use to further my research.”

“Then it sounds like you have a plan, Scientist,” Jason told the Ruu with a smile.

“Plans lead to success, your Grace,” she replied mildly.

“Then if you’ll excuse me, I’m gonna go talk to a few people,” Jason said with a grin.

As he expected, when he got Dellin on a hologram while in Trenirk’s office, he heard more or less bad news that put a kill on his cautious elation. *“It takes nearly nine days to do the refit, Jason,”* he answered. *“If it was just the IP unit, it would only take about two or three days. But having to*

replace every single emitter in the hull is very time-consuming. That's 51,763 emitters. Even using robotic assist, that takes a lot of time."

"Well...fuck," he grunted, crossing his arms and drumming his finger on his vambrace. "I was hoping we might get at least a few of them out there. That armor will make the frigates absolute beasts."

"We have one frigate with the system, the Javelin. They finished the refit five days ago and did some extensive tests, and I assume the ship passed inspection if we're out of prototype stage and into production stage," Dellin said.

"Well, at least we'll have *one*," Jason mused. "Tren, go ahead and get the IP modules and the new emitters on the board for production, but don't put it on *oh my God we need it now* priority. I want the systems ready to be installed when we have the time and opportunity to do them."

"What does this IP thing do anyway, Jayce?" Trenirk asked. "An upgrade to the CMS system?"

"It's an active powered armor system, Tren," he answered. "At the foundation, what it does is absorb hostile energy used against the ship and use it to reinforce the hull, kind of like an energy shield, but one *within* the hull itself instead of projected outside of it. The stronger the attack, the stronger the armor becomes to resist it."

"Oh. Ohhhhhhh," he breathed, his eyes widening. "And it works with the shields on too?"

"They can't be active at the same time, but that's not an issue," he answered. "If the shields go down, then the IP system activates and takes over, and that gives the shield generator time to reset or the crew time to do damage control on it. But the simple truth is, the IP system is *stronger* than the shields," he chuckled. "The shields will really just be there as an extra layer of protection."

"Too bad we can't use this for other ships."

"The team that developed this is working on a different form of IP armor to use on ships without a CMS," he replied. "But they haven't gotten anything up to prototype stage yet."

“And believe me, I’ll be happy to organize that refit operation,” Dellin said with a smile. *“Tom let me observe their testing of the CMS IP system, and it’s impressive. The frigate took hits that would have put a heavy cruiser out of action and just kept coming,”* he added with a little surprise in his voice.

“That’s exactly what I hoped it would do,” Jason nodded with a big smile. “Something that protects my sailors is something I want on my ships *fucking now.*”

“Well, we won’t get this *fucking now*, but it’ll be there when we have a chance to refit, Jayce. I guarantee it,” Trenirk told him with a grin.

“That reminds me, Dellin. Did they arm the tactical battleships with those Kimdori stream weapons?”

The hologram nodded. *“We finished the refit on the last bulldog yesterday, we pulled out four rail cannons and two pulse cannons and replaced them with stream weapons. They even released the specs for them so we can build them ourselves. That only took them, what, eight years?”*

Jason laughed. “Kimdori love their secrets, Dellin,” he replied. “And we gave them the specs for particle beam weapons in return, so it was a fair trade.”

“I’ve got the stream weapon units on the production queue,” Trenirk injected. “For all ship classes.”

“They’ll be a good addition to the arsenal,” Jason predicted confidently. “I’ll let you two get back to work. I think I’m going to go home and rest a while. I’ve only been running around like a madman for about ten hours now.”

“I can imagine,” Trenirk nodded.

Jason looked over the specs of the IP system while riding back home, and he was *very* impressed. They took his original idea behind the CMS and amplified the fuck out of it, creating a system where the interphasic waveform infused the laminated Neutronium CMS skin and turned it into something *beastly*. The armor absorbed 90% of all known forms of hostile energy used against it—energy that didn’t ignore three-dimensional physics, anyway—and then used that raw energy to amplify the interphasic

waveform, which super-energized the ionic bonds holding the Neutronium alloy together. The waveform also prevented the metal from heating up beyond a certain point, preventing the molecules from agitating by regulating their vibration, which created a pretty formidable endothermic effect. The effect was everything Jason hoped it would be. The skin of the CMS, when energized by an IP waveform, was potentially *stronger* than the carapace hull under it, depending on how much energy was released against the skin. He reviewed the testing they did, where they literally shot weapons at the *Javelin* and seeing how its hull responded to the attacks. The IP system had absorbed it all. The kinetic energy of rail slugs, the thermal and plasmonic energy of MPACs and other plasma weaponry, the energy of neutron, ion, and heavy mount wave weapons, nothing penetrated the CMS skin. Even phased weaponry was stopped because of the paradoxical existence of the interphasic waveform, existing in all phased states simultaneously without being phased itself, and then focusing all energy into its single state that was then represented across all phased states.

It was a success. It was a *smashing* success, and Jason could see that once they invented the full-scale IP system and they got it installed on the ships, they would become *tanks*. Just fucking *tanks*. Their hulls would be all but invulnerable, which would require enemies to get very creative to find ways to do damage to them...but only so long as the ship's captain wasn't an idiot. The IP system could be brought down like shields could, by overloading them, so a ship captain couldn't just ram her ship down the enemy's throat and absorb sustained, concentrated fire without the ship losing its IP system and taking some damage—unless that captain was Sevi, that is. Sevi was the exception, not the rule. A ship captain doing things the right way, treating her ship like it wasn't invincible, that captain was going to have a ship whose IP armor was going to turn her ship into a total fucking *monster*. KMS ships were already some of the toughest ships in the CCM thanks to compressed carapace armor, Teryon shields, and exceptionally robust operational systems coupled to extremely effective damage control, able to absorb damage that would knock other ships out and still fight, but this would multiply that resiliency several times over. The IP system would prevent vibration and shock damage conducting through the hull due to its absorbing of kinetic energy, prevent hull heating from weapons like plasma fire that could cause overheating damage in the ship sections on the other side of the hull, would make lower-energy weapons

like neutron and ion weapons completely useless, and would even let the ship heavily resist some of their *own* weapons, just in case someone out there did finally get their hands on their tech and used it against them. It was even more than what he hoped it would be.

While it was too bad they wouldn't have this for the ships for this action, it did look at least favorable. They were outnumbered by the Syndicate and their thousands of moon-sized ships exacerbated that imbalance, requiring them to send *hundreds* of ships out to destroy just *one* of theirs. But they held the edge in tech, and unlike the Consortium, the Syndicate was going to run into some rough going trying to overcome that advantage. Their main weapon, Torsion cannons, were useless against CCM ships. Their telepaths would find themselves facing off against the Faey, an entire *race* of telepathic beings that had thousands and thousands of years of experience in how to fight other telepaths. They would be facing weapons the size of an exomech that could cripple and disable their moon-sized ships, which turned every single jumper and combat dropship racing towards their ship an even greater threat than the enemy fleet behind them. All it would take would be *one* of those ships to land on the hull and deploy the weapon, a process that only took about seven minutes. The practice drills the Marines were running showed that it took about seven minutes to get the Megatron unit off the jumper, get it set up, secure it to the hull so it couldn't shift or move, allow it to charge up while they aimed it, then fire it. And Jason would bet that they could do it even faster with more practice, since it only took the unit two minutes, twelve seconds to charge to full power once it was activated. If a jumper managed to land on their ship, they had seven minutes to scramble a response, get it there, and prevent that landing team from deploying the Megatron unit and blowing out the power plant of their ship.

Seven minutes, on a ship the size of a moon, where it might take them seven minutes just to get out onto the hull. Where it might be a ten-minute trip from the nearest airlock just to reach the landing point of the enemy jumper. Where it might take them five minutes just to get their security forces *to* the airlock.

Yes, they looked to have an edge, but Jason still couldn't shake the feeling that this wasn't going to be easy. The Syndicate was hiding a few surprises, he was sure of it...but only time would reveal those surprises.

One thing was for certain, though. Two years of preparation was over. In three days, the war would begin.

Chapter 8

Koira, 6 Shiaa, 4404, Faey Orthodox Calendar

Thursday, 23 August 2018 Terran Standard Calendar

Koira, 6 Shiaa, year 1329 of the 97th Generation, Karinne Historical Reference Calendar

Tactical Merge Asset Allocation Center (the MAC), Joint Base Alpha, Karsa, Karis

This was it.

Jason was the only hologram in the room, which held 48 riggers sitting on chairs facing the mission board and receiving a mission briefing in one of the many mission briefing rooms in the MAC. Forty of these riggers were members of the 151st Marine Exomech Company, known more by their nicknames, the Storm Riders, and the other nine were Karinne Marine Reservists rated on a Titan who had been activated for this mission. Rated Titan riggers were in high demand in the KMS, and *anyone* with a Titan rating was being activated for this, even Jason. The Storm Riders were one of the more elite mecha companies in the KMS, not quite as elite as the Banshees or the KBB, but they were highly respected and very dangerous due to the leadership of the company commander, a brilliant career rigger named Major Tara Strovarre. Tara was a grizzled warhorse, a rigger with thousands of hours under her belt, but was shockingly only 38 years old. She was so good, so respected, that Kyva had offered her a position in the KBB, then Liira offered a position as the second in command of the Banshees, but Tara had refused both offers. She had built the 151st the way Navii had built the KMS, and she wasn't about to leave the unit she hand-picked and trained from the ground up herself. And in a way, Jason fully supported that decision. Tara was a scary good rigger, but she was also one of the best company commanders in the Karinne Marines. She was a much

greater asset to the House commanding her own rigger company than being under Kyva's command.

Jason wasn't here as the Grand Duke Karinne. He was here as one of Tara's reserve assets, one of the riggers under her command, and as such, he was required to attend the briefing so he knew what was going on if she wanted to use him...and she already told him that *he* was going. There were ten such reservists in the briefing, ten riggers that would pilot Titans by remote merge if Tara felt she needed the reinforcements.

It was with Tara that he made his deal to act as a reserve reinforcement and fight *in the battle* if necessary. Jason was not kidding when he told Siyara that *every person matters* in this war, and if he could help protect the House and the Confederation from the Syndicate by fighting on the front lines in a rig, or even a Rocker, or even there personally using his talent as a weapon, then that was exactly what he would do. Jason was a highly skilled rigger thanks to being trained personally by Colonel Kyva Karinne and the KBB, had scores so high that any exomech company commander would snap him up in a heartbeat if they saw the scores without his name, and it would be utterly criminal if he didn't do *something*.

He was no tactician or military specialist. That was what the KMS command echelons were for, to do their jobs and lead in combat. His status as the leader of the House was more or less of no use to anyone now, since this was now the KMS and CCM's batchi match. And he couldn't just sit in his office and wait for status reports, sit and wait and worry. He had to *do something*, and thanks to the development of viable combat capable remote merge technology, now he could.

Tara wasn't afraid of his title, which was why he made this deal with her. She knew that out there in a firefight, he knew damn well who was in charge, and he would obey her orders. And she was confident enough in that to agree to take him as a reservist attached to her unit

"Knock off the chatter," she barked in her paradoxical voice as she stormed into the briefing room and took her position at the lectern, a voice as velvety as a professional singer but filled with bursting with adamant command. "Orders are in, girls and boys. We're being attached to the CCM for this operation," she declared, and behind her on the command board, a star system appeared. "This is R1XC-1493. It's an inhabited planet with a

civilization that's reached the planetary colonization phase but hasn't left its system yet. This is one of the systems randomly targeted by the Syndicate. There are sixteen ships heading for this system, with *four* of their super-ships, and we're being attached to the task force assigned to protect the indigenous civilization and destroy the enemy." Stock images of Syndicate ship classes appeared in place of the system diagram. "Four super-ships, six of their medium battleships, and six escorting cruisers. We're being attached to a task force of 120 CCM ships to take them out."

"Please tell us there'll be a KMS battleship in the task force," a rigger called plaintively.

"Two, a tactical battleship and a fleet battleship, with four destroyer and eight frigate escorts. Count yourselves lucky, girls and boys, we pulled the *Ori Ai* as the fleet battleship, and that tactical battleship is the *Arabax*," she replied, which caused quite a few sighs of relief. Just about everyone in the KMS knew about Sevi Karinne and the legendary *Arabax*. "And the fleet battleship is one of the two main pieces of the operation. We're on both offense and defense for this one. C Squad and D Squad are going to be assigned as escort defense for the fleet battleship. Your job is to make sure it gets in range of the enemy super-ships so it can take them out with its main guns, which means you'll be engaging with enemy mecha and probably also attacking the escort ships with the super-ships. A and B Squads are assigned to lander escort. You're going to make sure the Marines get onto the hull of the ships alive and give them time to set up and set off Megatron units."

"They're gonna try to land on all four ships? Even ones the fleet battleship takes out?"

"It's called making sure, Sergeant," Tara answered, looking at the young Faey woman. "If the Syndicate escorts block the *Ori Ai* from targeting the super-ships or take it out somehow, the Megatron units will take them out. With four of them, the amount of sheer firepower they can unload on our task force will be pretty nasty. That's why they're sending so many ships, to literally be extra targets to give the *Ori Ai* the chance to close to range. Optimal range for its main gun to score a kill on a super-ship is 40 kathra, and those enemy ships are designed to fight from a much longer range. That means the ship has to come in through their fire to get into position to take a

shot, and that's including multiple heavy plasma cannon main guns on each super-ship that are effectively one shot one kill weapons. We'll be coming in through a gauntlet to get range on the super-ships."

"Shit," the Sergeant grunted.

"This isn't going to be a walk through Trelle's garden, girls and boys," she said bluntly. "But it won't be as bad as it sounds. The vast majority of the enemy's heavy cannons are Torsion cannons, so they'll be useless against us, especially the escorting cruisers. The only real weapons the battleships have to worry about are missiles and those fuckin' big plasma cannons. But the battleships and super-ships do have other hot plasma weapons than their main guns, so those will be the primary threat to the line ships once they figure out that their Torsion weapons are useless. For us, the diffusers in our rigs can't diffuse a direct hit from a heavy cannon, so don't get hit by one," she ordered, which caused a few chuckles.

"What we'll be up against are enemy rigs," she continued, bringing up two holograms, one a Syndicate "walker" heavy artillery mecha, and the second a more conventional bipedal combat mecha. "They deploy the walkers on the surface of their ships the same way we do to act as additional firepower, and it's gonna be those that primarily shoot at our fighters and rigs. Heavy cannon mounts have problems tracking fast moving fighters and rigs, so they use their walkers as anti-fighter platforms on those rare instances when they come up against an enemy that uses fighters. They use their mecha as fighters, so instead of us having to deal with enemy fighters, we'll be dealing with enemy mecha rigged for space combat. The info our spies pulled on these units is that they're a threat," she warned in a strong voice. "They're much faster and more maneuverable in space than they look, and since they use an externally held weapon, it gives them a very wide field of fire and the ability to change weapons quickly. But, we learned that the *only* weapons they issue to these mecha are Torsion weapons, they don't even *have* other kinds of weaponry, so it doesn't mean shit how wide their field of fire is against us," she said, a bit smugly. "Their Torsion cannons are no threat to us, but their missiles and hand to hand combat weapons *are*. So, first rule, girls and boys, diffusers up before we launch, and they stay up until the mission is over. Second and third rules are, watch for missile barrages, so keep your Wasp systems online at all times, and when the enemy rigs are out of missiles, they'll try to engage in

close combat. When they get to that point, girls and boys, we'll be acting as additional protection for the fighters. They're not designed to fight that way. *We are.*

"A and B Squads, all of that applies to you as well. Your job is to get the mech jumpers to the super-ships in one piece, and then protect them while the Marines deploy the Megatron units. It takes them seven minutes from the instant the jumper hits the enemy hull to set up and fire a Megatron unit, girls and boys. Seven minutes. For those seven minutes, they're utterly depending on you to keep them alive and protect the unit. Remember, all of you, a single Megatron unit has the potential to completely knock an enemy super-ship out of action, if they aim it right and it manages to hit their central energy reactor, so *don't* think that you pulled the shit assignment. That's why my own squad's assigned to jumper escort, because it's absolutely vital we get those Megatron units set up. The main advantage we're gonna have, girls and boys, is that central command believes that the enemy's not gonna see the landing parties as the threat that they are until it's too late. I agree with that assessment. They won't believe in a million years that a group of infantry can take out their ship from the surface, so they're not going to respond with heavy defense until after they see the first of their super-ships get knocked out. *That's* when it's gonna get nasty, so be ready for it.

"There are gonna be 20 different landing parties, five per ship, so naturally we're not gonna be protecting all of them," she continued. "Other rigger companies will be doing that. Each landing operation is going to have mecha, fighter, gunboat, and corvette escort, which will be acting as defense once the Marine units are out of the jumper and setting up the Megatron. Infantry units in the jumpers will be acting as additional defense once the landers unload. Each element from the company will be escorting one landing party, one per ship. Maka, you're in command of element B. Zilvi, element C. Mol'Vek, element D," she finished, looking towards the lone Urumi in the briefing room. "Reservists, you *will* be activated for this operation, all ten of you are going to be on lander escort duty. Individual assignments will be coming down once you get in your pods. Last thing, girls and boys. We'll be running this mission by remote, so reservists, report to merge bay 37 and get your Titans online. My riggers, we're using the ROC in the Whale, so we'll be in the theatre. Any questions?" When

silence greeted her, Tara nodded. “Alright then. We bounce in thirty minutes, girls and boys. Reservists report to bay 37, everyone else to the transport. Our Whale is in orbit at Terra, fully loaded and waiting for us.”

Whales were the newest addition to the KMS. They were like miniature carriers, about halfway in size between a destroyer and a frigate. They served one purpose and one purpose only, and that was to transport a company of Titans to and from a combat theatre. Titans were too big to transport in large numbers on most KMS ships, they’d fill every landing bay on about anything but the *Tianne*, so they’d built a rather simplistic hyperspace-capable transport based on the KP-660 freighter whose purpose was to launch and recover Titans, as well as provide a mobile field base for Titan companies to allow them to do simple repairs and maintenance to the units. Whales were very basic ships, with a crew of 5; the ship’s XO, two navigators, ship’s engineer, and a trained and certified medic. When on deployment, there would be upwards of 20 crew on board in addition to the 40 riggers, who were select members of the ground crews that maintained the mecha, who came aboard to help prepare the mecha for their missions and do basic repairs and maintenance to and from a deployment zone. They didn’t have had enough space for individual quarters for the company’s crew and riggers, so they used dorm-style bunk rooms instead. Only the company commander and XO had their own quarters on a Whale. A Whale also had a galley, a mission briefing room, a small sickbay for treating minor to moderate injuries, an on-board merge pod op center for remote operation, an engineering bay, and not much else.

The ship’s mecha hangars took up the vast majority of the ship’s internal volume, an upper deck and a lower deck, each deck designed to hold 30 Titans. Only 24 of the Titans on a deck were considered active, with the other six being reserve or backup units. While Whales weren’t designed for front-line fighting, they were armed and heavily armored, and had all the usual defensive equipment for a KMS ship; carapace armor, shields, diffuser, and a shockwave generator. Each Titan company had a Whale, and the crew of the ship was considered part of the company and ultimately under the company commander’s command. The Captain of a Whale was technically the company commander, but the ship’s XO was a Naval officer, not a rigger, and the one that commanded the ship while the company

commander was deployed on a mission. Most company commanders rarely set foot on the bridge and let the XO handle running the ship.

In the upcoming operation, the Whales would not be fighting, but they could very well be right in the middle of a firefight. They would launch their mecha and then retreat to the back of the task force, then advance to recover their mecha once the mission was complete. But, given they may be called upon to enter a fight to launch or pick up their mecha, they were heavily armored, almost *ridiculously* armored, and with multiple defensive systems designed to protect much bigger ships, which made them exceptionally tough and durable. Whales could take a major pounding while coming in, launch or recover their mecha, then get out. In that respect, they were designed similarly to infantry and mech jumpers, designed to come in under heavy fire to deploy or recover troops or mecha.

But Jason heard what he wanted to hear, even if he already knew it. He'd be active for this mission. He'd be fighting shoulder to shoulder with his girls, and that was exactly where he felt he needed to be. He dissolved his hologram, but he communed with Tara over the network, contacting her interface. *[I'll merge to my mecha once I get word that the riggers are aboard, Major,]* he told her.

[Don't be late, your Grace. Grand Duke or not, I'll kick your ass if you're not ready on time.]

[That's why I love you, Tara,] he replied playfully. *[I have a few things I need to catch up on, then I'll be there.]*

He opened his eyes and looked out over his office. Dera and Rina were sitting on the couch, looking quite relaxed, while Ryn and Suri were in the outer office with several Marine guards. Aya was behind him, pacing, believe it or not, walking back and forth between his chair and the back wall. He shared her apprehension. *Calm down, Aya,* he sent soothingly, turning his chair and putting a leg out to stop her.

I object to this idea of yours in the strongest possible terms, Jason, she sent, near-outrage bubbling under the surface of her thought. Jason had finally come clean with Aya about ten minutes ago.

I'm not going to be there in person—

There's still risk involved! she cut him off. *If you suffer dump shock, that means you won't be here in case you need to make an important decision! This is not the time for the house to be without you, Jason!*

I'm rated on a Titan, Aya, and we're so short on Titan riggers that I can't just sit back and do nothing. Myri would probably pull you for this war if she thought she could get you. You're rated too. They're that hard up for Titan riggers. My girls need me, Aya, and I will be there for them in any way I can.

She gave him a long glare. I'm about to pull rank on you, Jason.

Not this time, you're not, he warned. *Don't fight me over this, Aya. This is the one fight you do not want to pick, and I mean it.* He stood up and put his hands on her shoulders. *Remember what you told me after they tried to kill Dahnai with those missiles they smuggled in from Makan, when I jumped in Justin's fighter and went up there myself to shoot them down? About why I do the things I do?*

You weren't raised as a noble, she admitted. You came up to your position through the infantry, so you're not afraid to fight.

That's right. I got into this chair literally by fighting for it, Aya, and you know I'm not afraid to pick up a pulse rifle and charge into the battle myself if that's what I think will best protect the House. And right here, right now, the House needs me in that Titan far more than it needs me behind this desk. Can you understand that?

She was silent.

You can be as mad as you want after this is over. Until then, woman, you'd better get hold of your panties, because you're going to be on the wildest ride of your life, he warned, which made Dera laugh voicelessly despite herself.

Aya sent a withering cold stare in her direction. You're making me regret recommending you for promotion, Dera, she warned.

Sorry, Captain, she replied with an insincere look. *But Jason does make a good point. At least if he does this from a merge, we minimize the danger to him. And besides, I've seen his scores in a Titan. I think he'll be just fine.*

Jason gave Dera a beaming smile. *I need to go down to the war room, then I'll be deploying for the mission*, he announced.

I'll escort you, Aya declared. *You four stay here*.

Aya didn't try to lecture him or berate him as they walked down three flights of stairs and a long hallway, but he could sense her fury. But he'd expected this. Aya was sometimes *too* protective, he felt, and she often forgot that Jason Karinne was unlike any other member of the Confederate Council in myriad ways. He may lead the House of Karinne, but he led from the *front*, not the *back*. He wouldn't ask *anyone* in the House to do anything he would not do himself, and his subjects knew it. It was one of the reasons he suspected that they gave him so much loyalty, because they knew he cared about each and every one of them. *They* were the House. Not Cybi, not the CBIMs, not their technology or reputation. *They* were. And while he may be the patriarch of this 1.2-billion-member family, it didn't excuse him from sharing in their trials and tribulations as much as he shared in their successes and prosperity.

The command center was a frenzy of activity. Every comm officer was on duty, and they were sending out orders and instructions at a fevered pace as Generals and Admirals and their aides rushed around the large room and its surrounding offices. All five CBIMs and Coma had holograms present in the room, very small ones hovering above and behind Myri to stay out of the way, who was standing at the main planning console looking at a hologram of a star system with Juma and Navii. Sioa was at the next table over with some of her Army generals, discussing a hologram showing a large swath of ground terrain.

Where we at, Myri? Jason asked as he reached the table.

We're at 93 minutes to the task forces jumping out, she answered. *Both CCM and KMS operations are organizing for jump right now. Terra is a madhouse at the moment as the task forces get into position to jump. We've got our own forces organized and ready, they're just doing final checks and waiting for the go signal*.

Are we going after a super-ship?

We are, Navii answered. *Jenn and Vella are on board the Tianne. It's the flag for that operation. We haven't changed targets*.

How many Marines and Tarks are going in?

Two thousand, Juma answered. We have two Megatron units calibrated for the shaft breach, and Hadhja Siyhhaa and Myleena finished the hack module just two hours ago.

I was about to ask about that. “Cybi, do you have access to the hack module for the capture mission?” he asked aloud, looking up at her shakra-tall hologram.

“I’ve already downloaded a few patches into it,” she answered. “If they can get it into their main computer control facility and connect it to their main computer core, I can seize control of the ship. I’ll then order the ship to open all hatches and airlocks and kill the crew through depressurization. I will then order the entire ship to shut down and lock out the computer so only we can reactivate it.”

“As much as I hate having to do that, you have my authorization,” Jason said grimly. “We can’t give them any chance to take back control of the ship or make it self-destruct. But we won’t be quite that ruthless with *other* ships we may capture,” he said, a bit more optimistically. “So, we’re on schedule?”

“Yes we are, so you can get out of here and stop distracting us, Jason,” Myri told him, then she pointed at a simple stool sitting over in the distant corner. “There’s two choices you can make.”

He laughed. “I’m too busy to sit in the corner. Keep Chirk updated on the missions as reports come in.”

“We will.”

Back in his office, Jason met a rather nervous young Doctor Rilvin Delarre, whom had been sent up from the clinic in the building to monitor Jason’s biorhythms while he was merged. He wasted no time climbing into his merge pod in his bedroom as the doctor sat at a console by the door, with all four of his guards and Aya in the room with them. *Alright, I’m ready,* he announced. *Doctor, you won’t have very much to do. Just watch vidy or something unless the alarm goes off.*

I was instructed to monitor your biorhythms, your Grace, and that’s exactly what I’m going to do, he replied.

It's your boredom, he replied flippantly. *Alright, Aya, I'm going in.*

Be careful, your Grace. And good luck, she answered, concern shimmering through her thought.

He took a cleansing breath, then relaxed and closed his eyes. He merged up into the control computer in the merge pod, allowing it to serve as a bridge through which all his telemetry would flow, then reached across hundreds of light years, all the way to Terra. He located his Titan and merged to its main computer core, then brought it out of standby mode. The sensor mesh system activated, flooding him with both sensory and technical data, megarings and megarings of pure data flowing through his mind as the 47 individual systems a Titan rigger had to manage came online and reported back to him. He sorted through that data with practiced skill, organizing it to take advantage of his greatest asset in a Titan, which was his Generation ability to focus his attention on multiple things at a time instead of just one. It was this aspect of him that made him such a good Titan rigger, since he could divide his attention among the different systems and manage them in harmony, where other riggers had to work through them one at a time. They worked through them in milliseconds, everything was done with the speed of the mindscape rather than the physical world, but in the world of riggers and fighter pilots, milliseconds could be an eternity. Jason established his sensor streams, and the silent darkness in which he floated slowly became infused with light, sounds, smells, tactile sensations as his sensor mesh system went active.

[Titan K1 online,] he announced to the Whale's local commune network as the cameras came into focus, and he found himself standing in a reserve bay slot on the upper hangar deck. Before him two lines of Titans stood at the active bay slots with dozens of ground crew techs swarming around their feet and hovering in midair on platforms or while wearing hoverpacks, preparing the mecha for deployment. *[All systems online and nominal. Sensor mesh system online. Limiters enabled, combat mode on standby.]* He reached back to the control computer in the merge pod, then connected it to his office system and placed a floating 2D holo of his video stream up over the merge pod for the guards and the doctor to see. *[Telemetry online. I have a 100% merge]*

[Confirmed, 100% merge, K1,] one of the deck techs answered. [All telemetry channels are 100%.]

Jason first ensured there were no techs in his bay area, defined by lines painted on the floor, then he spread his feet a little and raised his arms, made a fist with his left hand, and placed it in the palm of his right hand, starting the practice exercises to “settle in” to his merge, to feel less and less like he was merged to the mecha and more and more like he *was* the mecha. The settling process was a critical one for merge operation for mecha and fighters, both remote and PIM, Pilot In Mecha, to the point where both the Army and Marines mandated a minimum 15 minutes of merge time before units entered a combat theater for anything but a scramble response mission. That made absolutely sure that the riggers and Wolf pilots were fully settled into their mecha and operating at peak combat efficiency. Some riggers settled faster than others, but the average time to fully settle into a merge was about four minutes. Jason usually only took about 20 seconds to fully settle into his merge, which was about average for a Generation. *[You guys getting the A/V feed?]* he asked back to his office.

[We’ve got a clear view, Jason,] Aya answered. [But we’re only getting one channel.]

[I’ll enable the other channels once I switch to combat mode and get my spinners up,] he replied, then he connected up to the biogenic network and located Tara. [Major, I’m online and ready to start PDs.] PDs were Pre-Mission Diagnostics.

[Go ahead and get a head start, K1,] she answered, making sure to only use his Titan designation now that they were out in the field. Nobody would refer to him by name or title, either over commune or gravband. [We’re about five minutes from the Stargate. We’ll be aboard in about fifteen minutes.]

[Understood. I should finish my checklist before you arrive.]

With the help of the ground crew, Jason was indeed completely finished with pre-mission diagnostics and inspections by the time the riggers arrived. They came in through the roof doors, their dropship landing in the open area in the bay, and the riggers boiled out and headed straight for the ROC, the Remote Operations Center. From that room, holding 60 merge pods and

overseen by the Whale's engineer and medic to handle either a technical problem with a merge pod or a medical issue that might pop up during a mission, the riggers would be driving their mecha by remote merge. Juma had mandated that Marine Titan riggers would operate from remote merge unless the mission required them to run PIM, Pilot In Mecha, to protect the rare and valuable Titan riggers from getting killed in action. It really made sense, since Titan riggers were too busy with their very complex mecha to worry about telepathic combat. Riggers in Gladiators and Juggernauts could handle telepathic combat and allow the Titans to wreck face. Sioa hadn't instituted the same rules for the Army, but Jason felt she would. It was just a matter of time.

Barely two minutes after Tara rushed into the companionway leading to the crew sections of the ship, giving the personnel dropship time to take off and exit the hangar, her Titan powered up, which indicated she was merged to it. *[Titan AI online,] her commune swept across the hangar. [Alright, Heln, let's get the PD checklist going.]*

Jason stayed in his assigned bay space and passed the time catching up on messages from the command center as the Storm Riders and the other nine reservists went through pre-mission, as techs checked systems and did last-minute inspections through maintenance doors while the riggers ran through the checklists and diagnostics to ensure the rig was combat ready. Once that was all done, Tara issued out external equipment to the company, and left it up to the company as to who would carry which weapon. Jason almost felt lucky that he managed to get himself a CM-120 Vindicator gatling disruptor, a shoulder-mounted PM-60 heavy pulse cannon, and a Falcon missile pod for his right upper shoulder mount, which would give him maximum Rambo-ness. Like all rigs, his back pod mounts were taken up by flight pods, which weren't *entirely* necessary, but were mandatory equipment for any Titan that was going to be operating in space.

In reality, a Titan could run on its internal grav engines, which separated it from all other Karinne mecha when it came to non-ground operation. Titans had *Wolf* engines in them, the exact same engines used in Wolf fighters, and if that wasn't enough, there were *two* of them in a Titan. A Titan needed two because the asymmetrical placement of the engines in the mecha, the mecha's bipedal robot construction, and it required two engines to give it stability when used in aerial and space-based combat theaters. It

was just *too* unstable with only one engine, even with helper engine pods in the lower arms and legs, so they installed two. Given it had two of the most powerful engines ever designed for their size, it gave a Titan a fuckton of speed and power when operating in vector-based space combat. However, it wasn't anywhere near as agile as a Wolf, it lacked the Wolf's ability to change its vector quickly, so flight pods were standard equipment in space operations to provide a Titan with the agility it needed to defend itself against fighters and other mecha. The mecha didn't need flight pods for anything else except controlled descents into atmospheres. While not absolutely necessary for controlled descents, it took a very skilled rigger to bring a Titan down in a controlled descent without flight pods because of the very un-aerodynamic profile of a Titan when it encountered air resistance.

Since they'd be operating in space for this mission, flight pods were mandatory equipment.

Jason did a systems check on his pod units and found them fully operational...and there was little more to do but wait. He stowed his shoulder cannon in carry mode, which caused it to retract over and behind his shoulder and rotate up to point at the ceiling, returned to his assigned bay, and had the bay's anchors reattach to his unit so it was physically locked down for jump. He again kept an eye on the incoming enemy fleets and CCM deployment through the command center as their task force got underway, heading for the catapult that would get them out to R1XC-1493. They had to use a catapult because 21 of the ships in their task force lacked real-time jump engines. When the mission was complete, a tug would jump in a catapult to get them back to Terra.

[Five minutes to jump. Secure all Titans for jump,] the XO on the bridge announced over local commune.

[All Titans secure and ready for jump, XO,] Tara reported.

[Aye-aye, Skipper.] Tara hated to be called *Captain* by the Whale's crew, so they did the same thing her company did and called her *Skip* or *Skipper*. *[We jump for nineteen minutes, 27 seconds, and we enter the target system hot.]* A *hot* entrance meant that the enemy would already be in the system, which was what they wanted. They wanted to come up behind the Syndicate fleet as it came in towards planet 4 under sublight, which would

help block their best escape vectors by being physically between them and their shortest path to jump distance.

[All rigs, sync your spinners,] Tara ordered. [Jumper escort use local B for spinner telemetry, ship defense use C.] That would feed all spinner data to every Titan, providing the entire company with full coverage. What one spinner saw, every Titan would also see. [Command channel is STG local 1. Green up when you're set.] Greening up was sending confirmation back to Tara via computer, without having to verbally acknowledge the command. After about a minute, she continued. [Alright, we're all green and ready. Settle in and relax, girls and boys. Nothing to do now but wait.]

All the way back at Karis, Jason took a deep, cleansing breath, while his rig rolled its shoulders a little bit. What was about to happen wasn't going to be *fun*. This would be the real thing. People were going to die, on both sides, and he was going to be right in the middle of it. He'd killed in battle before, but that had been while merged to Cybi and reaching out from hundreds of kathra away, and in a way, it was both much more distant but also horrifyingly intimate. This time, he would be shooting a gun at the enemy, and if he hit them, they were dead. No distant disassociation from the act of ripping apart battleships, seeing them as *things* without considering the living crews inside. Yet, there would also be no requiring him to locate and crush minds, shattering their sanity, to feel their minds snap under the force of his power, and in that fleeting instant while he was still connected to them, to know what true madness was from the *inside*. So, in what was coming, he felt like he was getting it better in one way and worse in another.

Either way, he wouldn't hesitate to pull the trigger.

Jason spent the nineteen minutes in hyperspace sharing a long silence with the other riggers, all of them forced to do nothing but wait. But these were veteran riggers, riggers who had seen combat before, so the silence wasn't filled with fearful trepidation. It was filled instead with quiet resolve...that might be less sober than if they were all personally in their rigs, were personally in danger. The fact that no rigger in that bay was going to die today filled all of them with unspoken relief.

The ship dropped into normal space exactly on time, and Jason saw through the Whale's internal telemetry that the enemy fleet was about

200,000 kathra in front of them and making for planet 4 in the system at what was for them full speed. The task force accelerated to flank to catch up to them, and for nearly four minutes Jason watched those ships on the Whale's tactical display. It took them those four minutes to realize they were being followed thanks to sensor jamming, but they eventually noticed their pursuers and turned around. The cruisers and battleships pulled back in between the super-ships, seeking protection from the numerically superior force, allowing the four super-ships to advance towards them on a very slow acceleration curve that betrayed the ungainliness of something that big. On their side, Jason saw the *Ori Ai* and *Arabax* speed up, taking the lead in the formation, and the rest of the ships fell in behind them in an arrow formation with the Whale directly behind the *Ori Ai*, using it as a shield.

[It's go time, kids,] Tara ordered over local commune. [A and B Squads, join your assigned lander teams and stay behind the Ori Ai until the lander deploy signal is given by flag command. C and D squads, deploy into ship defense formation alpha around the Ori Ai. Open bay doors!]

[Bay doors opening, Skipper,] the XO acknowledged.

[C Squad, D Squad up!] Tara boomed. On the lower hangar deck, the 20 members of C and D squads squared up in front of their open doors. *[Launch!]* In unison, the 20 Titans lunged through the airskin shield and vanished into the darkness of space. *[Reserves on the line!]* Jason disengaged the anchors holding his Titan in place and moved up along the center line. He was the first reserve in the line, so he moved all the way up to the front of the landing bay and took up a position directly behind Tara. The other reserves took up positions behind the other Titans on both sides of the bay. They would follow them out the doors when the go signal was given, and since Jason was assigned to Tara and her wingwoman, he'd stay close to them. *[A Squad, B Squad up!]* All anchors were released, and the 20 mecha with the 10 reserves behind half of them prepared. *[Launch!]*

Jason followed Tara out of her bay door, and he went from the artificial gravity of the Whale out into weightless space. He engaged his engines and quickly moved into his assigned position in their formation, a loose staggered line sitting about a quarter kathra behind the stern of the gigantic *Ori Ai*, using it as physical cover. The Whale pulled back, receding in the

distance to take up a matching course well behind the warships, for it wasn't a line vessel and its job was to keep itself undamaged until it was called in to pick up its mecha. Jason was the second rank behind Tara and her wingwoman, Harin, his disruptor held in his Titan's hands. Behind them, the jumpers holding the landing teams started to line up, also using the battleship as a shield, and they were quickly surrounded by 20 Wolf fighters, four corvettes, four gunboats, and Gladiator and Juggernaut mecha equipped with flight pods, until there were nearly 50 naval craft and exomechs in the formation.

None of the units were manned. Not even the jumpers had crew members in them. The jumpers were filled with remote-piloted Gladiators that would get the Megatron units set up and Rucker units to serve as additional infantry protection while the Gladiators did their job. Since the telepathic abilities of the Benga were a wild card, it was decided that lander crews would be remote operated to remove that variable from the equation.

[Lander escort leaders sound off,] came an order from command.

[Lander Alpha ready and standing by,] the mech jumper holding the Megatron unit Jason's element was assigned to defend responded.

[Lander Alpha-Beta standing by,] the other mech jumper responded.

[Alpha One, all Titans standing by,] Tara answered.

[Alpha Two, all exomechs standing by,] another company commander called. He wasn't sure who, he didn't recognize the voice.

[Alpha Three, all fighters standing by,] the fighter wing leader answered, Commander Dreanne from the 235th Naval Fighter Squadron.

[Alpha Four, all corvettes and gunboats standing by,]

And so it went, until every element of the Alpha team replied, and that process was being repeated on different command channels for each of the lander teams.

[Alpha team, stand by for orders,] command called. *[Alpha Team, prepare to deploy. Target and landing point unchanged. Target and landing point unchanged.]* Jason saw several missiles hurtle by the stern of the *Ori Ai*...the Syndicate had opened fire. Several faint flashes of light illuminated the dark space over the top of the hull. *[Approach vector being loaded.]*

Jason checked the data coming into his mecha and saw that they were instructing them to go under the belly of the *Ori Ai*, including no-go vectors indicating firing arcs from the battleship's weapons. The entire formation started to descend, to get into position.

[Deploy ECDs,] Tara ordered. Jason launched all six of his spinners, then deployed his two gun drones, small automated drones carrying rail cannons that would follow the Titan and assist either in attack or defense. The feeds of every spinner in the company was flowing into his computer, and in his mind, he had a large and comprehensive tactical map of the entire area as each spinner contributed a piece of the puzzle. He pulled his heavy pulse cannon down into a firing position over his left shoulder and began charging it, then swung his disruptor into a firing position. All around him, the other Titans were making similar preparations.

[Deploy in thirty seconds,] command relayed to them.

[Tighten up, kids,] Tara ordered. *[And keep sharp. This is gonna be a rough ride.]*

[Target data uploading to your combat computers.] In his mind's eye, target locations on the super-ship they were ordered to attack appeared, pointing out weapon battery locations they both had to keep in mind as they started shooting at them and also targets to destroy as they came in. Most of the gun batteries on the super-ships were pillbox constructs on the hull, built on top of the armor, that gave the guns a wide range of fire. The heavier weapons were built into recessed bunkers hollowed out of the armor with only the end of the weapon barrel protruding from the surface. That gave the bigger weapons a more limited field of fire but protected them from attack much more effectively. The super-ship didn't have shields that protected the entire ship, it was far too big for that with Syndicate technology, but each gun emplacement had its own shield to further protect it from incoming fire.

Too bad most of the KMS' weapons were shield-piercing.

Most of those gun batteries were Torsion weapons, which they were effectively told to ignore. After all, they posed absolutely no threat whatsoever to their line vessels. The gun batteries that were being fed into his targeting computer were hot plasma cannon batteries.

[Diffusers on standby until we clear the diffusion field of the Ori Ai, then switch to active,] Tara ordered. *[Missile defenses active. Save your Swarm packs for missile defense, Falcon missiles only for offense.]*

[Alpha team, deploy deploy deploy!]

Jason followed Tara as they surged down and forward, clearing the edge of the stern, and the enemy fleet came into view. Explosions and lances of energy of different colors were flying back and forth between the distant ships and the CCM task force, as each side opened up with their long-range weaponry, and thus far it looked like the exchange was mainly one-sided. Jason counted two Syndicate ships out of action, one completely destroyed and one on fire with a gigantic hole blown out of its bow section, venting atmosphere into space. The CCM was pounding the Syndicate with rail cannons, which had effectively unlimited range, and the Syndicate could only answer with missiles. The streaks of light he was seeing were rail slugs flying at the enemy, the slugs lit up by static electric charge induced into the iron that then streaked across space at relativistic speed, making it look like a line of faint, ghostly light going from the firing ship to its target.

He had to note that those were being fired by *other* ships, not KMS ships. KMS rail cannons didn't do that, they didn't electrically charge the slug when firing, because KMS rail cannons were more efficient and just plain-out built better.

[Heads up small movers, we're almost in their Torsion range!] command warned. *[Hold inside line vessel diffusion fields until after the first volley!]*

Jason focused some of his attention on the super-ship, and just seconds later, his sensors showed them lowering their diffuser. A split second later, it fired a concentrated barrage of reddish Torsion bolts at the incoming enemy. That red wave of angry energy all but filled the entire sky in front of the enemy task force, lashed out at every ship in the CCM formation, and not a single ship made any move to dodge or evade those blasts. A second later, the reason why became obvious to the enemy, as their searing red Torsion bolts dimmed rapidly once they entered the diffusion fields of the CCM ships, and then faded completely before they came anywhere near the hull of any vessel.

Jason almost wished he could see the looks on the faces of the Syndicate officers on those ships. Thanks to sensor jamming, the Syndicate had *no idea* their Torsion weapons were useless until they tried to use them.

[Punch it while their cannons are recharging!] Tara barked, and the entire formation surged forward in unison.

It was a harrowing approach, but also enlightening. Navii was right, they didn't see the landers as a threat, so they weren't launching their own exomechs to respond. But they didn't ignore the landing teams enough not to do anything about them. An almost uncountable number of missiles launched up from the surface of their target ship, much smaller ones than the volley launched at the line vessels. Jason knew that they'd switch to shockwave generators, but they'd wait until the last possible second, destroy as many missiles as they could in a short window, then bring the diffusers back up. *[Shockwaves!]* Tara barked, and Jason switched from diffuser to shockwave generator, then the five Titans, corvettes, and gunboats took the lead, shielding the mecha and landers behind them that weren't equipped with Torsion shockwave generators. Jason spiked power to both his shields and shockwave generator when the missiles nearly reached them, then the missiles hit the shockwave effect. His optics kicked in the filters to tone down the searing light from multiple explosions, then the formation moved right into the hellstorm of those explosions, spiking the surface temperature of his Titan's hull. But, as quickly as the firestorm flared up, it died down, and the landing team came through the cloud of boiling fire. Jason saw no other missiles on his tactical, so he switched back to the diffuser unit as missile launch platforms and plasma cannon batteries on the surface of the ship ahead of them started to explode, struck by rail cannon fire.

[Rail cannons on the ground batteries! Falcon missiles when they get in range!] the landing party commander ordered. *[We have range with heavy pulse cannons, open fire!]*

Jason didn't have to be told twice. He already had the priority targets selected, and his shoulder-mounted heavy pulse cannon blazed with white light as it unleashed a powerful pulse blast, assisted by his two rail drones, which were firing at the same target. It hurtled away from him with sizzling speed, then 2.1 seconds later struck the plasma cannon battery he'd

targeted. The blast went through its shield and tore through the emplacement, penetrated through its armored hull, then exploded inside, sending twisted pieces of fiery debris blooming up from the surface of the ship. He fired again, and again, and again, as the other mecha carrying heavy pulse cannons joined in, sending a rain of blazing white bundles of explosive Teryon energy down onto the hull, wiping out a large swath of host plasma cannon batteries. When he ran out of batteries to shoot, he started targeting and destroying their heavy Torsion emplacements.

In barely 20 seconds, the Titans had cleared a large enough area of the hull of plasma batteries that it created a safe landing zone for them... exactly as planned. The universal mount design of the plasma batteries gave them the ability to fire on mecha that landed on the hull, but they'd cleared out every battery that could line up a shot at them. The rest were blocked by the curvature of the spherical ship's hull.

[Contact! Contact at four o'clock!] a Wolf pilot called, and Jason focused his sensors in that direction. Syndicate mecha were coming up, lifted up on an elevator, some 30 of them, all the same size as a Titan and carrying external Torsion cannons.

[Open up on 'em!] Tara barked. He watched as Tara shot down four of those enemy mecha in quick succession with her rail cannon, the others scrambling in every direction, clearly not expecting to come under fire from an enemy that far away. Jason's rail drones added to the fire raining down on the enemy mecha, but they scored no hits. They didn't return fire, not even with missiles, they all retreated away from the elevator, then regathered behind a burned-out plasma cannon battery. *[Form up, 20 seconds to touchdown,]* Tara barked. *[And the enemy will reach us almost at the same time. Jumper Beta, you better have that diffuser unit and shield generator ready to deploy!]*

[The diffuser's already active, Major. The shield generator will be as soon as we land on the hull of the ship. It requires a surface anchor, it's a ground-based unit.]

They came all the way in with almost no incoming fire, and Jason landed his Titan on the armored hull of the super-ship, his focus on the surviving 26 enemy mecha, who were charging towards them. He immediately raised his disruptor and unleashed a volley of angry white-blue

lances of energy at the closest enemy mecha, who had just come within range. The enemy mecha danced to the side with surprising agility, staying just ahead of Jason's fire as he tried to lead the target and walk the disruptor's fire across it, then the enemy returned fire with a hand-held Torsion weapon. The angry red beam lashed towards them, then dimmed and fizzled out as it entered the diffuser field being generated by the infantry diffuser unit on the second jumper. A column rose up from the top of the second jumper, and a hard shield shimmered into existence around them, extending out in a half-sphere nearly 200 shakra in radius. Tara gave a grim chuckle over local commune. *[They know they can't fight us at range now, at least once they find out their missiles won't penetrate the shield. Get ready for close combat!]* she warned over local STG, even as ten Gladiators and 30 Rockers boiled out of the jumper. Four Gladiators were hauling the Megatron unit with them, which had hoverpods attached.

[Seven minutes, ladies, the clock is ticking!] the landing party commander declared.

[We are on the clock, girls! Phase one go!]

The Gladiators set the unit down barely a shakra from the lander's ramp, and then the unit shuddered when it annealed itself to the hull, anchoring. *[Unit startup!]* the lead Gladiator called. *[Bai, get us a lock on their reactor and aim the unit! Gravity, Melza?]*

[Not strong enough, but we can cover with the onboards,] came the answer. *[I'm adjusting the compensators right now.]*

Jason looked up and saw a large complement of enemy mecha rushing towards them, another wave that must have come up from another elevator and flown over. Instead of diving at them from above, they landed on the hull about 500 shakra away, joining the other mecha behind the burned-out plasma cannon battery, then they used it as cover, firing their Torsion weapons at them...which were completely useless. *[Return fire, piercing weapons only!]* Tara snapped as she raised her arm and extended her nested pulse cannons and then opened fire. The white bundles of Teryon energy went right through the burned-out emplacement, and the other mecha scrambled in every direction even as an explosion from behind the emplacement told Jason that Tara hit one of the enemy mecha's power plant. She was using spinner telemetry and MV scope data to aim through

the solid object, which was what the spinners were designed to do, let them see more than just from their own position. Spinners were target spotters and down-pointing sensors, giving them more information to use, and that was always a good thing. Jason was carrying two piercing weapons, so he opened up again with the Vindicator, sending a blitz of bluish-white lances of energy in that direction. Explosions from the matter the disruptor beam hit and destabilized bloomed in the burned-out emplacement. White blazing bundles of pulse energy and other blue-white disruptor bolts unloaded on the emplacement, peppering it, and the heavy volume of fire that was going right through the charred, twisted metal and hitting the enemy mecha behind it chased the rest of the enemy mecha out of their cover. The enemy mecha were running to the sides, strafing to be a harder target since they now knew that a small bit of cover was useless against weapons that went right through solid matter, still firing their Torsion weapons. The landing party ignored those weapons completely, sending pulse, MPAC, rail, and disruptor fire back at them, even as the fighters hovering above opened on them as well, adding heavy pulse cannon fire to the mix.

The firepower was too much. The enemy mecha retreated in unison, turning and using their engines to glide over the hull of the ship upon which they all stood, trying to get out of range. Several of them were shot down as they tried to flee, and several more crumpled to the deck when they were targeted by the exomechs carrying rail weaponry. Navii proved she was right yet again, she predicted the enemy mecha would pull back, retreat in the face of that firepower and the fact that their own weapons were ineffective, no doubt calling in a heavy hitter to strike the lander's position. But that just bought the lander team time, and seconds ticked by, and more seconds, and more seconds as the Megatron's power plant started charging the rail cannon inside, preparing it to fire. Again, the enemy didn't understand the danger of the landing party, no doubt thought that they were trying to board the ship and the unit was trying to cut through the hull. Jason spared a second to look back towards the CCM task force and saw that they were engaged in a savage firefight with the super-ships and now their escorting ships. The four super-ships had advanced to form a semicircle, and they were trying to get the task force in the center of it so they could rake the ships with fire from multiple directions. There were explosions and some fire up there, and he saw the *Arabax* slice one of the enemy cruisers into about 20 pieces as it charged right at a formation of

smaller ships. The *Arabax* chopped two more of them to pieces with its nine particle beam projectors, then banked away to chase one of their big battleships, which was now retreating from the tactical battleship.

The enemy's answer was exactly what Navii predicted it would be. One of their cruisers came up over the horizon, coming in low and fast, and it was coming right at them. *[Heavy hitter!]* Tara boomed, even as the fighters, corvettes, and gunboats raced away from them to intercept it. But Jason saw two frigates decloak directly over the enemy ship, and both of them unleashed their particle beams at it. One cut completely through the bow section of the ship as the other cut deeply into the stern, not cutting all the way through, but it clearly did more than enough damage. The cruiser shuddered, its running lights went off, and fire and smoke gouted from the two ghastly wounds as the ship suddenly veered off its vector. It was caught in the super-ship's gravity well, and the ground party watched as the huge ship turned to port and descended, then plowed into the hull of the super-ship. They felt the armored hull under them buckle and shudder, knocking the Rockers off their feet and nearly knocking the Gladiators and Juggernauts down. Molten slag and sparks fountained up into space as the battleship scraped across the hull, wiping out undestroyed Torsion batteries and the burned-out hulks of plasma cannon batteries, as well as some of the other constructions on the hull, like sensor towers and comm units. The battleship rumbled by only about 600 shakra to Jason's right as he watched, the group turning to watch it grind by, then it slowed to a stop with fire and atmosphere venting out into space.

[Fuck, that knocked the Megatron out of alignment!] one of the techs fretted. *[Re-acquiring!]*

[Is the unit damaged?] Jason asked.

[We're not sure, we're checking it now,] the lead tech answered. *[It's still in charging sequence. I'm getting no errors back on the board. I think it's still good.]*

[We've gotta move it, the hull's buckled under the unit! It can't hit the reactor!]

[Get it done, ladies! Three minutes!] Tara ordered.

[Get it unannealed!] the lead tech called quickly. [One of you Titans, pick it up and set it down on a flat hull section!]

[I got it,] Jason called as the techs quickly unannealed the unit, letting go of his disruptor, which caused it to hover using its gyro pods and move out of his way, but stay close by so he could grab it again. Jason picked it up and took about five steps to the right, then set it back down on an unbuckled section of the armored hull. [Anchor it, anchor it fast before the power plant diverts! It's designed not to allow the cannon to charge past 80% if the unit's not anchored!]

The sun exploded. That was what it seemed like, as everything suddenly went incandescent with light. Jason looked up as his optics filtered out the saturation of light, and he saw that the *Ori Ai* had made its run at the most distant super-ship from their location, and clearly, its Teryon rail cannon had done the job. Jason saw the armored hull of the super-ship distort and inflate like a balloon, then the entire ship detonated in a cataclysm of released plasma energy. The Teryon burst fired from the fleet battleship's rail cannon had hit the main power reactor in the ship, which was virtually a tiny captive star, and that star unleashed *all* of its energy when the chains the reactor put on it were removed. It was almost like the Chesapeake explosion on a titanic scale, when the power plant in the exomech was intentionally overloaded, showing just how dangerous and powerful plasma-generating power plants could be when they were directly attacked.

[Holy Trelle,] Valda communed reverently.

[The Ori Ai scored a kill,] Tara declared to the landing team. [Shockwave incoming! Shield to max!] [Shield at max.]

[All units brace, all units brace!] Tara ordered as the shockwave of that explosion raced towards them. Titans, surround the Megatron unit! Shield it!] Jason moved his mecha between the approaching shockwave and the Megatron unit, kneeling down and physically shielding it with his metal body. The shield protecting them flared to brilliant visibility when the shockwave roared over them, making the hull under them vibrate violently. A piece of twisted debris the size of a KMS destroyer, a piece of the super-ship's armored hull, slammed into the hull barely a hundred shakra from them, then bounced off and hurtled out into deep space. The cyclone of released energy and surviving metal passed over them seconds later, leaving

a tremendous amount of damage in its wake. Many of the sensor towers, comm nodes, and gun batteries they hadn't bothered to attack had been scoured off the armored hull of the ship, and the battleship that had crashed onto the hull had been blown back out into space. There were multiple deep gouges in the armor of the hull, and even a few pieces of smoking wreckage sticking out of the armor, driven into it by the force of the explosion. Jason focused on the enemy cruiser that had crashed on the hull and saw that it had been ripped to pieces by the shockwave, and the debris was spinning out into deep space behind the traveling shockwave.

[This is gonna get really ugly really fast,] Tara predicted as Jason saw the three surviving super-ships change course. They started to spread out, and *everything* was being fired at the *Ori Ai*, which was retreating away from them in a wide loop that would allow it to come back around and make another run at another enemy ship. Jason zoomed in and saw that the Generation aboard was doing her job, as bolts of hot plasma veered away from the hull, bending away from it as the Generation inside warped space around the ship, which sent those shots harmlessly off into empty space. The enemy now knew that their gigantic moon-sized ships could be destroyed by what they saw as a medium-sized battleship, a ship with some kind of defense that turned shots at it away, and he had no doubt that there were some nearly panicked orders being thrown around from the bridges of the three surviving ships. They'd do anything they possibly could to keep the *Ori Ai* away from them—

And Navii was right yet again. The enemy mecha that had retreated away from them took off from the hull and started into space. Hundreds of other enemy mecha were also rising up from the ship they were on, launching from the landing bays, and they weren't coming after the landing party. They were all going after the *Ori Ai*. All of them. Every single one. There were *thousands* of them, Jason saw, once the mecha from the other two surviving ships also started to ascend, some having to come around the ships to chase down the fleet battleship. The *Arabax* veered in as the fleet battleship continued its wide, looping turn to line up for another run, acting as a physical shield against the incoming enemy mecha, while the surviving ships in the task force swooped in and started shooting at the armada of enemy exomechs. The first groups of them that survived that gauntlet looked to try to go over or under the *Arabax* to get at the ship behind it, and

they were summarily ripped apart by the *Arabax's* Torsion shockwave generator. Torsion bolts lashed out from the super-ships—they must have figured out that the ships couldn't run both at the same time—but those shots bent away from the hull of the tactical battleship and sizzled out into empty space.

And *that* was why Navii had rallied so hard to get Generations into the battleships. Not just for their ability to telepathically attack, but their ability to telekinetically warp space as a *defense*. Just as Saelle once saved Dahnai by warping space to divert the path of MPAC blasts, the Generations aboard the two battleships were warping space to divert plasma and Torsion bolts to protect their ships from attack. With a Generation on board, those ships were all but untouchable so long as the gestalts could stay online.

[They're completely ignoring us,] the landing party commander chuckled. *[Let's make 'em pay for it. Status?]*

[94 seconds,] the lead tech reported. *[Megatron is aligned and at 86%. All Megatrons are synced to fire simultaneously. All five Megatrons are showing ready to fire.]*

[Techs on the jumper. Get ready to evacuate!]

[We bug out at 32 seconds,] the lead called. *[Bring the shield down at 35 seconds.]*

[Recall all ECD's, pull telemetry from command,] Tara ordered.

It was a smooth process. At 35 seconds to fire, the shield on the second jumper deactivated, and three seconds later, the exomechs and jumpers launched from the surface. The fighters and larger escorts followed them as they punched their engines to full throttle, because they'd seen what happened when a super-ship's reactor was breached. They screamed away from the ship, several heavy Torsion cannon shots coming up at them. Jason evaded one that was aimed at him, then flinched when one of the escorting corvettes was hit, the ship twisting to the side as its stern exploded when its engines were breached. The carapace of the corvette contained most of the explosion, so about three quarters of the corvette spun away from the retreating formation, fire and plasma gouting from its ruined stern. At five seconds, Tara barked over local, *[Brace for shockwave! All shields at max!]*

Five seconds later, the super-ship upon which they landed ceased to exist. All five Megatron units on the hull fired simultaneously, and at least *one* of them managed to hit the reactor. There was a nova-bright eruption of light behind them, triggering his optics to filter the light, then he was tossed around like a stuffed animal in a dryer when the shockwave hit. Something struck his left arm, and he saw almost clinically that his Titan's left hand was sheared off by a piece of debris from the exploded ship that penetrated his shields, sending a jag of sudden sensory disruption through him that could almost be called pain for a merged rigger. The ships and mecha tumbled about for a few more seconds, then they started to recover. Several of them were damaged by shrapnel, a few so severely they were offline, and the lead jumper had a big hole in its port stern that was venting metaphased plasma into space. Jason felt the psychosomatic reaction Songa warned him about when a rigger was merged to a damaged rig, a feel almost like his *real* left hand was taken off and sorted through the sensation and managed to quell it.

[Grab the damaged, set course to rendezvous with the fleet. XO, bring up the Whale,] Tara ordered.

[We're incoming, Skipper.]

Jason checked telemetry and saw that of their group, minus the corvette that was hit while they evacuated, four Juggernauts, two Gladiators, a Wolf, and a gunboat were severely damaged and had to be towed back., with two Juggernauts and the gunboat offline, damaged enough to knock out their power, thus causing the controlling pilot to lose merge...and no doubt suffer dump shock. The Titans of the Storm Riders hadn't come out of it unscathed. Including Jason's missing left hand, all but two of their Titans had some kind of damage from the shockwave and the shrapnel carried with it, mainly to external equipment like their pods and pits and gouges on their carapace hulls. Tara had a smoking hole in the upper left back shoulder of her mecha, which had blown off her missile pod and penetrated deeply enough to damage the motor control systems of her left arm. A piece of red-hot armor from the hull of the super-ship was sticking out of her back, lodged into her carapace.

Holy *fuck*, that explosion had to be utterly insane to put enough energy into the debris to penetrate a Titan's *carapace*.

Behind them, Jason watched as the two remaining super-ships, the last ships left in the Syndicate fleet, looked to be turning to retreat. He got a view of the *Ori Ai* making a run at the one on the right. It came right in at it, all but on a collision course, and it came in right down the throat of their heavy plasma cannons, the *big* ones that could one-shot most any ship. A massive bar of hot plasma erupted from the surface of the super-ship and raged right at the fleet battleship, but it bent away harmlessly just before it hit the hull. The Generation inside turned that attack aside. The battleship charged in after that plasma bolt lanced out into deep space, then it fired its Teryon rail cannons when it reached optimal range. A blazing bar of incandescent light ripped away from the fleet battleship and went into and through the Syndicate vessel, and just as the fleet battleship started to veer to port, the super-ship simply *shattered*. Jason got a perfect view of it, its armored hull rupturing as if someone put a firecracker in an orange, then the entire thing went up like a nova. The *Ori Ai* vanished in the blast for a moment, then emerged from the blast wave trailing smoke as it accelerated to flank, outrunning the shockwave. Jason checked telemetry and saw that the lander teams had evacuated before the attack, no doubt warned to get off the ship by Marayi before it made its run.

The damage was utterly *devastating* for the Syndicate, and not just to their super-ships. Virtually all of their surviving mecha were destroyed in the shockwave when the super-ship exploded, torn to pieces by the blast, given how close they'd been to the ship when it exploded. They'd been chasing the *Ori Ai*, trying to stop it from attacking, and they followed the fleet battleship to their own doom.

The last ship had no chance. Just as it finished its maneuver to turn to run, it too exploded into a miniature nova as the Megatron units set up on its hull did their jobs.

[The theater is secure, the theater is secure,] Marayi's voice came over command once they weathered the shockwave. [All ships stand down from battle stations and begin recovery and damage control operations. Well done, ladies and gentlemen. Well done.]

Jason pulled command telemetry from Karis, something the company couldn't access, and saw that this battle had gone very well for the Confederation. They'd only lost 12 CCM ships out of a task force of 120,

none of them Karinne vessels, with very few casualties thanks to the Confederation's mimicking of the KMS practice of supplying self-contained armor systems for Naval personnel. Those personal armor systems saved a *lot* of lives among the Confederation crews on the destroyed ships. There was some damage to a couple of KMS destroyers and one frigate was pretty roughed up, but it still had power and was able to maneuver. As Jason expected, the *Arabax* just absolutely kicked the Syndicate's ass, taking out six of their 12 escorting battleships and cruisers, and the *Ori Ai* had scored two super-ship kills with its Teryon heavy rail cannon.

Navii had been right. She'd been right about like *everything*. She accurately predicted how the Syndicate would react to KMS tactics, and accurately predicted just what kind of an effect the *Ori Ai* would have in the battle. He was going to kiss that woman when he delinked from his Titan and got down to the command center.

The only downside was they had no enemy ship wreckage to salvage and inspect. The destroyed Syndicate ships had been eradicated by the explosions of the super-ships.

[Wake up, K1,] Tara called.

[Sorry, I was accessing command telemetry, seeing how things stand.]

[And?] one of the other Storm Riders asked expectantly.

[Twelve destroyed CCM ships, very light casualties. Umm, we lost three lander teams, they didn't get to minimum safe distance in time. Wait. They're picking up some Syndicate survivors in exomechs. I guess some of them survived that hellstorm, they followed the Ori Ai right into it.]

[Good Trelle, K1, you need to give a promotion to whoever came up with the idea of the Megatron units. I still can't believe we blew up something the size of a moon with a piece of equipment the size of a racing skimmer.]

[The Megatron unit was initially General Sioa's idea,] he told them as the Whale approached. *[So you'll have to suck it up and pay a complement to an Army bitch.]*

[Hey, even an Army bitch can have a good idea once in a while,] Tara noted lightly.

[They're pulling the Ori Ai and Arabax to another mission. Not all of them are going as well as ours did,] Jason told them as the Whale started to decelerate. *[A bunch of our task forces are getting their asses kicked, but we're stomping the shit out of them with others.]*

[What's going on? Can you see why?] Tara asked.

[Yeah. It's us,] he answered. *[Any task force where the KMS has a strong presence is winning, particularly the ones that have our battleships or Megatron landing teams in them. But the CCM task forces with no KMS heavy ships or lander teams in them are getting pounded. Our ships are taking out the Syndicate super-ships, but the rest of the CCM is having a hell of a time doing it without us. A single super-ship just forced Task Force 36 to retreat, and it has 73 ships in it. They couldn't take it out, and it destroyed over half of them, even with their diffusers. They just couldn't do enough damage to it, it shot down the CCM ships one at a time with its main gun.]*

[Well, we're available,] Tara declared strongly. *[Get us to Task Force 36, Jayce, and we'll take that fucker out.]*

[They're diverting us to Task Force 119, at R1DB-39,] he informed them. *[So we're gonna see more action, guys.]*

[What about 36?] someone asked.

[It already retreated, so no use sending us there now,] Jason answered.

[Bull shit. Get us to where 36 was, Jayce. We'll take out that fuckin' ship,] Tara growled.

[Woman, you're about to get me in serious fuckin' trouble,] Jason complained, getting more reports in over telemetry. *[Well, fuck me,]* he added.

[What?]

[I hate being right. They're reporting that the Benga telepaths are seriously fuckin' hardcore,] he answered. *[The Benga talents are overwhelming many of our non-Faey telepathic defenders, but they're not*

beating the Faey quite so easily. The Army units are stalemating them. And they're no match for the Imperial Marines. Any engagement where they're coming up against the Imperial Marines, they're getting their asses kicked.]

[That's not a shock, the Imperial Marines are like some of the strongest talents we have,] someone injected.

[I know, I'm married to one. Trust me, the Imperial Marines are everything you've heard of them,] he said proudly.

The Whale slowed to a stop, and the escorting fighters and landers headed for the *Ori Ai* as the Titans entered the ship. Techs boiled out onto the hangar deck as the mecha got into their bay spaces and partially powered down, and Jason did the same, having the ship anchor his mecha as two techs went over his damaged left arm. *[What's the prognosis, guys? Quick fix?]* he asked.

[Afraid not, K1,] one of them answered. *[The hand unit's anchor socket is damaged, so we can't do a hand unit swap. The fastest we could possibly fix it would be to take the arm off at the elbow, but that's a four-hour job. And we have no backup units for you to take over, so I'm afraid you're out of action for now.]*

[There's six backup mecha on board!]

[And they're being taken by Storm Riders with damaged rigs. You're a reservist, K1. They have priority.]

[I'm tempted to pull rank.]

[You try that and Major Tara will rip your ears off,] one of the techs warned with a grin.

[Well, maybe I'll start a new fad, the no ears look.]

Both of them laughed. *[She'll also give you a reprimand, and that'll ground you,]* one of them added.

[Well...fuck. Alright then. Major Tara, the techs just told me I'm down for four hours minimum, so with your permission I'm gonna delink and go back to my day job.]

[Permission granted. Good work, K1.]

[Thanks, Major. Good luck out there.]

With an exhale, Jason delinked from his Titan and opened his eyes. He was greeted with the status board on the inside facing wall of his merge pod, and then the doctor, Rilvin, poked his head into the open-walled pod. “How are you feeling, your Grace?” he asked professionally, taking hold of Jason’s armored left hand. “Close your hand into a fist for me. Any lingering pain?”

“I’m just fine, I’ve dealt with that in training,” he replied, flexing his hand in the doctor’s grip, closing his armored fingers over the doctor’s supple, long-fingered hands. He passed his right hand over his face. “Just the usual effects after a prolonged full merge.”

“Stay in the pod for at least two minutes, your Grace,” the young doctor ordered. “Give your brain a chance to sort itself out.”

“I’ve done this before, Doctor,” he said patiently as he sat up. “See, Aya? No dump shock,” he said as she looked in over the doctor’s shoulder.

It was still reckless and completely irresponsible, she fumed.

And what the Captain won’t tell you is that she was fairly impressed, Jason. You’re a pretty damn good rigger, Dera added impishly, which earned her a short glare from Aya.

Thank Kyva, Tara, and Liira for that, they trained me, he answered, feeling the pins and needles fade from his legs. I’m good to stand. Move, Doctor.

You will stay in that pod for two minutes, your Grace, the young doctor retorted, trying his best to flood his thought with authority.

Yeah, I don’t play by the rules, Doc, Jason told him, then picked him up with his telekinesis and moved him back, then set him back on the floor gently. He swung his legs out and climbed out of the pod confidently

[Jason, now that you’re out and available, the council is in session in the Hall of Peace,] Cybi informed him. [They would seriously like you to attend.]

He sighed, then brought up a hologram that showed the Hall of Peace. All the members were present in their bionoids, sitting at their desks and

watching a series of flat holograms hanging in the air showing CCM missions and fleet status. "I'm a bit busy at the moment, friends," he said over the hologram. "I *just* finished a combat mission, and I'll be going out again as soon as they get my Titan repaired."

"I can't believe you're *fighting*, babes," Dahnai said accusingly.

"I have no reason not to fight, Dahnai," he told her bluntly. "We need every Titan rigger we can get our hands on, and I'm rated for combat operations. And on *this* planet, my title doesn't excuse me from doing my duty to the House."

"We watched you fight, Jason, the KMS was kind enough to send us a feed of your mecha sensory telemetry. That was quite impressive," Shakizarr said with a nod. "You are formidable."

"I've been training for this for years, Shakizarr," he answered evenly. "Now if you all will excuse me, I'm gonna go down and see if we can't get some KMS fleet battleships and lander teams out to the task forces that need reinforcement."

"That was exactly what we wanted to discuss with you, Jason, so we'll leave you to it," Sk'Vrae declared.

Jason rushed down to the command center, where it was even more busy than it was earlier that morning. The new additions were holograms of Lorna and Jarik Furystorm from the CCM command staff standing with Myri and Juma by an asset allocation board. "What's the current situation, Myri?" Jason asked as he strode quickly across the room, Aya behind him.

"We're already stretched to the limit, Jayce," she answered, pointing at the board. "Every fleet battleship and command class ship has a waiting list of task forces to visit to assist in taking down those super-ships, and we're breaking up the Megatron teams and spreading them out. Instead of sending five per ship, we're sending two. The units are proving effective, so we don't need quintuple redundancy."

"*We underestimated how tough those ships are,*" Lorna admitted. "*Our ships are doing damage, just not enough. They're forcing our task forces to retreat by simply outlasting them, destroying our ships one at a time and slowly wearing us down. The only task forces that are beating the super-ships are ones with your ships, INS command ships, or Coalition command*"

ships in them. The Faey and the Coalition are the only ones with enough raw firepower in a command ship to take out a super-ship, thanks to MPACs and heavy disruptor cannons."

"It's an entirely different scenario when your ships are put into the mix," Jarik continued. "Your ships can kill those super-ships with one shot, and those Megatron units are proving to be amazingly effective on the super-ships small enough for them to hit the ship's reactor. Every task force with those elements in them has destroyed the opposing enemy fleet."

"We need the Tianne, Myri," Lorna said sternly.

"You'll get it in about an hour," she replied. *"It's about to begin its mission, and if it's successful, we'll have one of their super-ships to study."*

"You sent the Tianne with the capture mission?" Jason asked in surprise.

"Yes, the Tianne is the only single ship we have with sufficient firepower to clear the hull of a super-ship in a matter of seconds to give the boarding team a safe landing zone," Juma answered. *"The GRAF cannon in the Tianne is nearly twice as powerful as the ones we have in the command ships, and that includes a much wider field of fire."*

"I don't see how that matters," Lorna protested.

"The cannon in the Tianne can fire in a much wider field by changing the focusing algorithms, widening its beam. They'll fire a cone of energy at the ship at 5% power, and at their planned range, that cone will be nearly 250 kathra across. That'll allow the burst to carry just enough power to destroy the gun batteries on the hull, but not enough to penetrate the super-ship's armor. With one shot, they can clear a landing area for the boarding team to get down and in safely."

"They'll strike the super-ship from range with the GRAF cannon and then come in within a half kathra of its hull to launch the boarding operation," Lorna added. *"The Tianne will use its particle beams to cut open the hangar we've targeted as our entry point, then launch the boarding operation. Once the boarders get inside, the Tianne will withdraw from the theatre. Its part of the mission will be accomplished."*

"That's when you can have it, Lorna," Juma finished.

"That sounds like a pretty solid plan," Jarik said approvingly.

“Thank you, Jarik,” Juma said with a smile.

“Then it sounds like you have everything under control,” Jason said, looking at the board. “Lorna, I suggest you explain this to the council, they’re a bit impatient at the moment.”

“I’ll send someone to mollify them,” she nodded.

“Don’t *overwork* our crews, Myri. Give them some downtime after running them around the galaxy.”

“We have everything under control, Jason. Why are you here instead of with the Storm Riders?”

“My Titan’s hand got sheared off by shrapnel when we blew up our target ship,” he replied. “Came right through my shields. The techs are working on it right now, they said it’s a four-hour repair.”

“Then go back to your office and wait where you’re *not* driving us crazy,” Myri ordered with a smile.

“Actually, I suppose I should join the council,” he sighed. “Much as I don’t want to, they might start getting pouty if I blow them off.”

“Good, go,” Myri said, pushing his shoulder. “Or get in your corner, either one works for me.”

He returned to his office, and instead of getting into his merge pod, he instead sat at his desk and leaned back in the chair. He closed his eyes and merged up into the biogenic network, then located the bionoid he kept in the Hall of Peace, which was literally in a small chamber underneath his desk in the hall. When he activated the bionoid, the seat upon which it sat rose up from the storage cell and into the Hall of Peace, joining the other bionoids attending the conference...all of them.

“You could have come over in person, babes,” Dahnai noted as the bionoids in the room were alerted via commune that Jason had joined the conference.

“Aya won’t let me wander. Besides, I have to stay close to my merge pod in case they get my Titan repaired early,” he replied. “Lorna was in conference with Myri when I got down there, she said she’d have someone from the CCM command staff brief the council.”

“Well, what did you find out? I’m not waiting for them.”

“They’re working on it,” he answered. “The main thing they’re doing is spreading out the Megatron units to more task forces. They’re reducing the number of attacking lander groups from five per ship to two per ship. That’ll let more units spread out to more task forces.”

“Are there sufficient units built to keep them supplied?” Grran said, in his bionoid-induced voice. Unlike his normal body which was incapable of articulating most speech, they’d built his bionoid with the ability to speak... and he *liked* it. He’d been using his interface to speak for him since getting jacked, but he liked the fact that his bionoid could speak even more than the interface.

“We’ve got 400 units built and ready not counting what was sent out in the task forces, and they’re building 15 of them an hour in factories on the planet as we speak, replenishing the reserves as they’re used. So we’re not gonna run out.”

“That’s encouraging news,” Grran nodded.

A hologram manifested in the audience well, and Jason saw it was Emperor’s Admiral Hezivarr, the Verutan commander of their Navy and a member of the CCM command staff. “*August member of the council, I have a status report,*” he declared.

Jason listened as intently as everyone else as Hezivarr gave them a complete overview of the various battles being fought all over the galaxy, and he was very honest about it. He explained *why* certain task forces lost their battles and had to retreat and explained the tactics the enemy was using in addition to the tactics they were using. As Lorna had told him, the CCM task forces that lacked KMS assets just couldn’t do enough damage to those moon-sized ships. They’d deal a great deal of damage to them, for sure, but their sheer size and redundancy allowed them to stay in the fight long enough to force the CCM to retreat, slowly whittling down the number of CCM ships until they no longer had sufficient firepower to kill the enemy super-ship. The CCM was faring much better against the enemy’s smaller ships, able to take them on and take them out, and it was a curious reversal of the very problem they were having with the super-ships. Unable to use Torsion weaponry, the Syndicate’s battleships and cruisers just

couldn't do enough damage to CCM ships to knock them out, where the CCM ships had more than enough firepower to take down Syndicate line vessels.

"It's obvious at this point that the key to repelling the Syndicate invasion is going to be the Imperium's command ships, the Coalition's command ships, and the KMS flag vessels and their Megatron shipkiller units," Hezivarr summarized after he finished the briefing. *"Their weapons can destroy the enemy's super-ships, sometimes with one shot. General Lorna is altering our overall battle plan as we speak so that no CCM task force engages Syndicate super-ships without those assets assigned to it. This is going to pull us back from the front lines significantly and allow the Syndicate to more or less roam free within the galaxy until we have a new plan ready to put into action, but there's little to be done about it. If we send ships against their super-ships without KMS, INS, or CSN support, we lose those ships. It's just that simple. We'll be reorganizing asset allocation so CCM task forces without sufficient support will primarily be responsible for attacking Syndicate fleets that don't have super-ships. Your Grace, your Imperial Majesty, High Chancellor, I have to ask. Do you have any ships in reserve that you can add to the CCM? Anything?"*

"We have several command ships we were holding in reserve we can assign to the CCM to assist," Holikk declared. "I can get them to Terra within four hours."

"I can pull the command ships we have assigned to Imperium territorial defense and get them to Terra," Dahnai answered.

Jason leaned his chin on his hand and drummed his fingers. "We don't have any active ships in reserve, we committed *everything* to the CCM. We do have fifteen newly built fleet battleships not assigned to the CCM, but they don't have properly trained crews ready to take them yet. That's why we didn't commit them," he replied. "Myri was going to hold them in mothball in case our active ships got too damaged to continue fighting, then transfer the crews to the reserve ships and send them back out. I'll talk to Juma and see if there's any possible way we can activate those ships. But given we have plenty of spare Megatron units, I'll have Sioa and Juma form new lander companies. It only takes a few hours of training to get a company of Marines or Army soldiers to where they can deploy a

Megatron, the unit's not complicated at all. I'll have them prioritize getting more infantry units sufficiently trained to deploy the device and get them out there."

"That would help immensely, your Grace," Hezivarr nodded. *"What about the Tianne? It's not on the CCM active roster."*

"It's currently on a KMS mission to try to capture one of the enemy's super-ships. It should finish its part in that mission in about an hour, and it'll be made available for assignment by the CCM command staff."

"The Karinnes are trying to *capture* one of those ships?" Ethikk asked.

"Yes we are," he replied. "Actually, we want to capture a bunch of them, as many as we can, both to study Syndicate technology and so *we* can use those ships. Why waste all those resources building them when we can just take them from the enemy?"

Ethikk chuckled. "Why indeed?" he agreed mildly. "I do hope that what you learn from the ship will be shared?"

"We intend to park one of them at Terra and let the Academy study it, so yes, we're sharing that information," he replied. "And if our plans work out, each member of the Confederation will be receiving some of them for their own use. How many each empire receives is gonna depend on how many we capture."

He could almost hear Dahnai's mind working. He had no doubt she was going to try to talk him into giving her the lion's share of those ships.

"And how do you intend to get that many?" Overmaster Birn asked. It was a bit strange seeing him in person without his breather unit, but he didn't need it when he was using his bionoid.

"Simple. We make them surrender," he answered. "We have a plan in place to force all the reserve Syndicate forces still at Oasis to surrender. *All* of them. And that means all those ships become ours."

"How many are there?" Sk'Vrae asked.

"Slightly over eleven thousand ships total, your Majesty, with some 4,895 super-ships and their command vessel, which we think deserves its

own designation as a planetoid-class vessel,” Hezivarr supplied. “That ship is considerable larger than the other super-ships.”

“How are you going to pull that off, Jayce?” Kreel asked.

“They can surrender, or they can spend the rest of their natural lives trying to get home,” he replied with a dark smile. “Or maybe their great-great-great-great-great grandkids might make it back to Andromeda. I’m not sure how many *greats* I need to tack on to get it right.”

“The interdictors!” Dahnai laughed.

“Now you’re thinking like a Karinne, love,” Jason told her with a nod. “We already know they don’t have FTL capability in any of their ships, so they’re vulnerable to interdiction. That puts them more or less at our mercy.”

[Jason, the capture mission just started,] Cybi informed him. [The Tianne just jumped into the system and it’s on course to intercept the target ship.]

[Thanks, Cybi,] he answered. He decided that monitoring that mission was more important than sitting around listening to the others talk. “Afraid I’ll have to bow out, friends,” Jason said. “There are some important things I have to take care of. I’ll rejoin when I can.”

“Don’t take too long,” Dahnai told him.

He delinked from his bionoid, which caused it to be retracted back into the floor, into its storage unit, then opened his eyes and brought up several holograms, telemetry feed from the *Tianne* and from several key members of the boarding party, including both Jenn and Vella’s Juggernauts. They were the Generations who were going in with the boarding party to assist them, piloting Juggernauts that had been converted into walking tactical gestalts. The mecha had only the necessary systems to allow the mecha to operate, power system, motor control system, computer core, and sensor mesh system. The only “non-essential” systems left in the Juggernauts were its defense systems, to protect the mecha and the Generation, so it had its shields, anti-missile missile packs, and carapace armor. Everything else had been removed to make room for the gestalt system. Even the internal nested pulse weapons and the monomolecular blades had been removed. Every cubic tikra of space inside the chassis cleared by removing the other

systems was filled with amplifier stacks to boost the tactical gestalt, turning the Juggernauts into *extremely* powerful walking gestalts with its merged Generation inside of it. The Juggernauts didn't even have internal glide drives, they'd be relying on external pods for their grav engines. So, while the two mecha were defenseless from a combat point of view, they were the two most powerful weapons they were sending in.

Jason focused on Jenn's Juggernaut, which had been painted to match the other mecha in the exomech company that was going in with them... none other than the Banshees. The KBB was also going in, and Vella's mecha had been painted to resemble one of them. And intermingled with those two elite units were the red mecha of the Red Warriors. Myri had sent their best on this critical mission, and Jason was almost sorry for any Syndicate security that would be called in to repel *those* boarders.

And *all* of them would be running PIM, would be there in person. Jason thought that they'd run the boarding party by remote to prevent the Benga mindstrikers from breaking one of the boarding party, but that was kinda a silly worry given they'd have Jenn and Vella there to act as defense against Benga mindstrikers. If they wanted to tangle telepathically with a Generation riding in a walking gestalt, they were more than welcome to try. Jenn and Vella would eat them for breakfast.

Kyva hated remote anyway, she said it dulled her edge. If there was no danger of death, then there was no reason to fight like it mattered, she often said.

He wasn't going to intervene. He wasn't even going to wish them luck. He was just going to watch and listen.

Chapter 9

Koira, 6 Shiaa, 4404, Faey Orthodox Calendar

Thursday, 23 August 2018 Terran Standard Calendar

Koira, 6 Shiaa, year 1329 of the 97th Generation, Karinne Historical Reference Calendar

Star System 7945-8365-8466, Sector R4RB (Karinne Astrocartographic Designation)

Leaning back in her chair, Staff Admiral Palla Karinne, commander of the *Tianne*, steepled her fingers before her as she looked at the tactical hologram projected in front of the bridge crew. Their target was showing on that hovering viewscreen, the largest of the super-ships sent into the galaxy that was sent in alone and sent to a remote section of the galaxy. That combination of facts had been the reason they selected it for capture, and that plan was about to be carried out. Sitting beside her and to her right was her XO, Admiral Sam Kerry, and to her left was the ship's second officer, Captain Moa Karinne. And beside Sam hovered the hologram of Coma, using that hologram mode where her legs trailed off into nothingness, who had her hands behind her back and was looking at the viewscreen with everyone else.

"We are back in normal space and on course, sir," her primary navigator called. "We will intercept the target in eight minutes."

"Very good, Lieutenant. Task force status?"

"All ships reporting ready, sir," one of her comm officers answered.

"Very good. Tactical, begin GRAF cannon ignition sequence."

"Aye sir, beginning GRAF cannon startup sequence," the tawny haired Jalla Karinne called from behind her left shoulder, standing at the tactical station. "GRAF power plants are online and beginning charging cycle. I

have green lights across the board. T minus six minutes until primary couplers are engaged.”

“GRAF systems status?” Palla called.

“Recoil absorption systems on standby.”

“Engine compensator system on standby.”

“Power distribution system is in GRAF ignition mode.”

“GRAF systems are showing all nominal.”

“The enemy target is changing course, sir,” navigation called. “It’s turning to intercept.”

“Reduce speed so we intercept in eight minutes,” Palla commanded. “Comm four, send to task force to take up formation Alpha Three.”

“Aye sir, reducing to one quarter.”

“Aye sir, formation Alpha Three. Sending it out.”

“Generations are on active standby, Captain,” Coma informed her. “Both Primary and Secondary are merged and ready. Both have 100% merge.”

“Thank you, Coma,” Palla answered her. “Activate gestalt system.”

“Gestalt system activating. Gestalt power system shifting to GRAF standby mode. All amplifier stacks should be fully charged and ready in 47 seconds.” Two more holograms appeared beside Coma, representing the two Generations on board the ship, the primary Kaili and the secondary Melliken. If there were any CCM staff on board, they wouldn’t be using holograms that depicted their actual faces. Kaili would be doing most of the actual work with Melliken serving as support, but also there to take over if for some reason Kaili became incapacitated during action. From what Palla was told, the two of them couldn’t work independently without one operating at vastly reduced power compared to the other. But, he could do *some* things without drawing on the ship’s main gestalt, drawing power from the non-gestalt biogenic systems in the ship itself, and that was what he’d be doing as long as Kaili didn’t need that extra power for her own assignment. Even those systems could boost a Generation’s power, even if they weren’t specifically designed to do so, but by no means anywhere near

as much as a gestalt could. Why, Palla didn't know, and it wasn't her business to know. That was Generation business. She knew what she needed to know, and that was what Kaili and Melliken could do while merged and how Palla could use it to accomplish the mission. Kaili would be using her merge with Coma and the gestalt system installed in the ship to amplify that power, Melliken drawing on the ship's biogenic systems, and he'd be ready to take over for Kaili if she couldn't continue.

"Primary, Secondary, are you ready?"

"*We're ready, Captain,*" the hologram of Kaili answered with a nod and a smile. "*Just waiting for your orders.*"

"Primary, you will operate as point defense during approach," she answered. "Bend their shots away from the ship, just make sure not to bend them into other ships in the task force. Secondary, you will back up Primary with the specific mission of protecting the GRAF cannon once the outer doors are open. Do not let *anything* hit it while it's charged, or there won't be enough left of this ship to put in a juice cup."

"*Understood, sir,*" Kaili answered.

"*Yes sir,*" Melliken added. "*We won't let you down.*"

"Very good," Palla said, crossing her legs demurely in her chair.

There wasn't much to do but wait. Palla watched the tactical map beside the main view that showed the enemy ship in relation to the task force of KMS ships sent to chase it down, 14 ships, though the enemy could only see eight of them. Six frigates were stealthed and already well away from the task force, which was their role in Alpha Three, moving into a position where they could attack main plasma cannon batteries on the hull of the super-ship that were a threat to the *Tianne*. Those were the only weapons on the enemy ship that Palla feared enough to knock out, since they fired such a tremendous blast of hot plasma that they could conceivably destroy the *Tianne* with one shot. The frigates would move into position to attack those main gun positions, and there were plenty of them on that ship. It had 378 different heavy plasma cannon batteries, laid out along the ship's equatorial plane and halfway between that plane and the polar axis in both the north and south hemispheres in such a way that the ship could bring one to bear on any target in about 16 seconds by rotating the ship to line up a cannon

with the target. Those batteries were one reason why the task force would get so close to the ship, to make it impossible for the enemy ship to rotate to align an undamaged cannon with its targets. They would destroy all gun batteries in a large area and then get nose to nose with the super-ship to stay in that “dead zone” where the ship’s own curvature protected it from working gun batteries.

Size could be a weakness, if one knew how to exploit it.

“GRAF cannon ignition,” Jalla called loudly. “Primary couplers are engaged.”

“Charge to 5% and hold,” Palla ordered as the enemy super-ship approached. “Target planned coordinates. Maximum dispersion.”

“Aye sir, charging to five percent, adjusting targeting system for maximum beam dispersion,” Jalla answered. “We have a target lock. We have a target lock. T minus 41 seconds until we have optimum range.”

“Fire at countdown zero,” Palla ordered. “Activate GRAF systems.”

“Recoil absorption system online.”

“Engine compensators online.”

“Power distribution set for GRAF cycling.”

“All weapons on GRAF standby.”

“Aye sir, all weapons on GRAF standby,” Jalla called.

“Open the outer doors,” she commanded.

“Enemy missile launch! Enemy missile launch!” Jalla warned.

“Keep the diffuser system up!” Palla ordered. “Primary, Secondary, point defense! Task force, Phalanx systems!”

“Aye sir, point defense,” Kaili replied. “Gestalt is at maximum. Point defense initiated.”

“Phalanx systems activated,” Jalla added. “Missile defense mode.”

Outside the gigantic ship, a cloud of missiles were screaming at them, fired from hundreds of battery emplacements on the hull of the super-ship. Tactical placed the number at nearly 2,000 missiles, and they were all aimed

at the *Tianne*. No doubt they'd detected the surging energy signature of the ship, a sure indication that it was powering up a weapon and responded by using their only extreme range weapon to try to destroy it. But the Karinnes had an even longer reach, and they started to prove it with their Phalanx systems. Every ship started firing barrages of small rail slugs, the targeting computers locking onto incoming missiles and firing a small-arms rail slug in response to strike the missile and destroy it. The system was based on something from the Terran Navy before they were brought into the Imperium, which was a system that fired a heavy volume of small arms projectiles at incoming missiles to make them explode before they reached the ship. Paired with railgun technology, it created a highly effective missile defense system, able to switch between long distance "missile sniping" and short range "curtain of iron" when it fired a heavy volume of rail slugs in an area to create a veritable shield of fire through which a missile had to travel to hit the ship. The computers in the Phalanx arrays wouldn't allow them to hit friendly ships and targets, utilizing sophisticated Friend or Foe targeting algorithms, which made them safe to use in tight formations and with fighters and ECDs in the area.

Shockwave generators were the preferred method of missile defense, but since they couldn't be used with a diffuser active, Phalanx systems had a definite role in ship defense.

The Phalanx systems did their jobs, vastly reducing the number of missiles that made it through the fiery hellstorm created when the missiles were struck and exploded, exploding with *tremendous* force. Those were missiles with *massive* warheads, the kind that could take out a cruiser or battleship with one hit! "Shields to maximum, redirect power from the stern arcs to the frontal arcs! Brace for impact!" Palla said strongly.

It was enough to even make the *Tianne* shake. Only one missile managed to penetrate both the Phalanx system and get past Kaili, and Melliken picked that one up, warping space to make it veer away just before it hit the ship's shields. But it exploded close enough to the ship to cause the ship's shields to bloom into visibility as they absorbed a *tremendous* amount of explosive energy. What kind of warheads were those? Antimatter? They were nearly as powerful as antimatter bombs!

“Damage control!” Palla barked, jumping to her feet. “Did we lose any ships?”

“No sir, all ships still in formation,” someone answered. “Three are reporting minor damage. Their shockwaves caused the enemy missiles to explode at sufficient distance for their shields to absorb the force.”

“Trelle’s garland, I love Teryon shields,” her secondary navigation officer murmured.

“Outer doors are opening, sir!” Jalla boomed.

“Secondary, point defense on the GRAF barrel!” Palla barked.

“Aye sir.”

“Captain, frigates are destroying the enemy heavy plasma batteries,” Jalla called, bringing up a tactical holo beside the main view showing the heavy battery emplacements on the enemy ship. They began turning red and winking out one by one as the frigates decloaked and attacked, then raced across the surface of the enemy ship to strike the next emplacement on their kill order list. “They’ve cleared a safety zone!”

“Navigator, keep us inside that safe arc!” Pall ordered.

“Twenty seconds to fire,” Coma supplied.

“All missiles cleared, the incoming will be destroyed by the GRAF blast,” Jalla added.

Palla watched as three more enemy plasma cannon emplacements were destroyed, but not without a cost. She saw one of the frigates suddenly crash into the surface of the enemy ship, it must have been struck by something on the surface. The sleek, small ship slid across the surface of the super-ship, tumbling and rolling after it slid sideways and caught on a sensor tower, but its carapace armor withstood that crushing impact and continued stress, demonstrating the incredible strength of compressed Neutronium armor. The ship slid to a stop intact, with multiple nasty burn marks and scratches along the hull from tearing through multiple sensor towers and Torsion battery emplacements, and then, almost miraculously, the ship’s running lights came back on and the ship’s engines restarted. The frigate lifted up off the surface of the super-ship and hobbled away, moving very slowly and on a shifting vector that made it clear that its engines were

seriously damaged, but not so damaged that they couldn't get the ship moving..

"Holy Trelle, those little ships are nasty *and* tough!" Jalla blurted as she watched along with Palla.

"What made that ship crash?" Palla asked, looking at Coma.

"Ion burst, it temporarily disrupted the ship's power," she answered. "Fired from the surface of the ship by a mecha squadron. They're learning, Captain."

"Warn the landing teams about that," she answered. "Will the frigate clear the GRAF firing zone?"

"It's just outside the firing vector, sir," Jalla answered.

Just seven seconds later, the GRAF cannon fired. An incandescent blast of brilliant white energy lashed out from the bow of the *Tianne* and raged across the blackness of space, but unlike other GRAF blasts, this one widened steadily as it traveled away from the cannon's muzzle. The blast was 250 kathra across by the time it plowed into the hull of the super-ship, the immense energy tearing apart anything that wasn't armored on the hull. Sensor towers, comm towers, gun batteries, the doors of recessed gun emplacements, missile launchers, they were all shredded by the GRAF blast, flattened into the hull's armor and then melted by the GRAF's intense energy or ripped off the hull and sent flying off into space as tiny pieces of twisted, nearly molten shrapnel. The kinetic energy of the cannon blast induced heat into the metal and the hull of the super-ship, since it was fired at such a low power setting that it didn't shatter all matter it struck into molecules in an instant. Palla knew that inside that ship, possibly thousands of enemy sailors and soldiers stationed near the armored hull were being incinerated at that very instant, killed by the heat quickly conducting through the hull, heat induced into metal that withstood the impact of the GRAF blast.

What the GRAF could not reduce to molecular dust, it heated to thousands of shuki in the blink of an eye as the pure kinetic energy of the blast was absorbed by the super-ship's hull and transformed into thermal energy, into heat.

That was part of the plan. By killing the crew around their targeted insertion point, it vastly increased the enemy's reaction time to the boarding party. The enemy crew that could respond at the point of attack were all dead, forcing the enemy to bring Marines in from other sections of the ship, on a ship so big that it might take those Marines twenty minutes to reach the invaded ship section. And that would give the boarding parties time to secure their entry point and begin the operation.

"Begin phase two! Increase to flank, get us into position over the target hangar!" Palla shouted, standing up in front of her chair. "Close the outer doors! Take the GRAF cannon offline!"

"Aye, sir, increasing to flank," her primary navigator replied.

"Outer doors are closing," Jalla answered. "Beginning GRAF power-down sequence. All systems are off GRAF standby."

"Begin phase two, begin phase two," one of her comm officers called over primary command commune channel.

"Jalla, target the hangar doors and fire the instant we're in position!"

"Aye, sir. Particle beams are ready."

"Boarding teams are standing by to deploy, Captain," Coma informed her as the super-ship zoomed up on them on the primary display, as they hurtled towards it at flank speed. The super-ship was trying to rotate to bring one of its undamaged heavy plasma cannons into alignment so it could fire on them, but the navigator changed course to keep the target hangar doors in sight, moving in an arcing curve that nearly looked like an orbital insertion vector. The hangar doors had been literally the aiming point of the GRAF cannon, had been the exact center of the cone's blast, but the doors had not been staved in by the blast. That was something of a testament to the quality of the armor alloys the Syndicate utilized, to build armored doors capable of withstanding a 5% blast from the GRAF cannon. Palla rather doubted that the doors were operational, but they *had* withstood the force of the GRAF blast.

"They launch the instant we have the hangar doors cut open," she answered. "Are the 3D toys ready for deployment?"

“Aye sir,” Jalla answered. “I’ll release them to drop onto the hull of the enemy ship when we get into position.”

“Very good,” she replied, staying on her feet, stepping down to the deck in the space between her chair and the three navigation positions in front of her. Coma drifted her hologram down to hover beside her, her holographic hands still behind her back.

It only took them about 28 seconds to roar up to the enemy ship, then the navigator skillfully brought them to a stop in a relative position about half a kathra from the hull of the super-ship, the bow of the ship directly over the target hangar. Palla watched on a side holo as the particle beam projectors flared to life, sending two searing white beams down into the hull, expertly and precisely cutting away the hangar doors right at the edge of the armored hull. A towing beam yanked them out, then a different pair of particle beam projectors cut away the inner doors nearly 70 shakra below, down a tunnel of pure armor, and those doors were blown out by the hangar depressurizing. Several dozen charred bodies and small pieces of debris were blown out with the doors, a white puff issuing from the rectangular hole as quite a bit of atmosphere vented into space. Given how much atmosphere vented, more than just the hangar had depressurized. The entire ship section may have been depressurized.

“Launch boarders!”

[Go go go!]

From his position in the forward port landing bay, Jenn Karinne launched behind Major Liira Karinne of the famous Banshees, hurtling out of the landing bay and screaming down towards the shimmering surface of the enemy super-ship. The shimmer was caused by the rapid cooling of the enemy ship’s hull after being flash-heated by the GRAF cannon, all that heat radiating out into the bitter cold of deep space. The opened hangar bay was right in the center of his camera optic, a crosshair hovering over it to show his destination, but his other camera angles showed *thousands* of mecha launching from the *Tianne* and the escorting ships. Jenn was one of 5,106 boarders for this operation, in both mecha and infantry in Crusader

armor, but he and Vella were *pretty important* members of the boarding party.

[You stay right on my six, Jenn,] Liira ordered as he followed her black-painted Juggernaut down. *[If I let you get hit, Jayce is gonna kill me.]*

[Right after I kill you,] he added lightly as they screamed towards the entrance. Six of Liira's Banshees surged forward and disappeared into the hangar entrance, the point units, as Colonel Kyva Karinne of the KBB escorted Vella down right behind them. But Jenn and Vella were already doing what they were here to do. They were both scanning for enemy minds, and much to his surprise, he found 20 of them inside the hangar below. With practiced ease, not even needing to tap into his gestalt, he and Vella dominated all 20 of them in a matter of seconds, causing them to blank out and drop to their knees, a signal to the other boarders that they were no threat.

[Get those fat whales moving,] Kyva teased.

[Push off, bitch, I won the coin toss, the Banshees get point,] Liira retorted.

Jenn entered the tunnel down to the hangar formed by the armor, though it didn't feel like a tunnel given how huge the opening was, then he and Liira landed inside the massive, huge hangar deck. The interior of the hangar was a giant maintenance bay, an open space large enough for a KMS cruiser to land inside, which was exactly what this hangar was designed to do. This was a maintenance hangar for escort ships, a gigantic hangar built so their smallest ship class could come into the ship into a pressurized area so it could be repaired or refitted. The hangar was empty, but it was nearly 700 degrees shuki inside, more than hot enough to melt lead and hot enough to cook any enemy sailors that had been in the hangar deck. Twenty enemy mecha were operational inside the hangar, the twenty minds that Jenn and Vella had sensed and attacked. They were riggers that had gotten into their mecha before the GRAF blast had hit, and they were not supposed to be in this maintenance hangar. This wasn't a maintenance hangar for mecha, nor were any mecha stationed in here, so it was a bit odd that they would be here. The twenty Titan-sized mecha were on their knees, their pilots dominated and completely under Jenn and Vella's control. *[These are the*

only active enemy minds within 2,000 shakra in any direction,] Jenn declared. *[What do you want us to do with them? Put them out?]* he added.

[Don't put them out,] Liira answered. *[Jenn, keep an eye out for any enemy minds coming up from the deeper sections that weren't cooked. Vella, probe them, see if they know anything we might want to know before we begin the operation.]*

[You got it, Major,] Vella replied as she landed behind them.

[Move it, ladies, there's a ton of people coming down behind you!] Kyva called over local command as she started moving out from under the gaping hole that was the hangar doors, making room for the other boarders.

[Tianne command, we have 20 enemy mecha with live pilots down here, all dominated by the point team. Want us to send them up to you for debrief and to study the mecha?] Liira called.

[Only if you can get them up here before the fleet withdraws,] came the answer.

Pfft, I'll have this done in 20 seconds, Vella sent in a bit of disgust as she approached one of the kneeling mecha. Even with it kneeling, the mecha's head was more than twice as high off the deck as Vella's Juggernaut's head.

[They'll be on the way in 30 seconds. We'll send them to the Tianne's port main landing bay. Have a mindstriker or mindbender there to receive them. And mind that they're the size of Titan rigs, so be ready for them to fill the landing bay.]

[Understood. Sending a corvette to the hangar opening to guide them. Have your mindstriker tell them to follow that corvette.]

[Understood. Vella, program the puppets to obey the corvette telepath. And have them disable their comms and telemetry so they can't get remote overridden.]

[Sure thing.]

In exactly 30 seconds, the enemy mecha were ascending towards the opening while more Gladiators, Juggernauts, and infantry in Crusader armor entered the landing bay. Jenn knew that others had landed on the hull

outside and were setting up automated defenses built by 3D around the hangar opening, while the entirety of the boarding party would be inside the hangar, chosen because it was big enough to accommodate 5,000 rigs, infantry, and their cargo dropships holding their equipment.

[Move it, ladies, move it!] Kyva barked over local commune, waving the arm of her Juggernaut. *[You're directly under that personnel jumper!]*

The boarding party commander landed on a jumper, and Line General Vei Karinne strode out in her Crusader armor, carrying a rail cannon in her armored hands. She was a Marine, and one of the most respected combat commander Generals in the Marines for her tactical brilliance. She was a Line General, whose main role in the officer corps was to command major operations from inside the units performing the mission, putting her right there so she could see what was going on and make fast decisions. The only indication that she was the commander was the single gold diamond on her armor, denoting her rank as the lowest rung of the General ladder and her membership in the House of Karinne as a noble. Jenn recalled that she'd been inducted into the house just last takir, which meant that just a few days ago, that diamond was silver. Only nobles had gold heraldry on their uniforms. *[Get those jumpers on the deck!]* Vei boomed over local commune, sweeping an arm towards the descending jumpers. *[Why are the companionway doors into the hangar not being annealed shut? Get the perimeter secured, you fuckin' slackers! And get the Megatron units unloaded! Move, move, move!]*

[That's Vei alright, all meys and oye wine,] Liira noted impishly over rig to rig, talking only to her Banshees, the KBB, and the Red Warriors.

[G1, G2, what is enemy action status?] Vei ordered of Jenn and Vella.

[The closest enemy minds are about four decks down, directly under us, ma'am,] Vella responded. *[From the feel of it, they're either in or in the companionway connecting to the shaft we're going to use.]*

[Sensor officer?]

[Six decks under us and the adjoining sections in all four directions are all depressurized,] came the answer. *[The particle beam strike severed the power conduits controlling the blast doors in this section and opened the six decks under us to depressurization,]* the sensor officer added, revealing

herself by pointing at the surgical slashes in the floor caused by the particle beam, which had cut two decks deep into the ship. Those gashes in the floor had caused the decks under them to depressurize, allowing the atmosphere to escape through those six shakra wide lines in the hangar deck. Those slashes in the deck were the exact width of a particle beam.

[Good, that gives us plenty of time to secure the hangar against counterattack,] Vei replied. [But if there are enemy minds four decks down, they already have people in life support gear moving into the vacuum area. Odds are, those are enemy Tarks or Marines, moving to repel us.]

[Aye, ma'am,] the sensor officer agreed.

In a matter of minutes, the giant hangar was secured, and five thousand rigs and infantry were on the hangar's deck with twenty jumpers, infantry and rigs unloading their supplies and equipment for the operation. When the last jumper landed, Vei twirled her hand over her head. *[That's it, let's get our operation teams organized! Comm officer, call the fleet and tell them to set the cap!]*

Jenn saw that they were already working on that. Above them, two cruisers were lowering what looked like a gigantic flat pyramidal metal wedge with a rectangular base of the exact dimensions of the hole above, made of hardened, armor-quality Carbidium. It was the plug for the hangar opening that they'd manufactured, something so huge that the Syndicate wasn't going to easily move it, especially after it was annealed to the armor from the inside and by combat engineering teams on the outside. It was a huge solid mass, but it also had multiple small holes in it, like a Terran cheese grater, holes large enough to prevent it from pressurizing the hangar if the Benga tried yet too small for the Benga to send troops into the hangar through the holes. The super-ship had no escorting ships with it, so they weren't going to be able to pull out the cap with a ship using a towing beam. And since the entire thing was made out of hardened Carbidium, it was going to take the Syndicate time and effort to cut through it. The entire hangar shuddered when the wedge was gently lowered into place and allowed to seat inside the rectangular door space, sealing them inside, but also sealed Syndicate forces out from their easiest way to get at them, from the same hangar entry they used to get in. With that giant cap over the entry,

their mecha couldn't attack them in the hangar without clearing it first, since their mecha were too big to be moved inside the ship.

Amazing how something as simple as a bottle cork—just at a titanic scale—was going to save them from a lot of fighting.

[Cap's down, get it annealed!] Vei ordered, pointing up. Members of the 377th Navy Combat Engineering Squadron moved to respond, women and a few men in armor rising up with military-grade annealers. And Jenn knew that on the outside, other combat engineers were annealing the cap to the armored hull of the ship on the outside, further securing it.

[Where's my 3D operative?] Vei barked.

[Right here, General,] someone responded. An armored figure glided up to her, and Jenn saw a hint of red hair. Maggie! *[Maggie MacCleod, General.]*

[Do you have all your equipment ready to go?]

[I've already released the spiders, and our other toys are about to be deployed. We'll be ready by the time you begin the operation.]

[That's what I needed to hear,] Vei nodded. *[Get the Megatron onto the shaft doors! Let's get this operation moving!]* she ordered.

"The cap's in place, they should have it annealed down in three minutes," Janna informed Palla from her station.

"Very good," Palla said calmly, crossing her legs. "Comm six, order the fleet into defensive position while the CE teams anneal the cap."

"Aye, sir."

"Enemy response, Jalla?"

"I'm reading some concentrations of enemy combat mecha about a hundred kathra away, bearing 270," she answered. "They've stopped trying to rotate the ship to align their main plasma cannons to get a shot at us, so they're preparing a mecha counter-attack. I expect them to launch another missile salvo just before their mecha move to engage."

Palla nodded. "Automated weapon status?"

“All cap defense automated weapon batteries are anchored to the hull and online. The diffuser built into the cap is online. The broadcast power node inside the hangar is up and feeding them power. The spiders seeded onto the hull are starting to work their way into the ship through the data and power conduit pipes running through the armored hull, they’ll be able to go nearly 400 kathra before they’re out of the broadcast power node’s range. All mines and skippers we set on the hull are reporting active, and the boomjacks we released once we took position have drifted about 20 kathra from the inner perimeter and are armed.”

“Very good,” Palla said calmly.

With Coma hovering in front of and beside her chair, Palla watched on a holo as the combat engineers rapidly annealed down the cap that would protect the boarding party from being attacked from behind by enemy mecha, so they only had to worry about the ones that would be in front of them. Those shafts were large enough for their Titan-sized mecha to move around, and Navii predicted that they would bring mecha into the ship from other locations, fly them all the way down to the core, then send them up the shaft the boarding party was going to use to penetrate into the ship. They’d also be dealing with enemy Marines and Tarks that would oppose them as they moved into the ship...but the boarding party had plans for dealing with that, and they also had two Generations there to assist them.

But it wasn’t going to be quick, even if Palla felt that it was going to be easier than the command staff believed. That ship was nearly 3,500 kathra in radius, so it was going to take the boarding party *hours* to reach the computer core, which was located very nearly in the exact center of the ship. And that was if they simply rushed straight to it. They weren’t going to do that, they were going to move in stages as the spiders they brought with them moved ahead of them and seized control of parts of the ship’s systems to prevent the Benga from self-destructing the ship to deny it to them. They’d be in there for about 20 hours if everything went according to plan.

“CE teams are done and returning to the ship, sir,” Jalla relayed.

“Very good. Recall all external assets back to their ships. Comm one, order the fleet to retreat once all assets are back on board. Navigation, plot course for Karis in mode one, speed twenty. Hold at twenty for exactly five

seconds, then come to a full stop and then execute a jump back to Karis in mode three.”

“Aye sir, setting course 343 mark 29, mode one, speed twenty, five second duration.”

“Plotting hyperspace jump from planned origin point to Karis,” her secondary navigator added. “We’ll have to hold at full stop in normal space for about thirty seconds for the nav computer to finalize the calculations, sir.”

“Understood, nav two. Navigation, orient the ship to execute course on my command.”

“Aye sir, turning the ship,” she answered. On her tactical view, she saw the massive *Tianne* slowly start to turn on an invisible axis, rotating to turn its nose away from the hull of the enemy ship. The other ships of the task force began to do the same, which caused the jumpers and individual sailors outside in their armor to change course to reach their destination landing bays.

They didn’t have to wait very long. Barely two minutes later, her tactical officer spoke up. “That’s it, Captain, all crew and ships are on board and secured.”

“Navigation, execute course,” she ordered in a measured voice.

“Aye sir,” she answered. The starfield of their forward view stretched and then snapped, and then five seconds later, it did so again. “We are back in normal space. Finalizing calculations and plotting a jump solution for Karis in mode three.”

“Are they pursuing?”

“No sir, the enemy ship is still at full stop.”

“They are going to ignore us to deal with the boarders,” Coma predicted.

“I believe so,” Palla nodded. “Comm sixteen, relay to General Vei, good luck.”

“Aye sir,” the comm officer replied. “Reply, sir. We don’t need luck.”

Palla gave a soft chuckle. “That’s Vei, alright,” she mused.

“Jump solution plotted, sir. Secondary and tertiary nav computers agree, the solution is good.”

“Execute jump,” Palla ordered. “And good luck, Vei,” she added to herself.

Jenn stood beside Vella in their Juggernauts as they watched a team of combat engineers move one of the ten Megatron units they’d brought with them into position over the giant shaft that served as both a ventilation shaft and elevator shaft for the moon-sized ship. The fleet had jumped out, leaving them there to fend for themselves...which was all part of the plan. The 5,000 boarders were ready for this, they were well equipped, and they had a solid plan to take over the ship, they just had to be careful and not get too antsy. The huge shaft’s blast doors were closed, the doors about five shakra below the level of the hangar deck, and Jenn could sense enemy minds directly under them, within the shaft. They were most likely trying to blockade the shaft to keep the boarders trapped in the section adjoining the outer hull.

They had no idea what a Megatron unit could do.

[Be careful with that!] Maggie barked as two infantry women dropped a large case. Jenn had no idea what was in it, but given it was Maggie, no doubt it was highly explosive and very, very sneaky.

[Where are we on the Megatron?] Vei ordered as she pointed a squad of infantry to the far hangar doors.

[Getting it set into place now, ma’am,] one of the operators answered. That wasn’t the only thing getting set into place. Maggie’s helpers were trapping the hangar doors leading into the ship with what looked like mines, no doubt to give them a nasty shock if they tried to cut through the annealed doors, as another team annealed down four different automated Phalanx rail guns that were pointed *up*, which were defense against any enemy that managed to cut through the cap. In addition to the toys, a complement of 1,000 infantry and Gladiators would be staying in the hangar to defend it, and they were building their fortifications around the elevator shaft and at three other locations within the hangar that would give each hardened

position a clear line of fire on the other three, letting the defenders catch attackers in nasty crossfires. Armored wall sections they annealed to the deck would be behind a mobile infantry hard shield and a diffuser unit, in addition to more Phalanx guns, these inside their makeshift fortress and pointing out, to defend the bunkers. Three of the fixed positions were on the floor, but the fourth was on the *ceiling*, and that unit was using annealers and 3D units that liquefied the metal without heating it to literally burrow up into the armor overhead and use it to protect the position. The plan was for that overhead unit to melt out tunnels through the armor that would let them fire down on the hangar below from different angles, which would make trying to retake the hangar a bloody nightmare for the Benga.

Jenn watched as the melted armor from above was pulled out and used to further fortify the other positions, as well as further physically blockade the doors leading into the hangar from the other sections. Makati and two Kizzik in modified armor took the pliable metal and slathered it over the doors like an old-fashioned mason mortaring stones, then combat engineers annealed the metal to the doors after it resolidified.

[That's a cute little trick, liquefying the metal,] Jenn told Maggie as she rushed past. *[Who invented whatever's letting you do that?]*
[Jason did,] she replied as she stopped right in the middle of the huge hangar and knelt down, holding some kind of detector in her armored hand. *[Right here, it's right here! I need a cutting team!]*

[You found the main data conduit?] Vei asked.

[Yes ma'am, we're about to cut down to it and hook in,] she answered. *[Bring over module number one!]*

Jenn watched as the smallest of the four bunkers was finished, and the hard shield winked into visibility with two doors into it, areas where the shield was left soft through which personnel were carrying supplies and equipment.

[Megatron unit in place and ready to activate, General,] one of the operators declared.

[Very good, Sergeant. G1, keep an eye on those enemy minds four decks under us. G2, conduct sweeps at your maximum range, look for any activity you think might be aimed at us.]

[*Yes ma'am,*] they replied almost in perfect unison.

This stage of the operation, Jenn remembered, was both the longest and also the most important—well, except for assaulting the computer core. If they didn't secure the hangar, the enemy could very well get their thousands of mecha into the shaft or come up behind them as they moved down with things like bombs and missiles, and then things would get ugly. They'd be moving slowly and carefully down the shaft, securing the shaft's doorways and vents as they moved to prevent the enemy from coming into the shaft behind them, and their main weapon would be the vacuum of space. They'd be depressurizing the far side of every door and bulkhead on their way down to force the enemy to have to take extra steps to try to stop them, force them into armor or pressure suits and stress both their Tarks and their engineers that would be trying to repair things so the Tarks could get at the boarders. There was no doubt that the enemy would try to slow them down from the front while they worked to get soldiers into the shaft behind them, so they could wipe them out in a crossfire.

For nearly an hour, the boarders finished their preparations and their fortifications, turning the hangar into a fortress that would take *significant* enemy action to dislodge them. Toys, traps, automated weapons platforms, shields, physical walls built of armor, the hangar had three heavily fortified bunkers, the largest of which was around the shaft, with a fourth built into the ceiling, into the cap and the surrounding armor. Automated weapons were mounted all over the place, on the floor, walls, ceiling, and 3D toys and traps were also liberally spread all over the hangar. Meanwhile, the enemy was still in the shaft about four decks down, and one of Maggie's toys managed to get an image of what they were doing. As Jenn suspected, they were fortifying the elevator shaft, putting traps in it, physically sealing the doors, and building fortification for their infantry as more and more enemy soldiers arrived from other sections of the ship. From what Maggie and Vei could figure, they were going to try to take the hangar and take prisoners, as well as try to capture as much intact equipment as they could, by bringing in enough soldiers to overwhelm the boarders with sheer numbers. There were nearly ten thousand of them in the shaft and the sections adjoining it by the time Vei ordered them to start the next phase of the operation.

Standing by the edge of the shaft, Vei looked up at the ceiling, at a piece of equipment that had been annealed to the ceiling, an ominous muzzle pointing down. Maggie was hovering close to the muzzle, a small door open in the casing which looked to be a maintenance door. *[Is that thing ready to go?]* she asked.

[It will be in about two minutes, General,] she answered. *[It's almost finished its charging cycle.]*

[Forty minutes to charge, it had better be spectacular.]

Maggie laughed, which translated over local commune as a burst of amusement. *[Oh, it's gonna be,]* she promised. *[We've been waiting to use this thing.]*

[And what exactly is it?] Jenn asked.

[This? Oh, it's gonna sweep that shaft clear of all enemy and enemy equipment,] she answered. *[This, my dear Jenn, is an ionic differential emitter.]*

[And what is that in plain Faey?]

[A lightning gun,] she replied easily. *[Specifically designed and tuned to overload and destroy Syndicate phase interlocked plasma power systems. Once the Megatron unit fires, this baby will fire down the hole it creates, and it's gonna fry all Syndicate equipment in the shaft, as well as fry any people in the shaft to boot. The Syndicate doesn't shield their power systems deeper in the ship. A cost-cutting measure to be sure, and one we're gonna exploit like nobody's business. Once this pretty girl fires, she'll overload and blow out the power in every section adjoining the shaft about four hundred kathra down. And anything in the shaft is going to get electrocuted and incinerated by the ionic burst.]*

[Clever.]

[That's what we do in 3D Jenn,] she replied grandly, closing the small door. *[Alright, she's ready to go, General. She can fire at your command.]*

[Then let's get this batchi ball moving,] she answered. *[Get ready to move out! Expedition companies assemble on the deck!]* she boomed. *[I want the Megatron unit to fire in exactly five minutes,]* she ordered. *[Lady*

Maggie, you fire the lightning gun immediately afterwards. And then we begin our advance to the core.]

The techs operating the Megatron unit set it, then they evacuated from the shaft. A hard shield winked into existence around the shaft, a column of energy from the cap above on which the lightning gun was mounted down to the floor. *[Megatron unit on automatic countdown, General, and distance calibrated and set. If we did the math right, the Teryon burst will peter out about 1,000 shakra from the computer core deck.]*

[You better be right, cause if you overshoot, you'll blow up the ship and kill us all,] Vei replied dryly.

[I'm betting my own life on my math, General,] the tech said with light amusement. *[The unit will be ready to fire at countdown zero, General.]*

[Very good. We should have our teams ready by then.]

It took only three minutes for the invasion teams to get organized and get their gear ready, and they stood in formations of both infantry and exomechs around the cylindrical hard shield, and Jenn felt proud that he stood with the exomechs of the KBB, the Banshees, and the Red Warriors, with Vella standing just beside him. They were going to be point in this operation, both finding and overwhelming active enemy minds and defending the exomechs behind them from enemy fire. Liira and Kyva, two of the best riggers alive, stood with them, both their partners and their primary protectors for this operation.

[Ebri, Kanri, you handle our babies' six,] Kyva ordered.

[I'm combat rated on a Juggernaut, Kyva,] Jenn retorted, a bit indignantly.

[Compared to us, you are babies, Jenn,] Liira told him impishly.

Without order from Vei, since she's already ordered the weapons to fire on a timetable, the Megatron unit went off. It made no sound in the vacuum, but there was a brilliant flash of light, and then an explosion as the Megatron unit overloaded and detonated, which was what the hard shield was for. Barely a second later, the lightning gun fired, sending an incandescent bar of pure white light down into the shaft, some of it muted by the roiling flame and smoke from the Megatron unit exploding. That

explosive flame was drawn down into the shaft, then the hard shield winked out. *[Hold positions, the shaft is about to decompress!]* Vei called. *[Brace for it!]*

About five seconds later, Vei's warning came to pass. A howling gale of vapor-laden atmosphere roared out of the shaft and up towards the cap, which had multiple small holes in it to maintain the vacuum in the hangar. Some debris came out of the tunnel, including some charred bodies, and they were literally torn into tiny pieces and sucked out of the hangar when they hit the cap overhead, ripped apart from the force of the evacuating air. The howling gale continued for nearly five minutes, a continuous raging blast of air, air filling the shaft almost all the way down to the core. Several times, the hangar defense units had to clear the debris off the top of the cap, pieces of metal and other hardened materials that weren't being torn apart and blown out into space, to prevent the ventilation shafts from clogging and slowing the decompression.

That atmosphere wouldn't go far, Jenn remembered from the briefings. It would evacuate the shaft, but so long as the ship wasn't moving, it would be captured by its gravity get pulled back to the hull, and become an ultra-thin atmosphere surrounding the hull.

The raging hurricane diminished to a steady powerful gust, and when it reached a certain point, Vei stood up and lowered the metal shield she was carrying to protect herself from flying debris. *[That's it! Point team, go go go! Everyone else get ready to deploy in the planned rotation!]*

[Let's go, girls. Deploy ECDs and get the drone scouts down there,] Kyva ordered. With not a second's hesitation, Jenn and Vella jumped off the edge of the shaft and through the ragged hole made by the Megatron unit in the shaft blast door, the armored metal showing no bending or effect from the escaping atmosphere, as ten drones raced ahead, drones filled with sensor units to scan the shaft ahead of them, hunting for anomalies or traps the enemy laid in the shaft. As they'd already agreed, Vella would be the primary Generation hunting for and taking out enemy minds, while Jenn would act as telekinetic point defense, protecting against incoming plasma bolts and missiles. The diffuser behind them, following them into the shaft with the cargo pods holding their equipment, removed the need for him to defend against Torsion bolts.

[Put your shield to max, Jenn,] Liira ordered as they started down the wide shaft, spreading out after getting through the small hole formed in the blast door by the Megatron unit.

[It is, it has to be a telemetry bug,] he replied as he tuned his sensors to maximum range. *[I'm reading zero energy output under us. The lightning gun did its job.]* A flash of light from above heralded the firing of pulse weapons, as elements of the point team fired into the doors of the decks opening to the shaft. They did that for one simple reason, to put physical holes in the doors that would decompress the section beyond if enemy sailors tried to enter those sections without using an airlock...and there were no airlocks this deep in the ship, just blast doors and emergency hard shields to maintain pressurization. The infantry units at the tail end of the point team, pulling large containers with them, annealed the doors leading out of the shaft at each deck and set a 3D unit on one of the doors as they passed, which would explode if any of the doors leading into the shaft on that deck were tampered with. *[Vella, anything?]*

[No minds within 1600 shakra of us,] she answered. *[From the thoughts I'm picking up, they're maintenance teams trying to seal off the depressurized sections.]*

[Warn us if you sense any Tarks,] Kyva called, her mecha ghosting down the shaft beside them. Her mecha was carrying a very nasty-looking disruptor gatling gun.

[Getting some readings from the drone,] their primary sensor tech called from the rear of the point formation. *[I think it's ambient ionic charge still in the superstructure. Also picking up traces of chemical explosive compounds. It's scattered through the shaft, I think the lightning gun destroyed the piece of equipment that was holding it.]*

[Chemical? As in not an energy burst explosive like a plasma grenade?]

[Exactly that, Colonel,] the sensor tech replied.

[Alright, girls, keep that in mind. They're using old-fashioned chemical reaction explosives, those aren't going to show up on most energy sensors,] Kyva warned. *[Tech, keep scanning for that compound, warn us if you detect it in any quantity that might explode with enough force to penetrate our shields.]*

[Got it, Colonel.]

[Booby traps?] Jenn speculated.

[Effective ones,] Liira agreed, her mecha's head nodding. *[Some chemical compounds can explode with the force of a plasma grenade.]*

They descended nearly thirty minutes into the shaft, passing 36 decks, having to traverse the twenty shakra wide holes that the Megatron unit made in nearly 120 armored blast doors, going through the hole one by one, before anything of note happened. *[I have contact!]* Vella barked suddenly, pointing down the shaft. *[Nearly two hundred enemy minds, four decks down, they're an assault team getting ready to hit us!]*

[Dominate them. Order them to go back into the ship and attack the ship's crew and blow stuff up. Have them create chaos,] Kyva ordered.

[Yes ma'am,] Vella answered. *[I'll just take out the enemy telepaths, they may break the domination.]*

[Do it,] Kyva agreed.

[Need help?] Jenn offered.

[Nope, stick to your job, I'll do mine.] Jenn did reach out with his mind to assense the situation, so he was able to mentally observe as those minds were suddenly thrown into chaos, as Vella spiked the power in her gestalt and struck at them from nearly 3500 shakra away, well outside the enemy telepaths' ability to attack them. About twenty of the minds in the formation were talented, but they were crushed by the sheer power of Vella's gestalt-boosted attack, even after the remaining telepaths raised their defenses after Vella took out the first few of them. She put them into a temporary coma-like state, then quickly swept through the remaining non-talented Benga Marines, dominating them in a matter of seconds. She then used her talent to dominate them, to convince them that *they* were the boarders and that the ship and its crew were their enemies, then she set them loose. Once the enemy Marines charged back down the companionway to attack the interior section of the deck, she came back to the telepaths, and one by one, dominated them and had them commit suicide by shooting each other with their weapons. Then the last one shot himself, removing the threat they posed.

[Nice and neat,] Jenn told her appreciatively.

[I paid attention in training,] she answered him lightly. [Done, Colonel. The enemy Marines are attacking the adjoining section and the enemy telepaths are dead. They'll go until Benga telepaths can subdue them, and in their state, that's going to take some time. I made sure to really whip them up.]

[Good job,] Kyva congratulated. [You two are gonna make this easy.]

[That's why we're here,] Jenn told her grandly.

That became the routine for nearly four hours. They slowly worked their way down the shaft, Vella rooting out and crushing twelve different attempts by the enemy to get soldiers into a position to attack them, until they reached the first of their planned stopping points 300 kathra down the shaft, about a quarter of the way to their destination. They took up defensive positions and waited for the main force behind them to reach them, then Maggie and her techs built a bunker at that location, a heavily fortified and heavily armed fixed position that would prevent any enemy movement through the shaft, and she then mounted the lightning gun on the base of the bunker and pointed it down the shaft. They were reaching the edge of the gun's effect the first time it was fired, so they were going to fire it again to blow out all power systems in the shaft below them, which would disable any defensive weapons or energy shields the enemy had managed to install ahead of them. Maggie activated the hard shield and pressurized the bunker so they could take off their helmets or open their mecha cockpits and get something to eat and drink while they waited for the lightning gun to charge.

After the scheduled mess break, the bunker was depressurized again, and they all had to retreat behind the bunker position so the lightning gun could fire without harming any of their own. *[Weapon's ready, General,]* Maggie called.

[Fire it, my Lady.]

[Yes ma'am. Lightning gun firing in ten seconds, everyone stay away from the walls of the shaft!]

[Report from the hangar, General. The enemy has broken through one of the companionway doors. There's a battle in the hangar.]

[Are they handling it?]

[Colonel Moi reports she has the situation under control. Their Torsion weapons are useless, and that's mostly what they have. The only problem they're having is with Tarks carrying rocket launchers, and a very few of them have ion rifles they must have dug out of one of their deepest cargo bays. She reports they have some powerful mindstrikers, but our mindstrikers are keeping them stalemated.]

[Keep me advised.]

[Yes ma'am.]

[Hmm. Maybe I should have left one of you two in the hangar. It seems that just one of you is doing the job,] Vei mused, looking at Jenn and Vella.

[I can be up there in twenty minutes, General, We'll clear them out, then I'll return. I shouldn't be too far behind the point team once we get started again.] Jenn offered.

She pondered for a moment, then nodded. *[Go. Liira, send four Banshees with him to protect him.]*

[Mae, Lera, you and your wings take him up,] Liira ordered.

[Let's get up there!] Jenn communed, almost eagerly, then he quickly flew back up the shaft to get through the invasion force. His four protectors caught up with him, and once they cleared it, they opened the throttle and screamed back up the shaft. They passed several manned chokepoints that Vei had left in the shaft to defend it, small bunker positions holding fifty infantry each, there to slow down any enemy breach into the shaft behind the invasion team.

Twenty minutes at full speed later, Jenn and his four protectors burst out of the shaft and entered a wild, chaotic scrum in the hangar. Nearly a thousand enemy Tarks had pushed into the hangar through a gaping hole where a companionway door had been, blowing it out and storming in behind mobile, hand-held energy shields that almost looked like the shields a medieval knight would carry. They were trying to advance up to the nearest bunker so they could attack the defenders hand to hand. Jenn's arrival immediately caught their attention, the only enemy they could see not in the hardened bunker position, so a blitz of ion fire came flying

towards him and his protectors. Jenn raised the arms of his Juggernaut in a nearly defensive posture, and those multitude of shots bent away from him, driving into the floor in front of him. The diffuser in the hangar prevented their Torsion weapons from working, but the ion rifles they had seemed to be pretty powerful. Jenn swept the nearly thousand enemy forces with his talent and found nearly a hundred enemy telepaths, which was how the force had gotten so far into the hangar. Those telepaths were *powerful*, and they were very well trained, he could sense, and they'd stalemated the Karinne Marine mindstrikers enough to get their forces into the hangar, which were some of the strongest mindstrikers in the invasion force. With Jenn and Vella escorting the point team, they'd put their strongest non-Generation telepaths in the hangar to defend it. Those hundred telepaths were protecting the entire formation from the Faey mindstrikers, and giving them enough hell on the telepathic mindscape to force the mindstrikers to protect the weaker talents among the defenders, to prevent them from being dominated the way Vella dominated the Benga Tarks and sent them into the ship to attack their own. With both sides stalemated on a telepathic level, the two sides were shooting it out the old-fashioned way.

Now he saw that those reports he heard were right, that only the Imperial Marines were really beating these Benga telepaths. They were *impressive*.

But they were also no match for a Generation sitting in a walking gestalt. Jenn was almost dragged into the bunker position by his Banshee escorts, where Colonel Moi was taking shots at the enemy from behind an armored plate in her Juggernaut. *[What are you five doing up here?]* she snapped.

[General Vei sent me to help you clear out the enemy, ma'am, I'm G2,] Jenn answered.

[Alright then, if you're here, go sic 'em,] she replied briskly, lunging out and taking several shots with her nested pulse autocannon, then retreating behind the armored plate as a thick cloud of ion bolts came flying in their direction. *[Take out their telepaths, we'll handle the rest.]*

[On it, Colonel,] he replied. From behind the armored position, Jenn swept out and found the closest telepath, brought his gestalt up to full power, and then he struck like a hammer. The Benga across the hangar

shuddered and crumpled to the deck when Jenn hit him, hit him with all the power his gestalt gave him, sending him into a coma. He quickly located the next telepath and struck again, and again, and again, systematically taking out the enemy telepaths one by one. They were too well trained for Jenn to use a multiple attack, so he was forced to attack them telepath by telepath and focus his entire power on them to take them down. But even though he was only attacking one at a time, he was doing so at the speed of the mind, which allowed him to strike and defeat several telepaths in a matter of seconds.

And as Jenn whittled away their numbers, the other Faey telepaths in the hangar started to gain the upper hand. Mindstrikers devoting their whole attention to defending the others were able to turn around and attack the enemy telepaths themselves, adding to Jenn's assault. The enemy started to pull back as their telepaths went down, and when about half of them were laying unconscious on the deck, the enemy ordered a full retreat, firing rockets at the four fixed positions as they retreated back towards the jagged hole they'd blown in the wall to get into the hangar. Dozens of the enemy fell to the deck, struck by pulse, disruptor, tetrayon wave, and rail fire, the atmosphere contained in their enviro-suits and armor bleeding out into the vacuum as they decompressed.

The casualties weren't one-sided. A number of still forms of Karinne Marines were laying in the center of the bunker positions, inside the hard shield, which allowed them to pressurize the area so a medic could treat the injured. Ion weapons were particularly dangerous to them because they could deal damage through their armor, causing electrocution and severe burns as the ion charge conducted through the armor metal. The gel backing in Crusader armor was designed to dampen ion attacks, acting as an insulator, to the point that many of the injured inside the hard shield would be dead if not for that dampening gel.

[Well done, G2,] Moi told him. [Get that hole sealed! Put out more automated weapon units! Are they still trying to cut into the hangar from above?]

[Yes ma'am,] someone answered.

[Want me to do something about that while I'm up here, Colonel?] he asked confidently.

[They're using robotic units, nothing to dominate,] Moi told him. [They're some kind of automated laser drill, they must use them for taking planetary core samples.]

[How close are they? Within four hundred shakra?]

[The units are nearly ten kathra above the cap, they're keeping them where they think they're out of our range. From what our spy drones can see, the lasers they're using are having a rough go of it drilling through the Carbidium. I don't think they have the kind of power it takes to melt armor-quality metals. The drills have only managed to get about thirty shakra through the cap over the last five hours.]

[Do you want me to stay here to help with that?]

[We have a plan, G2, I'm just having them keep me apprised of the enemy's progress,] she answered mildly, with malicious amusement shimmering through her commune.

[Uh oh,] Jenn communed with amusement.

[3D gave us some extra toys,] she told him liltily, which made him laugh inside his Juggernaut. [We have the situation under control here, G2. Get back down to the invasion force.]

[Yes ma'am.]

It took them nearly a half an hour to get back down to the invading force, mainly because they'd begun to move again while Jenn was up in the hangar. They had to work their way through the hundreds of infantry, exomechs, and the containers carrying their equipment and supplies, but they eventually worked their way all the way back to the vanguard of the formation. Jenn drifted back into place beside Vella at the very tip of the spear. *[Any excitement while I was topside?]* he asked.

[Just a few sweeps to dominate and neutralize enemy Tarks,] Vella answered. [Nothing exciting.]

[Let's hope it stays that way,] Jenn conveyed.

[This much silence isn't good. It means they're setting a pretty big trap further down the shaft,] Kyva warned.

About an hour of routine later, Kyva's warning turned out to be fairly prophetic. One of the sensor jockeys at the rear of the point formation barked out a sudden alarm. *[I'm getting massive thermal and plasma readings moving at high speed up the shaft! I think they're venting unphased reactor plasma up the shaft!]* she barked.

[What? What kind of readings?]

[Thermals are at two thousand shuki!]

[ETA?]

[Four minutes!]

General Vei cut in. *[They're nuking the shaft! Get a hard shield over the hole the blast doors in the section above us to protect our defensive bunkers! Combat engineers seal the blast doors in the section below us and get a hard shield over it. You have three minutes, or we all cook! Move move move!]*

Maggie MacCleod and her team of engineers rushed forward, and several sheets of Adamantium metal were hastily rushed down to the next set of blast doors they had to traverse, which had a 30 shakra wide hole burned through the middle of it from the Megatron burst. The techs, Maggie herself working with them, quickly annealed the Adamantium plates over the hole as another set of techs mounted the emitters for a hard shield that would cover the entire shaft. They moved with incredible speed, but also with deft skill and cool certainty. After just two minutes, they evacuated from the door and the hard shield was activated. *[Blast door is secured, General,]* Maggie called.

[Good work,] she replied. *[Is the shaft wall metal and the blast door metal going to melt being exposed to two thousand shuki?]*

[No, General, its melting point is nearly four thousand shuki. We'll be safe enough.]

[Good. We have any automated units that can survive two thousand degrees?]

[Actually, yeah, I have something that can handle that,] Maggie answered. *[It's a monkey drone rigged with a layer of hyper-endothermic material. We brought it to send it into the reactor core.]*

[Think you can put a pulse weapon on it that won't melt?]

[Hmm.... yes. Yes, I can do it,] she answered.

[Then do it.]

[Yes ma'am. Give us about thirty minutes.]

[You have it,] she answered.

Jenn got lucky enough to get into the throng of officers surrounding General Vei as she studied a schematic of the ship, looming over her in his exomech as they hovered in the shaft. *[Them nuking the shaft means we move to our alternate plan,]* she told her officers. *[We just cleared that thick layer of bulkhead between the crew sections and the engine cells, and that bulkhead is only pierced by the elevator shafts, there's no other way through. I'll bet that's most likely why they waited until we got to this point before flooding the shaft with hot plasma. They think they have us trapped in the shaft with a long trip back up to the crew sections, and I'll bet my left tit they're amassing a very large force on the crew deck on the other side of the bulkhead to come in here after us. Colonel Malai, send it up the shaft for our defensive bunkers to evacuate their positions and return to the hangar. Have them set up the plasma bombs two decks above the lowest deck, in the shaft, and seal the shaft over it so all the explosive force comes this way. Once the enemy enters the shaft to come down here after us, we detonate them and kill them all.]*

[I'm liking this plan,] Major Fera noted lightly.

[We're going to cut into the bulkhead of the engine cell right there,] she told them, pointing at the metal wall of the shaft, *[and seal it behind us. I don't think the enemy realizes that these walls and bulkheads aren't barriers to us. Our annealers can cut them. So, we're going to follow this route, going through these hyperspace jump engine cells down to the operations decks between the cells and the reactor,]* she informed them, putting up a hologram in the center of their group and tracing a path through nearly 400 kathra of jump engine cells. The path wasn't a straight line, it was a zigzagging, roundabout route that would swing them out wide and then bring them back close to the computer core. *[What we'll be doing is a diversionary tactic, ladies, making the enemy think our plan is to get down to the cell section and disable enough engine cells to cripple the ship,*

hiding our true objective. We'll be moving through these cells, but also cutting our way into the adjoining cells, killing any techs in them, and cutting the power feeds to the cells to disable them. Lady MacCleod, your little monkey drone is gonna reinforce that belief. You're gonna send it into the shaft after we clear the cell on the other side of that wall, and it's going to go down the shaft and breach the access doors and bulkhead walls of the shaft for the adjoining jump engine cells. If our research on the engines they use is right, two thousand shuki on their outer casings is going to make them fail, and fail spectacularly, if they try to use them. They're not designed to operate at those temperatures.]

[Clever,] Kyva communed in appreciation.

[Navii came up with this plan, there's no doubt it's clever,] Vei answered with admiration rippling through her commune. [This is just one of six alternate plans she sent with me for consideration. The other five are just as damn clever as this one. Moari, plot our exact route through the cells to swing us out and then get us onto the operations deck within one kathra of the computer core. Kyva, Liira, you and your girls are going to be handling the initial breach of each cell we cut into along our route. Break in, eliminate all resistance, then secure the cell for the rest of the invasion force. G1, G2, you'll be attached to the KBB and Banshees for this operation, same as the shaft. Bai, your girls are responsible for securing the cell we invade, annealing all doors and sealing all ventilation and access ducts. Fera, organize six teams to cut into adjoining cells and disable them, then seal the breach hole behind you when you pull out. Kalrani, your girls are going to be handling rear defense. Anneal the breaches behind us to keep the enemy from chasing us and set traps and other surprises in the cells we evacuate to make them coming up behind us or sending in techs to repair the damage we cause an exciting experience. Everyone know what to do?] When everyone communed their affirmation, she nodded and took up her railgun from where it was hovering beside her using its gyro pods. *[Alright, let's get this moving.]*

Koira, 6 Shiaa, 4404, Faey Orthodox Calendar

Thursday, 23 August 2018 Terran Standard Calendar

Koira, 6 Shiaa, year 1329 of the 97th Generation, Karinne Historical Reference Calendar

Star System Q3XD-19 (Karinne Astrocartographic Designation)

In the vacuum of space, there was no sound of tearing metal or the shriek of the rigger that Jason Karinne had just killed as he yanked his monomolecular blade free of the enemy exomech he'd just impaled through the chest, driving the blade right through the enemy mecha's cockpit, then in a fluid motion extended the pulse autocannons from their nested forearm emplacements on his other arm and fired a blast at another enemy mecha at virtually point blank range. The enemy mecha shuddered and then collapsed to the hull of the super-ship in a heap. But while there was no sound, there was plenty of chatter as the riggers of the Storm Riders beat back a furious assault from enemy mecha, who had charged the hard shield enclosing the Megatron unit his lander team was setting up on the hull of the ship. Unable to do any damage to them with their Torsion cannons, the enemy had attacked the position with hand to hand weapons, extended blades and a few pike-like weapons, blades affixed to poles that were being carried by some of the enemy units.

The entire sky turned searing white as another enemy super-ship was destroyed by the fleet battleship *Alaia* on the far side of the ship they were on from them, which meant that the super-ship they were on would shield them from the blast wave, it would rake across the far side of the ship's hull. And almost immediately afterward, an incandescent blast of pure kinetic energy from the GRAF cannon of the *Tianne* rampaged across the sky over them, striking another super-ship squarely in the center. The incredible armor of the super-ship was no match for the overwhelming power of that GRAF cannon fired at full power, the blast shattering *kathras* of armor and tearing directly through the ship. Jason had no idea how deeply the blast penetrated, but it was enough to drive the super-ship backwards and start spinning like a rotating moon, and it did not correct. The moon-sized ship spun out of the enemy's formation and started drifting out into open deep space. Most likely, the incredible kinetic energy the GRAF cannon transferred into the ship killed the entire ship's crew when it hit the ship. It was simple physics, for those unlucky crew, it was like being

inside a golf ball when it was hit by a club. Inertia meant the ball was moving and they weren't, so they'd be slammed into the side of the ball with all the force the golfer had invested into hitting the ball. The crew in the super-ship were slammed into the bulkheads, doors, and other secured objects inside the ship when the GRAF blast hit them, far more inertia than any inertial damper ever designed could absorb, and most likely it killed them all.

That scenario was one reason why KMS ships had hardcore inertial dampers in them, to prevent those kinds of injuries if a ship was physically struck or rammed...but those were mainly for the ship's own engines. Increasing from all stop to flank without inertial dampers in an average KMS ship would put about 170Gs on the crew inside, which was invariably fatal.

But that was what was going on up there. Down here, Jason had much more on his mind. He slipped to the side when one of the enemy mecha swung one of those pikes at his Titan's head in an overhanded chop, the blade hitting the hull under their feet, and Jason reacted by grabbing the mecha by the wrist, twisting to the side, and hurling it over his shoulder in an Aikido throw. The mecha was hit by a tetrayon wave blast in midair and was violently knocked to the side, then it rolled across the hull and did not move when it came to a stop. His proximity alarm went off, and he reacted quickly, leaning to the side just as a missile lanced towards him. The missile just *barely* missed him, spiraling off and hitting one of the comm towers on the hull, exploding and bringing the tower down. He watched two Juggernauts ventilate an enemy mecha with disruptor miniguns, which had just cut a Gladiator in half with its extended blade.

Thank *God* there was no pilot in that mecha, it would have cut *her* in half too.

[Port, incoming port!] Tara barked over commune, and she and Jason turned to square off against nearly fifteen more mecha that had reached them, gliding in at high speed along the hull of the super-ship. Jason opened his shoulder-mounted external missile pack, and a blitz of missiles rampaged towards the advancing enemy even as he sicced his drones on them. They scattered even more when a corvette overhead opened fire on

them with heavy pulse autocannons, trying to get in melee range to attack the formation.

It was all they could really do, and they'd figured that out. They'd also figured out that the lander teams were just as dangerous as the fleet battleship and flagship up above them, so they weren't ignoring them. They'd already seen two super-ships destroyed by Megatron units, so they were doing their best to make sure this super-ship wasn't number three. They were throwing *hundreds* of mecha at their landing site, trying to stop them from setting off the Megatron.

Ejecting his empty missile pack, Jason extended the arm shield from his left forearm, a rather nifty device that *Tim* had thought up, or at least it was Tim that had given Jason the idea for it long ago. Tim had once asked if they could make a hand-held shield of magnetic flux that could reflect an MPAC blast, and while that idea had never panned out, it did lead to this, a projected energy hard shield attached to the forearm that was like a medieval warrior's shield. Only Titans were big enough to equip the unit, but it was certainly useful by adding an additional layer of protection. The enemy's blade would have to penetrate both his mecha's Teryon shield if it was up and its forearm-mounted shield to get at the mecha behind them. And since most likely the Teryon shield would be down for engaging in hand to hand combat, the arm shield was the only shield available.

The manipulation of the Teryon shield in hand to hand combat was one of the many skills a Titan rigger had to learn, since if the shield was up and in hard shield mode, Jason couldn't hit enemy mecha with his monomolecular blades, the enemy mecha would bounce off his shield. Jason had to lower the shield to attack the enemy—Teryon shields were hard shields by design, it took special shield generators to make a "soft" Teryon shield—to use any weapon except energy weapons tuned to go through his own shield. That was one reason why they'd installed the forearm shields onto the Titans. While the Teryon shield was down to fire rail cannons, missiles, or engage in hand to hand combat, his forearm shield would provide protection if something attacked him before he could raise the shield again. The Teryon shield didn't raise or lower instantly, it took 130 milliseconds to form after he activated it...and in rigger combat, 130 milliseconds could be an eternity. Because of that, most Titan riggers switched their shield from hard shield to soft shield in melee combat

One thing was for sure. This scrum had proved that all the money and time Jason had invested in the Titan program had *paid off*, and paid off *big time*. The Titans were outmatching the enemy mecha in both strength and speed, had superior armor and shielding, were equipped with weapons that could take out the enemy with one well-aimed shot, and were just generally tougher and meaner than the enemy mecha. There were windrows of enemy mecha laying on the hull around the Megatron's hard shield, but there were only four Titan mecha laying among them.

Jason heard Palla's voice over local command. *[That's it, all enemy battleships and cruisers destroyed. All line vessels, support lander teams on the remaining super-ships and protect the Alaia as it makes its next attack run.]*

That had taken a while, but that was because there had been a *lot* of enemy ships for them to destroy. Jason and the Storm Riders were with a task force of 260 Confederation ships attacking one of the largest of the Syndicate invasion squadrons, which had 12 super-ships and 108 support vessels. Well, there were only six super-ships left, and that announcement told him that all the cruisers and battleships had been destroyed.

Five super-ships. The *Tianne's* GRAF cannon unleashed once again, and while Jason couldn't see its target, it was on the far side of the super-ship he was on, he had no doubt that it had disabled or destroyed the enemy super-ship.

Three super-ships. There were two massive detonations almost simultaneously as Megatron units on those ships fired, breaching their main reactors and causing the ships to explode in miniature novas.

In a matter of seconds, a Verutan heavy battle cruiser swung low over them, narrowly avoiding the shockwave from the two near-simultaneous explosions as it raged through space well above the ship, and its weapons started unloading on any Syndicate exomech that wasn't mixed up with the Karinne Marine forces on the hull. That withered the reinforcements attacking the position, but it didn't stop them from trying, because they already knew what would happen if they failed to take the Megatron unit before it fired. *[Hold the line!]* Tara barked as she leaned lithely to the side and back as she avoided a diagonal slash from an enemy mecha's blade, then turned and slashed her monomolecular blade across the enemy unit's

stomach. Sparks, plasma, and fluids that didn't flash-boil after exposure to vacuum sputtered from the damage, and the enemy mecha pitched over backwards and jerked spasmodically, then it stopped moving.

[Two minutes!] the lead tech on the Megatron announced.

[Verutan battle cruiser, lock towing beams on the damaged Titans and get them off the hull! Leave the smaller mechs, they'll get vaporized by the blast,] Tara ordered over local command. Seconds later, four towing beams sizzled down from the battle cruiser, and they picked up the offline Titans. Jason parried a blade slash from an enemy mecha, but it suddenly dropped its pike, took a step back, and knelt down.

[What the fuck?] Tara barked as the other enemy rigs did the same. Were they surrendering?

[Jason,] Coma called, directly communing with him. *[Jason, the three remaining Syndicate ships are broadcasting a surrender! What do we do?]*

[Why are you asking me? Palla's in command of this theater!]

[Because she told me to,] she answered. *[She's not about to accept their surrender unless a member of the council gives her direct orders to do so, and you're right here.]*

Jason thought furiously as Tara's Titan looked at him. *[Tell the Syndicate if they don't power down their primary reactors and everything but life support in 90 seconds, we take them out. Call in a tackler and have it activate its interdicator. And have Palla pull the fleet back away from the remaining ships when the tackler arrives.]*

[What's going on, K1?] Tara asked.

[The three remaining ships are surrendering,] he told her. *[I'm pulling rank here, ladies!]* Jason called over local. *[Cease fire! All units cease fire! Stop the countdown on the Megatron, but don't power it down! Set it for firing on command rather than on countdown. Major Tara, send that order to lander team B, tell them they don't fire that Megatron without direct authorization from Admiral Palla.]*

[On it,] she nodded.

[I'll mirror that order out to all other lander teams,] Coma added.

[Jason, the ships are starting to power down. They've already powered down their weapons,] Palla told him. [I don't think they're buying time. I think they're serious about surrendering.]

[They want to live,] Jason told her with grim amusement. [Are lander teams on the other two ships?]

[There are. Megatron units are set on all of them, but your ship's units are the ones closest to firing.]

[Alright. Coma, are there any habitable planets in this system? It's classified as terrestrial.]

[Yes, Jason. Planet four is habitable, within Faey tolerances. As I recall, the KES was scheduled to send a survey team here next takir.]

[Palla, how long will it take them to get there at their maximum sublight speed?]

[Nine hours is our best guess,] she answered.

[Get a scout ship over there and look it over. I want to know if there are any sentient species on it. If there aren't, we can order them to the planet and to disembark the ships. For right now, warn them if we see anything but life support power up on any of the ships, we'll blow all of them.] Jason saw a shimmering flash in the distance, and after zooming in, he saw the tackler ship enter the system. It was the *Strategem*. *[Coma, send it back to Karis, I want one of my standard bionoids, five generic macro bionoids, three super-ship hack modules, and the macro bionoid I used when we went to Oasis out here as fast as they can load them on a ship.]*

[I'm telling Cybi right now. I'll make sure the macro unit's self-destruct system is still armed.]

[Jayce, I have a scout ship on the way out there right now,] Myra communed from Karis. [It's the Broadway if you need to talk to the captain.]

[Rudy?]

[Yup.]

[Okay, good to know.] He looked at the enemy mecha, still kneeling in front of them. *[Palla, order the enemy to recall all mecha to their hangars.]*

Almost immediately, the enemy mecha stood up, leaving their rifles and melee weapons on the hull, then turned and started walking away from the position, *very slowly*. [*Leave the hard shield up and set up some drones to act as sentries to watch the Megatron,*] Jason ordered. [*Program them to call it in if any enemy comes within a thousand shakra of the unit. The rest of us will evacuate the hull once the drones are set and the Megatron is ready,*] he ordered.

[*XO, bring in the Whale,*] Tara ordered.

[*On the way, Skipper.*]

[*Tara, I'm gonna delink so I can get over to the command center and watch things from a better vantage point. Coma, take over my Titan and get it back onto the Whale and in its bay.*]

[*I'll take it over after you delink,*] she affirmed. She was more than capable over taking control of the mecha and getting it back to the Whale. He wouldn't ask that of any of the CBIMs, because he maintained a strict line of morality when it came to them. They were more than capable of assuming control of merge-capable units from Karis and fighting. For that matter, Cybi could assume control of an entire army of Rockers and merge-capable mecha and fight using them, but Jason wouldn't permit it, because *they were not weapons*. He was not about to ask the CBIMs to kill in any situation but the defense of Karis itself, not even Cybi, that was morally repugnant to him. Coma was the only high-level biogenic AI he would ask to do something like assume control of a mecha in a hostile theater, because, in a way, she was more or less designed to fight. It didn't define her existence, but as the CBMOM on the *Tianne*, she fully understood that she would be required to take military action from time to time.

[*Sorry for pulling rank,*] he told Tara.

[*No problem, I know why you did it,*] she assured him.

With a sigh, Jason opened his eyes back on Karis after delinking, then sat up. Doctor Delarre immediately put his head into the merge pod. "How are you feeling, your Grace?" he asked.

"Just fine, Rivlin, stop worrying so much," he replied, "but I'm not getting out of the pod. Just go back to the board, or even better, flirt with Aya a little bit. She's been lonely lately."

You stay out of my love life, Jason, Aya retorted frostily, which made him grin past Rivlin at her. He then leaned back in the pod again and closed his eyes, and effortlessly merged up into the biogenic network through the pod. He merged to the holographic system in the command center and caused it to display a hologram of himself in the manner of the CBIMs, a pseudo-nude representation of himself that trailed away to nothingness just below his thighs.

"I hope none of you have any problems with my decision," Jason told the assembled staff, including Lorna, who was there as a hologram.

"You did say you wanted to capture super-ships. We can't do that if we blow them up," Lorna noted lightly.

"You took proper precautions, Jason," Navii told him. "From what I've seen so far, the surrender was sincere. They were looking at certain destruction in a matter of minutes, and I can't really blame them for not wanting to die."

"Speaking of capturing ships, our last report from the invasion team was pretty good," Juma told him "They've penetrated all the way down to the engine cell blocks. Vei estimates they'll reach the computer core in about five hours."

"We may beat her to it," Myri chuckled.

"Did you warn the council of this development?" Jason asked Lorna.

"Jarik is doing it right now."

Jason looked over the battlefield on a hologram in front of them. There were only three intact super-ships left, but there were also six super-ships that were in various stages of damage from the *Tianne's* GRAF cannon, all of them slowly spinning away from the theater, given momentum both from the GRAF blast and the explosion of the other super-ships that had been blown up by the *Alaia*, the *Ori Ai*, or Megatron units. *"Send out some ships to tug those damaged super-ships back to the task force, we can salvage them,"* Jason ordered.

"Good idea," Navii agreed.

"Jason, your bionoids are in the theater," Cybi said aloud from a speaker. *"The council sends a decision. They give you authorization to*

negotiate the enemy's surrender."

"I'm not gonna do it, Palla is," Jason snorted. "That tackler reminds me. Is the interdiction bubble at Oasis in logarithmic mode yet?"

"It has been for nearly six hours," Myri answered. "I guess you've been too busy playing in your Titan to keep track of time."

"Trust me, Myri, this isn't a game," he replied bluntly. "How long until all possible routes out of the effect are sealed off?"

"One day, fourteen hours," Myri answered.

"So, here's hoping that that Benga woman doesn't try to send out reinforcements for forty-three hours," Juma said dryly.

"She has no reason to, not yet, it doesn't fit in with her overall plan," Navii said calmly. "The ships she's sent into the galaxy haven't had sufficient time to spread out our forces, cause chaos, weaken our fleet for her second wave, and get us frustrated yet. She won't try to dispatch reinforcements for three to four days, and by then it will be far too late," she finished with a malicious smile. "She believes she's unassailable at her location. She has no idea we can get ships out there in a matter of minutes, and that we can hide the trap from her sensors with Kimdori SCM. Trelle's garland, she doesn't even know about the interdictors."

"Aye, while Miss Arrogant Bitch sits at Oasis thinking we're a week away from her, we're just about to completely remove her and all her reserves from the war," Sioa chuckled evilly. "And the only way she gets out is if she surrenders."

"Palla has ordered the captains to gather in the hangar bay of the largest of the three super-ships to negotiate their formal surrender," Navii relayed. "Given the sheer size of the ships they have to travel through to reach the surface, it's going to take them nearly two hours to get there. In those two hours, I suggest we further secure the area, redeploy the fleet battleships and a portion of the task force to other theaters where they are needed, but leave the *Tianne* there as an overwhelming threat should the enemy suddenly decide that they aren't surrendering. Have Palla pull the *Tianne* back out of their range and keep the GRAF cannon online and ready to charge and fire at a moment's notice. They've seen that the *Tianne* can

destroy them in one shot, and that with the charged Megatron units sitting on the hulls of their ships will keep them well-behaved.”

“*Sounds good to me,*” Lorna agreed.

“Send it down,” Myri said, looking over at Shey.

“*We can get Rudy’s assessment of the planet in the system within two hours,*” Jason mused. “*If the planet pans out, I’m going to have the enemy crews disembark the ships and send them to the surface until we figure out what to do with them. We’ll send in some of those modular habitat units and let them set up camp on the planet while we inspect their ships from orbit.*”

“That’ll work,” Myri agreed.

[*Cybi, get in touch with Denmother and have her get some of her best interrogators to the Tianne, we’re going to need them,*] Jason ordered.

[*Of course.*]

“*Alright, ladies, I’m going to go over to the Tianne and keep an eye on things from the bridge.*”

Nearly two hours later, Jason was landing in the landing bay of the largest of the three enemy ships with Palla, Coma, Lorna, and Myri linked to generic macro bionoids, descending down through their version of an airskin shield into one of the smaller bays on the ship. Three Benga were standing beside a table that had been carried out, a woman and two men, wearing white uniforms with silver buttons and tassels, different ones from the ones worn by the Benga they’d negotiated with...perhaps those were formal uniforms and these were duty uniforms? Possible. The woman was the shortest of the three, with ghost charcoal black hair and ruby eyes. The taller male to her left had black hair in a military buzz cut and golden eyes, which clashed a bit with his green skin, and the youngest-looking Benga on her right had almost ridiculously long dark blue hair that he had over his shoulders to dangle down to his waist and dark blue eyes. As ordered, the rest of the landing bay was empty. Jason stepped out of the converted dropship first, his bionoid wearing formal robes, and the others came out, linked to generic macro bionoids. The three Benga saluted in their fashion as they approached. “I am Captain Sa Mi Ra Lu,” the lone female declared. “Senior officer in this task force. Captain Pa Ki Mel Vo and Captain Fen Ru Zi Ju.”

“I am Admiral Palla Karinne, ranking officer in this Confederation task force,” Palla’s bionoid, which looked nothing like her, announced. “These others are witnesses to this meeting. And this is an observing representative of our government to witness this meeting.”

“Grand Duke Karinne,” the woman said with a bow. That didn’t surprise Jason much, since he had the same face as before, and no doubt all their ship captains were privy to recordings of the initial meeting. “We are here to formally offer our surrender. I have nearly three hundred thousand crew on our remaining vessels, and I don’t want to see them lost,” she said in a strong voice. “The only condition I seek to guarantee is the survival and safe passage of my crew to a safe location, where they will be treated well, and their eventual return back to the Syndicate fleet at a future time.”

“After today, I have little doubt that the Fleet Commander will eventually sue for peace,” the pretty-boy captain said, his voice wavering. “I have never seen our fleet destroyed so...so *easily*. Not even the Consortium’s strongest weapons ever did *that* to us.”

“I warned your Fleet Commander at the initial meeting that she had no idea what she was about to get into,” Jason said, a bit pugnaciously. “If she’d only have listened, we could have avoided all this foolishness.”

Palla put a quelling hand on his wrist, and he fell silent. “Your terms are reasonable, but our skepticism is going to be ruling our decisions in this matter,” Palla told them. “There are certain demands that will be met before your crew will be guaranteed safety. First, you will permit two technicians to enter your main computer core and install a device into it that will allow us to monitor all computer activity within the vessels,” Palla began. “If the device sees any indication that the orders we send down are not being followed, your ships will be destroyed. Second, you three will submit yourself to debriefing once we arrive at our destination, and once it is complete, you will be returned to your crew. Fail to do so, and your ships will be destroyed. Third, you will formally surrender your ships to the Confederation as captured assets, surrendering all control codes and operational logs and data to the Confederation. When you are returned to the Syndicate, Captains, it will be *without* your vessels. Fail to comply, attempt to sabotage the ships after your crews are disembarked, and you will not be returned to your fleet. You will be put on a remote planet with

no technology or resources, that *barely* meets your environmental standards for survival, and left to live out the remainder of your natural lives subsistence farming as you shiver in your thatch-roofed hovels. We of the Confederation have come to learn that death is far less a punishment than a life of misery and hardship, and that is what awaits you if you violate the terms of your surrender. Do you accede to these demands?”

The three were silent a moment, no doubt sending between themselves, and then the woman sighed and patted her chest. “We accede,” she answered.

“Very well,” Palla said in a calm voice. “Your ships will remain at this position and with all systems down except life support until our monitoring devices are installed. Each of you will personally escort our technicians to your computer cores to ensure they reach their destination. Once that is done, you will be given further orders. In the meantime, send it out to your crews that they should pack their personal belongings and prepare to disembark their ships sometime within the next three rotations. They should include in their personal gear what equipment they may need to make modular habitat modules comfortable. Blankets and pillows, cooking utensils and whatnot. There will be no restriction on such items being removed from the ship. We have such things, but they are not sized for you. You are best served bringing your own.”

“I understand,” the woman said reservedly.

“Very well, then. Captain, you will accompany these technicians to your computer core and allow them to install their device,” Palla said, motioning as two Gladiators carried out a hack module. “The captains of the other two ships will board our transport and be taken to their ships to do the same. When those modules are installed, you will be given further orders.”

“Captain Mel Vo, Captain Zi Ju, do as the Admiral orders,” the woman said, standing up. “I am ready. Admiral,” she said, saluting again.

And just like that, the conference was over. They got back on the transport with the two male Benga captains, who sat rather nervously in the very back of the transport with four Gladiators hemming them in. Jason, who was sitting directly in front of them, rotated his chair and regarded the two Benga males with a calm, critical eye. “Since you’re going to tell us

everything you know anyway, I may as well find out the one thing that I've been most curious about since you arrived," Jason told them. "Exactly *what* is the Oracle system?"

They both looked shocked, almost stunned, that he would know that word. "It...it is a prediction unit that calculates the odds of success for a mission or undertaking," the buzz cut Captain Pa Ki answered. "It analyzes all pertinent data to predict a probability of success."

"And every ship is equipped with an Oracle?"

"Only the fleet command vessel carries an Oracle," Captain Fen Ru answered.

"I would be most curious to understand your naming convention," Palla said conversationally, changing tacks on them. "Why do you have four names?"

"We are named for our clan, our house, our family, and ourselves," Pa Ki answered. "I am Pa, of the family Ki, the tribe Mel, and the clan Vo. Among family, I am called Pa. In informal settings, I would be called Pa Ki by my friends. In official settings, I am called Mel Vo, to honor my tribe and clan. The use of my full name is only for initial introductions and the most formal settings."

"It's a tradition that predates the Syndicate," Fen Ru added.

"So, it's some kind of giant analytical computer?" Jason pressed.

"Of a sort," Mel Vo answered. Jason didn't have to work very hard to realize that he was being deliberately evasive...which was why he had Zaa send some of her best interrogators, ones with the most practice and experience picking up information from targets with a single touch. That *was* a skill as much as it was a natural ability, so only the ones with the greatest training in acquiring and retaining important information in a single touch were sent.

The transport slowed, descended through a tunnel through the next ship's armor, then set down gently. When the hatch opened, Palla looked to the pilot. "Which ship is this, pilot?"

"The smaller of the two ships, Admiral," she answered.

“My ship,” Zi Ju declared, standing up. “I am ready to escort your people to the computer core.”

After the long-haired captain disembarked, the pilot got them back out into space. The lone captain remaining as quiet, looked almost stonily stoic. “Relax, Captain,” Palla told him in a calm voice. “As long as your task force commander does nothing foolish, you and your crew will be alright.”

“You’ll excuse my trepidation. The Consortium does not take prisoners.”

“Then why did you surrender?”

“Because you are not the Consortium,” he replied. “And I’m still a little overwhelmed. I’ve never seen ships so small with such weapons. They make the main plasma cannons on my ship look like...like a thrown rock.”

“Size is not strength, Captain,” Palla told him sagely. “A lesson we learned in this galaxy long ago.”

He grunted in vague assent, crossing his arms over his lower chest and stomach. “I must know. What *are* those small devices you set on the hull?”

“They are called Megatron units,” Jason cut in. “They are shipkiller weapons.”

“But they’re so small!”

“Size means nothing,” Jason told him forcefully. “Forgive my bluntness, but your Syndicate is *vastly* inferior in technology compared to us. You may have massive navies and ships the size of moons, but we can destroy them with a piece of equipment the size of a hovercar. As we demonstrated today.”

“That I cannot protest,” he replied grimly. “I begin to think that the Oracle system was wrong about our odds of success for this campaign.”

The rest of the short trip passed in relative silence, and then the final captain was sent with two techs to the computer core. Jason and the others delinked from the bionoids and discussed the situation on the bridge of the *Tianne*, Jason moving from the macro bionoid to the normal one he’d had shipped there so he could talk with the bridge crew face to face. They watched and waited in silence as the *Tianne* loomed outside of their cannon

range and well far enough back to be able to thwart any missile barrage, until they received the first update. Cybi delivered it, manifesting a hologram into the *Tianne's* bridge. "*The hack module has been installed. I have effective control over the enemy vessel,*" she declared to the bridge.

"Alright, thanks, Cybi. Let's wait for them to call it in before we make any moves," Jason answered.

About twenty minutes later, the other two hack modules came online, and that prompted Palla to hail the three ships. When she had all three captains on holo, she addressed them from her chair. "I am Admiral Palla Karinne, captain of the Karinne Military Starship *Tianne*," she declared. "And yes, I know I don't look the same as I did in our conference. You were speaking to a generic-use bionoid that doesn't look like me. I'm afraid I don't have a personal bionoid sized for Benga," she explained. "You will make for planet four in this system at your full sublight speed. Once you arrive, you will prepare your crews for ship evacuation to this point," she said, sending data about the planet and coordinates, which was a fairly large island near the equator of the planet. "Our research indicates that the environmental conditions on this island are the most comfortable conditions for your people. We are bringing in temporary habitat modules to make your crews comfortable. They're not fancy, but they will give your crews shelter from any rain. Feel free to remove from your vessels any equipment or supplies you feel will make your stay on the planet comfortable, with two exceptions. You will not take anything that you have to have maintenance crews disconnect from your ships, nor will you take any of your exomechs or any other transport vehicles. Hand-held and mobile equipment *only* will be permitted. You will be staying on this planet until such time that hostilities between our two governments are over and we arrange to have you sent back to your fleet."

"Any equipment?" the female captain asked.

"Simply put, Captain, you will have no way to contact your fleet. The planet will be both quarantined and covered by active jammers to hide it from your fleet and prevent any sort of long-distance communications. So feel free to take communications equipment if you wish, you'll find that it won't work," Palla answered. "So yes, almost any equipment, including personal weaponry for your protection in case you are harassed by local

wildlife. You will effectively be left to your own devices on the planet's surface with only minimal contact from us, so ensure that you have everything you need to make your stay there comfortable and safe. While it is most definitely a prisoner of war camp, there will be no guards, no sentries, no overseers, you will be left a communication device to contact us in case of emergency and we will leave orbital platforms to monitor your activity and respond in case there is some sort of emergency or natural disaster that threatens your people. The planet itself will serve as all the prison we need to keep you contained and unable to cause any mischief. I would also suggest you take as much of your food stores as you can, so you are eating something familiar while we get some compatible foodstocks delivered."

The three captains all looked quite surprised by what they no doubt saw as almost ridiculously generous conditions, allowing them to bring literally anything that wasn't bolted down in their ships.

"Once we arrive at the planet, you three will submit to debriefing, a process that should only take about three hours. You will then be returned to your ships so you may oversee the evacuation to the planet's surface." She crossed her legs demurely. "Now understand very closely these warnings, Captains. While we are en route to our destination, any ship that breaks formation or tries to change course or speed will be immediately destroyed," she said bluntly. "There will be no warning, and *why* it happens will not matter. Any deviation from course, speed, and formation whatsoever will be seen as a violation of the terms of surrender, and the offending ship will be immediately destroyed with no warning. If your ship suffers engine malfunction, it will be destroyed. So I suggest in the highest possible terms that you keep your engines online and stable during the journey," she said with a slight hint of ruthlessness. "If our computer detection module goes offline during the journey, your ship will be destroyed. If our detection module detects any abnormal settings or activity that might suggest sabotage, the ship will be immediately destroyed. Once we arrive at planet four, you will insert your ships into a high orbit in a way that doesn't alter the planet's orbit or the orbital tracks of its moons and immediately deactivate your primary reactors and all secondary and emergency power reactors, leaving only the emergency life support system in your ships online. Three hours after we achieve orbit, after you three are

returned to your vessels, you will have exactly one rotation to evacuate your crews to the planet surface. Anyone left on the ship after one rotation will be considered a hostile combatant and will be killed without warning or quarter.”

“I have one hundred and four thousand crew on this ship, Admiral, one rotation may not be enough!” the female captain protested.

“Then you had better *find a way*, Captain,” Palla said calmly, but with a slight edge in her voice. “If you feel that your transports are insufficient to transport your people to the surface, we will bring in transports to assist you. But know that the one rotation deadline is non-negotiable and will be enforced. After one rotation, anyone left on the ships will be considered a hostile combatant and will be killed.”

“We are going to need assistance,” she said, a bit darkly. “We don’t have enough personnel transports aboard to evacuate the entire crew and all the equipment we’ll need to set up a temporary habitat in just one rotation. I could barely get a third of them off in that time.”

“Your Grace?” Palla asked, looking at him.

“I’ll send over sixty freighters and a Kizzik logistics officer to organize and carry out the evacuation. Each of them could carry a good ten thousand Benga, so that should be more than enough to get all of them and their equipment off the ships in one rotation.”

“I would suggest that you spend the time en route to planet four preparing for the evacuation,” Palla added. “And finally, I would make note, Captains, that if you *do* sabotage your ships, you will be violating the terms of your surrender, and your crews on the planet will be considered a hostile enemy from that point on. At which point a single bomb dropped from orbit will eliminate the threat you pose. So think very, very carefully about what condition you will leave your ships in.” She let that sink in for a moment. “Now then, Captains, you may bring your ship systems back up. When all three of you report readiness, we’ll begin our sublight cruise to planet four.”

When their holograms winked out, Jason nodded. “I think you have everything under control, Palla,” he complemented her. “I think I’ll stow

this bionoid and delink and let you handle it. No doubt the council will want to talk about this for three or four days,” he grunted.

“The Storm Riders are about to be deployed again, Jason,” Myri told him lightly. “Maybe you should just go with them.”

“No, Dahnai will bitch for a solid month if I don’t come back and tell them what’s going on,” he sighed, which made Myri chuckle.

A few minutes later, Jason was linked to his bionoid in the Hall of Peace, and as he expected, the council immediately dropped everything and had him brief them on what was going on. While he did that, he had Cybi brief him on what was going on...and it was about even. Across the entire galaxy, the Confederation had defeated the enemy or caused them to retreat after taking significant losses 51% of the time. A further 116 enemy task forces were trapped by 3D toys or interdictors, totaling 414 enemy ships... but those ships weren’t completely trapped, they were merely being delayed from redeploying, slowing down the enemy’s scatter and spread strategy so they could converge on a main objective with a large force. By keeping the ships from being able to move freely, it prevented them from joining together into huge, formidable formations. No Confederate task force engaged enemy formations without KMS ships, INS command ships, or Coalition command ships to destroy enemy super-ships, and that change of tactics had reduced the number of Confederate ships destroyed.

That was all relative, however, since the Confederation had only engaged 58% of the enemy’s scattered task forces, leaving 42% of them to move about the galaxy at will. Those unchallenged task forces were for the most part staying where they’d arrived, no doubt waiting for some pre-arranged condition or signal to make their move. However, the task forces that arrived at terrestrial systems were surveying the planets they found, and all of them were attempting to take long-range sensor surveys of the sector into which they had jumped. Kimdori SCM was thwarting those task forces in systems holding Confederate systems or were strategically important, but they just didn’t have enough ships to block all the enemy ships from taking sensor readings. And there was little they could do about it, at least for now.

After both briefings were done—which happened simultaneously, since Jason could easily listen to Cybi even as he talked to the Council—the council spent a good two hours just rehashing everything they already

knew, which really, really annoyed Jason, because he felt he was just wasting him time in the council room when the Storm Riders were out there fighting, fighting without him, and he felt he could contribute far more to the overall war effort in his Titan fighting alongside Tara and her company than sitting in the Hall of Peace listening to Anavan drone on and on and on and *fucking* on. They weren't doing anything productive, they were just talking about what they already knew because they wanted to feel like they were in the middle of everything, when the reality was, it was Lorna and the CCM that was running this show now. If they wanted to get in the middle of everything, they could *fucking* train themselves up on an exomech or fighter or line vessel operations and merge to a bionoid or asset that put them out there *doing something*, not sitting around talking.

He was getting so agitated that Cybi had to intervene, gently teasing him by playing soft jazz music over commune, even as she told Zaa to take hold of his hand and keep him relaxed. He almost reflexively caused the bionoid to blow out its breath, a purely psychosomatic reaction since the bionoid didn't need to breathe and calmed down enough to at least listen to what the others were saying. "The biggest question is, are we going to be able to move those ships, or will we have to send resources out there? I'd rather not leave them that close to where their crews are being held," Shakizarr was saying. "They might smuggle out some tech that allows them to take control of the ships by remote. Or even destroy them while our people are aboard."

"We can assemble enough ships to tow them through hyperspace, but it's going to take a significant number of ships to do it," Cybi's bionoid said from the front of the council chamber, standing in front of the dais and raised stand that held the gavel holder's podium, who was Dahnai. She would hold the gavel for the next six days. "Cyra already made the calculations, and General Lorna has ordered us to assemble enough tugs to tow the ships to the closest Confederate system, Skirasis of the Crai Empire. Your Majesty, would you allow us to use Skirasis as our base of operations for the inspection of the captured ships?"

"Of course," she answered. "We'll send some support ships out there right now so we'll have infrastructure in place when the ships arrive."

“I’ve already organized an inspection team from the Academy to join the CCM so we can document and archive all data acquired from the ships,” Cybi continued. “Jason and Denmother Zaa will be adding their data acquired from the Syndicate captains once their intelligence experts finish interviewing them.”

He was about to say something, but Cyra communed to him. *[Jason, General Vei of the capture mission reports success,]* she told him. *[They have taken the enemy ship and have complete control.]*

[Already? They shouldn’t be at the core yet!]

[The enemy captain formally surrendered the ship,] she answered. *[General Vei accepted the surrender. They are at this moment preparing to evacuate the enemy crew from the ship and add them to the crews of the three ships already captured.]*

Jason frowned, leaning back in his chair. That was...that was *too easy*. The enemy shouldn’t have surrendered with just a small boarding party, even if they had managed to get all the way down into the engine cells. With them having to go hundreds of kathra to reach either the bridge, computer core, or main power reactor, the captain should have made several attempts to trap them, kill them, or drive them back to the main bulkhead separating the engine cells from the crew decks above. Cyra supplied him with a mental image of the graphic showing where the invasion team had reached when the ship was surrendered, and it just reinforced his belief. They were 212 kathra from anything vital inside the ship, with hundreds of engine cells between them and the command decks.

[Is the hack module installed?]

[Not yet. Vei reports it should be within the next half hour.]

[Tell Vei that she doesn’t trust a damn word the Syndicate says until that hack module is installed,] he told her.

[I think Vei has it under control, Jason. Right now, most of the enemy ship has no power.]

[How did they pull that off?]

[Maggie devised a way to overload the ship’s primary reactor and make it execute an emergency shutdown by tapping into the main power feeds]

from an engine cell, and using the lightning gun to cause a massive overload by destabilizing the energy plasma. All the safeguards against a power blowback are right there in the engine cell, where she could disable them. A critical design flaw, though I doubt the ship was ever designed with the possibility that boarders would get so deeply into the ship,] she answered. [The attack fed back into the entire power system and caused over half of the emergency section power generators to overload. What little power the ship has is being devoted completely to life support, and that is minimal. The ship, Jason, is effectively dead in space right now, and that was when Myri jumped in the Pegasus and had it fire a warning shot with its GRAF cannon, demonstrating that the ship was more than capable of destroying the enemy vessel. The enemy captain decided that surrender was the only viable option at that point.]

Jason had to laugh aloud, which caused most of the rulers in the room to look at him. *[I knew sending Maggie on that mission was a good idea!]* he told her delightedly. *[But still, tell Vei not to let her guard down until she has all our girls off the ship and back on a KMS vessel,]* he added.

“What’s so funny, Jason?” Dahnai asked dryly.

“Just good news,” he replied. “The KMS just informed me that our boarding operation was a success. We’ve captured a fourth ship,” he declared. “I’ll tell my commanders to begin preparations to move the ship to Skirasis with the others, but it’s going to take maybe a couple of days before they can get it there.”

“Well done, Jason,” Brayrak Kruu said from beside him.

[I should also pass along that the three ships en route to planet four have made repeated attempts to hack into our hack modules,] Cyra told him. *[It’s not the crews doing it, it’s an automated response in the core computer to repel a hack attempt. I suggest we shut those core computers down completely once the ships are in orbit, and physically remove them and replace them with Confederate computers once we begin refit operations.]*

[Any danger of them getting into the biogenic network?] he asked.

[No, the hack modules have quadruple safeguards against reverse hacking, and Cybi is monitoring the hack modules personally. If she sees

any danger, she'll execute a hard disconnect, physically severing the connections between the hack module and the core computer. At the worst, she'll have the transceiver block the ID processes of the hack module from communing, that will shut down any attempt to get into the network]

[Alright, just make sure they don't get in.]

[I'll stop distracting you now,] she told him lightly.

After nearly two more hours, the council finally decided to take a break. Jason delinked and got out of his merge pod, stretching and walking around the room, then sat down to a meal that the cafeteria sent up for him. It had been a pretty long day, with him going on two deployments in his Titan and spending the rest of the time dealing with the surrendered ships and the council, and he was man enough to admit that he was tired. Tired and a little drained...but not so drained that he didn't check on the Storm Riders. He saw that they'd finished their third deployment of the day, successfully destroying a super-ship in the P3R sector, and that they were now off the board for at least 20 hours of mandatory rest. Seeing that made him feel it was entirely acceptable for him to decide to head home, that he wasn't ducking out of his duty.

He reached the strip well into late afternoon, and almost immediately noticed how...*empty* it felt. Most of the girls were called up and serving in a variety of non-front-line combat roles, from Zora on standby up in Kosigi to Sheleese over at Joint Base Alpha. Even Symone was deployed and was still on a mission. Maya was home, though, with a large number of babies, toddlers, and small children that she, her hired nannies, and several of the guards were caring for while their mothers were off fighting the war.

War...yes, it was a war, but this was the first time he'd ever heard of a war where the soldiers fought all day, then made it home for dinner.

Ayama regained a few points from the trigger point on the *kill her and dump her body in the Karsa Sea* list by all but pushing him into the kitchen after he got his armor off and sitting him down in front of a huge plate of lasagna, which was absolutely delicious. His only dining companion was Amber, who made quite a mess of herself and the table after Ayama gave her a plate of lasagna as well, her two tails slashing back and forth

aggressively as she dug in; Amber absolutely loved Italian food. *Where are the kids?* he asked Ayama as he ate.

Rann and Shya are at the Summer Palace, Sirri invited them over, she replied. *Danelle is over at Temika's. Jyslin has the girls with her at work, and the babies are sleeping,* she answered. Seido padded into the kitchen with Surin. *Is Sanjira asleep?* she asked Surin.

He nodded without sending in reply. *You look tired, Jason.*

I feel tired. It didn't hit me until just a little bit ago, he answered, his thoughts heavy with weariness. *I've been running around like a madman since dawn.*

You should go take a long hot bath after eating, that should relax you, Seido suggested.

That's not a bad idea.

After a long soak in the bathtub, Jason ended up in the nursery. He helped Ayama feed Jon and Julia, and after they were put back down for a nap—at least after Jon got over his bout of fussing—he stood over their cribs and watched them sleep, his thoughts heavy and somber. The numbers were starting to come in, and they were ugly. The CCM had lost 383 ships today, with nearly 19,000 dead and 36,000 wounded and 3,593 missing, those who had been in ships destroyed in battles where the Syndicate forced the CCM to retreat, leaving behind anyone who may have survived the destruction of their ships. The losses were spread almost equally across all empires, except for the KMS, who had taken significantly less casualties due to Crusader armor. The KMS had lost 14 ships today, with 370 dead, 590 wounded, and no missing, since the KMS was very, very good about leaving no biogenic crystals out where someone could get their hands on them, and no KMS ship had engaged an enemy task force and lost, so none of them were forced to retreat. The largest ship lost was the heavy cruiser *Henlavi*, and the battleship *Trelle's Gift* was in drydock right now getting repaired after getting pretty thoroughly mauled.

Kosigi was a blitz of activity, the reports showed. Ships were being brought in for repairs at a very brisk rate, almost *too* brisk, but Dellin and Cynna were keeping everything organized and moving up there.

Those were the losses on their side. Miaari's estimates after reviewing all logs and records of the battles fought today showed that the Syndicate had lost nearly 1,600 ships, 118 of them being super-ships, and their casualties were close to *ten million*, due to the massive number of crew in the super-ships that had been destroyed, with approximately 410,000 prisoners taken from the four captured super-ships. The average super-ship had a crew of nearly 70,000, with the larger ones having significantly more. The carnage was sobering...staggering. Ten million Syndicate dead. Ten *fucking* million. That was the population of Karsa. It was like the entire city of Karsa died today. Even if they were the enemy, even if they were here to enslave the entire galaxy, Jason's humanity could not ignore that kind of absolute carnage.

And something in him told him that to the Syndicate fleet commander, to their rulers, they weren't people. They were assets. They were *numbers*. They were...expendable.

Dear God, what have we gotten into, he sent into the room, not strong enough for anyone else to pick him, but his sending caused Julia to stir. She was a Generation, so she was very sensitive to sending, just like all of Jason's other Generation children. *But I do know one thing, my precious daughter. I'm doing all of this for you. And I'll do it again tomorrow. Sixteen hundred enemy ships and ten million lives are not worth yours*, he told her, stroking her short, wispy hair.

That was what it was going to amount to, Jason predicted. There were 18,583 that had entered their galaxy, and now 1,600 of them were destroyed. Just going on simple statistics, that meant that there might be close to 100 million enemy troops on the ships that remained—actually, his gestalt's math estimated that there were close to 170 million troops on the ships still in the galaxy.

Yeah, like he needed to know *that*.

But that just demonstrated the scope of the Syndicate. They probably had close to 250 million crew in the fleet they sent to attack the Milky Way, and that was only a *small part* of their overall fleet. They had millions of ships, billions of crew on them...and all of it would ultimately be coming their way unless they did something to stop it.

That was what they were up against, and *just* from the Syndicate.

[Jason,] Cybi called. [Jason.]

[Yeah, what is it, Cybi?]

[I hate to tell you this, but the Parri shaman is asking for you,] she answered.

That was a summons that he would never deny, no matter how tired he was. [Tell her I'll be there in a little while. And I'll be bringing the babies, she'll like that.] Ayama, we have to go out, and I'm taking the babies. Can you come up and help me get them ready?

Where are you going, Jason? Aya cut in.

The Parri village, so things should be safe enough.

Alright. I'll call in a frigate. But you're still putting on your armor.

Yes, mommy, he sighed mentally.

We'll be right up, Jason, Ayama answered.

Jason got one more passenger in the frigate, because Amber wasn't about to let Jason take the babies out of the house without *proper* supervision. So, he had a demanding little fluffball riding in Jon's hoverstroller along with them as they boarded the frigate *Kaliestra*. The babies took the trip very well, sleeping through most of it.

He met the *shaman* at the base of the ramp of the frigate, the large, burly Parri rising up onto her back legs and taking his hands, her expression calm and gentle. "It is good to see you again, Jason Karinne," she said, then she just lit up when Ayama and Surin brought the babies down in their hoverstrollers. "And you have brought your babies! A delightful surprise!"

"I thought you might like to see them, *shaman*," he told her as she leaned down and looked into Julia's crib.

"To see new life is always a joy, Jason Karinne," she told him, reaching down and putting a single thick, clawed finger on Julia's forehead. Julia stirred a bit but didn't open her eyes. "And she is quite beautiful." She turned to Jon's crib when Surin brought him down, and she took her time to pat Amber on the head, which made Amber's two tails shiver with delight.

“And hello to you too, Amber. It is good to see you,” she said softly to the vulpar before repeating the gesture with Jon. “So precious,” she murmured, then she rose back up and looked down at Jason soberly. “I have tea prepared, Jason Karinne. Please, come to my hut.”

Ayama and Surin found themselves almost mobbed by curious Parri, coming over to admire Jason’s children, which prevented them from bringing them into the *shaman*’s large yet spartan circular hut, with a design poured around the small firepit in the center with colored sand that was similar to her *jaingi*. They sat and drank nearly all their tea as she engaged him in polite smalltalk, an old Parri custom, before getting to the point. “We have seen a hopeful sign, Jason Karinne,” she said, swirling the last of her tea around in the bottom of her cup. “And it a sign that you must act upon if it is to come to pass.”

“What is it, *shaman*?” he asked hopefully.

“We have investigated the darkness of the loveless ones entering our territory,” she said. “But within that darkness, there is a single, small point of light. There is a faint illumination of love, but it is dimmed by fear, and terror, and hopelessness. The light of love we see is confused and afraid, trapped in a nightmare that forces darkness upon it, but it struggles against its chains and seeks release. It knows that freedom is close, and with your help, Jason Karinne, that light can be freed from its prison,” she said, looking at him. “It cries out the same message, over and over, hoping that it reaches your ears. We have heard its plea and pass on that message now to you.”

“What message?”

“A rather cryptic one, one we hope has meaning to you. The message is this: *turn it on*. That is all the message says, and it gets more and more desperate as time passes. We, we do not understand what this means, but that message is being sent out to *you*, Jason Karinne. Pray tell, do you perhaps understand its meaning?”

“I...I’m not sure. Turn it on,” he said to himself, bowing his head and putting his fingers to his chin. Turn it on...turn what on? What could they turn on that would somehow cause this single point of light to find escape?

Jason, ask her if she knows where this light is, Aya cut in, who was standing outside the hut and clearly heard every word.

“Aya wants to know if you know exactly where this lost light is,” he repeated.

“We do not know how to explain it in terms you would understand,” she said haltingly. “But what we do know is that this single illumination of love is surrounded by the darkness of the loveless ones, and the darkness actively seeks to smother the light and consume it, to turn it dark as well. What I can say is that they are far away from us.”

Surrounded by darkness...far away—could that be the enemy’s fleet at Oasis? That would be pretty far away, and if the Syndicate forces were the darkness of the loveless ones, then wouldn’t a single point of light surrounded by them be crew on the ship? Was there a small faction of Syndicate crew that were trying to escape from the Syndicate, to defect the way the Hrathrari sailors did when Hrathin’s father got stupid and tried to attack Janja?

Turn it on...turn *what* on? What could they turn on that would help this small faction of Syndicate crew to escape?

Turn it on. What could they turn on that would—

Of course!

“We’ve already done that, *shaman*,” he told her quickly. “We’ve activated the interdicator trap at Oasis to trap the majority of the enemy fleet where it is.

“I fear not, Jason Karinne, for the message still calls,” she answered.

You haven’t turned on all of them, Jason. The Backgammon is still hidden in the system, Aya reminded him. And if I remember right, it’s still 13 hours until the Syndicate fleet is trapped in Oasis. They can still get out if they move within the next couple of hours. If you activate the Backgammon, it will keep them from jumping into a position where they can squeeze out through one of the available windows.

Aya was right. They hadn’t activated the *Backgammon* because they were afraid that the Syndicate would detect the hyperspace flux it created and track it back to the tackler. That was something that not even SCM

could hide, not without completely jamming all short-range sensors...and they didn't want to tip off to the Syndicate that they had that much penetration into their perimeter quite yet. It might make them suspect they'd been boarded, and that would put the infiltrators in danger. Jason ran the numbers, and saw that if they turned on the *Backgammon's* interdictor right now, it would cover the Syndicate fleet in 16 minutes, and once it expanded to logarithmic mode, it would expand its interdiction effect to completely seal in the enemy forces in 81 minutes.

[Cybi, check with the Kimdori and tell me if it looks like the Syndicate fleet at Oasis is making preparations to move. Are they gathering ships into jumping task forces?]

[There is some activity,] she answered. *[It looks like they might be in the first stages of deploying assets.]*

[Oh no they're not,] Jason retorted. *[Activate the interdictor in the Backgammon right now, Cybi.]*

[Yes, Jason. I'm sending the order. The Backgammon acknowledges. They're activating the interdictor right now.]

He looked to the *shaman*. "I think I understand what the message was trying to say, *shaman*. I've had a piece of equipment turned on that I think is what the message is talking about. Can you tell if the messenger is still calling out?"

She looked into the fire between them for a moment, then smiled. "The message has ceased. I sense great relief and a sense of hope, which comforts the struggling light," she answered. "I believe you are correct, Jason Karinne. Whatever it is you just did, it is what the message meant."

"But that does beg the question, *shaman*, is how whoever that is knew about that piece of equipment," he said soberly. "And who else knows?"

There was one way to find out. As they discussed the message and who the messenger could possibly be, Jason kept a close eye on what was going on over at Oasis. He watched a graph sent to him by the command center that showed the tackler's interdiction effect expand from the unit hidden on the far side of the star from the fleet, and exactly 16 minutes later, it spread over the fleet and continued to expand. The fleet made no unusual moves,

still slowly and rather lazily gathering ships into task forces, acting as if they had no idea they had just been interdicted.

Maybe that was why the message was so urgent, he pondered. Once they tried to jump those task forces out, they'd find out in a *hurry* that they couldn't use their jump engines.

Jason projected a hologram of what he was monitoring out for the *shaman*, the image wavering and spazzing a bit due to the hot air rising up into it from the fire below. "This device emits an energy that keeps our enemy's ships from jumping into hyperspace, from moving very, very fast," he told her.

"You mean that time when we have to sit in those chairs with restraints and see the hallucinations?"

He nodded. "It looks like that was what our messenger wanted us to do, trap the enemy fleet at Oasis to prevent them from sending reinforcements into our galaxy. But the question remains, who *is* the messenger?" he asked. "How would they possibly know about the interdictor? And are they keeping that knowledge a secret from the rest of the Syndicate?"

"Given the messenger is a single point of light among their darkness, and seeks escape from it, then I would surmise that they are doing exactly that, Jason Karinne," she told him. "Mayhaps, it is some small number of our foes who seek the light of love and know that their only hope to find it is to escape their brethren?"

"In other words, there are Syndicate forces that don't want to be in the Syndicate, and see coming here as a chance to defect," Jason mused, looking at the shimmering, unstable hologram. "After all, this *is* an entirely different galaxy. They're as far away from the Syndicate as they can get right now," he chuckled without humor. "And if they knew about the interdictors but didn't reveal that to their superiors, then maybe it's someone in their sciences department. I remember that scientist I talked to at Oasis when we went to go talk to the loveless ones, he wasn't a soldier. He was just a scientist working with their Navy because he wanted to do his science. Maybe...maybe it's a complement of their scientists in the enemy fleet. They discovered the interdictors, figured out what they do, and you sensed their desperate hope that we'd turn them on and trap the enemy fleet

in the system, which means that the only way they're getting out is if we *let* them. That would give these scientists a chance to defect."

"Perhaps," the *shaman* said calmly. "It does follow your logic."

"But does it follow *yours*?" he asked pointedly.

"In some ways, but the light calling out, crying for help...it does not feel like more than one," she told him.

"Maybe that one is a representative of others," Jason said. "I don't see how a single person could pull all this off." He crossed his arms. "But on the other hand, if they got the message to *you*, then perhaps there's much more going on here than either of us can see," he speculated.

"The message was not directed to us, Jason. We simply heard it, because it was crying out from the heart of the messenger, a message that they may not even realize they were sending out, but nevertheless, a message that was trying to reach *you*. The light of love in our hearts calls out to others that are similarly illumined, Jason Karinne. That is how we heard the message through the darkness that surrounds the caller."

Jason leaned back a bit, thinking furiously. "Well, there's not much more we can do now, *shaman*, and it's getting fairly late. I'd best get the babies home. Would you mind if I send Miaari here to discuss this with you, so she may learn everything she can and investigate things?"

"I would be happy to, Jason Karinne. Miaari is quite a dear young lady, and I enjoy her visits."

"I'll have her come see you tomorrow morning, alright?"

"That is quite fine," she smiled in return.

Jason stood up, and once the *shaman* did as well, he took her large hand-paws in his. "It was good to see you again, *shaman*, but I must get home and get the babies in their beds and think about this some more. I'll come back when I've had time to ponder it, and we'll discuss it some more."

"That is fine, Jason Karinne. Perhaps you can bring Jyslin next time? I would like to see her."

"I'll arrange it," he promised.

He left her hut, and quickly, the others gathered up with him as he walked towards the frigate. *I heard most of that. You think there's a complement of dissidents in the Syndicate that would defect?* Aya asked.

It certainly looks like it, but how the shaman got involved in this is beyond me. Another one of those Parri things, he sent with an audible grunt. Remember, Aya, not everyone in those ships is a soldier. I think maybe a complement of their scientists somehow figured out what's going on, and their desperation—who knows, maybe they did call out to the Shaman from thousands of light years away. Either way, if these dissidents want to defect, then they hid information about the interdictors from their superiors, and now that we've turned them on, they're hiding the fact that they're active. I don't think the enemy's officers are going to realize they're there until they try to jump.

One good thing came of this. If my math is right, we have the fleet trapped at Oasis now.

We will in about 29 minutes, he corrected. The tackler goes into logarithmic mode in 25 minutes, and four minutes after that, the Syndicate fleet has no hope of outrunning the effect to get into a position where they can jump. We just have to pray that the Syndicate doesn't find the Backgammon until the surrounding interdictors merge their fields and completely trap the fleet in the system. That happens in about nine hours. But it still bugs me. How did they know about the interdictors? Our assessment of their sensor capabilities said that they wouldn't detect them through Kimdori SCM, and they can't see the Backgammon with it being on the far side of the star. Did they get a sensor dropship out where we didn't see and they detected it, then the scientists that want to defect sat on that data instead of passing it up the chain of command?

Any indication in the logs that the Syndicate could see through CMS? Aya asked.

He shook his head. *So there's another question. How did they see the Backgammon when it's cloaked in CMS on the far side of the star from the fleet? Orrr, is this all just an elaborate deception the Syndicate is playing to somehow further their own plans?* he asked ruefully.

Getting a large portion of their fleet trapped in interdiction in no way gives them any kind of strategic advantage, Jason, Aya told him.

That we can see. They may see things differently, he speculated, pursing his lips.

And maybe you're grasping at straws.

Entirely possible, he admitted. There's just too many fucking questions here, and not enough answers.

Then we wait and see.

I hate waiting when people are dying out there, Aya, he growled as they started up the ramp.

*I hate it too, but you gotta do what you gotta do, she answered, her thought converting in Jason's mind to that old *Futurama* quote since she wasn't framing her thought. She never did when sending with Jason. *And you're also very tired, so I don't think you're able to think this through as thoroughly as usual.**

God, is that the truth. I'm both exhausted and drained, he admitted. I've had a long day. I'm overjoyed the Storm Riders are on a mandatory rest cycle. I could use the break.

Don't go there, Jason. You know how much I disapprove of you doing that.

Hey, if it's pissing you off, it must be the right thing to do, he replied with weary cheekiness, giving her a tired smile.

*She gave him a half-smile in return and smacked him very gently on the back of his head with her gauntleted hand. *We're going to be discussing this in private after all this is over, Jason. I suggest you make sure Songa's not busy that day.**

Bring it on, Aya, he replied as the ramp behind them started to close. But for right now, how about just getting me home so I can get some sleep?

I think we can manage that.

Chapter 10

Raira, 7 Shiaa, 4404, Faey Orthodox Calendar

Friday, 24 August 2018 Terran Standard Calendar

Raira, 7 Shiaa, year 1329 of the 97th Generation, Karinne Historical Reference Calendar

The White House, Karsa, Karis

The Syndicate fleet at Oasis was now officially out of this war.

Jason looked at the representing hologram with more than a little relief, as a small dot representing the *Backgammon* was moving quickly out of the system, leaving behind it an interdicted bubble of space nearly five light years wide. The trap was set outside the system, and itself encompassed two layers of interdictors set up in a double shell configuration with a void space between them. The inner shell was six interdictors set up across the three axes set so their interdiction fields ended about 3.2 light hours from the Oasis system, which was just outside the most distant planet orbiting the star. The inner shell of interdiction was about two light years in diameter, the interdictor field reaching a light year beyond the unit in every direction. It wasn't two light years across everywhere, it narrowed down to around 1.6 light years at the edges where the interdiction fields intersected, but that was still *sixteen months* of sublight travel to get past the effect. The outer shell was 68 interdictors and had a similar configuration, with the interdiction field anywhere from two light years to 1.33 light years across depending on where it was, and there was a void of uninterdicted space between the two shells that was about .7 light years across on the average.

It was similar to the system in place at Karis, which had been altered after the climactic battle with the Consortium so the entire interdiction field was not outbound, which would have let the Consortium escape. They had reconfigured the Karis interdiction system as a two-shell system with a void

between them, just with two interdictors at the center, one a primary and the other a backup. The Karis system created an interdiction field about 3.5 light years in radius on the average, with three light years of interdicted space with a half light year of uninterdicted space between them.

Just nine minutes ago, the last possible route out of the interdiction field was sealed, and with that, the *Backgammon* shut down its interdictor and jumped out, trapping the majority of the enemy's invasion fleet a week outside the galactic rim. And they weren't getting out unless Jason *let* them out.

But that was a small favor right now. The war was raging into its third day, and there were 126 different sorties on the board today, which would attack Syndicate task forces all over the galaxy. Since they'd destroyed the two largest task forces, removing the immediate threat they posed, now Lorna was going after the smallest, picking off the stragglers and small numbers of ships that had jumped in together, cutting down on the number of ships that could rendezvous and form large, dangerous fleets inside the galaxy by destroying any ship or small squadron they could with minimal danger to the CCM. The thinking was that the other ships would have gathered where those two largest task forces were located, so the CCM destroyed those first, and now they were going after the smaller squadrons now that the task forces they had the greatest chance to join had been destroyed.

And Jason was out of it for at least two days. Jason heavily suspected that Aya had made some ugly threats to Myri and Juma, because the Storm Riders were officially off the board until the eight members of the company that were currently suffering from dump shock comas recovered. Granted, that did put Tara down eight riggers, nearly a quarter of her company, but they had reservists that could take those eight spots. Tara wasn't that happy about it either, from what Jason heard. There weren't many company commanders that had the tits to threaten to punch Juma in the nose if she didn't put them back on active status. But that was what made Tara so lovable. She was spunky.

But he couldn't deny that being grounded for a couple of days was going to let him catch up on the paperwork. He sat behind his desk in a tee shirt and jeans as he worked through his inbox, but he wasn't alone in the

office today. Dera and Ryn were keeping a casual eye on Aran and Sora, who had almost threatened mutiny if Jason didn't honor the schedule and bring them to work with him today. The kids weren't doing anything all that productive, though. They were playing a racing game using toy hover-racers, sitting on the couch and merged to their racers as they zoomed around a track they'd set down on the floor, turning merging practice into a game. But, the presence of the kids in the office did cause him to do all his business over the biogenic network via a private link. Not because he didn't want to expose his kids to the reality of being a ruler, but because he didn't want them to repeat anything they heard back to the other kids on the strip.

All his older kids were fully aware of what was going on, exactly what a war was, and it meant that the mommies and daddies of kids they knew were not going to come home one night. He felt it a bit callous of himself to be very thankful that hadn't happened to his kids yet, but there had been fatalities, and that meant that somewhere on this planet right now, there was a child crying because her mother or father was never coming home. And there was very little Jason could do to make that right.

In a way, he knew how that felt. When they lost Clem and Ruthie, Luke's entire family, Reggie and Julie and Paul and Irwin, Steve, and so many others in the attack on Chesapeake, it truly did feel like he'd lost family. He'd lived with those people for a long time, had built something with them, and then in just a few swift moments, they were all dead and everything they had built was gone.

And that was *never* going to happen again.

The war was still raging. There were at that very moment 31 different operations going on against Syndicate squadrons and task forces, involving 216 KMS vessels, including six flag-level ships. Every big ship except the *Trelle's Gift* was going to fight today, which Dellin estimated would take nearly 10 days to repair given how much damage it sustained. The *Tianne* was currently fighting against a Syndicate task force of 26 ships, two of them super-ships, supported by a task force of 38 CCM vessels, including the carrier *Brian Fox*. He was almost tempted to tap into the telemetry feeds to see what was going on, but that wasn't his business. Besides, it would just make him worry needlessly.

The kids were just settling back in after a trip to the Parri village, where he, Miaari, and the *shaman* had discussed what Jason felt had to be a small group of scientists among the enemy who were trying to defect, and what was more important, had withheld critical information from the fleet commander—Sha Ra—which had led to the Syndicate’s main fleet being trapped inside an interdiction bubble. The biggest thing they took out of the meeting was that Miaari was going to send that up to Zaa, who would try to have her infiltrators find out just who it was in the fleet that wanted to defect, and once they knew who and how many, what they could do to help them pull it off. If it was their scientists as Jason suspected, it meant that they could get their hands on a lot of data about Andromeda and the Syndicate fleet without having to dredge it out of Syndicate computers or lift it off unwitting or unwilling subjects. He’d discussed that further with Myri and the girls down in the command center and had just gotten back up to the office to catch up on the paperwork he’d been putting off the last few days. Even though they were in the middle of a war, the paperwork never stopped.

There was some good news. The super-ship the boarding party had captured was already at Q3XD-19, because they’d gotten the power back on in the ship and jumped it there under its own power. There were four intact super-ships and three damaged ones in orbit around planet four, with three of the damaged ships already at Skirasis and with inspection teams starting the long process of studying the ships. The disembarkation operation was underway, with steady streams of both Syndicate and KMS freighters, dropships, and transports moving crew and equipment down to the surface. The island they’d chosen to hold them was a fairly nice place, he noticed on the report, in the planet’s tropical belt with a climate much like Hawaii back on Terra, where the temperature almost never went above or below a comfortable range. The island itself was fairly flat and almost completely dominated by grassland—well, small, soft, fuzzy ferns that looked like grass from a distance—with indigenous animal life that wouldn’t be much of a threat to the Syndicate. The planet didn’t have an animal on it larger than a large dog...*anywhere*. And the vast majority of the life on the planet lived in the ocean, with only about 2% of its species living on land, and virtually all of that were small herbivorous invertebrates and carnivores that preyed on the herbivores. Astrocartography noted that the star and planet system there was very young in a cosmic sense, barely over two billion

years old, so the life on the planet hadn't evolved complex macro organisms yet. There were no trees on the entire planet above water, the largest woody plant were bamboo-like stalked plants that only grew to be about seven shakra tall, not far over Jason's head. But there were some pretty damn big kelp-like plants in the warm shallow seas surrounding the island.

It would be a fairly boring place for the Syndicate prisoners to live, but he'd bet they'd prefer a boring few months on a prison planet to death.

The habitat modules they were bringing onto the planet were by no means fancy. They were literally little more than shipping containers with racks for bunks, big enough for the Benga to live in, with no air conditioning or even power. They were little more than replicated boxes that would give the Syndicate a place to get out of the rain. They were also setting down some pavilion-style roofs to cover their cooking and eating areas. It was a pretty big operation, given they had 443,174 prisoners that had to be fed and sheltered, and Jrz'kii had already worked out a supply schedule to keep food and basic humanitarian supplies flowing to the planet.

But there were four prisoners that interested Jason, and he was waiting for Zaa's initial reports about what they knew. The four ship captains they had finished their debriefing a couple of hours ago, and most likely, the interrogators were comparing their notes and preparing the initial report.

If they were anything like the Benga mecha pilots they had in custody, captured in the various battles once their ships were destroyed, the interrogators weren't having much fun. Miaari had sent interrogators to debrief the captured pilots, and to call them uncooperative was a *mild* understatement. Virtually every word out of their mouths were lies, even lying about their names, and the one they asked about the operation of their mecha had given the debriefer a series of instructions that would have caused the mecha to self-destruct. Little did those pilots know, though, that they were telling Miaari's packmates everything they knew, and they got it all under the guise of a *cursory medical examination to ensure no visible injuries are present*. All they had to do was make skin to skin contact with the Benga pilots.

One thing Miaari had already passed on was that the Syndicate had different protocols than the KMS when it came to exomechs. They had both

talented and non-talented pilots, but only allowed the non-talented pilots to fight against the Consortium, who didn't use telepathy as a battlefield weapon. They weren't about to let a pilot get easily dominated by an enemy telepath and allow him to turn that firepower on his own forces.

Another thing of note was that *only* Benga were piloting those exomechs. There were other species crewing the ships, but it seemed that for that kind of up-close fighting, only Benga did the job.

There was another bit of good news. Despite not having any plans to actively convert the frigate fleet to IP until after the fighting was over, Dellin had taken the specs for the new IP system and went ahead and finished 58 partially built frigates with the experimental armor system, pulling shipbuilding crews off repair docks when they had no ships to repair and having them finish the frigates...but he wasn't doing that *now*. Every shipbuilder in Kosigi was elbows deep in work repairing damaged CCM vessels at the moment. Those new frigates were at that moment being activated by pulling crews off old frigates and transferring them to the new ones, the captains bringing the names of their old ships to the new ones. While only having 59 IP frigates in the fleet—including the original IP frigate, the *Javelin*—wasn't going to matter very much, it was a good number to do some testing in real combat conditions, see if the armor was as good in practice as it was in testing. The captains, first mates, and tactical officers would undergo a few hours of training on the new system, basically explaining what it was and how it was used, then they'd undertake a very brief shakedown cruise to make sure the frigates were battle ready, then be inserted into task forces to put the new system through its paces in real combat.

All but one, anyway. The *Javelin* was off the board, taken off by *Miaari*, for some mysterious, secretive reason. She must have an operation in mind and needed a cloaked ship that was also one of the toughest and most durable ships in the fleet to pull it off. The IP armor made that little frigate as tough as a battleship, if the testing proved to pan out in real combat conditions.

Many of the frigate captains had certainly embraced the role of the ship with their choice of ship names. Among the 58 ships having their flag

transferred to the new vessel, there was the *Shadow*, the *Wraith*, the *Spectre*, and the *Stalker*.

He just hoped that they had the IP armor system for other ships soon. RDX was still working while the rest of 3D was deployed for the war, and she sent Jason daily reports on her progress. She was still searching for the optimal harmonic waveform to use with their carapace armor and had narrowed it down to a composite frequency within a band of upper interphasic frequencies with harmonic components above and below that band. She'd discovered some waveforms that were ranging from 70% to 162% increase in armor integrity, but that was a *pittance* compared to the IP armor in a frigate, with its insane, mind-boggling 13,000% maximum increase in armor integrity while the IP armor was energized.

Jason was almost afraid to see what a 13,000% increase would look like in a compressed Neutronium carapace, which was already the strongest armor known to Karinne science and an order of magnitude stronger than the laminated Neutronium skin they used on frigates for CMS. That would make the armor in a ship like the *Tianne* virtually indestructible, vulnerable only to weaponry that ignored three-dimensional physics.

He paused in his reports and watched the race. Sora's racer was blue and Aran's was green, and the two little toys were zipping in wide circles around the far side of the office with some impressive speed. They were a common toy sold on Karis, but only recently were they upgraded to make them merge-capable. And that was a process happening all over the Confederation. While non-Generation children couldn't merge without a jack, there were enough adults that liked things like small drones and RC cars and whatnot for there to be a market for merge-capable toys and models, to race and operate the models from the *inside*.. And Kumi had gotten into that with Myleena's initial toy Gladiator she built for Rann, putting out a line of merge-capable toy exomechs based on popular military models like the Gladiator, Juggernaut, IAS Knight and Coalition Brawler, and fictional designs used in some movies and TV shows, even some Terran ones. Kumi was selling toy exomechs on Terra based on the old *Gundam* anime show, as well as the robo-lions from *Voltron* and fully functional *Transformers*.

One of those was sitting on his desk, the first in a new production line sent over from Kumi's office. It was a fully functional Transformer based on the KMS' own Wolf fighter, capable of running around as a robot and then transforming into a fighter and flying around using small but powerful grav pods, carrying the name *Sky Wolf* on the package. She'd even licensed it through Hasbro to make it official, and Hasbro jumped all over it, licensing out with Kumi to build operational versions of the original toys. She had production plans for both the original real Transformer toys like Optimus Prime, Starscream, and the other famous ones, and new ones based on modern vehicles and military units, like INS Raptor and the new Alliance Starhawk fighters, marketing empire-specific units to the empires that used those vehicles.

Leaning back in his chair, Jason had the little toy transform into a Wolf fighter, almost mystified as to how Kumi had managed to build it. He could see the seams in the metal after it changed, but outside of that, *fuck* did it look like a Wolf fighter. And when he had it change back, it looked like a fully articulated and even gracefully agile robot. It had full range of motion and everything. Whatever engineer she had design it...he was *fucking good*.

He musingly wondered if they could build a full-scale version of it, to build a *real* Transformer. A transforming Wolf fighter wouldn't really have any use in the KMS, and it certainly wouldn't be very useful in real combat since the need to build it in a modular fashion would wreck the mecha's ability to carry any strong weapons, but *fuck* would it be cool as all hell. The pulse cannons in a Wolf couldn't be in some transforming variant because they were too big, and the engines would also pose a massive problem. Then there was the problem of datalines and power conduits that would have to be severed because they'd cross parts of the robot body hidden within the fighter's hull.

Actually...he *could* do it. Datalines and power conduits didn't mean shit if the thing was completely biogenic and based on broadcast power, each module of the ship getting its data and power feeds without needing hard connections. The only problem would be the large pieces of equipment inside that couldn't be broken apart in the transformation process, like the fighter's pulse cannons or its engine.

He actually sat there and started building a crude holographic concept of the idea, pondering where the fighter's equipment would need to be so it could be built within the robotic body and then put in the right place when it transformed into a fighter. Actually, he *could* break the pulse cannons down, into a collector unit and a coherence amplifier/barrel array, make them two parts that would align and connect when the unit was in fighter mode, but couldn't be used in robot mode. Put smaller version pulse cannons in the robot's forearms, do a little work on the hip joint system to give it more stability given how much weight would be put on the joint, put the engine in a movable module and have it shift downwards into the robot's torso when it transformed to keep the engine at the unit's center of gravity, design the entire thing around the idea that the pilot in the cockpit inside was the foundation around which everything else moved, and it'd be ready to rock.

Fuck yeah, he could build that. And it would *work*. It wouldn't be very useful in a military sense, but it would be the coolest and most expensive toy ever built by anyone ever in the history of history.

And what is that, Jason? Dera asked, looking at the hologram.

Oh, just me being as much a little kid as my children, he answered lightly. *I was distracting myself with the idea of building a full-scale model of that,* he added, pointing at the toy on his desk.

It would be a terrible battlefield weapon, she chided. *The Faey experimented with adaptive transformable mecha like that not long before the Third Civil War, and they were a disaster. The need to put so many systems into it to make it work in both modes made both modes unusable.*

I know, but it'd be so fucking cool, he stressed, which made her wheeze out a voiceless laugh.

Boys and their toys, she grinned.

Hey, one of the perks of being the Grand Duke is I get the cool toys, he replied cheekily.

[Jason, Denmother Zaa sends word, the report of the initial interviews are finished. She asks for you to join her in Jaxtra in person to hear the report.]

[About time,] he answered in relief. [Tell her I'll be over as soon as I can.] He looked to Dera. Change of plans. The interrogation report is ready, but I have to go to Jaxtra to hear it. I can't take the kids with me for this one, not even Zaa would let them sit in on a briefing this classified, he warned. Pips, pack up, Dera's going to take you home, he told them. Call back to the barracks and get some extra guards over here so some can go with me and some can get the kids home.

I'll inform Captain Aya right now, Dera answered with a nod.

I'll call in two frigates, Ryn added.

It only took an extra complement of guards about ten minutes to get to the White House, which gave Jason time to armor up, and they took Aran and Sora home while Aya, Dera, Ryn, and Mai rode with him on a frigate to Jaxtra. They discussed the possible information he was about to learn—and Aya would learn as a matter of course, since he didn't keep many secrets from her—and that passed the time very effectively, to the point where he was honestly surprised when the pilot announced they were on final approach to the Denmother's vacation house in the city.

Much like the Hearth, the house below them wasn't very large, nor was it very fancy. The Kimdori were a very modest species when it came to success, didn't brag or display their success or wealth like the Faey or Terrans did, so the house to which the frigate went didn't look much different from any other house in the neighborhood. It was built in the Kimdori style, with a flat roof and small windows, the entire thing made of tan stone that wasn't painted. The only real differences it had were it had a fenced-in yard and a landing pad in the back large enough to accommodate a corvette. But not a frigate. The ship descended to just over the house, and Jason and the guards came down from the belly ramp and used their armor to safely drop the 40 shakra of distance between the ramp and the landing pad.

It wasn't just Zaa that came out to greet him. Her two cubs jumped excitedly at his feet when he landed, and Denfather Grun was standing by the patio door, scolding the cubs a bit for their lack of decorum. Zemaal and Gwendi were both total cuties, with Zaa's coloration but Grun's stockiness. They were the national treasures of all Kimdori at the moment, as the young cubs of the Denparents usually were. Both of them showed tremendous

promise. Both of them were highly, highly intelligent, and Grun had already started educating them, which gave them more maturity than most Terran or Faey two-year-olds. Both the cubs were typical Kimdori cubs in most other ways, including being very precocious and more than a little mischievous. They were at that age where their Kimdori curiosity drove them to extremes, and they got into anything and everything. As such, they required almost constant close supervision. Jason had to kneel down and hug both of the two-year-olds. “Hey guys,” he said gently in Kimdori. “How are you? I didn’t know you were here!”

“Denfather brought us!” Gwendi said with a bright smile. “How are you, Uncle Jason?”

“I’m doing fine,” he told them, picking both of them up and carrying them with him towards Zaa. “Denmother,” he told her. “You made my day with this big surprise.”

“I would ask if you can send them over to the strip on the frigate, so they may see their friends and play a while,” she asked. “That way they are suitably entertained while we are busy.”

“Of course,” he said. “How does that sound, guys? Wanna go play on the beach with the strip kids?”

“That sounds fun!” Zemaal cried eagerly.

“I’m sure it’ll be better than sitting around listening to people talk. Maybe I should get back on the ship with you. I’d rather play in the water with you than listen to your mother talk,” he said with a sly smile in her direction.

“That can be arranged, cousin,” Zaa warned, which made him laugh.

“Is Gary gonna be there?” Gwendi asked. Luke and Songa’s two-year-old toddler was her best friend on the strip.

“I’m sure he will be,” he answered.

Denfather Grun and one of Zaa’s nanny helpers took the cubs from him and got onto a zip ship that came down, and the frigate pulled away and started back for Karsa as Jason and his guards walked into the house. Grun was one of Zaa’s closest advisors, but he wasn’t officially part of the government, so he wouldn’t be present at the briefing. He’d learn

everything from Zaa later. “Have you heard any of the report yet?” he asked Zaa as they turned past the kitchen and went downstairs. Like most Kimdori dwellings, half of it was above ground and the other half below. Zaa’s secure briefing room was downstairs, with her office and other official rooms where she did the business of ruling the Kimdori while on Karis. Because of that, Zaa’s underground was significantly larger than the upstairs.

“No, I waited for you to arrive, cousin,” she answered as they came down into the main living room, and she turned them towards a large, heavily reinforced door on the left side of the room. That was her secure briefing room.

Miaari and Kemaari were already in the briefing room when they arrived, as were three other Kimdori sitting at the briefing table Jason didn’t know and two Kimdori females standing in the front of the room. The door was closed and locked, then the room was put into secure mode, requiring everyone within to speak Kimdori. Jason and Zaa took seats at the center of the table, and the two females in front of them both gave a little bow. They had very similar grayish coloration with white bellies—just not in the bands of a Denmother or Handmaiden—very natural white tummies that covered most of their front torso. Both of them had small but perky ears, and slightly shorter muzzles than average for a Kimdori. “Honored Denmother, Grand Duke Karinne, I am Peraa Grof. My sister, Venaa Grof.”

“My masters of interrogators,” Zaa supplied. “Proceed with your report, Elder.”

She nodded, and a flat hologram appeared behind her, an image of one of the three super-ships. “We have finished our debriefing of all four ship captains and have combined this information with the data sent back to us by our infiltrators at Oasis. We will begin with a very basic overview of what we have learned.

“Firstly, we have learned the short-term orders of the enemy’s fleet. They are to move randomly through the galaxy for the next two days, spending no longer than ten hours in any star system, and then converge at this star system in two days, six hours,” she said, turning and pointing at the hologram behind her, which displayed a starchart. “This is R1DB-24. It holds a large terrestrial system with three inhabited planets. The indigenous

civilization consists of two separate species from neighboring planets who have formed a unity government and colonized the other planet in its system. The Syndicate have no data about this system, it was chosen completely at random. In the meantime, for the next two days, the enemy forces will move randomly through the galaxy and get as many long-range scans they can, searching for a defensible permanent base of operations within our galaxy. After they get data on this system, they very well may decide that R1DB-24 may suit their needs.

“Once the fleet regathers into a single force, it is to await further orders on how to redeploy to secure a permanent base of operations and begin crushing all resistance to its invasion,” she continued. “We believed that we had eliminated all means for them to communicate with their fleet, but we were wrong.”

The other Kimdori stepped up, and the hologram switched to a piece of equipment. “This is how they are bypassing our jammers. Your Grace, you may understand this equipment, but with respect, my Denmother, I’m not sure you are familiar with the science behind this device. It is called a Quantum Entangled Computer. This device uses the Law of Quantum Entanglement to transmit data instantly across any distance, ignoring time and space.”

The Law of Quantum Entanglement was easy enough to understand ... but implementing it wasn’t all that easy. The theory stated that two discrete quantum particles could be entangled in a way that changes in one affected the other, no matter how much distance was between them. There were naturally entangled particles, but they could also be entangled artificially, and was much more practical since you already had both the particles, where the companion to a naturally entangled particle may be anywhere in the *universe*. By using them in a computer, turning the particles into the medium by which data was saved, it caused that data to mirror into the computer which was entangled with the original. While that did work and was fairly stable and instantaneous despite distance between the two particles, the problem was that a particle couldn’t be entangled with multiple “sister” particles, it could only be entangled with one.

That was the easy part. The hard part was entangling two discrete quantum particles, then managing to gather enough entangled particles

together and get them to stay in one place long enough to form a viable data storage unit. That took a fuckton of time, effort, and energy. It would take weeks, maybe even months to entangle and gather enough particles to get into a data storage unit, and even then, its capacity may not be more than 40-50 megastrings. His gestalt had more storage than that. Hell, the little Sky Wolf toy on his desk had a 50 megastring chip in it.

But computers built on quantum entanglement did have one advantage; much like telepathy, they ignored time and space. The changes in one entangled computer were mirrored to the other instantly no matter how far apart the two computers were, which would allow instant communication over vast distances. In many ways, the quirky laws of quantum mechanics ignored time and space, just like psionics.

But while it was a viable concept and design, it was still rife with many drawbacks, the biggest of which was the *one particle can only entangle one other particle* issue. If every super-ship had an entangled computer, it meant that the fleet flagship had to have thousands of individual computers, one for each of them, and had to send out commands to them over each computer. Sure, the ship's master computer could just shoot out that order in parallel to all the computers, but still, there had to be two or three entire sections in the fleet command ship devoted just to quantum computers. And any ships joining or leaving the fleet had to take the sister computer with them and install it on a new command ship. It was seriously fucking inefficient...but then again, it was all the Syndicate had. So they worked with it.

"I see you understand what this is, your Grace," Venaa noted.

"Yeah, but good God, that has to be the most inefficient computer system in the ship."

"I have some basic knowledge of quantum entanglement," Zaa said. "It means that all data in this device is mirrored to another device to which it is linked?"

"Exactly so, Denmother, and distance means nothing. This computer is linked to a sister unit in the Fleet Commander's ship, and she can issue orders to all super-ships in her fleet using them, who then filter those orders down to the smaller ships. Every super-ship has one of these devices."

“A question. Can we use these devices to invade their computer system?”

“An intriguing question, my Denmother, and one I lack the expertise to answer. I will refer the matter to Elders in computer science and have them get you an answer.”

“Very good. Continue.”

“Yes, my Denmother. The captains destroyed these devices before surrendering the ships. It is their standing order that these computers are destroyed the instant that the captain believes the ship is lost, either about to be crippled or captured. However, we have successfully retrieved four of them from the *damaged* ships, the ones struck by the *Tianne’s* GRAF cannon. The ship captains and crew were killed before they could give the order or destroy the devices. We are even now removing them from the damaged ships and sending them to our most experienced computer science Elders for study. We are also sending one unit to Hadhja Siyhhaa here on Karis for her to examine. She is the leading expert on computers on Karis.”

“Outstanding,” Zaa told them, which made both of them nearly puff up in pride...as if *they* had anything to do with it.

“We speculate that we will get no intercepted fleet orders from the enemy fleet using the devices,” Peraa continued. “We believe that the enemy fleet commander believes the ships destroyed, so for the computers to come back online, it would arouse suspicion. Most likely, they have been removed from the enemy’s order queue, possibly even destroyed. But the devices should reveal quite a bit of technical data that we may find useful, and we will, of course, gain whatever data is *in* the computers. However, we do know their short-term plans, and I’m sure the military strategists can make use of that information.”

“What it does mean, Denmother, your Grace, is that the tactics we have used against the enemy fleets may be known to the enemy fleet commander, which means we may see an adjustment in tactics very soon to counter Confederate battle tactics,” Venaa took over. “We have managed to determine that these devices constantly upload critical data to the sister computer, transmitting their most important telemetry logs in real time, so there is a very good chance that by now, the enemy’s commander has seen

the shipkiller weapons, knows which ships in our fleets can destroy the super-ships, and will be sending that information out to the rest of the Syndicate fleet as soon as their analysts are finished with the log data. And since the Karinnes have used interdictors against super-ships in several theaters, it means that the enemy most likely knows of their existence.”

“They haven’t done it yet. Maybe they just have so much data to go through, they haven’t gotten to the data from the ships that have seen it yet,” Jason mused. “But I take it that it also means that the enemy knows how many super-ships we’ve destroyed, if their QE units are going offline.”

“Yes, your Grace,” Peraa nodded. “I am sure *that* information has reached the enemy commander, for it is important. The very fact that we are destroying their super-ships at a steady pace itself is critical data she should have seen quickly. It tells her that her fleet is not invincible against us.”

“We learned little of value from the captains outside of the, ah, QE device, at least as is important to this briefing,” Venaa said. “We have acquired many of the enemy’s operational protocols from the captains, which we will send to the CCM headquarters for study, and our computer science Elders are even now copying the contents of the captured ships’ computer cores for study by various computer experts in the Confederation. A full list of all information we picked up from them will be made available to you to peruse at your leisure.”

“You said that the devices communicate. Is there any indication that the enemy fleet commander knows that her fleet is trapped by interdiction at Oasis?” Miaari asked.

“No indication we have found in the data we have acquired so far, Handmaiden,” Peraa answered.

“Individually, the Benga officers we have interrogated display a sense of complete shock at how they have lost to us,” Venaa picked up. “They believed that we would be easily conquered, that our defeat would be swift and relatively effortless. Their briefings with the Fleet Commander led them to believe that, to use a Terran idiom, this would be a cakewalk,” she said, giving Jason a slight smile. “I’m not sure if this is valuable information to the military planners, but we felt it was important enough to note.”

“Not much, but you’ve told us the important parts,” Jason grunted, leaning back in his chair. “So, we know when and where the elements are going to converge to form a giant fleet. We need to make sure we have a warm welcome waiting for them,” he said with a dark smile.

“I do not think we have the ships to confront the entire invasion force head on, Jason. But I assume you mean toys?”

“A few,” he grinned. “But, one thing I feel is most important is to protect that indigenous civilization from the Syndicate. I can get an interdictor there and have it fully expanded before the fleet starts to gather. The fact that they can’t get within a light year of it might cause a little confusion and delay them gathering in one place, allowing us to snipe at their scattered task forces in a way that allows us to concentrate our assets. But, that’s not really my ultimate decision,” he added with a grunt. “That’s Lorna’s call.”

“True, but you can also get the interdictor there *now* so it’s fully expanded in time. If Lorna decides to allow the Syndicate into the system, you can always pull it,” Miaari offered.

“True enough,” he agreed.

“I would assume, cousin, that there is no way to disrupt these quantum computers?” Zaa asked.

“Not easily,” he replied. “Once you entangle quantum particles, it takes even more energy to unentangle them than it did to entangle them,” he replied, scratching his chin as he thought. “A coherent tachyon burst would do it, tachyons cause altered quantum particles to revert to their natural state, but it would have to hit the computer directly, and the tachyon emitter systems we have don’t have anywhere near the necessary range. We might have to look at the fact that we’re not going to stop the ships from communicating with their flagship and just work around it. The fact that tachyons can revert or disrupt quantum manipulation is why most civilizations don’t bother developing quantum-based weapons or systems, because they can be easily ruined by anyone that can generate tachyon energy...which is just about anyone that’s capable of interstellar travel.”

“Does not the Coalition use a quantum-based weapon?” Zaa asked.

“Sorta. Their quantum blasters don’t use actual quantum manipulation, they just exploit a law of quantum mechanics to supercharge a standard plasma weapon into something even more nasty,” he answered. “The weapon itself doesn’t utilize any quantum manipulation tech.” He chuckled. “I have a lot of respect for the scientists and engineers in the Coalition. Those guys are both damn smart and seriously creative. Anyway, if you want to knock out those quantum computers, Denmother, then my suggestion is to have one of your infiltrators sabotage them,” he told her. “If one of them can find out where the computers are in the fleet flagship and somehow get in there and blow them up, it’ll cut off all comm between their commander and the ships in the galaxy. But it’d be dangerous. There’s no doubt that those computers would be in the most heavily guarded section of the ship, and given how many of them there are, they’re not all going to be in the same room. That means that even if an infiltrator manages to destroy a roomful of them, there are going to be lots more, and they just set off just about every alarm the ship has. It would take a coordinated effort from multiple Kimdori to find all the computers, get into position, and destroy them all at once, in a coordinated attack.”

“It would be worth it, however,” she said soberly. “Handmaiden, send down this order to our infiltrators. Their primary objective is to find those computers and ascertain if they can all be destroyed in a simultaneous attack, particularly to determine if there are enough infiltrators in the fleet to manage the operation. If they cannot destroy all of them at once, or if there are insufficient agents in the fleet to complete the task, then they destroy none of them. That way their presence in the enemy fleet is not revealed. Order them also to determine if there is some way to sabotage the system that controls the computers, which should be much more compact and easier to reach and disable. If we can cut the lines between the computers and the fleet commander at a critical moment, we can delay orders reaching the ships inside the galaxy.”

“Yes, Denmother,” Miaari said, standing up. She then hurried from the room.

“Have you informed Lorna that the enemy’s main fleet is trapped at Oasis, cousin?” Zaa asked.

“Not exactly. We told her about the interdictors, but we haven’t confirmed to her that they’re trapped yet.”

“Perhaps we can use that as leverage, negotiate an end to this quickly,” Zaa suggested. “We could get the fleet’s commander to order the ships inside the galaxy to withdraw as part of a cease fire.”

“We *had* a cease fire with them, Denmother, and how long did they honor it?” he asked.

“That was before the fleet’s commander and well over half of her fleet found themselves facing the prospect of spending the rest of their natural lives trapped,” she pointed out.

“I’ll give you that, but I also believe that Sha Ra isn’t going to accept any cease fire until she’s certain that she doesn’t have enough ships left in the galaxy to beat us,” he replied. “We have her fleet trapped *now*, but she could decide that that’s only a temporary problem that will get rectified as soon as the fleet inside the galaxy destroys the Confederation.”

“Possible,” Zaa conceded. “But given how many ships there are, Jason, I would prefer to find a peaceful solution. If we are forced to destroy the entire Syndicate fleet, the cost to us in ships and lives is going to be absolutely ghastly. Look at the casualty figures already incurred after just two days. Now imagine those numbers after a month. Or two months.”

“I can’t argue with that,” he agreed. “But that does touch on something I need to pass on to you.” He related his discussion with the Parri *shaman* about the possible dissidents in the ship. “I’m not sure if Miaari had the chance to brief you about that yet, given we just talked about it this morning.”

“She mentioned it, and that I would get a full briefing later today,” she nodded. “I already sent orders for our infiltrators to try to locate and identify these possible dissidents. They may help us.”

“We could use some help on the inside,” Jason grunted.

“If there is nothing else, then I suggest we take some time to consider this information, and I believe you have some calls to make, Jason,” Zaa suggested.

“I get the hint, you want me to go home and keep the cubs out of your hair so you can have some quiet time,” he replied, which made her laugh. “But you’re right, I have to talk to Lorna, and I’ll deliver the report to her if you have one prepared. She’s on Karis right now, deliberating with the girls over in the command center.”

One of the two sisters stepped up and handed him a panel without a word.

“Alright, I’d say we’re done here,” Jason said, standing up. “Good work, ladies.”

“Thank you, your Grace,” Peraa said with a little bob of her head.

He didn’t waste any time. Aya had had the foresight to call in a second frigate when the first went back to Karsa, and it was none other than the *Javelin*. Gia met him on the ramp as he and the guards walked towards the ship, and she smiled when he kissed her on the cheek. “Glad you’re keeping yourself busy since you got pulled off the board,” he said.

She laughed. “I was *not happy* about that,” she said. “We should be out there, not sitting in Kosigi waiting.”

“Blame Miaari, she’s the one that pulled you. So expect some covert op spy mission to come down the pipe soon,” he answered as they started up the ramp. “How’s the IP system doing now that it’s had uptime?”

“Like it’s even more than what was promised,” she replied. “You have no idea how nice it is to sit in the chair and know that my ship can take hits that would take out a heavy cruiser and laugh at them.”

“Until you overload the unit, so don’t get cocky,” he chided as they approached the bridge. “Any issues between the IP and the drive?”

“None,” she replied immediately. “The drive doesn’t pull enough power to affect the IP system when in mode one, and we don’t use IP in mode three. I don’t see how mode one does that. It pulls *less* power than the grav engines do.”

“That’s because translation engines are power hogs, but the tradeoff is that they’re the most powerful and stable grav engines in the entire galaxy,” he replied. “The drive’s translight stage is seriously power efficient. I’d

almost advocate using them in sublight mode in combat, but they're just not as good as grav engines."

They spent the short trip between Jaxtra and Karsa discussing the ship's performance and upgrades. The *Javelin* was the first of the frigates, but it was also the most teched up, with a translight drive, IP armor, all the coolest and most cutting-edge toys and systems, and was considered the most elite frigate in the KMS to serve on. Gia had built a kick-ass crew for her frigate, to the point where Juma often looked at her crew as promotion stock, the first frigate crew to be considered for positions on larger ships. Gia herself had turned down two offers to captain a destroyer or a cruiser, because she liked her role on the *Javelin*. She would rather be captain of the most elite frigate in the KMS than just another captain of a destroyer or cruiser.

Gia didn't know it yet, but she was going to be offered a promotion up into the command staff to serve as the supervising officer of all frigates, to oversee the training of frigate crews and ensure all the frigates were as kick-ass as the *Javelin*. She knew them inside and out, understood their capabilities and limitations better than any officer in the KMS, so she was the perfect choice for the role of overseeing the operation and crew training for all frigates in the fleet. She'd go from Lieutenant Commander straight to Captain, skipping Commander completely, and be part of the operational staff in KMS headquarters.

The *Javelin's* chair would be taken over by her XO, none other than former comm officer Mikano Strongblade. She had moved from communications to command last year and had done fairly well for herself. Granted, it might look like a downgrade going from serving on the bridge of the *Iyaneri* to being the XO on a frigate, but everyone in the KMS knew that the ladder up the command chain started with the second chair on a frigate. If Mikano ever wanted to captain a vessel, she had to start at the beginning...and she eventually would. As one might expect for a member of Gia's crew, she had the highest scores of all first mates in the frigate fleet, and since she'd served on the *Javelin* for nearly eight months, she was the natural choice to take over the ship when Gia left to go up to HQ.

She wouldn't be the first Shio captain in the fleet, but she'd be captain of one of the most elite ships in the fleet.

Mikano was no stranger in Jason's house. Both Jyslin and Symone had taken quite a liking to her since Rann's birthday party at the water park a few years ago, and she often went out with them to galpal around, one of several ladies in Jyslin's entourage of off the strip friends. There was that, and the fact that Tim had the *biggest* crush on Mikano, made even more intense by the fact that she wasn't a Faey woman, therefore she wasn't quite so willing to jump in bed with him as a Faey woman would be.

Gia got him back home, landing in the water off the beach and pulling up to the dock, and he strode down the old-fashioned wooden quay with his mind getting back on the matters at hand. He pondered the briefing as he changed out of his armor and came back down for a late lunch, then spent nearly an hour up in his office carefully reading the written reports that Peraa had given to him, waiting for Lorna to arrive. She was in a meeting with Myri and the command staff over at the White House. The report only had a few minor additions that Peraa didn't go over, the boring technical details she'd omitted in her briefing, so the report wasn't a rehashing of what he already knew in that regard.

Lorna arrived just as he reached the last section, coming in with Siyara in her arms, resting on her hip. Lorna was in a suit of Crusader armor—she was family, he protected family—and Siyara didn't seem to mind straddling her metal-clad hip. *Did it hurt that much?* Siyara asked her, touching the faint scar on Lorna's face, going through her right eyebrow and continuing down her cheek, to end near the base of her nose. Lorna was a rare, rare woman that she hadn't had that scar removed, had kept it as a reminder to herself how a moment's inattention could be costly. Lorna had a replacement right eye due to that old injury, the accident had blinded her original eye. And like Meya, her eye was cybernetic, built to perfectly resemble a natural eye.

Not at all, she replied with a smile. *What hurt was what made the scar, not them replacing my eye. I've had this eye for so long, I don't even notice it anymore,* she smiled.

It doesn't look like a machine.

It's not supposed to, Lorna told her as she set her down. *Now, me and your father have some things to talk about, so back downstairs with you, pippy.*

'Kay. You staying for dinner tonight, Aunt Lorna?

Of course I am, she replied.

Amber appeared in the doorway and gave a playful yip, and Siyara squealed aloud with glee as the little vulpar chased her down the hallway, her squeaky barks fading quickly. Jason closed the door with his gestalt and put the room into secure mode, the window behind him shimmering as it shifted, and Lorna sat down in the chair in front of his desk. "Myri was feeling talkative," she said by way of apology, leaning back a little in his chair and crossing her legs. "What did you learn from the Kimdori?"

"Plenty. First thing, though, is that the trap we placed at Oasis worked. We have their entire reserves pinned in at the system, so they're out of this."

"That's wonderful news," she smiled.

"Tell me about it. We also found out that there's a faction of dissidents in the enemy fleet that actively hid that fact from their command structure, which allowed us to trap them there. You can read over that part when you go over this, it's in there," he said, offering her the panel he'd been reading. He'd copied its contents into his gestalt. "It has everything the Kimdori learned in its memory, including the important things you need to know right now. The short of it is, they've dug up the Syndicate's short-term plans. The entire fleet in our galaxy is going to spend two more days taking as many long-range scans and surveys as they can to search for an ideal base of operations, and then gather at R1DB-24 and await further orders."

"We suspected that was their plan," Lorna grunted. "And how we handle it is still a matter of debate in CCM HQ. Some of the staff want to take them out in a single glorious battle, but that would cost us almost our entire fleet. Others want to try to trap them where they gather with an interdictor and then try to negotiate, but we can't really trust any agreements they make with us. Still, it has the best chance to succeed despite that."

"Not so much now, the Syndicate knows about the interdictors, so they'd flee the system or try to hunt it down and destroy it as soon as we turned it on."

"How?"

“They have a comm system we didn’t know about,” he answered. “They use quantum entangled computers to send data back and forth between the super-ships and the fleet command ship.”

“Trelle’s garland, seriously? Nobody uses those, a single tachyon burst and they’re fried!”

“They put them so deep inside the ships no tachyon burst can reach them,” he answered.

“Well...I guess that would work,” Lorna mused, scratching her chin. “So, that means they have data on our tactics and equipment, and we should expect them to adjust very soon.”

He nodded. “Miaari thinks that we’ll see that as soon as their analysts get through the data,” he affirmed. “There’s a *lot* of data coming in at their fleet command, and she thinks that’s why we didn’t see them adjust sooner. They simply had so much to go through, they didn’t have time to quickly send down warnings.”

“Then we’ll adjust to their adjustments,” she declared. “Do the Karinnes have data on that system they’re going to use as their rally point?”

He nodded. “I added it onto the panel. The short of it is, there are three arable planets in the system inhabited by two neo-spacefaring races. They’ve managed interplanetary travel, but not interstellar,” he answered, bringing up a holo depicting the 14-planet star system, with a large white star in the center. “The rest of the system isn’t all that impressive, outside of this gas supergiant here. There must be a queen’s ransom worth of heavy core gases and metallic hydrogen in it, it would be worth mining out,” he added, pointing to planet nine. “I’ve already sent an interdictor there and turned it on, so it’ll be at full strength by the time the enemy moves to rendezvous. If you decide to let them into the system, we can just turn it off.”

“Kimdori have SCM there to hide the field?”

He nodded. “They won’t see it if they get any long-range scans of the system before entering.”

“It would be strategically best to let them into the system, but if there’s indigenous life there,” she frowned. “We’d be more or less sacrificing

them.”

“I know, it’s a bitch of a problem,” Jason grunted. “Some of the more ruthless command staff won’t care about them, may even be glad they’re there to distract the Syndicate, but that’s 17 billion people, Lorna. I’m not throwing away 17 billion people if I can help it.”

“I’m not sure we want the entire fleet to gather in one place, it’ll make destroying them an extremely expensive proposition,” she said, looking at the hologram. “What if we do there what you have here at Karis? Trap them in a shell between two interdiction fields?”

“That would be really hard, Lorna,” Jason told her. “They’re coming in from every direction so we couldn’t turn on the outer shell interdictors early. We’d have to let them jump in, encounter the interdictor already on, then somehow hold them in place for 51 hours until the outside shell interdictors expanded enough to trap them inside.”

“Hmm,” she said. “What about this. Can you reset the interdictor so it’s halfway through its logarithmic expansion when they start jumping in? They’ll hit the field and drop into normal space, and the interdiction field will expand behind them too fast for them to catch up. They’ll all be there in the same system but separated by *takirs* of sublight travel from each other. We put a Stargate in the system to get in, jump outbound to get to the elements and destroy them, then jump back to a Stargate system and do it again.”

Jason gave her a bright look. “That might work!” he blurted. “If they all jump at the same time, or close to it, we’ll have them trapped in a wide sphere about half a light year outside the system! Aunt Lorna, that’s fucking *brilliant!*” he told her.

“I’m not the commander of the CCM for nothing, nephew,” she winked.

“We just need to know when they’re going to jump, and that’s *in their orders*,” he said. “Cybi.”

Her hologram winked into existence by his desk. “*Yes, Jason?*”

“Talk to Miaari and have her find out *exactly* when the Syndicate fleet in our galaxy is scheduled to jump to R1DB-24.”

"I have her report in my memory, Jason. They're scheduled to begin jumping to the system in two days, 4 hours, 14 minutes our time. However, they won't all arrive at exactly the same time."

"That's more than enough time to link a Stargate," Lorna smiled. "Yes it is. Cybi, calculate *exactly* when we'd need to reset the interdicator in R1DB-24 so the enemy fleet jumps into the effect as it expands in logarithmic mode, and traps most of them as close to half a light year from the system as possible. That will put them anywhere from three to five months from getting out in any direction and put them takirs apart from each other."

"I have it. Do you want me to deactivate the interdicator, and program it to activate at the proper time?"

"Yes," he answered. "Because I think Lorna's onto something here. It's everything we could hope for. Getting the entire enemy fleet in one place to make it easy to wear them out yet unable to gather into a large enough force to destroy a huge chunk of our fleet. And it keeps them from doing any damage at any other system."

"It's not a guarantee we do it that way, so leave the interdicator running for now to expand the interdiction field. We can always shut it off if we decide to do that, give our fleet the chance to jump into the system while the Stargate is linking."

"You heard the lady, Cybi."

"I'll take care of it," she nodded. *"Should I pull enough ships off the board to tow a Stargate?"*

"Do it," he nodded. "Do we have one available?"

"None available, but we can pull the Stargate to PR-371 and jump it to the system. With the Stargate at Imxa Prime, that one isn't entirely needed. They can reroute all our cargo traffic to Imxa and it can come in through Terra."

"Sounds like a plan. Warn Jrz'kii we're pulling that Stargate so she can reroute freighter and cargo traffic and get those ships out to PR-371. Delink the Stargate and get it ready to jump as soon as they're there."

“I’ll have Cylan handle it,” she told him. “We’re going to have to make contact with the inhabitants of the system, Jason. They’re going to see us for sure.”

“True enough,” he grunted. “And I hate revealing pre-jump civilizations to the Confederation, it makes them start thinking of conquest.” He rapped his fingers on the desk. “Get my bionoid, yank Ethikk’s and Mesaiima’s out of the Hall of Peace and contact them and warn them we need their diplomacy skills,” he said. “We’ll let them handle negotiating with the indigenous system to allow us to use it as a staging area to take out the Syndicate. Have Yeri prepare a first contact team and get them aboard a KES scout ship and prepare them for the mission. We’ll get there in the scout ship.”

“Why not a cruiser or a battleship?” Lorna asked.

“Too big and too scary,” he replied with a shake of his head. “If I were an interplanetary society, I’d react with sheer terror if something the size of a KMS battleship just appeared in orbit around my planet. For that matter, I remember how I reacted when the Faey first appeared at Terra,” he grunted. “We’re not going to traumatize them that way. Scout ships are packed with powerful defensive systems, Lorna, the diplomatic team will be fine. I don’t think this civilization has any weapon that can so much as penetrate its shields, let alone get through its carapace.”

“I’ll get a probe there to get readings on their communications technology, so we can emulate it,” Cybi offered.

“Sounds like a plan.”

“I think we’re about done, Jayce. I need to get this back to HQ and go over it with the staff,” Lorna said, holding up the panel. “And it sounds like you’re going to invite yourself along with the diplomacy corps, so I’ll leave you to get ready for it. I’ll have some decisions for you in a few hours.”

“It gives me something to do since I’m on mandatory R and R,” he told her.

She chuckled. “You have no idea how much respect you have from quite a few CCM command staff that you’re actually fighting in this war,” she told him. “They see you as a ruler that *understands*, in a way that most rulers don’t.”

“I sat behind a desk through one war, and it nearly drove me insane. This way, I’m out there feeling like I’m *doing something*,” he told her.

“We’ve watched some telemetry feeds from your Titan. You’re a very good rigger, nephew. You are definitely no liability out there for your company.”

“I’d *better* be after all the training I went through,” he replied.

After Lorna left, heading for her dropship to get back to Terra, Jason got hold of Yeri over in the State office. *[I already have a team picked out, they’re getting ready now,]* she told him. *[They’ll all be aboard the Lexington in about an hour.]*

[Good deal. Get their language uploaded as fast as you can so Mesaiima can access it through her bionoid.]

[We’ll get it done, Jason.]

After making sure of that, Jason waited for Ethikk and Mesaiima to answer his comm request. Ethikk answered first, his furry face appearing on a flat hologram in front of his desk. “What’s going on, Jason?” he asked.

“We’re going to need your diplomacy skills again, Ethikk,” he answered, then explained the plan to him. “We need right of passage agreement with that civilization, and you and Mesaiima are going to get it for us.”

“I’d be happy to help, Jason,” he replied with a toothy smile. “I take it I’ll be using a bionoid?”

He nodded. “We’re pulling your bionoid out of the Hall of Peace to send on the ship, so that’s the bionoid you’ll need to link to when we’re ready.”

“How are we handling language?”

“We’re sending telepaths to pick up their language, and they’ll upload it to your bionoid once it’s in the network. After that, it’ll be like any other language you insert into your interface memory. You may have a little problem with exotic pronunciations, but you’ll understand every word you hear.”

“Sounds good. Can you send me everything you have on the race I’ll be speaking with?”

“We don’t have anything on them yet, but you’ll get everything we find out once our probes get there and start scanning. This is a first contact situation.”

“Ah, okay. Just send me a time frame so I know when to get ready.”

“I’ll let you know as soon as we have something.”

After going through that again with Mesaiima, Jason got in the first intel about the system’s inhabitants. They had two species that evolved on different planets in the system that looked to have entered an alliance to form a single government, like the Strath-Zegra or the Gudara-Yood, and both of the races were quite surprising, at least to Jason. The race inhabiting planet two were very, very small bipedal felines like the Jirunji, but only stood about two shakra tall on the average according to recon, which made them even shorter than the Prakarikai. Planet two was heavy gravity, 1.43 standard, which partially explained why they were so short. The images he saw of them reminded him of anthropomorphic housecats more than anything else, complete with tails, and they were fuzzily adorable. The other race was yet another notch in the belt of Gora’s Law, because the image of the race inhabiting planet four looked so much like a Terran that at first Jason thought Cybi sent him the wrong picture. They could pass as a Terran *easily*, could walk down any street on Terra and get not a second glance, with one slight difference. This humanoid race had vertically slitted pupils instead of round, their skin color was a uniform mocha-brown color not too far from Temika’s skin tone and had six fingers on each hand.

Their home planet’s environmental and physical conditions were so similar to Terra that that Jason would find it hard to tell the difference if he was there. 1.0001 gravity compared to Terra, almost exactly identical nitrogen/oxygen atmospheres, 25.1 hour day, 349.3 day year, a mean average planetary temperature just .7 degrees shuki colder compared to Terra, a nearly identical proportion of land to water on the surface...it was like Terra the Sequel, just with different shaped continents.

The technology of the civilization was what Jason would have expected his Terran people to have achieved by the year 2150 had the Faey not conquered the planet. They had achieved interplanetary travel, to the point where they could travel between planet two and planet four in the system in about two months or so, depending on where they were at in their orbits.

Most of the ship traffic he could see on the intel showed that most of the travel was between the two outside planets to planet three, which was also inhabited. They had to use old fashioned rockets to get into space, but once in space, they utilized microwave resonance engines—what Terran science would call an EM drive—powered by solar panels for space travel, the crudest form of the technology but showing that they were on the right track technologically speaking, and their civilization utilized electricity as a power source and used solar panels almost completely to supply it. Planet four, the Terran-like race's home planet, showed a lot of lingering hydrocarbon pollution in the scans, showing that they had only recently adapted "green" energy sources, but planet two was nearly pristine, with no pollutants at all in their atmosphere. Yet, their planet had large cities with strong industry...perhaps the cat-people traded solar energy to the Terran-like people not long ago as part of their alliance?

Both of the races were well represented on the third planet in the system, which hinted to Jason that the two of them had mutually colonized the planet. It had architecture from both races intermixed in the cities, showing that the two races mingled, didn't segregate...up to a point. The small size of the cat-race made complete intermingling potentially dangerous, so their shared cities had special infrastructure to accommodate both species to keep the much smaller cat-people out from under the feet of the humanoids. Planet three was almost halfway between the two other planets in many ways. It was 1.12 gravity and had .96 pressure, which made it comfortable for both species. Scans indicated that the average age of the buildings on planet three was only about sixty years, and the cities there were spread out, with a large amount of wild, uninhabited territory between them, which meant that they'd not been on planet three for very long. They must have developed their microwave engines, made contact with each other, and entered into their alliance and colonized planet three all within the last 150 years.

It was all quite intriguing to him, and he was glad he ordered Cybi to load up one of his bionoids. And he took a holo and dimensions of the small cat-people and sent them to Rook so he could design bionoids based on the species.

After getting all that done, he really had nothing to do but wait, and he decided to spend that time waiting playing with Zemaal and Gwendi down

on the beach, where Maya had brought out quite a few of the toddlers and younger kids to play before lunch. Miaari had sent her own cubs along with the Denmother's, so Maaaleth, Yemaari, and Haan were also on the beach, the five Kimdori cubs tussling and rough housing with each other in ways they couldn't with the Faey toddlers. Kimdori cubs were much more physically developed at two than a Faey toddler was, so rough housing could get the Faey kids hurt. Even Amber was getting in on the action, chasing toddlers and Kimdori cubs up and down the beach with enthusiasm.

He was a bit surprised when Ayuma came down the steps and approached him. She spent most of her daylight hours over at her office, where she ran the Academy by hologram and memo. Despite being restricted to Karis, she was still the Dean of the Academy. "Jason," she said, sitting on a lounge close to where he was laying on his back, tossing Gwendi up into the air as she giggled.

"Hey Ayuma, what brings you by?" he asked.

"I wanted to talk about those bionoid things," she said. "But first, you can introduce me to this cutie."

"This is Gwendi. She's Denmother's cub," he replied, holding Gwendi under her arms, then he switched to Kimdori. "Say hello to Ayuma, Gwendi."

"Hi! You're a cousin!"

"Yes I am, sweetie," Ayuma smiled, speaking fairly decent Kimdori; Gwendi hadn't learned much Faey yet, but that was no hindrance for her on the strip, since almost all of the younger kids spoke conversational Kimdori, and Rann and the older kids were fluent in both spoken and written Kimdori. They had to be, if they ever took over as the Grand Duke, they had to be able to speak and read Kimdori to interact with Miaari and Zaa on an official level. "Mind if I talk to Jason a minute?"

"Only if Uncle Jason gives me swings."

"She's a Kimdori, alright," Ayuma laughed, switching back to Faey.

"She's a demanding little thing," he agreed, shaking Gwendi very gently, which made her laugh. "So, what about the bionoid project do you need to talk about?"

“Can you really merge to them no matter where they are?”

“Yup,” he replied, looking up at her. “Lemme guess, you want one for the Academy?”

“I’d rather *be there*, Jayce,” she told him. “If I can’t be there in person, well, a bionoid is the next best thing. Are they safe to use for extended merges day after day?”

“As far as we know. In essence, you’d be beta-testing that aspect of them for a Generation, we already know they’re safe to use for extended periods with a jack,” he said. “If you don’t mind being a test subject, we can set you up.”

“I don’t mind.”

“Not a problem, then. I’ll send down an order for Rook to build you two moleculartronic bionoids, a primary and a spare, and he’ll ship them to your office over at the Academy as soon as they’re ready. And since you’re who you are, I’ll tell him to make sure the bionoids are armed. Someone may try to abduct you, and Rook can put some pretty nasty weapons in a bionoid,” he chuckled.

“How hard are they to use?”

“For you? It’ll be like merging to any other computer,” he told her. “I’ll send you over to Rook’s lab, he can explain the differences and give you a copy of the assimilation software we use to train people on them. By the time the bionoids are ready, you should have it down.”

“Sounds good to me. Where is his lab?”

“Cybi can upload directions into your hovercar,” he told her. “I’ll have him get you a merge pod, too, they make it comfortable.”

“What’s that?”

“It’s a unit we use to give jacked remote users a way to achieve a full merge with a remote computer, it’s got control equipment to allow a full merge, and monitoring equipment so keep tabs on the driver to and ensure they stay safe. For us, it’s just a comfortable place to sit while we’re merged, since it’s designed for someone to use it like that. Though, I do use the control equipment in my merge pod as a safeguard when I’m piloting an

exomech,” he added. “But you won’t have to worry about that, since you’re not using your bionoids in combat. Just have them put it in your office or somewhere it doesn’t get in the way when you’re not using it. But you don’t *have* to. I often merge to things sitting on my couch, I just have to make sure I don’t have a krick in my neck when I’m done.”

“Sounds good to me. Now, I think you owe a little cutie some swings,” she winked, saying that in Kimdori for Gwendi’s benefit.

“She has to earn them first,” he grinned up at her, pushing her out to arm’s length again, then pulling her down and rolling over enough to put her down on the sand on her back. She laughed and twisted and struggled as he tickled her white-furred tummy, and after a suitable amount of torture, he picked her up and swung her back and forth as promised.

But, ultimately, work intruded on his fun. He had to extricate himself from the toddlers and cubs to answer a call from Mesaiima, and barely ten minutes later, he was merged to his bionoid on the *Lexington* along with Mesaiima and Ethikk, receiving a briefing about the upcoming negotiation. The captain of the KES *Lexington* was a Terran, Kimberly Hamilton, a botanist by profession that decided to take up a dual career in both botany and commanding a scout ship. She was the ship’s primary botanist on top of being its captain, and she enjoyed both jobs.

That wasn’t unusual. Kim wasn’t the only scientist that also worked in command in the KES, since it *was* an organization dedicated to exploration and study. Many of them started as scientific crew aboard the scout ship, then decided to move up to ship operations and command while still doing their day jobs.

The briefing was being given by Meya and Yeri by hologram, which was hovering in front of them. “*We’ve got in all the data, so we’re ready to jump in,*” Yeri told them as a flat holo of a small space station appeared beside her. “*We’re going to approach this space station in orbit around planet three, which we think is a starport for them, and initiate first contact. A first contact specialist from my staff will pick up their language and upload it to the network, and then you can download it. That’s when things switch to you, Madam President, High Staff,*” she continued, nodding towards Mesaiima. “*I won’t even begin to tell you what to do in that regard.*”

“We’ve already gotten a full briefing of the objective of the negotiation,” Mesaiima answered. “We just need their language so we can talk to them.”

“Kim, you need to approach the planet very carefully in the Lexington,” Meya ordered. *“It’s going to be very intimidating to them given its size compared to their orbital assets and spacefaring craft. Make sure you tell your navigator to move slow, move carefully, and don’t give them any reason to think your ship is hostile. Come into telepathic range at a crawl and make sure you establish contact before allowing the diplomat to launch in a dropship. Military wise, you have nothing to worry about. We got our scans back, and this civilization doesn’t even have arms on their ships. They’re absolutely no threat to you.”*

“Got it, Boss,” she nodded in reply.

“Have you cracked their comm?” Jason asked.

“They use old-style EM modulation, and we’ve logged their ops frequencies,” Meya answered. *“That means that they don’t have real time comm with the other two planets. There’s gonna be a three-minute delay to planet two and a five minute delay to planet four.”*

“Cybi, get a couple of gravband comm relay beacons out there that can emulate EM transmission on any frequency band,” Jason ordered. “We should have four or five of them in the warehouse from when Kim had us build them for Terra.”

“They’re on Terra, but I can get them here in about forty minutes,” Cybi answered from a speaker. *“You can make two short stops at planets two and four and launch them, and they’ll be ready by the time you get to planet three and have their language uploaded.”*

“That’ll work,” Kim agreed.

The briefing ended just moments after that, and they spent the time waiting for the relay beacons going over the data the probes had gathered. “This is what Berya looked like four thousand years ago,” Ethikk mused as they studied an image of planet three. “The tiny station, the craft that takes cycles to get from planet to planet. I wonder if they have any inkling what they’re about to see. How it might change them.”

“I know, and it worries me, almost as much as the simple fact that nothing’s ever gonna be the same for them after this,” Jason grunted. “But we don’t have much choice. The Articles of Confederation don’t allow us to just walk in there and set up our equipment without their permission. Well, to be honest, I kinda already *did*, but I can’t *leave* it there without their permission. They qualify as a spacefaring race, so that means they have sovereign control over their star system.”

“I wonder, should we invite them into the Confederation?” Mesaiima asked.

“That’s a matter for the council, not for us,” Ethikk said. “But the bigger question is, should we allow them to send students to the Academy? You can almost guarantee that they’ll demand some of our advances in return for their cooperation.”

“Haven’t you allowed other civilizations not far above their tech in?” she asked Jason.

“We don’t bar anyone from the Academy, it’s open to anyone and everyone that wants to advance the cause of knowledge, but they have to be able to *get there*,” Jason said simply. “We use that as a roadblock to keep out species whose civilizations would collapse or descend into war if they gained access to advanced tech. But with these species...I dunno yet. We’ll see after we talk to them. If they’re the kind of people I think I can live with, and I’m fairly sure that them learning Confederate standard tech won’t destabilize their government or society, I’ll allow them access to the Academy. That’s why we let the Rakarri in,” he chuckled. “They went from butter churns and animal-pulled carriages to replicators and hovercars, but their society didn’t fragment or break down because of it. Not every species out there is that resilient.”

“That’s the truth,” Ethikk agreed.

“We’ll see how they react to first contact. That says a lot about a species,” Jason added. “The Rakarri were intensely curious and courteous, but we’ve had a few first contacts that broke down into violence. Those are the ones we tag and leave alone.”

“And how many species have you made first contact with, Jason?” Ethikk asked lightly.

“About thirty. These KES scout ships actually *do* go out and explore stuff, Ethikk,” he said with a smile. “When we come across a sentient, organized species, we make first contact to trade for their agricultural products, so we can study them and see if they’re worth growing and exporting. Fourteen of those first contact situations ended in violence.”

“Nobody permanently hurt, I hope,” Mesaiima said in concern.

“We’re pretty careful about making sure our first contact teams are protected,” he assured her. “And the team is always led by a top-tier telepath, the one that does the language lift and upload. She usually quells things before they get too dangerous.”

“But not every time.”

“Not every time, which is why the first contact team either wears armor or formal robes made out of a pliable armor mesh cloth that can stop almost any archaic or low-grade energy weapon,” he nodded. “They also go in with personal shield generators.”

“Barka’s pillar, you miniaturized a hard shield down to that size?”

“The shield is a resonant tetryon shield, Ethikk, something that couldn’t stop most Confederate weapons...but in these first contact situations, most of the time the other guy doesn’t have a weapon that can penetrate a shield like that. Now, the seven times we’ve made first contact with more advanced civilizations, we’ve taken more precautions, and upgrade their defensive gear to match the tech of the other guy.”

“Seven?”

“Don’t get speculative, Ethikk, all seven are in the Confederation now,” Jason chuckled. “The six empires in the R quadrant that all joined as a block last year, and the Dakk.”

“I like Mufar,” Mesaiima said. “He’s quite the jovial fellow.”

After the probes arrived, they executed the jump. They sat on the bridge with Yeri’s first contact specialist to watch Kimmy do her job, stopping at each of the outer planets to launch the beacon, then she jumped to the third planet and started a half hour cruise in at sublight. The locals didn’t notice them until the ship was very nearly at the station, because they didn’t have sensor technology. They only knew the ship was there when it got close

enough to see. There was no initial visible reaction, but the EM transmissions spiked around the station as the ship approached, which was strong evidence they knew the ship was there. The navigator did a great job creeping up on them very slowly, making no sudden or threatening moves, getting the ship within six kathra of the station.

“I have a contact. It’s a telepath,” the diplomatic officer declared, a finger to her temple. She was one of Yeri’s most experienced first contact specialists, Ria Melalle. “They agree to a face to face meeting.”

“What kind of talent is it?” Jason asked.

“Strong,” she answered. “Very nearly at the level of an Imperial Marine. Kim, they want you to hold position here,” she called.

“Sure thing. All stop!” she barked.

“Aye sir, answering all stop,” the navigator answered.

“They want to meet me at the docking ring,” she said, creating a hologram in front of her with her interface and pointing to the location. “We don’t have a physical docking clamp to match their equipment.”

“You have to go in under armor, Ria,” Jason warned. “Tell them you have to come in using a self-propelled space suit, that we can’t dock with them. Your armor is first contact, right?”

“Of course it is, Jason,” she replied, standing up. “I’ll go put it on.”

“What’s different about that?” Ethikk asked curiously.

“It has a personal resonant tetryon shield incorporated into it, but no weapons except monomolecular blades,” he answered. “Those don’t register to an energy scan, so most potentially hostile species don’t detect them.”

It took Ria about fifteen minutes to get ready, then she started on her way. She exited from the scout ship’s landing bay and slowly floated over to the space station, which had a rotating outer ring to simulate gravity, and then floated into an open airlock. The doors closed behind her, and Jason brought up the telemetry of her armor, which gave them a visual from the cameras on her helmet and embedded into the upper chest, shoulders, and back of the armor. After pressurizing, two of the Terran-like species

wearing what were clearly combat uniforms opened the heavy inner door, who were armed with rifles of some kind, and they escorted her into the hallway beyond, where four of the Terran-like beings and two of the very small feline creatures were standing. They were all wearing white uniforms with red heraldry. Ria took off her helmet and then stepped up to those six people.

They couldn't hear what was going on because Ria was sending, but after about ten minutes, she removed her gauntlet and stepped up, offering her bare hand to one of them. One of the humanoids advanced and took her hand, and they stood silently for several long moments.

"Getting upload now," Cybi's voice came from a nearby speaker. *"Ria is uploading three separate languages to the Academy mainframe. Decoding. Decoding successful, Initiating download into the bionoids."* A flood of data was dumped into his bionoid's memory, and within seconds, Jason was fully fluent in languages known as Pai, Mua, and Ebridi. There was additional data with the languages, basic information about the two races in the system. Pai was the language of the felines. Mua was the language of the humanoids. And they spoke Ebridi as a "common" language, which was used for all official functions between their governments.

Their government wasn't unified. It was an alliance, with separate governments on the two homeworlds of the races that had a cooperative organization between them that handled space travel and colonization of their shared planet. This cooperative organization didn't really have any political power outside of its very strict role as space agency and arbiter of the neutral planet they both colonized, but the two governments were on very good terms with one another. So, Mesaiima and Ethikk would have to negotiate two separate agreements, one with each of them.

"We will give you one *koi* to warn your governments, and then we will initiate contact with them on their command channel," Ria said aloud in Ebridi, which they could hear over telemetry. "I will not be conducting that negotiation. Members of our government's ruling council are aboard our ship and will be conducting the negotiation."

"We will send the message immediately," one of the humanoids answered in Ebridi.

“I will return to my ship now, Commander,” she said, putting her helmet back on. “Go with the grace of Meb.”

“Safe journey.”

“I think we’d better handle this separately, Ethikk,” Mesaiima ventured after the meeting was over. “I’ll negotiate with the Muri, you negotiate with the Pai.”

“Sounds like a plan to me,” he agreed. “I may relate a little better to a short fur-covered species with a tail than you.”

She had to laugh.

Because of the split negotiation, Jason was rather sulkily left out of most of it. He sat in the briefing room with them as they sat on opposite sides of the room, communicating by video with the respective rulers of their governments. For the Pai, it was a monarch, a young and fuzzily cute king, but for the Muri, it was a council of five older-looking men and women. They spoke for about an hour on each side, and then, *finally*, the separate negotiations were merged, and Jason was brought into it. “This is the Grand Duke Jason Karinne, who will be the one who will be actually moving equipment into your system,” Mesaiima introduced to both parties.

“Actually, it’s already here,” Jason admitted. “We had to place it as an emergency measure, because time was critical. But we can’t *leave* it here without the direct authorization of both of your governments. If you tell us to remove it, we will remove it.”

“And this device will keep this invading navy out of our star system?” the Pai monarch asked, whose name was Mrrsha.

Jason was *not* surprised.

“Yes, your Majesty,” Jason answered. “It interferes with the engines they use to travel between stars but will in no way impact or interfere with your own equipment and technology. You won’t even know it’s here. All we need is your permission to leave it in your territory, we currently have it placed in orbit around the first planet of your star system. Our laws usually forbid us from doing so without your consent, but we’re currently at war with the government who is sending that fleet here, and that gave me the legal authority to place the device first, *then* ask your permission to allow it

to remain. Since you share this system between you, we require permission from both of your governments to leave it here. Once the threat is passed, we would be most agreeable to discuss opening official diplomatic relations and trade channels with both of your governments. Our people are always looking for new species of food plants to grow for our populations, so we would be most eager to trade samples of your crops and seeds to grow them for textiles and raw materials.”

“We can discuss the specifics of future trade possibilities at a later time,” the most senior Muri on their governing council stated, his voice dignified and measured. “I would want to know more about this invading force. This *Syndicate*. Are they truly a threat to the entire galaxy?”

“Sadly so, your Eminence,” Mesaiima answered. “They originate from the large galaxy across the cluster from our own, which we call *Andromeda*, and their purpose here is nothing less than to conquer every sentient race in the galaxy. The threat of them is the reason the Confederation came into being, to match their endless numbers with sufficient ships and soldiers to push them back. Why they are coming to *your* star system is simple bad luck. They chose your star system purely at random as the rally point for their divided fleet to rejoin into a single force. Our device is meant to prevent that from happening, for if they manage to do so, they represent a military force that not even we can easily defeat. And that military force will be in orbit around your planets, where they will no doubt conquer you.”

“And you can present irrefutable evidence of this?”

“We can,” she replied with a nod.

“We would see this evidence. And if it proves true, you will have our support,” he declared. “*But* we demand an audience with your full Confederate Council, at their place of meeting. We demand you take a diplomatic detachment there so they might be presented with this evidence, then either return them home or arrange a way for us to communicate with them from that location so they may report their findings.”

[*These Muri are fairly savvy,*] Ethikk communed in appreciation.

[*They are quite cunning. Nearly as cunning as a Prakarikai, just without the pompous attitude,*] Mesaiima agreed.

“I think my Muran Council friends have a good idea,” the Pai monarch agreed. “I will send one of my daughters to this Confederate Council to learn more of this threat, and she will return what she learns to me.”

“We can do so, esteemed friends, but it must be done quickly. The enemy fleet will be here in just two *modo*, and we must secure your authorization to leave the device here before they arrive to prevent them from entering your system” Jason warned. “Time is a factor.”

“Then we waste it sitting here talking. Is your ship capable of making a landing to pick up our envoys?”

“It can launch a small personal transport to pick up passengers,” Jason answered. “It can visit both planets and have them aboard in half a *ba*.”

“Then we will have a diplomatic detachment ready as soon as your ship arrives at our planet,” the council leader declared. “Take them to your Council and explain the threat we face, and once we are convinced of it, you will have our permission to leave your device here.”

“Aye, I agree to that,” Mrrsha said. “Send your transport to my palace, and my daughter Mrri will be waiting to board. She will speak with my voice to your Confederate Council.”

Several moments later, the three of them disengaged from the conference so Kimberly could get specifics about where to go and what to do to pick up the envoys, and Ethikk just had to chuckle. “Methinks we have stumbled across some formidable people here,” he said. “They’re quite clever. And the Pai king is much more clever than he let on. He *let* the Mura demand to take them to Terra.”

“That was fairly smart,” Mesaiima agreed. “The real reason being so they can get a look at our technology.”

“Well, it’s not going to be all that fun for them,” Jason grunted. “Cybi, how long of a jump is it to Hratha Prime from here? That’s the closest Stargate.”

“*Nine minutes*, ” she answered.

“Work it out with Kimmy how to get them to Karis without them suffering jump shock, that’s where the council is right now,” he said. “And I mean remember you’re dealing with hyperspace virgins here, so get

Medical on the case with the biometric data we scanned. They may have to limit their jumps to ten seconds at a time.”

“Ohhh, that’s right, they don’t have jacks,” Mesaiima breathed.

“Kinda funny how quickly we forget what doesn’t bother us anymore,” Ethikk chuckled dryly.

“Cybi, just in case they can’t do hyperspace at all, how long would it take us to get a Stargate out here and linked?”

“*Fifteen hours,*” she answered.

“Too long,” Jason growled. “Well, I hope they have strong stomachs.”

“Either way, we’re more or less done here, friends,” Mesaiima said. “I’m sure the council is debating the matter right now, and we should join them. No doubt they’re observing through our telemetry.”

“Well, it’s a good thing I didn’t call anyone any names,” Ethikk said with a grin, which made Jason laugh.

“I do it to their faces,” Jason said with a wink.

“We’ve noticed, Jason,” Mesaiima replied with a sly little smile.

“I’m going to delink for a little while, friends. I have to go to the bathroom,” he admitted.

Jason decided to hang around on the scout ship and was there with Mesaiima and Ethikk to greet their visitors. The Pai princess was utterly *adorable*, only about two shakra tall and with black fur with a white throat that ran up under her chin, heavily suggesting that her hidden tummy under her tunic was also white. Unlike most canoid and feline species, she had two very Terran-like pronounced breasts, and her legs were plantigrade, again very Terran. But given she was a heavy gravity species, when she took Jason’s hand in greeting, he felt her *powerful* grip. She had a high-pitched yet soft voice, and like many furry mammal-based species in the Confederation, she didn’t have hair. But the fur on her head was longer than the rest of her body, giving the illusion of it. She wore a sheer blue tunic without sleeves or leggings, the tunic ending at her mid-thighs, almost like a one-piece dress, and she wore no shoes. He had to all but kneel down to

take her hand in greeting, and she gave him the strangest look. “Your Highness, I’m the Grand Duke Jason Karinne,” he greeted.

“Princess Mrri,” she replied, her voice distracted, her ears tilting back and forth almost crazily.

“Are you alright, your Highness?”

“I—yes,” she replied, looking up at him. “But I must ask, your Grace. Are all your species robots?”

He blinked, then gave a chuckle. “No, your Highness. I should have suspected you could smell the fact that this is synthetic,” he said, touching his chest. “We call this device a *bionoid*. While it’s a machine, I can assure you, you’re addressing a living, flesh and blood person. I’m connected to this device so that I can see and hear through it. It’s a bit complicated.”

“Is that what that is?” she asked, looking up at him, her ears swiveling back to him. “It’s, well, it’s going too fast for me to understand.”

He gave her a surprised look. “Are you a telepath, your Highness?”

“Yes,” she replied. “Some of what I can hear is going way too fast, or it’s talking like a machine. But some of it I can understand, it’s like telepathy on a different bandwidth,” she said, looking at Mesaiima and Ethikk.

[She can hear communion, she must be a very strong and well-trained telepath,] Jason told them.

“Is that what you call it? Communion?”

Jason gave her a stunned look. She, she *understood* communion? He knelt in front of her, getting his eyes more level with hers—she really was very tiny—and looked her right in the eyes. *[Can you hear this, your Highness?]*

“Of course I can, but I’m not sure I can respond the same way. It’s... well, it’s the *weirdest* form of telepathy I’ve ever encountered.” She looked a bit confused as all three of them gaped at her. “Is there something wrong?”

“No, your Highness,” Jason said quickly. “It’s just that you’re the first telepath we’ve ever encountered outside of the builders of these bionoids

that can understand communion,” he told her, his mind racing. How? *How?* the Generations were engineered to be able to understand communion, but this tiny little feline female could do it *naturally*! They’d never encountered *any* species that could do that! He sent that little revelation back to Cybi as he thought furiously about the drastic and immediate impact this was going to have, the most important of which would be to find out if this female was the exception or the rule. If the Pai telepaths as a species could understand communion...that was *huge*. “If you don’t mind a suggestion, you’re going to find being on this ship a bit confusing unless you block out the parts of what you’re hearing that you can’t understand. Trust me, it takes some practice when so many machines are communing back and forth at each other.”

“It’s the *machines* doing that?” she asked in surprise.

“Yes,” he answered honestly. “Part of our technology is based on machines that can use a very specialized form of telepathy. And you are part of a very, very small minority of people that can understand it.”

“So that’s why it sounds like a machine...because it *is*,” she mused, looking around, then back at him. “And you’re using this telepathic communion to control that robot from a different location, like seeing through the eyes and ears of someone else by telepathic union?”

“Exactly, your Highness,” he said with a nod. “In reality, I’m about a quarter of the way across the galaxy from here, as are the President and High Staff,” he added, motioning at the others. “We use these bionoids in first contact situations as a safety measure. If a meeting goes terribly wrong and breaks down to the point where things get violent, the only thing at risk are a few machines, not our lives.”

She looked up at him, then gave him a knowing nod. “That’s fairly prudent,” she agreed.

“If you’re ready, we have a stateroom nearby where we can sit and talk as we travel to planet Muros to pick up the Muri delegation,” Mesaiima said, motioning towards the door to the companionway. “The trip should take about twenty of your *eo*i. While we’re traveling, I’m sure we can discuss things with you.”

They settled in a fairly nice waiting room not far from the landing bay in the scout ship, and Jason sat down across from the Pai princess. He explained communion in a little more detail with her as they cruised for planet four, Muros, at about half the speed of light, and found that Princess Mrri was quite formidable on top of her surprising talent. She had just graduated from school with a degree in astrophysics, and she was *far* more interested in how they were going half the speed of light than she was in communion.

That worked for him. He needed time to discuss this with the CBIMs and Myleena before they made any moves.

So, she managed to bait him into quite a conversation about sublight physics as they approached the outer planet, and they stayed in the stateroom as Ethikk and Mesaiima went to the landing bay to greet the Muri delegation. He enticed her into telling him how the Pai and Muri came to form their cooperative space exploration agency, how they managed to make contact with each other and establish peaceful relations. “We discovered that Muros was inhabited by another species about four hundred years ago, but there wasn’t much we could do about it,” she told him. “We observed them through telescopes, and after a few years, we realized they were doing the same to us. So we started signaling each other using large mirrors. About ten years after we made that contact, we worked out a basic code with the Muri using mathematics. And later, when we developed radio technology, we started broadcasting those code signals into space. Eventually, they started answering, I suppose when they developed their own radio technology. We used mathematical codes to communicate with each other for, oh, about a hundred years or so, managed to build a very complicated language using math, until the Muri developed rocket technology. They managed to get a space probe to Paian, holding schematics on how to build the rockets ourselves. It took us a little while, but we eventually figured out their schematics and started building our own rockets.

“We traded scientific advances with each other over the next couple of decades, because we made a deal to try to meet on Javi, the third planet. It was too far to try to get all the way to Muros from Paian, and Paian is lethal to the Muri due to the gravity, so both of us were working to reach the planet in the middle, so we could officially meet face to face. That took

about forty years. One hundred and thirty-nine years ago, the Pai met the Muri on Javi, and we decided to establish the Cooperative. The Cooperative oversees Javi on behalf of both our species and coordinates with us and the Muri to advance science and space exploration.”

“That’s a very interesting story, your Highness,” Jason said as the hatch opened, and his friends returned with three Muri. They were a bit shorter than the average Faey on the average and looked so Terran that they could walk down any street on Terra and not get a second glance. Two of them were male and the third female, and they were clearly being led by the tallest and oldest of the three. All three wore maroon tunics with silver heraldry, a wide black belt, and a maroon kilt-like wrap with a black hem around their legs that ended at the top of their knee-high boots. Jason and the Princess stood as they entered the stateroom, and Jason shook the hand of the leading Muri. “Your Eminence, I’m Jason Karinne,” he greeted.

“How have you been, Methus?” Mrri asked the older gentleman. “It’s good to see you again.”

“I’m not surprised at all your father would send you, Princess Mrri,” he said with a smile. “You are his most competent daughter.”

“Aww,” she sounded modestly.

“Your Grace, may I present my fellow diplomats, Havill Bross and Kenli Hargan, members of the Muri Republic’s diplomatic corps.”

“It’s good to meet you,” Jason said, taking the hands of the two younger Muri. “If everyone would come in and have a seat, I’ll inform the captain that we’re ready to begin our trip. But there are few things we need to warn you about as we cruise out away from your planet. We have to be a minimum distance from your planet’s gravity well to travel out of the star system, the time it takes to get to jump distance will give us time to explain what’s going to happen.”

Jason had them sit down, Ethikk and Mesaiima doing the same, but Jason stood up and faced them. “Our trip to meet the council is going to take about a *ba* of time, but one leg of that trip is going to be...very challenging for you,” he explained. “How this ship moves between stars is by *jumping* out of three-dimensional space and into the upper dimensions of space-time, where distances are much, much shorter.”

Mmri gave a gasp. “The hyperspace theory! It’s *true*!”

“Yes, it’s true, your Highness,” Jason nodded. “But what you have to understand is that our three-dimensional minds are incapable of comprehending hyperspace, and while we’re in hyperspace, you’re going to suffer vivid and powerful sensory hallucinations. That’s your brain trying to make sense out of something it was never designed to experience. Extended exposure to hyperspace has a detrimental effect, so what we’re going to do is make a series of very short jumps with rest periods in between, as we evaluate how resilient your species are to hyperspace exposure. Some species have very strong resistance to the effects of hyperspace, and some do not. Once we have an idea of how long of a jump you can manage, we’ll be extending the length of each jump until we arrive at our destination.”

“Well, that sound ominous,” the female Muri, Kenli, chuckled.

“The good news is that the trip, if we were to take it in one jump, will only be about twelve *eo*. When we arrive at Hratha Prime, we’ll be traveling on to the host planet for the Council using a device called a Stargate.”

“Artificial wormholes!” Mmri realized.

He nodded. “We can’t just move around the machines that create them due to how long and arduous a process it is to turn it off and turn it back on, but that’s effectively what a Stargate is. The gate at Hratha Prime is linked to a sister gate in a system called Terra, and once we’re at Terra we’ll travel to another gate that leads to Karis. That leg of the journey will take about half a *ba*. You should be meeting the council to discuss the right of passage treaty in about one and a half *ba*, then we will bring you home so you can confer with your governments.”

“It sounds quite efficient,” Methus said. “How large is your Confederation?”

“It represents one hundred and fifty-nine different civilizations or empires from all over the galaxy, your Eminence,” Mesaiima said. “Some are vast empires that span multiple sectors of the galaxy, like my esteemed friend the High Staff’s Alliance, while some are just single planets, such as my own and the Grand Duke’s worlds. The size of the governments doesn’t matter to the Confederation, because it was formed as mutual defense

against the Andromedan invaders. We are all bound together in the common goal of protecting ourselves against the two galaxy-spanning empires from Andromeda, the Consortium and the Syndicate, who are both sending fleets to establish a foothold in our galaxy so they may invade and conquer.”

There was a shimmering flash outside the window, and all four of their passengers gasped. “By the claws of Mraka, what *is* that thing? It’s gigantic!” Mrri blurted as the *Pegasus* pulled up with the scout ship, about ten kathra to port.

“There’s gotta be over a hundred ships out there!” the other male Muri, Havill, said with wide eyes.

“That’s the *Pegasus*, a fleet command ship, escorting a task force of assorted Confederate ships,” Jason said, standing up. “But I had no idea it was coming.”

“It’s the size of a city!” Methus exclaimed.

[Jeya, what are you doing here?] Jason demanded, which made Mrri’s ears swivel towards him.

[We just intercepted and destroyed a Syndicate squadron that jumped for the system early,] she answered. *[Lorna decided that there’s too much of a risk that your ship may get ambushed at a rest point on the trip to Hratha Prime, Jayce. The Syndicate forces are jumping all over the place, almost randomly, we think it’s one of the counter strategies they’re implementing. There are three different Syndicate task forces within a ten-minute jump from here, and Myri’s afraid they’ll pick up the Lexington on a long range sensor scan and attack. So, if you don’t mind me pulling rank, we need to get you and the emissaries transferred over to my ship, and we’ll be taking you back to Karis.]*

[Alright. Contact Kimmy and get her navs, we’re using special protocols since the diplomats have never jumped hyperspace before.]

[Will do, Jayce. I’m sending over a dropship to pick you up.]

“Alright, it seems that the orders were changed and just hadn’t reached us,” Jason said aloud. “The captain of that big ship just told me that there are Syndicate forces within striking distance of our planned route to Hratha

Prime, so they sent a task force to bring you safely to Karis. They don't want you to be on this ship by itself, that it may invite attack."

"And we'll be safe aboard that ship?" Methus asked.

"My dear emissary, you will be quite safe," Mesaiima told him in a calm voice. "That is the *Pegasus*, one of the most powerful ships in the Confederate Combined Military. The Syndicate retreats when they see that ship enter the theater. They know just how formidable it is."

"He's a good ship, with a great captain and crew," Jason said proudly. "Now, if you don't mind, we're going to board another transport and transfer over to the *Pegasus*."

They returned to the landing bay, and while they waited, Jason decided to take a few precautions. He'd worked out that Princess Mrri could understand basic organic commune but couldn't understand computer data transfer or modulated comm commune, so he made sure to transmit by modulated commune to the *Pegasus*. [*Jeya, listen carefully,*] he ordered. [*We have a potential security risk coming on board. I want you to send down the order right now that no classified information is sent, received, or discussed over unmodulated or unencrypted commune. Order your crew to commune only by modulated shortrange comm.*]

[*I'll send the order now, Jason. May I ask why?*]

[*One of our dignitaries can understand organic commune,*] he told her. [*So nothing important or sensitive is to be communed without it being modulated by a transmitter, relayed by a biogenic computer as raw data, or encrypted.*]

[*Wow. I'll take care of it, Jason. And if I might add, if this dignitary isn't some kind of freakish coincidence, we should consider encrypting all ship operation commune as basic operating procedure from now on.*]

[*After meeting her adorable cute and fuzziness Princess Mrri, I think that's a damn good idea,*] he grunted mentally in agreement. [*We just discovered that commune isn't as secure as we thought it was.*]

A fairly large dropship landed in the landing bay, and they ushered their guests on board. Jason hadn't considered what might be waiting for them in the main landing bay of the *Pegasus*, however. The four diplomats skidded

to a halt and gaped as a Faey Knight exomech walked by with two Gladiators, and an element of four Skaa *Grazkik* exomechs stood near a maintenance console. It wasn't unusual for a command ship operating in hostile territory to carry forces from other governments. "What manner of machines are those?" Mrri gasped, looking at the Knight, which had stopped close to them.

"We call them *exomechs*, your Highness. They're robotic fighting machines much akin to heavy tanks or mechanized armor, controlled by a pilot. Knight rigger, open your cockpit," Jason called in Faey. The four gasped when she did so, and the Faey rigger inside, an Imperial Marine no less, stepped out enough so they could see her. She took off helmet and smiled down at them, showing that pattern beautiful Faey face and dark green hair that was very nearly shaved to a crew cut, with just a flare of longer hair over her eyes. "Some of our foes are giants, standing at the same height as our robots, so we built them to be able to counter them in ground combat."

"How does a pilot control a device like that?" Methus asked.

"By telepathy, using those telepathic machines," Mrri blurted.

"Knight exomechs are controlled by direct mind to machine interface," he answered. "You see that metal device resting under her left eye? That is a small computer directly connected to her brain, and that device acts as a bridge between her and her exomech, connecting them together. When she pilots her exomech, she literally *becomes* the machine. She can move it like her own body and has complete control over it. Go ahead and get back in your mecha, Marine. Thanks," he called in Faey.

"Any time, your Grace," she answered with a smile, putting her helmet back on and backing into the cockpit. The doors and armored shell closed over her, and the sleek, graceful exomech began moving again.

"Your science is almost like magic," Methus breathed soberly. "Such things are the conjecture of science fiction authors on my world."

"But it's still science, your Eminence," Jason told him. "If you'd follow me, there's a very well-appointed stateroom very close to this landing bay. I'm sure you'll find it comfortable."

After leading them to the stateroom, Jeya herself came down to greet them. She was in her armor but without her helmet, and he was reminded yet again how adorable Jeya was. She was the youngest flag officer in the KMS. “Your Highness, your Eminences, this is the captain of the *Pegasus*, Jeya Karinne,” Jason greeted as Jeya reached them. “It’s long been a tradition of her military for the captain to personally greet distinguished guests that travel aboard her ship.”

“It is an honor to greet all of you,” she said in flawless Ebridi. “As the Grand Duke said, it’s been our tradition for the captain to greet honored guests, but unfortunately, I was delayed on the bridge and couldn’t greet you as you arrived. It’s also long been a tradition of the Karinne Navy to offer our distinguished guests a tour of the ship, which we can begin once we complete our hyperspace jumps. Would you be interested in a tour?”

“Oh very much so!” Mrri said almost immediately, even going to the extreme of standing on the seat of her chair.

“I would be quite interested to see what you’re willing to show us, Captain,” Methus agreed.

“I’d be happy to show you around the ship personally, your Eminences, your Highness. But first, we have to finish our jumps. If it pleases you, two technicians and a supervising physician are going to arrive shortly to help you prepare for the jumps, and the doctor will be here to evaluate your resistance to hyperspace after our first two jumps, so we can lengthen or shorten our jump durations to minimize your discomfort while still getting us to Hratha Prime as quickly as possible.”

“That sounds quite acceptable, Captain,” Methus said, and Mrri nodded in agreement.

It turned out the Muri and the Pai were fairly resilient when it came to hyperspace travel. They certainly didn’t like it very much—nobody really did—but the doctor decided after a very brief assessment of the four of them that the task force could extend their jumps out to two minute intervals with about fifteen minutes of rest between them. They managed to reach Hratha Prime in about an hour, and once they were there, Jeya took them on a tour of the ship as they cruised in under sublight. Jason, Ethikk, and Mesaiima tagged along as she took them through several operational

sections, then showed them a part of engineering, showed them the main hangar bay where twenty Wolf fighters and twenty Gladiators and Juggernauts were parked, then took them up to the bridge. They were on the bridge when the ship passed through the Hratha Prime Stargate and entered Terran space, and their four guests gawked when they saw Terra hanging in the distance, with thousands upon thousands of ships in orbit around it, as well as moving around them as they traveled to and from the Stargate. “That large station there is the Terra Entry Station for the Hrathrari Empire,” Jeya said as she pointed at the large station on the forward view holo. “It handles all cargo and passengers that move between Terra and the Hrathrari Empire. Every member of the Confederation has a Stargate leading to their territory, and each empire utilizes an entry station to control what enters and leaves their territory. Terra is something of the unofficial capitol of the Confederation, if it had one. Most of the cooperative agencies that were formed to support Confederate activities are based on Terra, and Terra is the host planet of official meetings of the Confederate Council, as well as the hub of our transportation system. All gates lead to Terra, as many in the Confederation say,” she said with a light smile. “It is considered a neutral planet by all parties, owned by no empire and open to all.”

“And what is *that*?” Mrri asked, pointing at a side view holo, where the massive *Tianne* was hanging in space. It must have completed its sortie and returned to Terra for its next assignment.

“That is the Karinne Navy’s flagship, the *Tianne*,” Jeya answered. “It’s the largest ship in the Confederate Combined Military, commanded by Palla Karinne, one of the best ship captains in the Confederation,” she added, a bit proudly.

“It’s the size of the island of Marrida!” Mrri blurted.

“It is fairly big,” Jason agreed mildly. “It has to be to do what it was built for.”

“What is that, your Grace?” Methus asked.

“If you think that ship is big, you haven’t seen the ships our enemies use,” he said seriously. “Some of them are the size of *moons*. And I’m not

in any way exaggerating. The *Tianne* was built with the specific mission to destroy the giant ships of our enemies.”

“Truly?” Mrri asked.

He nodded. “We’ll be presenting you with that information when you meet with the Confederate Council,” he told them.

“So, that is one of *your* ships, your Grace?” Kenli asked.

“It is, your Eminence,” he answered with a nod.

“And yet you said that your territory is a single planet?”

“We’re very good at building things, your Eminence,” he answered dryly, which made Jeya smile. “It’s our niche in the Confederation.”

“The House of Karinne is an integral part of the Confederation for that very reason,” Ethikk chuckled in agreement. “They are among the most skilled engineers in the galaxy.”

“I notice that your bridge is very large, Captain,” Methus said.

“This ship often functions as the flag in a task force or fleet, so it was designed to coordinate battle operations for a task force,” she replied. “Most of the personnel you see behind my chair are here for fleet operations, while the people in front of my chair manage ship operations.”

They continued to chat about most anything the emissaries could get Jeya and the members of the Council to reveal, being rather clever about it, until they passed through the Karis gate and inserted into orbit around Karis. They transferred to a dropship, piloted by Aura no less, and were ferried directly to the Sora Karinne Complex. Dahnai was standing at the pad in her formal dress robes, and it was the *real* her. She’d come over from the summer palace. She stepped forward when Aura opened the hatch and extended the stairs, and Jason escorted the emissaries down onto the pad. “Your Eminences, your Highness, this is her Imperial Majesty, Empress Dahnai Merrane of the Faey Imperium,” Jason introduced. “She is the current head of the Confederate Council.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, your Highness, your Eminences,” she said with a nod of her head. “As the holder of the gavel for the Council, I felt it my duty to come greet you and conduct you to the council chambers

myself. If you'd follow me," she offered, motioning towards the main entry doors with her hand.

"Are all the council except the Empress represented by those machines?" Mrri asked.

"Yes," Jason answered. "Though Empress Dahnai does have her own machine. Me and the Empress have a very special and close relationship, and she owns a private retreat here on the planet. But she usually doesn't attend council in person, she uses her bionoid just because it's more convenient than flying all the way over here from her summer palace and back again when council is done. I usually use a bionoid as well, so I don't have to travel back and forth. But I promised her Highness I'd meet her in person, so I came over while we were jumping hyperspace. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm going to go stow this bionoid," Jason said. "I'll meet you in the Hall of Peace. My true self is there right now, so you'll be meeting me in person in just a few minutes."

Jason greeted them for real at the door into the main council chamber, shaking their hands again and noting Mrri's look of intense curiosity. "I know, I look the same," he said with a smile. "The bionoids are built to resemble us as precisely as possible."

"If you didn't smell different, I'd swear you were the same person," Mrri laughed.

"I wanted to look much more handsome, but no, they had to go for complete authenticity," he said blandly, which made the three Muri laugh.

The session went fairly well. With Dahnai at the lectern, they explained everything to the emissaries, showing them holos of the Syndicate ships, the Benga, and the Consortium and their bug soldiers, then explained the situation to them in detail. Jason wasn't paying much attention to that, however, since he was engaged in a deep discussion with the CBIMs and Coma over the revelation that little Princess Mrri could hear and *understand* organic commune. But all they could really do was talk about it, at least until they got more information. And that meant they needed to get Princess Mrri alone and administer a few tests.

In all, the conference went very well. They conferred with the emissaries for about two hours, presenting all their evidence, with a promise

from both Mrri and the Muri that they would advocate in strong terms to allow them to leave the interdictor in their system. The council session ended as the other leaders deactivated their bionoids and Dahnai returned to the summer palace, leaving Jason alone in the council chamber with the emissaries and the guards, at least until Yeri arrived, wearing formal robes. “This is Secretary Yeri from my diplomatic corps, and she’ll be escorting you from here.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet all of you, your Highness, your Eminences,” Yeri said smoothly, giving Mrri a fluid bow. “I’m sure we can also discuss possible permanent communication channels after you make contact with your governments to pass on what you have learned.”

“The Confederation already arranged for open channels.”

“With the *Confederation*,” Yeri said. “I’m talking about with the House of Karinne. While we are members of the Confederation, each member of it is a sovereign state, which minds its own affairs. Since we are the ones that sent our ships to bring you here, it’s only fair that we get the first chance to establish permanent ties with both your governments.”

“Are you talking potential trade, Madam Secretary?” Methus asked with sudden interest.

“Among other things, your Eminence,” she replied with a smile. “I think his Grace did mention that we are *always* looking to trade for new food crop varieties, so we will most definitely be discussing trading for some of your food plants. But there are some other potential opportunities that we can discuss,” she said liltingly. “We have quarters arranged for you in the city where you can rest after you contact your home governments. Hyperspace travel can be quite taxing, after all, and we wouldn’t force you to have to do it again so soon, not when you’re not used to it. I assure you, you can ask to return to your home planets at any time, but if you would like to stay here on Karis and discuss things, we’d be happy to host you.”

“I think you don’t need us to answer that question, Madam Secretary,” Methus said with a slight smile. “Of course we’ll stay to conduct additional talks. I take it you have communication technology that will let us speak with our governments in real time?”

“We already have it arranged, your Eminence,” she nodded. “And you, your Highness? Do you wish to remain a while longer to conduct talks, or return to your home planet?”

“I’ll certainly be staying,” she replied.

“Very well then. I’ll escort you to a communication room here in the complex where you can discuss your findings with your governments, and hopefully get a reply to our request to install interdiction in your home system. Afterward, I’ll escort you to quarters befitting your station here in Karsa where you may take a brief rest, then we can meet and discuss the potential in establishing permanent relations with both the Confederation and the House of Karinne.”

“I’ll leave you to it,” Jason said. “I skipped out on quite a bit of work, so I need to get back to it. Secretary Yeri will be at your service whenever you call for her, your Eminences, your Highness. She’ll explain the process by which you can contact her, and she’ll take good care of you while you’re here. And let me affirm what she said. You may ask to return to your home planets at any time,” he stressed. “The *Pegasus* and its task force will be standing by to take you home whenever you call for it.”

“I appreciate your concern, your Grace, but I believe I may be here a few *modo*,” Mrri said, looking up at a smiling Yeri. “There are a great many things that I wish to discuss with Secretary Yeri.”

“As do we,” Methus agreed with a nod.

“You have as much time as you need, your Highness, your Eminences,” Jason assured them.

Once Jason was back on a dropship and heading home, Aya gave him a sidelong, sly look. *You have something planned*, she accused.

That tiny little Pai can understand organic commune, so we need to find out just how extensive her abilities are when it comes to commune and biogenics.

Seriously?

Yes. She can’t understand computers transmitting data or telemetry, and neither can I for that matter, but she can understand commune framed so an organic mind can understand it. If it turns out she can mimic other

Generation abilities, well, it puts her entire species at risk, he grunted mentally. Unfortunately, Ethikk and Mesaiima know about her, so it's going to spread through the council. So we need to test her and see how similar her telepathic talents are to Generations, then find out if she's the norm for her species or a rarity. And naturally, move to protect her and her people, so yes, I do have something planned. After talking to them on the trip up, I don't feel like giving them advanced technology is going to wreck their civilizations, so I'm not against them applying for membership in the Confederation. Both of their species are very mature despite their lack of advanced technology. They're both like the Rakarri, they can handle it. So, I told Yeri to get a head start when it comes to trade deals, and trading technology is on the table, he said, flashing her a quick smile. I told her to tell them about the Academy and offer them the same right we afford everyone else, to send students to it. Her first trade target, though, is transportation. I told her to offer them the services of Karinne civilian transportation services to move people and goods back and forth between their worlds and Javi, the shared planet they both colonized, move their students to and from the Academy, and some other quality of life stuff, like inducers and gravband technology. Her only restriction is she has to trade them Confederate technology, giving it to them before they get into the Academy and start learning how to build it themselves.

Sneaky.

Hey, they came on my ship, that means I get first dibs, he replied shamelessly. Besides, their best bet to not be hassled by some of the more warlike members of the Confederation once it gets out that at least one Pai can understand organic commune is to be members themselves. For the Pai, it's important to get them nice and allied to us as quickly as possible. The Muri are more or less gonna benefit from that arrangement.

That sounds like a good plan, she complemented.

If you think so, then it is, he told her, which made her give him a slight smile.

He got home a bit late, to find that everyone was more or less settled in. He changed into a tank top and shorts, and Ayama and Surin got him some dinner while he sat at the table going through some reports about the day's action against the Syndicate...and it was the same as yesterday. They were

winning more than losing, but it was coming at a cost of ships and lives. For the KMS, the *Alaia* and the *Methai*, fleet battleships, were down for extensive repairs after getting pretty much mauled today. The Syndicate was adapting to their tactics, and primary among them was to focus most of their firepower on the ships that could destroy their super-ships in one attack pass. Those quantum computers were letting that woman Sha Ra send down counter tactics, and that was increasing their repair bills and casualties. They had also adopted a strategy to avoid unfavorable battles by jumping almost randomly, and spending no more than one hour in one place, making it very hard for the Confederation to get a task force there to destroy them or place interdictors in front of them to knock them into normal space and trap them.

They had to do something about that.

He finished going through the reports and came into the living room, where Rann, Shya, and Kyri were watching vidy. As usual, Rann and Shya were taking up as much of the couch as possible, Shya laying with her head in Rann's lap, and Kyri was sitting at the other end. Raisha and Miyai were visiting with Sirri, so Sirri was sitting on the floor in front of Shya and the toddlers were playing with some toys over in the open area near the piano.

He stopped short. Shya looked...she didn't look right. Call it parental instinct, but he could tell just by looking at her that, that something was... something was *wrong*. He came right over to her and leaned down, putting a hand on her forehead, and she was indeed a little warm. *Hey Dad*, she sent. *You're blocking my view*.

You feeling alright?

I feel fine, just a little tired. We were surfing before we came in, she replied. *Why ask?*

Because it's my job, he replied, looking over in the direction of Luke and Songa's house. *Songa, you home?*

Of course I am, dear.

Do me a favor. Activate the medical scanners in the house and have them check Shya.

Give me a few minutes, I have to activate my console.

You're being a bit silly, Dad, Shya protested.

It's my job to be silly, he replied seriously.

Before Songa could get into position, Cybi communed with him.
[Jason, we have a big problem,] she warned. [You need to take both Shya and Sirri to the annex, right now. They need to be placed under medical care immediately.]

[What? What's wrong?]

[The same thing that happened to Miyai is happening to them,] she replied intensely. [I'm detecting a retroviral agent in their systems, and it has already begun rewriting their DNA. It's already started, Jason, and that means that it can't be stopped. By the time Songa could purge the virus out of them, too many cells would be altered for them to remain viable. Their immune systems would literally kill them trying to purge the altered cells out of them.]

He nearly turned white, standing up quickly. *[That's impossible!]*

[Ten minutes ago, I would have agreed with you, Jason, but the scans are unmistakable,] she continued. [I have more data. The virus originated from Miyai, and it seems incompatible with all other DNA except that closely related to her own. Anyone who shares a large segment of Miyai's DNA is at risk, Jason, and that includes Kellin. She can't affect any Faey that doesn't share her DNA. We have to get the girls to the annex and under medical care immediately, to mitigate the chance that it kills them. There is a risk, Jason, a real risk. And if Dahnai and Kellin are also infected, the risk is much greater for them, because they are much older. My records from the initial gene therapy indicate that the older the subject, the greater risk of rejection, or death.]

Aya! Aya, get a car ready to go NOW! he thundered, which probably startled people twenty miles away. *Songa, talk to Cybi! Shya, Sirri, you get up right now, we have to go!*

I'm on the way over right now! Songa replied in a frenzy, her thought shocked and concerned. No doubt Cybi just told her.

Jeez, Dad, what's the matter? Shya asked, leaning up.

I'll tell you on the way over. Get up right now and get into the car.

You're overreacting.

He reached down and bodily picked her up. *I'll show you overreacting*, he replied with absolutely no humor in his thought whatsoever. *Get up now, Sirri. If you don't, I'll have a guard drag you by the hair to the car. Aya, where's that car!*

I called a frigate—

No! We go now! You get the first vehicle you get your hands on out of the garage and get it out onto the pad! Captain Liri, he sent, looking at one of Dahnai's white-armored guards, part of Sirri's detachment. *Get in touch with the guards with Dahnai and tell them to get her and Kellin to the medical annex right fucking now. This is not a joke*, he sent intensely, fear and concern rippling through his thought.

I will. Can you tell me what the emergency is?

Miyai infected Shya and Sirri the same way she was infected by Raisha, he answered. *And that means Dahnai and Kellin may have also been exposed. They need to get to the annex immediately so they can be checked.*

Liri's face paled a bit under her blue skin, and she gave an emphatic nod. *What about the twins?*

Leave them here for the moment, that way they'll be physically separated from Dahnai, Kellin, and Maer. Cybi can run some scans from the house and find out if either of them is in some way contagious. If they weren't exposed, we need to keep them separated until we figure out how it happened and prevent it from happening again.

[I can confirm, Jason. Dahnai has been exposed,] Cybi called. *[She just moved in range of one of the medical scanners in the summer palace. I have no data on Kellin yet, he's out snorkeling. But if Dahnai has been exposed, there's a good chance he has as well.]*

[Fuck! Get her to the annex, Cybi! And find out about Kellin!]

Jason all but ran out the back door and raced for the pad, carrying a no longer amused Shya. Aya had the hatch open on one of the skimmers usually parked there, beside his Nova, and she beckoned to them. *I have fighter escort ready to take us*, she informed him.

This is no time to worry about security! Jason snapped in reply as Sirri, Rann, and Kyri hurried behind him, all three of them confused and a little afraid. He dumped Shya into one of the seats and raced to the cockpit, where Aya was sitting in the pilot's chair. *Get us moving, Aya!*

As soon as everyone's aboard, she answered. In seconds, about ten guards, in both black and white armor, charged through the hatch, and she closed it and picked the skimmer up off the pad.

The mad dash to the annex gave Jason time to think. How did this happen, and why didn't any of the medical scanners in the house or in the summer palace pick it up? How could Miyai have infected the rest of her family? Where in the *fuck* did this retrovirus come from? He knew that there was no way that anyone on Karis would have the *balls* to try to engineer one, Cybi would sniff it out and crush it. But where else could it have come from? And in the actual case that this was somehow natural, what had changed that turned Miyai contagious? How did she infect her sister and mother with a retrovirus that couldn't possibly exist? And why had it taken *years* to show up? The toddlers were three years old now! What had changed in Miyai that caused her to suddenly become contagious years after she was born?

And how was this going to change things? Miyai was one thing, but now *Sirri and Dahnai* were also infected, which meant that they would become Generations...if they survived the process. How was he going to manage *that*? Fuck, it was going to put a *Generation* on the Imperial throne!

Thank *God* it happened here, though! At least with it happening on Karis, they could keep this contained, keep it a secret. Had Dahnai fallen ill on Draconis, it would have gotten out that she'd been the victim of a DNA-altering agent, and it could very well get her dethroned by the *Siann* as a threat to the Imperium. She would no longer represent the paragon of Faey purity, which was why the *Siann* had a cow when she got pregnant with Raisha, because it put a *half-breed* in line for the Imperial throne. Right now, the only people who knew about this were the Imperial guards, Songa, Jason, and a couple of his kids.

Songa landed right behind them on the roof of the annex in her hovercar, and she took control of the situation immediately. "Get her

Highness and Shya into isolation immediately!” she barked at two medics that came out to meet them. “Prepare an isolation unit for Empress Dahnai! Get the full medical staff assembled! Get them inside, Jason, follow the orderly! Sixteenth floor, turn left out of the elevator, a nurse will meet you and show you where to go!”

They were down in the isolation ward in moments, and Shya and Sirri looked *frightened* as they were hustled through the waiting room and into a room just past it. *Calm down, girls, and do what the doctors tell you to do*, Jason told them. *You’re going to be alright so long as you follow their instructions.*

What’s happening Daddy? What’s going on? Shya asked fearfully.

What happened to Miyai is about to happen to you, he answered her honestly. *But since you’re not an unborn fetus, it’s not going to be quite so fun for you as it was for her.*

I’m gonna get sick?

You’ll be asleep through all of it, Shya, you won’t feel a thing, Songa assured her, her thought tender, reassuring. *You’re going to wake up a little different than you were when you went to sleep, that’s all.*

I’ll be like Miyai?

Yes, dear.

So I’m gonna be a Generation?

That’s right, Jason told her.

Oh. And here I thought it was something serious, she sent in relief. *You guys acting all nuts had me seriously scared.*

Jason had to shake his head.

It is serious, Shya, Songa told her. *But now that we’re in the annex, we’ll make sure that it’s going to be alright.*

[Jason, why am I being manhandled like a peasant?] Dahnai demanded over the biogenic network. *[My guards just physically carried me into a dropship and are taking off!]*

[They have a good reason. You need to get to the annex immediately, Dahnai. You're about to get very, very sick.]

[What? I thought Karis was disease free!]

[It is, you picked this up from your daughter,] he answered.

[I'll make this simple, your Majesty,] Songa cut in, no doubt helped by Cybi to do so. [The same thing that happened to Miyai is about to happen to you. Somehow, Miyai infected you with an agent that's rewriting your DNA cell by cell,] she explained. [The process just began, and I mean hours ago. And it's irreversible now. Once it begins, there's absolutely no way to stop it.]

[Wait, what? My DNA is being altered?]

[By the same process that created Miyai and the original Generations,] Songa confirmed. [But there's very real danger in it for you, Dahnai. You're a fully developed adult, and that means the risk of rejection is high. We have to get you to the annex immediately so we can mitigate that risk.]

[Rejection? You mean my body attacking itself and either scouring the altered cells out of me or killing me?]

[Exactly that, your Majesty.]

[Get this thing moving faster!] Dahnai barked over commune, then there was a pause as she obviously relayed that order again to people that could hear her. [Is this spreading to other Faey on Karis? Are we looking at a nightmare scenario pandemic here?]

[No, your Majesty, it can only affect people related to Miyai. So, only Kellin is at potential risk, and they should have someone out there now bringing him back to the island so he can be scanned,] Songa answered. [This isn't a generic retrovirus, it's a very specific DNA sequence that can only bond to similar sequences, so it can only affect Faey that share a large portion of Miyai's DNA. In other words, her immediate family. It won't even affect her cousins, only you, Kellin, her sisters, and Maer. But Cybi is giving her a complete medical scan as we speak to make sure that doesn't become a possibility.]

[Alright. We'll be there within the hour.]

[I'll have everything ready for you, your Majesty.]

Jason led Shya and Sirri into a room holding two beds, then helped them undress when Songa ordered it. He then helped Shya lay down on a bed, leaning over her and patting her on the forehead. *Just keep calm, pips,* he told her gently. *Songa will make sure everything's just fine. And when you wake up, you're gonna be a Generation, just like Rann.*

I'm looking forward to that, she answered him with a nervous smile. *I've always wanted to be like him. I think it's amazing, the things he can do. I want to do them too.*

Well, you're about to get your wish, he answered ruefully. *Not the way I would have wanted, but life doesn't go the way we want all the time. It's gonna be a mess, but we'll figure something out. We always do.* He moved over to Sirri, who was looking decidedly scared as she leaned back on the bed. *Just relax, Sirri. Songa's gonna use the sleep inducer to have you go to sleep, and when you wake up, it'll all be over.*

That doesn't make it any less scary. I've talked to Mom about what happened to the Karinnes when they did this to their population.

There's risk, he admitted with a nod. *But with you here and the entire Medical Service watching over you, you're gonna be just fine. I promise,* he added, leaning down and kissing her on the forehead.

I love you, Uncle Jason.

And I love you, Sirri, he smiled. *Sweet dreams, baby girl.*

And with that, Sirri closed her eyes when the sleep inducer in the bed was activated, sending her into a deep slumber. He checked Shya to make sure she was also asleep, then he pulled up the thermal cover on both of them to both cover them and keep them warm, then walked out of the room as six doctors rushed in.

[Any word on Kellin?] Jason asked.

[Not good. He's been exposed,] Cybi answered. *[I just got scans on him, Jason. I told them to bring him to the annex.]*

[Great, now it's Dahnai's whole family except for Maer. Fuck, what are we going to do about Maer? If it turns out that Miyai's permanently

contagious, he can never come into the same building with her. And what if it mutates, to become the pandemic that Dahnai feared when we first found out about this? Miyai may be a threat to the entire Faey species.]

[Don't get worked up, Jason,] Cybi answered. [Let's find out what's going on before we panic.]

Jason met Dahnai on the roof and gave her a crushing hug. *I always wanted to get the secrets of the Generations for the Imperium. This was not what I had in mind, she sent ruefully.*

I don't think any of us did. Songa has an isolation unit ready for you, love. She's going to put you to sleep so you don't feel a thing. You'll wake up with it already over.

Provided it doesn't kill me, she set wryly. What word on Kellin?

Not gonna sugar coat it, love. He's been exposed. Cybi's having them bring him in.

Well...fuck. At least we can learn together, I suppose. He's much younger than me, so I'm not too worried about him surviving this. I'm the one at greatest risk here.

Stop talking like you're an old lady, woman. You're still in the prime of your life, he sent reassuringly, putting his arm around her and leading her towards the doors inside.

It was the beginning of a long, *long*, nerve-wracking process. Jason, Jyslin, and most of his family and friends on the strip gathered in the annex and stood silent, worried vigil as Dahnai, Kellin, Shya, and Sirri began the process that would have their entire cellular structure rewritten by Miyai's Generation DNA, adding to their helixes what was needed to make them Generations themselves without altering anything already there. Cybi explained the process to him from her records as he paced in the waiting room. It would take about two to three days, depending on the patient and how their body reacted to the process. It would start very slow, but as more and more cells were altered, that produced more and more of the retrovirus, which would spread with geometric speed through the body. The truly rapid phase would begin when the retrovirus got to the red blood cells and other blood cells like antibodies and T cells that came into contact with them, causing the agent to be spread through the entire body by the blood, making

the alteration take on an ascending bell curve shape. Start slow, spread like wildfire, taper off as fewer and fewer unaltered cells remained. The most dangerous part of it would be the alteration of the cells in their hearts, brains, and stomachs, which could cause heart attack, hemorrhaging, or the release of stomach acid into the abdominal cavity. At any time, they would be susceptible to system shock and organ failure, which was what Songa and her team was going to be there to prevent.

Two to three days. Well, that would give Jason plenty of time to figure out how he was going to deal with this.

At around midnight, after giving Miyai exhaustive medical checks, they had a cause. Songa came into the room and lowered her surgical mask—odd that such a highly technologically advanced organization still used old fashioned masks—and gave Jason a grim look. “I know what caused it, Jason,” she announced to him and Jyslin. Rann and Jyslin were asleep on a bench beside them, Rann cuddled in Jyslin’s arms, and Symone and Tim were sleeping in chairs across the room.

“What happened, Songa?”

“The scans were right, it was a virus,” she answered. “But not anything engineered. It was a common virus present on the Sha’i-ree homeworld, and Dahnai must have contracted it from Emperor Enva. It’s a harmless virus, dear. It’s a completely passive and harmless virus to virtually all forms of life, and in Sha’i-ree, it’s actually a probiotic, it only invades and kills cells that are infected by another, much more dangerous virus. It’s almost like a virus that hunts and kills other viral structures, and quite a marvel of molecular biology. Virtually all Sha’i-ree carry it. Well, Dahnai passed it to Miyai, and in *her*, it became something not quite so benign.” She touched her interface, and a hologram winked on between them, showing them a virus as pictured by a microscope. “This is it. The *Jaisho-T* virus, as named by Sha’i-ree medical journals, a virus that can only reproduce when it bonds with the deadly *Haijaki-M* virus inside the cell of a host, killing the more deadly virus in the process. When it passed to Miyai, it reacted to Miyai’s DNA in an unexpected way. When it invaded the cell nuclei of one of Miyai’s gastric stem cells hunting for the *Haijaki* virus, it was the *virus* that was attacked and rewritten by the nucleus, and mutated it into a reactive retrovirus similar to the original retroviral agent used to introduce gene

therapy into the House of Karinne. However, unlike the original retrovirus, this one is *only* a threat to those that carry large segments of the original host's DNA, like how the bioagent that contaminates Moridon is only a threat to Generations and Kimdori. Dahnai, Kellin, and their immediate children are the only people that can be affected by this virus. It poses no threat to anyone else, not even Dahnai's two younger sisters, nieces and nephews, and cousins."

"Holy *shit*. I didn't think that was possible!"

"I didn't either," she nodded. "It seems that the echo of the original retrovirus that created the Generations still lurks in your DNA, Jason, because Miyai's stem cells naturally *created* a version of the retrovirus out of the *Jaisho-T* virus. It seems that Miyai is more, well, more *volatile* than other Generations, no doubt due to the unique way she became one. But, given that the virus mutated into this form, there is always the chance that it mutates further and becomes a threat to the entire Faey race," she replied grimly. "Because of that, I've ordered the virus purged from the twins, and an aggressive treatment to make them much more resistant to *all* viral structures in the future. Jason, I've ordered both of them placed on a medical spider program," she informed him. "The spiders' primary job will be to attack and destroy *all* viral structures they find within them, with the very limited exception of the viral patterns of a Kimdori. If not for that exception, the spiders would actively attack any Kimdori that came into contact with them."

"I'm not gonna object," he told her with a relieved sigh, making a note to have a long talk with Kereth about this. He may know of a medical treatment that would prevent this kind of thing from happening again. But, from the sound of it, it was the Kimdori aspects of Generation DNA that was responsible for this. Miyai's body created *viral attack cells* out of this Sha'i-ree virus and unleashed them on her mother, sisters, and father. "So, we know how it happened, and it looks like we can prevent this from becoming a pandemic."

She nodded.

"So, now we have to deal with the consequences of our lack of foresight," he said grimly, looking through the window at Dahnai and Kellin, in medically induced comas and with bioboards over their heads

showing their vital signs. “Dahnai will wake up a Generation. That puts a Generation on the Imperial throne,” he sighed. “The last thing I ever wanted to see. I was able to handle Raisha and Miyai, because they weren’t the Crown Princess. But now it’s *Dahnai*, and after her, *Sirri*. And every Empress after them in succession. It gives them a very *personal* reason to want the secrets of biogenics, because it will increase their *own* power.”

“Well, it may not be a bad thing, dear,” she noted. “Since it now affects her and her family too, she might be much more amenable to your secrecy and safeguards.”

“Or we may have a few million clones of Dahnai walking around in a few years.”

“I doubt that. Consider, dear, that every one of those clones could conceivably replace Dahnai on the Imperial throne. Do you think Dahnai wants that many of her genetically identical clone-sisters scheming to take her throne from her?”

“Clones have no rights under Imperial law, their very existence is a crime. And it’s the only religion-based death penalty the Faey still have. Any clone discovered and exposed is executed for crimes against Faey religious proscription against cloning. They believe that a clone has no soul, and thus is an abomination against their gods. Then they go after whoever the clone was made from for creating it. So, in your scenario, the first time the clone would get close to a medical scanner, that would be it. Game over. Fuck, that was why what the IBI did was such an atrocity to so many Faey, because their plan was to make thousands of clones of Saelle. Thousands of soulless abominations, affronts to Trelle.”

“And as the Empress, the first thing the clone would do would be to remove the medical scanners from the palace, then find doctors willing to keep her secret to act as her physicians,” Songa said mildly.

“Well, those are worries for later, I suppose,” he sighed as Cybi’s bionoid came in the waiting room. “What word, Cybi?”

“Nothing new, Jason,” she replied, brushing her ankle-length hair back over her shoulder. “All I can really say is that according to the latest scans, all four of them are stable and the prognosis looks favorable. Shya is the most progressed so far, with 8.6% of her total cells successfully

transformed, and thus far showing no signs of cellular rejection of immune reaction. If her process follows the data I have in my archives, it should be complete for her in 63 hours. A little over two days.”

Jason gave a depressed, rueful laugh. “Why does all this wild shit always happen at the same time?” he complained. “I mean, there’s a war going on, and I *just* found out about the Pai, and now *this*. It’s like that time back in my Legion days, when Symone and Tim came out to join us, then Miaari dumped an injured Kumi and her entourage on me to hide them, then like right after that we pick up Jyslin out in the mountains. It was all bang bang bang, one crisis right after the other. And now it’s happening again.”

“Well, there is that old Terran saying, Jason. Bad things always happen in threes.”

“Shut your mouth, little miss optimism,” he threatened, which made her smile at him.

“Look at it this way, dear. If Cybi’s right, then we’re safe from anything else bad happening,” Songa injected lightly.

“God, I hope so,” he said wearily.

“Jason dear, I think it’s time for me to pull rank on you and send you home,” Songa said. “We know what caused it, and Dahnai and her family are going to be fine. I know you feel it’s your duty to be here, but you’re about to fall over. You can come back in the morning. Or even better, you can rejoin the Storm Riders. They come off restriction in the morning and will no doubt be put back in the duty rotation. I think a little therapeutic blowing things up will be good for you,” she said mildly, which made Jason laugh despite himself.

“There is a bit of good news,” Cybi said. “The Pai and Muri have agreed to allow us into their system. Their governments signed the agreement just moments ago,” she announced. “And Princess Mrri agreed to some tests to determine how similar her abilities are to Generations.”

“I have to admit, I like that little Pai,” Jason said honestly. “She’s quite charming.”

“She is at that,” Cybi agreed. “If she’s a true representation of her race, I think the Confederation will be better for their joining.”

Songa carried through with her threat and had him literally kicked out of the annex. Aya flew him home alone—she didn’t kick Jyslin or anyone else out, only him—and the flight home in the warm Karsa night gave him time to think...not that he wanted to. God, this was going to be a *nightmare*. Now he’d have Dahnai’s entire family to worry about as potential risks to the biogenics program, even as he’d really have no choice but to teach her how to *be* a Generation. He had no idea how he was going to do this. Should he give her a gestalt? A tactical gestalt in the palace for her personal protection? How was he going to balance what he saw as her rights as a Generation with the fact that she was the Empress of the Imperium, and thus could use those rights to exploit the Karinnes to further the Imperium? And what about Sirri?

And just how much of a danger was Dahnai and her family going to be to the Imperium? If what happened to Miyai happened again, just this time with a virus that attacked *all* Faey, it could create a species-threatening pandemic. The death toll could reach the *billions*, and it would destabilize the Imperium and possibly even throw the entire sector into war as the neighboring empires took advantage of the Imperium’s weakness. That could shatter the entire Confederation and a critical time when it needed to stand together, with the Syndicate in the galaxy at that very moment and the colonizing force from the Consortium just three years away. Dahnai was the Empress of an Imperium that was directly threatened *by* her, if some other highly adaptive virus got into her and got rewritten to mimic the original retrovirus that created the Generations in the first place.

And what about Maer? He wasn’t exposed...and the fact that he was going to be married into the House of Dorrane very soon would make it an absolute *cluster fuck* if he somehow got exposed, putting a Generation *way* out of Jason’s direct ability to manage. And how was it going to affect his relationship with his family, forever being *different* from them, separated from them? That wasn’t really fair to him. Maer was a great kid, and Jason had some sincere love for him.

Shya, at least, wasn’t going to be a problem. And in a way, it was going to bring her and Rann even closer together, because they would be the

same...mostly. He was honestly curious to see what how strong Shya would be after this. Telekinetic, listener, and very soon, a Generation. There was no telling how that was going to affect her other abilities.

All he could do was lean over and put his head in his hands. Maybe Songa was right. Maybe he would go out on the sortie with the Storm Riders tomorrow, just so he could clear his head. Maybe the distraction would give him a chance to approach this fucking quagmire from a new direction and give him some answers.

Because at the moment, he didn't have a single answer to *anything*.

Chapter 11

Daira, 8 Shiaa, 4404, Faey Orthodox Calendar

Saturday, 25 August 2018 Terran Standard Calendar

Daira, 8 Shiaa, year 1329 of the 97th Generation, Karinne Historical Reference Calendar

1.2 light minutes outbound from planet QBA-3945-8584-3944-6, Q quadrant

This wasn't the kind of therapy that he needed.

He was starting to think that this was a bad idea, as he pushed Tara's damaged Titan back through the curtain of the shield protecting their landing site, which shimmered and turned hard just after he passed through. Behind him, the shield flared into visibility between him and several thunderous explosions in the vacuum of space. The Syndicate had adjusted to Confederate tactics in a *big fucking way*, and this wasn't the cakewalk that it had been the last three sorties.

Just getting onto the hull of the super-ship had required a major change in tactics, because as Jason expected, the Syndicate now considered any lander or dropship to be as dangerous as the *Tianne*, and any time one appeared, they focused everything they had on it. After four other lander teams were completely wiped out—a *huge* loss of valuable Titans—the Faey admiral in command of the task force had ordered cruisers and other larger ships to shield the lander teams right up to the hull to launch Jason's lander team, and they paid for it in a hell of a lot of damage once the lander team was on the hull. Those ships were sitting over them at that moment, providing support as waves and waves and waves of enemy mecha and infantry assaulted them on all sides. They knew what would happen if the lander team fired the Megatron unit, and they were throwing *everything* at them to stop it.

And they had more than just hand to hand weapons, missiles, and explosives to do it now. They were still using Torsion rifles, but one of their engineers must have come up with a conversion process to turn a Torsion weapon into a coherent ion rifle, which fired a sustained beam of ions that were a threat both due to their ability to melt through armor and destroy internal systems and the ion effect that the beam had on flowing plasma, disrupting power systems. They clearly didn't have all of them converted yet, since only about a quarter of the forces attacking them were armed with them, but a quarter of twenty thousand attackers was still a fuckton of incoming fire. Add that to the multitude of missiles and launched explosives, even infantry Tarks throwing hand grenades, and it was a blitz of incoming fire that the hard shield was hard pressed to absorb. At this rate, Jason knew, the hard shield would come down in a matter of minutes, a good four minutes before the Megatron was ready to fire.

And it wasn't just their hand weapons. Torsion batteries in the enemy ships were now firing coherent ion beams, and that had been what had done so much damage to the Confederate ships that escorted them in. They'd lost 12 ships on the approach, one a smoking wreck laying on the hull just half a kathra away, and half of what was going on was the crew of that Jirunji battle cruiser fighting their way to the landing zone to both get into the fortified position and reinforce the lander team.

They'd lost 14 Titans so far, with three others heavily damaged but still operational, and Tara was among them. Jason himself had taken a hit from an anti-mecha missile, but he'd had his shield up and it had taken the brunt of the blast.

[Get those Jirunji over here! Command, get an evacuation dropship down here to pick them up!] Tara ordered as her Titan staggered back towards the lander dropships, her left arm mangled almost beyond recognition and extensive damage to both legs. The only thing that saved her was the fact that she used her forearm melee shield to take the hit, and it had absorbed a good portion of the blast energy. They were using *antimatter* missiles, and they were doing enough damage to penetrate Titan carapace armor. And it said something that they'd miniaturized an antimatter warhead down to where it could be put on an anti-mecha munition. The line of armored Jirunji were still filtering in, since they had to fight their way to the shield as the enemy tried to cut them off. Most of

the other mecha and Rocker infantry in the lander team were out there holding that lane open to get them here, putting their unmanned mecha at risk to save the very real lives of those Jirunji sailors. The Jirunji were running as fast as they could, and Jason could only watch helplessly as they fell one by one, killed by the crossfire raging across the lane as the enemy on both sides tried to stop them from joining the defenders.

This was war. Those Jirunji out there were dying, and he couldn't do anything to stop it.

Barely half of the Jirunji that survived the crash of the ship made it to the hard shield, and they quickly integrated themselves into the operation. The wounded were taken into one of the lander dropships so they could be tended in a pressurized area, while the rest took up positions around the physical walls they'd set out to protect the Megatron unit, and started firing at the Syndicate forces that surrounded them. Jason had to be careful where he put his feet as their phased ion rifles added to the pulse, MPAC, and disruptor fire going through the hard shield at their opponents, while multiple explosions and coherent ion beams struck the shield on the far side, wearing it down.

[I have to delink, my Titan is about to shut down!] Tara warned. *[KI, you're in command!]*

[But—]

[You're the highest-ranking Titan in the theatre! Take over!] she cut him off. The telemetry from her Titan went a little crazy, then it went offline as she delinked before the onboard system crashed. She intentionally delinked to avoid dump shock, which was a smart thing to do. Her Titan slumped, then leaned over to one side and fell, thankfully not falling *on* anything.

The Grand Duke in him took over. He barked a series of commands as he moved to a new position, organizing his Jirunji reinforcements even as he got a dropship launched to pick them up, then barely glanced when one of the Skaa fast attack ships overhead was blown apart in a fiery cataclysm after it was struck by a heavy missile. That left just two support ships overhead providing cover fire, a Crai cruiser and a Hovi heavy destroyer. And still more of them came, swarming in from every direction, most of them infantry in pressure suits. Thousands of them! *[Time?]*

[Five minutes, twelve seconds,] the lead tech overseeing the Megatron unit answered.

Not enough. Not enough time! They were going to bring down the hard shield and storm the position before the Megatron unit could fire! And he'd be *damned* if he let this mission fail while he was in command of it! He quickly went over their remaining assets in his mind as he unloaded with his particle beam minigun through the shield. They had only 24 Titans left, 12 Gladiators, 13 Juggernauts, and 26 Rockers. He had 79 uninjured Jirunji sailors, with two heavy personnel jumpers coming down to evacuate them. The hard shield and diffuser unit, the Megatron and its backup unit, which was still in the lander. Overhead were two medium-sized line vessels, but they couldn't use anything overly powerful else they'd bring down the hard shield themselves.

He thought furiously as he changed his position again, unloading on a new swarm of infantry coming at them, the fiery wreckage of the Jirunji battle cruiser behind them, illuminating them—

The cruiser! That was *it*!

[Listen carefully, commander Hovi destroyer, commander Crai cruiser,] he sent over local command. *[I want you to pick up the largest intact section of that downed Jirunji battle cruiser with your towing beams, and I want you to drop it directly on top of this position on my command!]* he ordered.

[Are you crazy?] the Crai captain protested.

[Trust me, just do it! Everyone, everyone listen up! Get as close to the Megatron unit as you can!] he ordered the lander team and Jirunji *[Lander dropships, start your engines and get ready to bug out! Megatron team, unload the spare Megatron unit and activate it! Unanchor the active Megatron unit!]*

[What the fuck are we doing, K1?] one of the Storm Riders demanded.

[We're being creative, that's what we're doing,] he answered. The Megatron techs did as he ordered, unanchoring the active unit. *[Good! Now turn it over!]*

[Do what?]

[Turn it over! Point it upwards! And realign the focusing system for maximum dispersion!]

[I don't—ohhhhhh!] the tech responded, her commune laced with malicious amusement and respect. *[That's fucking devious!]*

[Welcome to 3D,] Jason replied curtly. *[Commanders support vessels, when you pick up that wreckage, you do not get directly over the landing site! You'll be destroyed! Stay to the sides of the wreckage and be ready to drop it on my command! Get the Jirunji on the landers! Evacuation dropships, abort mission!]*

With some impressive coordination, the lander team and the Jirunji obeyed his orders. The Jirunji swarmed aboard the two dropships as the second Megatron unit was started up, and the active one was turned over, so its firing array was pointing *up*. He switched to theatre-wide command. *[Commander task force, this is commander Gamma lander team, listen carefully! We're about to fire the Megatron unit upwards at maximum blast dispersion at 23% power! Calculate the blast vector and move all ships out of it!]*

[Why in Trelle are you doing that, commander Gamma?] the Faey admiral on the INS command ship that had command of the theatre responded.

[It's called saving our assess, that's what!] he answered as the two Confederate ships extended towing beams down and picked up nearly half of the Jirunji battle cruiser, still venting atmosphere and flame out into space.

[The unit's not going to fire unanchored, boss!] the lead tech said.

[Not if you follow the instructions it's not,] he answered. He extended a monomolecular blade and approached a mauled Juggernaut, then he cut off its external armor plate, the one that covered the cockpit doors. He brought it over and set it on top of the inverted Megatron unit. *[Anchor it to that plate, then realign the gyro inside so the unit thinks it's right side up,]* he ordered. *[You can do that by resetting the gyro subroutine with the inducers inside generating a max power field, they're designed to direct their field at the base of the unit. It's gonna try to fly up into space, so hold it down until the gyro resets.].*

[That's pretty fuckin' clever,] the tech answered in admiration as she did so.

[I helped design it, Sergeant, I know how it works,] he answered her.

By now, everyone knew what Jason had up his sleeve, and they were preparing for it. All the remaining online units were clustered around the Megatron unit, barely giving the techs room to get it ready and get the secondary anchored and charging. *[Listen up, this is gonna be tricky! Infantry, Gladiator, Juggernaut units, suppression fire, the enemy will charge the position when the hard shield comes down! Crai and Hovi commanders, the same, give us as much cover fire as you can! Titans, focus all your firepower on the wreckage at the target I paint, we have to blow a hole in the hull large enough to accommodate the entire landing zone and let the Megatron unit do the rest!]*

[You got it, K1,] one of the Titans answered, a bit fiercely proud for some reason.

[Crai and Hovi commanders, when you get the wreckage in position, hold it there until I give the order to let it go! We have to be sure of our target! And for God's sake, both of you release it at the same time or it's gonna swing out of position and crush all of us!]

[We've already synced our towing beam arrays, we'll both release at the same instant.]

The Syndicate forces looked up when that huge piece of flaming wreckage was picked up and slowly moved over them, then they got it position directly over their heads and held it steady. Jason's on-board computer did the math, then he highlighted a circle on the scarred hull directly over them that mirrored to the targeting computers of all the Titans in the company. *[Titans, open fire!]* he barked, and he and the 24 remaining Titans raised their weapons aloft and unleashed. In mere seconds, they completely destroyed the hull in the target area, exposing two decks behind it to space. *[Count down from my mark, ten seconds. On countdown zero fire the Megatron, and exactly 320 milliseconds after it fires, release the towing beams! Landers, prepare to bug out!]* He looked around to make sure everyone was in position, then jerked his arm down. *[Bug out, move move MOVE! MARK!]*

In a beautiful bit of coordination, the hard shield came down even as the landers lifted just high enough to clear the Titans, then they rocketed away at full speed. The mecha and infantry clustered around the Megatron units unleashed on the charging Syndicate infantry and mecha, but Jason saw that those near the back were running the *other way*. They realized what they were going to do. Mecha and infantry in pressure suits collapsed to the hull in windrows under that heavy sustained fire for seven seconds, then Jason stopped firing and squatted down. *[Titans, down! Don't get in the blast cone!]*

Three seconds later, it happened almost simultaneously. The Megatron fired, sending an incandescent cone of Teryon energy upwards even as the unit itself exploded, knocking most of the Rockers down, going right through the burning wreckage above them. Just as the brilliant cone of light faded, the ships above released their towing beams. The wreckage above them plunged towards them at almost terrifying speeds, and then it slammed into the armored hull.

And Jason's calculations were perfect. The lander team clustered around the Megatron unit were inside the hole created by their weapons and the fired Megatron unit and weren't crushed flat by the impact. The hull under his feet shuddered violently from the impact, an impact which crushed over half of the Syndicate defenders, and those that remained would have to pick their way through the twisted wreckage of the Jirunji cruiser to reach them.

[Un-fucking-believable,] the lead Megatron tech communed, almost reverently, then laughed.

[We'll evacuate through the hole above us,] Jason ordered calmly, almost casually, as he pointed at the hole over them created when the Megatron disintegrated the ship. *[Get that Megatron unit going, they're gonna figure out real quick the only way in is through the hole. All mecha take up positions on top of the wreckage, defend the hole! Drag that offline Titan over and have it physically shield the Megatron unit! Everyone else, defend the Megatron until evac order!]*

Jason's crazy idea bought them the seven minutes they needed. With the mecha defending the only way to reach the unit easily, they were able to defend the position as the Megatron unit charged, and once it reached 20 seconds to fire, they all bugged out. Jason and another Storm Rider were

carrying Tara's offline Titan and the others that were salvageable—they were too valuable to leave—and the Hovi heavy destroyer got behind them to physically shield them from the blast when the super-ship exploded. The whale came up to pick them up as they returned to the task force as it was finishing up the last few Syndicate battleships, and almost as soon as he stepped through the airskin shield, the commander of the task force, INS Admiral Rolika Gevalle, contacted him. *[That was brilliant, Gamma commander. I'm putting you in for a citation.]*

[Only if you put in the entire unit and the Crai and Hovi line vessels supporting us for the citation as well, Admiral,] he countered. *[That wouldn't have worked if all of us hadn't done exactly what we needed to do when it needed to be done.]*

[True. And done,] she agreed magnanimously.

Tara came out of the ROC with a big grin on her face as she looked up at Jason's Titan. "K1, that was both crazy and ingenious. I'm impressed," she called loudly

"As I've often said, Skipper, sometimes crazy works," he said mildly over his external speakers as he looked down at her, which made her laugh. "I need to delink, there's a shit-ton of paperwork for me to barrel through."

"Permission granted, K1, and thanks for bringing back my rig."

"Better than you commandeering mine," he replied playfully.

"I will be until they get mine fixed," she warned. "So you're off the board until my rig is back in action. You *are* a reservist."

"Just bring it back in better shape than yours," he retorted, which made her laugh.

"I'm gonna blow it up just to spite you, K1."

"I sign your paycheck, woman," he warned lightly, then he moved down the center line and to his reserve spot. He anchored in his Titan, then began shutdown. *[Titan K1, requesting permission to delink,]* he called to the Whale's computer.

[Delink is a go. Good work, K1,] came the reply.

[Delink initiated. Titan automated shutdown sequence engaged. KI offline,] he relayed, and then he delinked.

Back in his office, he blinked his eyes and leaned up from the headrest of the merge pod as Rivlin poked his head in. “How are you feeling, your Grace?”

“The same as every other time you ask me that question, Doctor.”

“It’s not going to stop me from asking it,” he replied with a little more confidence. He was getting used to working in Jason’s office. “The day you *don’t* give the same answer is the reason why I ask the question.”

“Didn’t I tell you to flirt with Aya to keep yourself busy, Rivlin?” he demanded.

“I’d rather flirt with Ryn,” he replied confidently as he put his hand on Jason’s forehead. “I think you’re good to exit the pod, your Grace. And I’ll be returning to the clinic.”

Jason climbed out of the pod as Rivlin picked up a handpanel, then he was escorted out of the office. All four of his usual guards were with him, but Aya was over at the annex, standing personal vigil over Shya.

She’d be roused from her coma early tomorrow morning, Jason noted as he checked on Dahnai and her family. All four of them were stable, at least now. Dahnai had suffered liver failure about three hours ago, and it took the medical team nearly an hour to get her out of danger. But it had permanently damaged her liver, and Songa had already ordered a cloned replacement to be grown, which would be ready in about a week. Until then, she’d be on a drug regimen and diet restrictions to keep her healthy until her cloned replacement could be transplanted. And after the transplant, she’d have to recover from the operation, which *was* fairly invasive.

That part of this whole fucking mess had been handled. It had been released to the Confederate Council and to the *Siann* that Dahnai and her entire family had been in a skimmer crash and were currently at the annex for treatment of minor injuries and observation. They’d faked some evidence in that regard, Dahnai’s usual passenger skimmer with failed engines and some staged viddy that showed the skimmer crashing into the Sarei Ocean just after takeoff from her private island from the vantage point of one of the skimmer’s escorting fighters. The fact that Dahnai was in the

annex had brought several Grand Duchesses to Karis to keep watch over her—an old Imperium tradition—and they’d “seen” Dahnai and talked to her. She told them that she was fine, but Kellin had suffered a severe concussion in the crash, so she was staying at the annex while he was under observation. She then invited them all to stay at the summer palace until Kellin was released from the annex.

The things Cybi could do while operating Dahnai’s Hall of Peace bionoid. She was so convincing as Dahnai that it even fooled *him* a few times.

How they were going to handle the liver transplant...he wasn’t sure yet. She’d be in the annex for four to five days after the operation to heal up enough to go home, and she wouldn’t be fully healed for two or three weeks.

Dahnai was the only one that had suffered any complications thus far, which wasn’t entirely unexpected by Cybi. Kellin and the girls were young enough to withstand the alteration of their DNA, but Dahnai was considerably older than them. It took that to remind him that Dahnai was 15 years older than Kellin, she was 46 (still in the prime of her life for a Faey, she wouldn’t hit the downhill side of middle age until she was in her early 60’s) and he was 31.

Outside of running that sortie today, all he’d done or thought about was this whole mess. He’d spent most of the morning in deep talks with Zaa over this, telling her what happened and then discussing how they were going to handle this. Dahnai was about to learn some of the deepest secrets of both the Karinnes and the Kimdori, and they couldn’t hide them from her. The first time she came in the same room with Jinaami or Miaari or Kiaari and sensed her, she’d know that *something* was going on. Most of what they discussed was how much to tell her, which secrets they could reveal and which they had to keep, mainly because Dahnai was so damn smart. If she found out exactly what biogenic crystals were, he wouldn’t put it past her to come up with the idea of using segments of *her own* DNA to try to create her own version of them.

In all, though, Zaa wasn’t *too* upset about this. She saw a few potential opportunities here, mainly with a Generation being on the Imperial throne. That would keep the Imperium from *ever* trying to bring the Karinnes back

into the Imperium by some future Empress who thought that Dahnai letting the Karinnes secede had been a terrible idea.

That had been his entire morning. After lunch, he reported to the company and prepped for the mission, which he had just finished...and *ugh*. The Syndicate was adapting, and that sortie, while successful, had been *costly*. 37 ships lost, over 4,000 casualties, and what hurt the KMS, they lost 66 Titans, 212 Gladiators, 163 Juggernauts, and 376 Rockers in the operation, in addition to 12 jumpers and all the equipment they were carrying, like hard shield generators, diffusers, and Megatron units. Titans were *expensive*, and that was 66 precious Titan riggers currently suffering dump shock—wait, 65, Tara managed to delink before she could be dumped. That was nearly three entire Titan companies off the board just in riggers, but in reality, it took *six* Titan companies off the board due to losses among all three. The hardest hit was the Karinne Marine 98th Mecha Company, they lost 30 of their 40 Titan riggers to dump shock. Tara had lost too many riggers for her company to be viable, and odds were, Juma would temporarily merge the Storm Riders with the operational riggers other companies to get a Titan company back on the board for the next sortie. 65 riggers was a significant number, given how few Titan riggers there were. The KMS had no line vessels in the task force, but almost all the lander forces were KMS, and they'd taken the heaviest proportion of casualties in the operation because the Syndicate was now focusing on them.

It was a victory, but it was a *costly* one. And if that was any indication of how the rest of this war was going to go, maybe they *should* be doing everything they could to sue for peace.

But, the selfishness in him made him glad that no member of House Karinne had died in that battle.

It wasn't going to be easy from here out. The Syndicate had sniffed out the trap they laid for them at the Pai/Muri home system, and the Kimdori had already intercepted the fact that their orders had been changed. The Syndicate forces still loose in the galaxy were in the process of merging, but in small groups. Small groups would rendezvous at a point sent to them immediately before they jumped, then that force would merge with another, and so on and so on. And all the while, all Syndicate squadrons and task

forces were jumping randomly around the galaxy, never staying in one system longer than 30 minutes, which made them constantly change their vectors and made it almost impossible to get interdictors set up in front of them. And they were learning from response times by Confederate forces where most of them were based, so they were moving their squadrons further and further from Terra with each jump. It was making them bloody *hard* to chase down, and now they had to resort to tackler ships trying to catch them while out of hyperspace to pin them in a system long enough to scramble a task force to the system to attack them.

So, the galaxy was now the playing field in a giant game of tag, but a game that would end soon. Navii had Cybi crunch the numbers, and if she was right—and she usually was—the Syndicate fleet inside the galaxy would be fully reconstituted in about 23 hours. And that would put enough ships in one place that the Confederation wasn't going to just throw a task force together and jump over there to attack it. That was some 6,304 ships by the latest intelligence, with 1,483 of them super-ships, and that was a big enough fleet to decimate the CCM if they took it on in a single decisive battle. Even if they won, it would leave the CCM in shambles, and the Consortium's colonization force was starting to lurk in the back of their minds. Everything they did now had to be done with an eye on dealing with *that* in three years.

Lorna had already taken steps. She pulled almost all the offensive interdictors Jason was using against the Syndicate to place them at systems over in the Coalition as protection, and he couldn't deny that logic. The chance at an easy victory over the Syndicate had come and gone, and now they had to put defenses in place around their own territory to keep that fleet out of it once it was reformed.

There would be no quick end to this war now. The reconstituted fleet would be too big to take head on, Sha Ra already sent down orders that it wasn't to stay in one place long enough to get trapped the way the main fleet had been at Oasis, and the Syndicate wouldn't be able to get at Confederate territory. Navii speculated that this could drag on for months, as the Confederation sought to take out task forces dispatched from the main fleet, but not allow the main fleet to come up behind them and pincer them. And while that was happening, the main fleet would be constantly on the move to prevent Jason from getting interdictors in place to trap it, which

would effectively end the war. Both sides would adopt a stance of defending their assets while trying to destroy as many of the enemy as possible, and once one side had a decisive numerical advantage, they could press the issue and take the remainder out in a single battle. The Syndicate was at a disadvantage because this was not their home territory, they had no safe permanent base, and now they knew that they couldn't set one up because of Jason's interdictors. If they stayed in one place long enough, Jason could trap them. So, the Syndicate forces would try to whittle down the Confederate fleet until it could no longer counter them, then most likely go on the offensive, try to breach interdiction at a critical Confederate system like Terra or Karis or Draconis, and try to get at critical and valuable Confederate technology and infrastructure.

Lorna wanted to punch Sha Ra in the face, but she could also respect the Benga's counter to Lorna's tactics. The two of them were truly masters of this game, and they were trading blows over their chessboard.

That was what *they* were doing. Jason had a few ideas how the Karinnes might be able to tip those scales in the Confederation's favor, using technology that Lorna didn't know about. And since they now knew that Sha Ra was communicating with her superiors in Andromeda via those QE computers, well, that opened the option of scaring the Syndicate into ordering Sha Ra to withdraw from the Milky Way.

Despite not being able to use the Pai/Muri system as a trap, they weren't just walking away from it. Jason was leaving the interdictor there to protect them, and they'd already opened official diplomatic relations with both the Muri Republic and the Pai Kingdom.

But, he had far more immediate concerns to deal with. He checked in with Jyslin, who was still at the annex with Rann, who absolutely refused to get out of sight of Shya, then cleared more work out of his inbox as he continued to ponder what to do about Dahnai. Zaa's discussions with him that morning hadn't really led to many hard decisions, mainly because so many of them would depend on Dahnai herself. So, really, they were just waiting.

There was little else they could do.

One little note in his inbox got his attention. The *Javelin* had been deployed, under Miaari's authority. To *Andromeda*. The report didn't say why, Miaari wasn't about to reveal something like that in a report, but she did reveal that she'd put whatever plan she had into action.

She must really have a dirty trick in mind.

After clearing out enough of his inbox that Chirk wouldn't cut his arms off in the morning, Jason boarded a frigate and headed over to the annex. Jyslin, Rann, Symone, and Aya were in the room, as well as 12 guards along the walls, in both white and black armor, and beyond the glass on the same wall in two isolation rooms, the four of them were laying on beds, covered in thermal blankets. There were no attendants in Shya and Sirri's room, but three doctors were in Dahnai and Kellin's room, two with Dahnai and one with Kellin, *right there* in case there was another emergency like Dahnai's liver failure. *Any change?* he asked as he came in, his four guards behind him.

No, Jyslin answered, taking his gauntleted hand when he reached them. *Songa came by just a few minutes ago to tell us that.*

So, they're holding on those estimated times?

Yes, Symone answered. *Sixteen hours for Shya, eighteen for Sirri, twenty for Kellin, and 23 for Dahnai.*

I'm almost tempted to have Songa put me in a sleep inducer and wake me up when they're up, Rann fretted. *This waiting and worrying is driving me nuts. I'm so worried about Shy.*

Songa's convinced she's going to be alright, pippy, Jyslin told him gently, lovingly.

I just wish she could send to me, or something. Anything, he sent, anguish rippling through his thought.

I know, Rann, I know, Jason told him gently. *But she's alright. And right now, it's best that she's completely unconscious. She'd not feel well at all if she was awake right now.*

I know, and it makes me feel rotten that I wish she was awake to send to me.

Rann, maybe it's best if you did go home, if only for a little while, Jason suggested. You've been here for over a day. You could take a bath, have a home cooked meal at the dinner table, and maybe even take a short nap, then come back.

No! I couldn't sleep in our bed without her! Everything there would just remind me she's here, and I'd be even more worried!

Son, you need to calm down, Jason told him, more forcefully. Take it from someone who's worried a lot more than you about a lot more things, you'd be amazed at how something as simple as a bath can calm you down.

There's a full bathroom off Songa's office, Jyslin suggested. How about we go up there and take a bath, Rann? That way we'll be right here in case Shya needs you, and let's be honest here, son. You need a bath.

He gave his parents a long, nearly suspicious look, then finally nodded. Okay, but someone has to stay here to watch over Shy.

I'll be here, Jason assured him.

I'll tag along, I could use a bath too, Symone said, standing up. And I'd kill for an hour out of this armor right about now.

There, we have a plan, Jason told Rann with a smile. And trust me, son, you'll feel much better after you have a nice hot bath.

I'm not gonna enjoy it.

You're not there to enjoy it. You're there to try to relax a little bit before you come back down here. At this rate, you'll be so wound up that by the time Shya wakes up, you may put yourself in the hospital from sheer stress. Suri, he sent, looking over at her.

Yes, your Grace?

You think Rann's old enough to handle one of your deep relaxation massages?

Age has nothing to do with it, your Grace, she replied. But as tense as he is, I think it may do him some good.

Then why don't you go with them and decompress him a little bit after his bath? He's so tightly wound right now, he may burst a blood vessel.

I'd be happy to. Are you ready to go, Rann? she asked him.

Jyslin and Symone took Rann upstairs with Suri, Shen, and four guards, leaving Jason alone in the room with the remaining guards. He sat on the couch and looked into Dahnai and Kellin's room, watching the two doctors give her a physical check, looking for any signs of subdermal hemorrhaging or discoloration. At that moment, inside her body, millions of her cells were being rewritten, and if her immune system wasn't being suppressed by Faey medicine, it would be having a complete apoplexy. It would see the altered cells as foreign invaders and attempt to destroy them and altered immune cells would see unaltered cells as invaders and try to destroy *them*, which was why she was in the isolation unit. It was a clean room, to prevent them from getting an infection while their immune systems were being suppressed. The bioboard over her head showed the progress so far, showing large sections of red all over her body that indicated regions of altered cells. And minute by minute, the amount of red in that image slowly increased. The one over Shya was the most advanced so far, with over half of her body showing alteration, and what was most important according to Songa, both her brain and the largest concentration of bone marrow in her body, in her thighs and hips, had already undergone complete alteration. Every cell in her brain had been altered, which meant that where it counted, she was now officially a Generation. And with the alteration of that large concentration of bone marrow, it meant that substantial red blood cell production was back to normal, preventing possible anemia. Cybi's records indicated that a large-scale purge of red blood cells during the process was one of the possible side effects, the body filtering them out of her blood as unsuitable or thinking they were damaged while it was caught in the middle of the conversion, but with her body producing red blood cells once again, the risk of anemic reaction was greatly reduced. And it was a risk, because while she was undergoing this change, she couldn't accept any blood transfusions. Her limbs and lower gastro-intestinal tract were the least altered parts of her body, but the red was starting to creep into those empty areas as blood carrying the retrovirus flowed through them.

Aya stepped up to him. *You had a long talk with Zaa today?*

Yeah. You can guess what we talked about.

What did she have to say?

Right now, not much. She's kinda conflicted about this, he answered. She sees some benefits from Dahnai being a Generation, but they're balanced by the potential for disaster. She said that almost everything we do is going to depend entirely on Dahnai. How much we can trust her is going to dictate how much she learns about who she is and what it means.

Telling her everything might bring her to your side.

Yeah. And she might turn around and try to use it to create her own biogenic crystals, he answered. But the one thing we both agree is that she has to learn about the Kimdori, and how we came to be. There's no way we can hide that from her. The first time she comes into the same room with one, she's gonna figure out that the ties between us go far deeper than she ever dreamed.

Aya knew about that. Aya knew almost all of the secrets of the Generations, and to her credit, she had kept her silence. She took her vows as an Imperial Guard to keep the secrets of her charges deadly seriously, which was half the reason she knew as much as she did. So, Zaa considers her a cousin?

Yes. Dahnai will be as much a Generation as I am when it's over, Aya. We're just not sure how her powers are going to stack up against ours, since I'm the product of ninety-six generations of selective breeding, and she's not.

Given how strong she is, I think she's gonna stack up against you fairly evenly, Aya predicted.

Not arguing there. Dahnai was a top-tier telepath and TK before this, and she will get a small boost in power from being a Generation. And with a gestalt, she's gonna be swinging her tits around with most of the other female Generations. What I'm most curious to see is how it affects her TK. I'm betting it's going to make her even stronger, even without a gestalt.

That's a good point. And both Sirri and Shya are TKs as well.

Yeah, we'll see how it affects all of them. What Cybi's most curious about is how much Kellin develops. Strong telepathy and TK is part of our Generation DNA, but the reason why it's so strong in me and the others is because of the selective breeding program, breeding the most favorable traits into each successive Generation. Kellin is going to show us where the

Generations started before the program started increasing our psionics. His talent is going to get stronger, and he'll develop TK. How strong they become will give us a window into the past, to see how the very first Generation compares to the 97th and 98th Generations.

That's another good point, Aya speculated, looking in Kellin's direction. I guess we could have found that out with Miyai, but Kellin and Miyai together gives a bigger picture.

He nodded without answering, watching as one of the doctors pulled down Dahnai's thermal sheet and visually inspected her fit, toned, sexy body, then started probing her flesh with her fingers, feeling for anything abnormal. Jason had noticed more than once that despite all their machines and advanced technology, the doctors of the Medical Service almost always backed up the prognosis of those machines with a personal examination. They still used their own senses and their own experience and judgment to assess patients, not completely relying on their machines...and Jason thought that was a very smart thing to do. While the medical scanners in the room could find what that doctor was looking for, she was still using her own fingers, her own senses and skill and experience, to look for it herself.

Well we have no idea what we're gonna do about is the liver thing, Jason continued. *We can't make any announcements about anything until this is over, in case she suffers another complication. We also can't just go a week or so and say, "oh by the way, we totally missed an internal injury to the Empress she suffered in that crash a week ago that requires surgery." And if Dahnai has another accident, the Siann might think I'm trying to assassinate her.*

I'm sure when Dahnai wakes up, she'll have a good plan for it. She's fairly cunning, Aya said proudly.

That she is, he agreed.

How did your sortie go?

It was a victory, but fuck was it messy, he answered, then told her about the mission. *Dropping that wreck on top of us was the only thing I could think of, the Syndicate was going to bring our shield down and overwhelm us before the Megatron fired,* he finished. *I'm amazed it worked. I fully*

expected to wake up in a couple of days after suffering dump shock when they dropped that thing on top of us, and I saw it coming down.

That was pretty damn clever, Jason, she sent in appreciation.

What? No threatening me with a paddle for going out again?

She gave a voiceless little wheeze of amusement. After watching your telemetry, Jason, I feel much more comfortable letting you do it. You are a damn good rigger. I know you're not going to do anything stupid out there. I still don't entirely like it, but I can accept how you feel about it and give you a little leeway, in this one very narrow instance. But don't ever think you're going out there in person.

Why thank you, Aya, he sent grandly. Maybe next time you can come along with us, get some real combat experience in a Titan. And I think you'd be an absolute beast in a fight. I'd be happy to have you on the line with me anytime, anywhere. The only condition is, you have to take orders from Tara.

As much as I might want to try it, Jason, my duties to you and Shya don't allow it. I'm not here to fight in the war, I'm here to protect your family. No matter how much I may want to help our cause or try my hand in a Titan in a real fight, my place in the design is clear.

Well, wouldn't accompanying me on a mission be protecting me?

Sophistry, and I won't succumb to it, she sent firmly. My duties are clear, Jason, and I won't let personal desires lure me away from them. That's the fastest way to fail in my mission.

Well, I suppose I can respect you for your devotion, he sent with great admiration shimmering through his thought. And that was in no way feigned. Jason's regard for Aya was towering, even if she did drive him crazy with her overprotectiveness sometimes. And that reminds me of something.

What?

Given that the Grand Duke or Duchess Karinne is forever going to be a target, even long after I and Rann and Shya are gone, I want you to do something for me. Build a Guard service for the Grand Duke that rivals the Imperial Guard, he told her, looking up at her. I want these girls to have the

same morals and discipline as the Imperial Guard. I want them to be educated, well-trained, and unswerving in their duty. As a Captain of the Imperial Guard, I am utterly confident that you can build a Guard service that will serve the throne of the House of Karinne with distinction.

I've already started doing that, Jason, she replied. I've been training the Marine Guard, remember?

Those are Marines. I want a dedicated service, Aya, just like the Imperial Guard. You find the best girls and train the hell out of them, instill into them the same duty and competence and discipline as the Imperial Guard. I want them to be so good and so trusted that the Imperial Guard will allow them to serve side by side with them when the future Empress visits Karis, he sent powerfully.

That, Jason, I can do, she replied with an eloquent nod.

Then I'll create the Order of the Ducal Guard tomorrow morning and set up your budget. And I won't be a cheapskate.

You'd better not be. It takes a lot of credits to fund the Imperial Guard due to the training involved, and no Empress ever balks at that cost.

The lives of my descendants are worth every credit, he told her. I'll even set up a training academy outside Karsa. And if Dahnai wants, we can coordinate with her and the Imperial Guard, have them send some instructors to teach us how to be as good as they are. While our guards will be a separate organization, like I said, I want the Imperial Guard to fully trust them, and our guards to fully trust the Imperial Guard. I want them to be interchangeable on Karis.

I think we can arrange that, Jason. I'll discuss the matter with the Colonel.

And I already know what heraldry to give them. I think they deserve the honor of wearing the Legion Phoenix, but we'll make it white instead of gold to honor the Imperial Guard, he decided. That will be their standard.

I do love that design, Aya admitted. Elora's a talented artist, I'll have her draw up some concept designs for us to consider.

They discussed the idea until Jyslin, Symone, and Rann returned, back in their armor but with their hair still a bit damp, and Rann all but ran over

to the glass and put his gauntlets on it, looking into Shya's isolation room. *She's just fine, Rann, Jason assured him. I've been watching her. Do you feel better?*

A little. Thanks, Dad.

You're welcome, son, he answered. I think I'm gonna call back home and have Ayama bring us some home-cooked food. We can set up a table right here.

I am a little hungry, Rann admitted.

I thought you might be.

There was quite a crowd in the room when Shya's eyes fluttered open, and they seemed to come into focus. Rann was right there, holding her hand between his own and looking about ready to cry in relief, and Jason, Jyslin, Symone, and Tim were sharing space around the bed with all four of his other elder children. Amber was sitting on Shya's chest, her two tails spiraling hypnotically, but her luminous little eyes were locked on Shya's face. "Am I awake now?" Shya asked woozily.

"Yes you are, baby girl," Jason chuckled as Rann leaned down and gave her several frenzied kisses.

I was so worried! How do you feel, Shya?

I'm...I feel weird, she replied. But okay.

Stay down for a moment, Shya, let your body shake off the sleep inducer, Songa warned from the isolation room across the hall. They were in a recovery room at the moment.

'Kay. How are mom and sis and Kellin?

All three of them are just fine, hon, Symone answered, smiling down at her as she stroked her hair. Sirri is going to be woke up in just a couple of hours, and so are your mom and Kellin.

So, did it work? Am I like you now, Ranny?

Yes you are, Shya, Jason answered. The conversion was a success.

Good, she declared, smiling as she looked up into Rann's eyes. I do feel...I don't know, something. I look at you, and I feel something.

That's part of who you are now, Jason told her. I'll explain it later.

Oh, you mean the thing where I can tell Generations from other people?

Jason nodded. He wasn't surprised that Rann told her that. They didn't have many secrets.

Alright, Shya, you can get up now, Songa declared. Just take it easy, you're going to feel a little dizzy when you first sit up, but it will pass quickly.

Okay, Songa. They made room for her as Rann picked up Amber and removed her blanket, then she sat up on the bed and swung her legs over. Oh yeah, I'm feeling dizzy.

It's a common effect from extended periods of time in induced sleep, dear, nothing to worry about, Songa told her. It'll pass in just a moment.

I'm already feeling better, she reported, then slid off the bed and stood up. Rann had his hand on her arm and looked to almost want to pick her up and carry her. Where's sis? Wasn't she in the room when I went to sleep?

You were moved to a recovery room, pips. This isn't the same room. Look around, Jyslin told her.

Oh, yeah, you're right, she realized. It's kinda hard to see anything from the bed with all you blocking my view, you know.

What, you wanted to wake up in an empty room? Kyri challenged with a grin.

As long as Ranny is here, I don't care who else is in the room, she replied, putting her hand on Rann's cheek and gazing deeply into his green eyes. I hope you weren't too worried.

He just drove all of us crazy the whole time, Aran replied, which made Rann glare a bit at him and his other siblings laugh.

Dad almost had him put to sleep until you woke up, Sora agreed.

Just wait 'til you guys get married, you won't be laughing then, Rann retorted, a bit indignantly.

You're free to go home, Shya, Songa declared. But you're on restriction. You need to eat a good meal and rest until I examine you tomorrow. No going outside, no swimming, nothing strenuous.

I want to wait here for sis and Mom to wake up, she declared.

That's fine. But you need to eat, so straight to the cafeteria with you, she answered.

The kids pestered Shya with all kinds of questions while she ate and after they returned to the waiting room, and Rann was taking Songa's warning to heart by wrapping his arms around her armored torso and not letting her go, sitting with her in front of him on the bench, and only let her up when Songa announced that Sirri was about to be awakened. They went back to the recovery room and gathered around her bed, this time with Jason standing by her head, and he was the first person she saw when she woke up. "Is it over?" she asked blearily.

"It's over, Sirri," Jason smiled down at her, patting her hair. "And you came through just fine."

"I don't feel any different."

"I guess you wouldn't, but you should get a strange feeling looking at me."

"Yeah...now that you mention it," she nodded.

After Sirri had a chance to recover a little and get in her armor, they took her down to eat while they waited for Kellin and Dahnai. Kellin had suffered a very minor complication that caused Songa to decide to delay waking him up, and she further decided to just wake him and Dahnai up at the same time. When that time came, they all went into the isolation room holding them, and they gathered around Kellin's bed first; Songa was going to awaken him first, then Dahnai. His eyes fluttered open seconds after the indicator on the bioboard showed the sleep inducer being deactivated, and he turned his head to look at Jason. "Jayce," he said. "Is it over?"

"It's over, and you came through just fine," Jason assured him. "How do you feel?"

"Sleepy, but that's not unusual," he replied. "This isn't the first time I've been put out by an inducer."

“And when was the first time, Kellin?” Symone asked.

“When they had to put most of my teeth back in after I got smashed in the face with a batchi stick,” he answered. “Broke my jaw in nine places and knocked almost all my teeth out on my right side.”

“Ouch,” Jyslin winced.

“Yeah, I was out for almost nine hours as they reconstructed my jaw and put all my teeth back in,” he agreed. “Is Dahnai awake yet?”

“We’re about to wake her right now, Prince Kellin,” Songa said from the console on Dahnai’s side of the room. “Go ahead and stand up but do so slowly. You’ll feel dizzy when you first sit up.”

“I remember that from last time,” he said as he sat up. After a moment, Jason helped him out of bed, and they gathered around Dahnai’s bed. Songa deactivated the sleep inducer, and almost immediately, her beautiful eyes opened. They took in the many faces looking down at her, and then she smiled up at them. “I made it,” she said quietly.

“You made it,” Jason agreed as Kellin leaned down and kissed her. “But it’s not over for you quite yet.”

“Uh oh, what happened?”

“You’re going to need a liver transplant, your Majesty,” Songa told her evenly. “Your liver failed during the process, and as of right now, it’s *barely* functioning enough to keep you alive. There’s nothing we can do to repair it. Until the cloned replacement is ready, you’re going to be on a strict drug regimen and diet, and under constant medical supervision.”

“Yikes. How long?”

“The liver will be ready in about five days,” she answered. “Outside of that complication, your Majesty, you came through very well.”

“So, I’m a Generation now?”

“Yup,” Jason told her. “Don’t you feel something when you look at me?”

“You mean something other than what I usually do? Well...yeah. Yeah, I do. Like a shiver up my spine,” she reported.

“That proves it,” he told her. “Generations can sense one another, Dahnai. And since you can sense me, then that means the process was successful.”

“Cool,” she said, sitting up. “Whoa, too fast,” she said, gripping both Kellin and Jason.

“That will pass quickly, your Majesty,” Songa told her. “As soon as you’re feeling up to standing, you’re free to go. I’ve already sent your dietary requirements to the summer palace, and they’ll have a meal ready for you when you arrive.”

“Good, because I’m hungry. But first, I have got to pee.”

They got Dahnai clothed and ready, then boarded a frigate that took them back to the summer palace. Dahnai spent the journey listening mostly to Rann, who was recounting his vigil as he waited for Shya to wake up, clearly saving what she knew was going to be the serious discussion for after she ate.

And she was right about that. Jason took her, Kellin, Sirri, and Shya into her private living room off her bedroom after she had a chance to eat and rest a bit, and much to the objections of most everyone else, he only allowed Rann and Saelle to come in with them. There were, however, five guards in the room, two white-armored guards as well as Shen, Dera, and Aya. Rann sat hip to hip with Shya on the couch, Dahnai sat in her favorite chair, and Kellin sat in his chair beside her. Cybi manifested a hologram into the room, and the door opened once again.

Zaa stepped inside along with the commander of the guard complement of the Imperial Guard of the summer palace, Captain Viya, as well as the commander of the entire Imperial Guard, Colonel Mari, who had assumed the role just four months ago. Zaa’s expression was stoic, and as the door closed behind her, Dahnai’s eyes widened a little bit. “Wait a minute!”

“I see your report was accurate, cousin,” Zaa noted.

“And now you know why the Kimdori call us *cousins*, Dahnai,” Jason told her. “We can sense the Kimdori the same way we can sense each other.”

“How is that possible?”

“It’s quite simple once you know the truth of things, Dahnai,” Zaa answered her as she strode up to Jason.

“Do you remember the story I told you, Dahnai? The story about how the Generations came to be?” Jason asked.

“Of course I do,” she answered.

“Well, you never told me,” Kellin protested.

“The very short of it, Kellin, is that a long time ago, the Karinnes began a project to break the human-machine telepathic barrier,” Jason told him. “It took them quite a while, but eventually they managed to develop biogenic crystals. The problem was, as I think you understand, no Faey could understand them. They tried for even longer to solve that problem, but they never could. Eventually, they decided to attack the problem from the other direction.”

“Since they couldn’t understand the crystals, they created Faey that could,” Dahnai supplied.

“And that’s how the Generations began,” Jason nodded. “But what I never told you, and what you have to know now, is that the Kimdori were the key to that.”

“The Karinnes came to us and asked us to help them engineer a gene therapy treatment based on *Kimdori* DNA that would allow Faey to alter their telepathic powers, to be able to communicate with biogenic crystals,” Zaa continued. “Because our DNA is mutagenic and highly adaptable, it was the perfect foundation for Karinne geneticists to create the original retrovirus that created the Generations. Simply put, your Majesty, there is a little bit of *us* inside of you.”

“And now you know why the Kimdori call us *cousins*, Dahnai,” Jason finished with a nod. “Your ability to sense other Generations was never an intended ability, much like gestalts amplifying our powers wasn’t the original intent of the program, it just became something of a lucky happenstance. It’s something of a side effect of them using Kimdori DNA to create the Generations. We inherited the Kimdori’s ability to sense each other, no matter what shape they may hold.”

“The Kimdori and the Karinnes have held a tight bond for many millennia, Dahnai, originally formed when Karinne scientists literally saved our race from extinction, and strengthened by the Generations, who we see as part of *us*,” Zaa told her. “After the fall of the original house of Karinne, we watched over the survivors of the House, never interacting, but always observing and protecting. When Jason surfaced, the one Generation of which we were not aware, we knew we had found the next Grand Duke Karinne. He had all the qualities we knew were essential for the new Grand Duke. So, we began to prepare him for his task, without his knowledge of course,” she said with a smile over at Jason, “and when he was ready, aided him in restoring the house, and then we gathered up the lost children of Karinne and brought them home.”

Dahnai and Kellin looked quite surprised, Dahnai putting her hand to her chest. She then gave a sudden laugh. “Well, that explains *so* much,” she declared.

“What you just learned never leaves this room, all of you,” Jason told her. “If it got out that the *Kimdori* know the process to create Generations, it would put them at great risk. And we keep our alliance a secret. Yes, everyone knows the Karinnes and Kimdori are very close. But they don’t know *how* close, or *why* we’re so close.”

“I’ve learned to keep a lot of secrets since I married Dahnai,” Kellin said evenly.

“So, can we shapechange like a Kimdori?” Dahnai asked.

Jason laughed. “No,” he replied. “The only real aspect of their abilities we have is the ability to sense Kimdori, no matter how they may look, and each other.”

“We had a very long conversation this morning over how much to tell you, Dahnai,” Zaa said honestly. “But we both agreed that this is something that you must know. You must understand who you are now and what it means, and you cannot understand it fully without knowing how you began.”

“How I began?”

“The fact that you weren’t born a Generation doesn’t mean anything. You *are* a Generation now, and that means that you are now a member of a

very rare sub-race of the Faey, Faey but also different, and you carry a tremendous burden of both secrecy and duty. But far more important than that, we hold ourselves to a higher bar than just about anyone else. We know what we can do, and all of us live by a very strict code of morals that ensure that we do not become the monsters we are capable of being.”

“Jason makes a very important point, Dahnai,” Zaa nodded. “You cannot comprehend the power you now wield as a Generation. Jason has only showed you a *portion* of what a Generation can do, that which the outside must know to understand how they use those abilities for the Confederation against our enemies, and they are things that you will learn as you come to understand who you are. That power must be respected, your Majesty. The strict moral code of the Generations ensures that their power is used responsibly, wisely, and always with respect for all other life.”

“And now the burden of that power falls on you four to carry,” Jason said, looking at them. “And the greatest burden is *secrecy*. What you have learned today, what you will learn later, you never tell *anyone*, not even those who already know. The secret unspoken remains a secret,” he said intensely. “That means that *Maer* will never know what you’ve learned today. Not even *Jyslin* knows everything, Dahnai. And she is the other half of me,” he added, looking at Dahnai. “The only non-Generations on this planet that know virtually everything about the Generations are my detachment of the Imperial Guard, and that’s only because both me and Zaa trust them. Their oaths bind them, and they would die before revealing what they know. Their job more or less requires them to know the truth, we can’t keep those secrets from them or else it places a void of trust between us that could cause problems. That’s why Captain Viya and Colonel Mari are in this room now,” he finished. “Because we *trust* them, and by extension, we trust the Imperial Guard. Their honor is beyond reproach.”

Viya gave Jason a gracious nod.

“You’re going to need the help of the Guard to keep this secret, Dahnai, both now and hundreds of years down the line. They will know that a Generation sits on the Imperial throne, and they will help you keep that secret. And it’s my hope that they will remind your descendants of the

tremendous responsibility that comes with that power. They will be your moral compass, Dahnai, if you listen to them.”

On that you have my vow, your Majesty, Mari told her proudly.
Denmother Zaa explained much to me on our trip over here, and you will have the support of the Imperial Guard.

“I’m relieved to hear that, Colonel,” Dahnai told her. “So, what’s going to change for us?”

“That’s a good question, and one I’ve been debating with Aya, because even we aren’t entirely sure,” Jason answered. “But you *will* notice a moderate increase in the power of your talent, even without a gestalt. You were already powerful, Dahnai, definitely top tier, but now you’ll probably stand even with a mindbender. As to your TK, we don’t know. I’m actually curious to see if it increases your TK. But as for Kellin, he’ll develop TK as well. That’s a part of the Generation genetic footprint,” he added, looking at a rather surprised Kellin. “We’ll have to start him on the exercises we used to coax Sirri and Shya’s TK out. All of you are going to have to undergo training to learn how to split your attention. It’s a rather tricky skill, but once you get the hang of it, it’s pretty easy.”

“What does that mean, Uncle Jason?” Sirri asked.

“It’s those tricks he does, Sirri, where like he’s using both his hands and each one is doing something different, or he listens to like ten people all stacked on top of each other talking at the same time and can tell you what all ten people were saying,” Dahnai answered.

“Those are the party tricks, but yeah, along those lines,” Jason agreed. “It has other applications that are much more useful. Sirri and Shya will need to start merge training, since now they don’t need a jack. But for you two, you won’t find merging as a Generation much different than using your jack. And you’ll have to learn how to access and use a gestalt. It’s not hard at all, but if you’re accessing a gestalt you’re not passively merged with already,” he said, tapping the gestalt on his face, “you do have to learn how that works.”

“You’re giving us gestalts, Jason?” Dahnai asked with sudden interest.

“I’ve decided to give you these kinds of gestalts, yes,” he answered, tapping his gestalt again, “with the same kind of safeguards that I have on

your armor and the other biogenic gear I placed in the palace. But I'm not installing a tactical gestalt, because there's already one there. The one in Saelle's Gladiator," he answered. "No way in hell am I installing a gestalt in the palace that's not incorporated into an exomech. Oh yeah, you'll have to undergo exomech training. If there's a tactical gestalt in an exomech, you have to know how to pilot that exomech, just as basic protection and security. You'll probably undergo basic flight training as well. It's a rule here on Karis that if there's a tactical gestalt in a vehicle, every Generation has to know how to operate that vehicle, so you can move the gestalt if it's needful. You may not necessarily need that rule in the palace, but it's just basic common sense, and it helps you learn how to protect yourself. So, Dahnai, Kellin, Saelle is going to teach you how to pilot a Gladiator and a Juggernaut, and it's best if that training is *public*. Let the entire galaxy see that you know how to operate it. It might put off anyone that might want to take a shot at you. Sirri, *you're* going to learn as well," he said, looking at her, which made her give a wide-eyed smile. "I think you have the maturity to learn how to pilot an exomech, so you're going to learn, but you're going to learn here, and we're going to keep it a secret. I'm going to send ten of each class of exomech over here at Captain Viya's *request*," he said, glancing over at Viya. "The public line is, after seeing how trustworthy the Imperial Guard has been with the Karinne tech I have installed in the palace, I've decided to trust my exomechs with them as well, and they're going to learn how to pilot them. Those will be *your* exomechs, permanently dispatched to the summer palace. And you will have that option if you so wish, Viya. If you want your detachment here to be trained on Gladiators and Juggernauts, you have that chance. I trust the Imperial Guard to use them without trying to steal their secrets."

That goes without saying, your Grace. I'd like to get all my girls trained on both.

"You got it. My own guards are already trained on them, Aya can send a couple over here and get you trained on both," he answered. "Saelle is going to use those exomechs to teach Sirri, doing it here, in the one place that we can do things like that and keep it secret from the *Siann*. Shya will learn as well, at least when she gets older, Symone will be teaching Rann and Shya when they come of age. I enjoyed the exomech training so much,

now I'm basically a rigger in the KMS," he chuckled. "Symone really got me hooked on it."

"What about learning how to commune?"

"I don't have to teach you that. It's genetic knowledge, it's instinct," he answered. "I'm assuming that since you just went through this, your ability to commune will wake up after you've had a chance to recover. When you start hearing the biogenic systems in and around the palace communicate with each other, you'll know it's awake. Commune works the same way as talent does, and most of the tricks you've learned in telepathy also work in communion."

"I can hear that already. I already could," Dahnai answered.

"Is *that* what that is?" Kellin asked. "It's almost like a buzzing in my mind. I had to block it out."

"That's it," Jason nodded. "The computers communicate too fast for us to understand them. Even if we could, they're transmitting raw data, and they frame that data in the programming language biogenic computers use, so it locks us out anyway." He laughed. "Now, Myleena can understand at least bits and pieces of it, but that's Myleena. She's in a class by herself."

"She's the top dog around here, eh?"

"You have no idea how smart Myleena is, Dahnai," he chuckled. "Her being able to do that has nothing to do with her power, she *learned* how to do it. You gotta understand, that woman can *think* in biogenic programming language, she can speak that language as fluently as you can speak Faey. So it's no stretch that she can pick meaningful things out of a datastream using it."

"So, we need to train a little bit," Dahnai reasoned, "but some of it is instinctive."

"More or less, yes," Jason nodded. "And for the next few takirs, me and Zaa are going to be teaching you some of the history of the Generations, so you fully understand how we began, how we developed, where we are now, and where we plan to go in the future. I'm a firm believer in history, Dahnai, same as you. If you know history, you can avoid the mistakes of the past as you move into the future."

She gave him a bright look. Dahnai was a massive history nut, so he knew she appreciated what he meant. And offering to teach her more history would no doubt have her undivided attention.

“When I’m not here, Saelle and the CBIMs will be able to teach you here at the summer palace, and when you go back to Draconis, Saelle will be there to explain things,” he nodded towards Saelle. “But me and them are the only ones that are going to be teaching you. At home, Shya will learn from me and Cybi.”

“It’s going to be very nice to able to tell you much more now, Dahnai,” Saelle told her. “Sometimes it’s hard to be close to people when I have to keep so many secrets from them.”

“We’re gonna be as close as sisters, Sae,” Dahnai smiled back. “I fought Jason tooth and nail to get you back in the palace.”

“She is our ambassador to the Imperium,” Jason chuckled. “And you and her and Jinaami are going to be quite a little clique.”

“Oh yeah, Jinaami,” Dahnai chuckled. “I always wondered why you and her were always closeted up together, Saelle.”

“Jinaami is a cousin, but she’s also one of my best friends in the palace, Dahnai,” Saelle answered. “And that has nothing to do with her being a cousin. I *like* Jinaami.”

“You’re gonna have to tell her about Kelaa and Keraa,” Jason noted.

“They can’t hide from her anymore,” Saelle laughed.

“What? Who are they?”

“My two pet giruzi,” she grinned. “They’re actually Kimdori, part of my security detail to protect both my family and yours.”

“They are?” Dahnai asked, then she laughed. “I never noticed anything weird about them!”

“They’re very good at pretending to be giruzi,” Saelle said. “Sometimes even *I* forget, and I’ve lived with them for three years. But they’re a secret, Dahnai. Not even Evin knows about them.”

“If they couldn’t be convincing, they wouldn’t be very good Kimdori,” Zaa sniffed.

“So, you think you can show us one of those tricks that you don’t show anyone else?” Dahnai asked curiously.

Jason took a step away from Zaa, took a deep breath, closed his eyes, and then held his index fingers about a shakra apart in front of him. They watched him for a moment, then they all jumped in surprise as an arc of lightning flashed between his fingers, creating a loud *BANG* in the room. “That’s telekinesis,” Jason told them as he opened his eyes. “But on a *molecular* scale, manipulating the free electrons roaming around in my body. Here’s another trick we’ve learned.” He raised his hand, index finger out, and a shimmering sphere of distorted space appeared over it, like a ball. It then shuddered, and then condensed down to a tiny point over his finger that immediately began to radiate intense red light. “Telekinetically created Torsion, this pinpoint of Torsion ignores all matter, like a Torsion beam,” he explained. “TK can affect space. Well, we’ve learned how to warp space with TK so severely it creates a Torsion effect.”

“Incredible!” Kellin breathed.

“A few Generations have been exploring microkinetic and micro-spatial applications the last few months, focusing our TK into smaller and smaller things and areas. Samin’s the one that figures most of this out, he can manipulate individual *atoms*,” he said modestly. “He’s the best TK among us, and he spends most of his time experimenting, exploring the limits of his abilities. He teaches us what he learns. Here’s another trick he taught me.” He again gave a deep exhale, and brought his hands together in front of him, his thumbs and middle fingers touching, forming a ring. He took on an expression of intense concentration, then held hands up to the light panel overhead. The room visibly darkened as the light of the panel was pulled into the space between his hands, and a beam of intense light shined down on the floor between his armored feet. “Direct light manipulation,” he said in a strained voice. “And *God* is this hard to do.” He pulled his hands apart with a huge intake of breath, the beam winked out and the room brightened again, then he panted a little bit as sweat started forming on his brow.

“Samin can do that to the point where he can generate a laser beam that can

melt through lower grade metals, but I can't get anywhere near that. At least not with just my personal gestalt. I can do it with a tactical, though."

Dahnai gave him a shocked look, then burst out in delighted laughter. "That's amazing!" she gushed. "Can I learn how to do that?"

"You can now, since you can augment your TK with a gestalt," he replied. "I couldn't do it without mine, and there are things Samin can do that I just plain out can't, at least not without being merged to Cybi, because he's so much stronger than I am. It also requires me to split my attention quite a bit to pull it off and not kill myself. I don't think a non-Generation could do it, even if they had the raw power to pull it off. But when it comes to protecting yourself with TK, manipulating space is still the best thing you can learn, because it makes you untouchable. And I know Saelle has taught you how to do that."

"Yup," Dahnai nodded. "After she saved my life in the throne room, I made sure she taught me."

"I take it I'm going to be teaching her most of the other tricks, Jason?" Saelle asked.

"Sure, go ahead," he replied. "It's a good way to gauge how being a Generation affected her TK. You knew her limits before, you can help her test those limits now."

"So, we start without using a gestalt?"

"You will. We want to see how your TK was affected by this, so I want you to try to learn the tricks without using a gestalt, at least at first. That way we'll know if it strengthened your TK."

"Oh, okay. I don't mind being a test subject," she smiled. "And I *seriously* want to learn that laser beam trick."

"It's tough," Jason warned.

"I'm tough," she replied with a wink.

After a little more discussion, they broke to give Dahnai a chance to rest and her doctors to give her a thorough exam, ensuring that her damaged liver was functional enough that their current drug and diet regimen would keep her healthy. Jason spent a great deal of time while Dahnai was in her

clinic talking to Aya, Viya, and Mari, telling the other two officers about his intent to form a Karinne version of the Imperial Guard, with the same intense requirements, towering moral character, and comprehensive level of training as the Imperial Guard. Mari fully supported his idea, and even pledged to send two Imperial Guard instructors to Karis to help Aya get it off the ground. They wouldn't be dispatched to Karis, they'd be there to basically take Aya and three other of the guards already dispatched to Jason and Shya and train *them* to be instructors. They would then form the Karinne Ducal Guard and instill into it all the discipline and competency of the Imperial Guard.

After that, he had another long talk with Zaa, the two of them walking up and down the beach near the palace. "I find some optimism so far," Zaa finally concluded. "Dahnai seems at least amenable."

"For now. We'll see how amenable she is when the newness of it wears off," Jason answered. "What I'm glad about is that the Imperial Guard is with us."

She nodded. "Given they knew about this when you had them bring Dahnai to the annex, it means that the secret was already compromised." They came around a gentle curve in the beach and saw Rann and Shya, sitting on a blanket. Shya had her head leaning on Rann's shoulder, and he had his arm around her, still very clingy after her recent scare. They walked up to them, and they both looked up when their shadows blocked the sun. "Hey Dad, hey Denmother," Rann said.

"How are you two feeling?" Jason asked.

"I feel a lot better, Dad," Shya answered. "We were just talking about all this."

"That's what we were doing," Zaa said.

"Things aren't going to change much for you, Shya," Jason told her. "Given you live here. Things are gonna be hardest on Sirri, I think. She's got *this* on top of everything else she has to deal with now."

"I know what you mean. I saw what sis has to go through being the Crown Princess, and she can *have* it. I'm much happier right here with my Ranny than I woulda ever been sitting on the throne."

“And that just shows how wise you really are, Shya,” Jason chuckled. “Have you figured out commune yet?”

“Yeah, Ranny taught me,” she answered. “It didn’t seem hard at all.”

“It didn’t for me either,” Jason told her.

“Dad?”

“Yes, pips?”

“Why can Sirri learn how to pilot an exomech but I can’t?”

“You’re eight years old, Shya,” Jason told her simply. “And piloting an exomech is *serious business*. It’s not a game.”

“But Sirri’s only thirteen.”

“Pips, I am *not* going to let you merge to an exomech,” Jason told her firmly. “You’re eight years old. Enjoy this time, Shya, because when you get to be Sirri’s age, the fun and games stop, and all the boring and insufferable training begins.”

“Meanie,” she said without much conviction.

“You bet I am,” he agreed strongly, which made Zaa chuckle. “We’ll leave you two to go back to enjoying the beach. Me and Zaa have a few more things to talk about.”

They walked past the kids and came close to the main house, and Jason was honestly surprised to see several Faey on the beach, all nude, two of which he recognized as Semoya and Emae. He’d honestly forgotten that the Highborn Grand Duchesses were on the island, they’d come when they announced Dahnai’s “accident.” Semoya was leaning back on her elbows on a beach towel with Emae sitting beside her, and the two of them were playing some kind of holo-game projecting out from Emae’s interface.

“Ladies,” Jason greeted as they walked up to them. “Did you get a chance to see Dahnai and Kellin?”

“A while ago, and they look none the worse for wear,” Emae answered. “Dahnai did drop something of a bomb on us, though.”

“What?”

“She said that they found Hanniger’s Disease in her liver after she was examined after the accident,” Semoya answered. “She didn’t want to release any official statement about it until she had a chance to talk to the Highborn Council.”

“She didn’t mention that to me,” Jason lied, glancing back at the palace. Clever, clever Dahnai, she’d already planted her excuse. Hanniger’s Disease was a disease of the bile-producing cells of the liver, a malignant genetic mutation caused by a virus that originated from Goraga, somewhat like a virus-produced form of cancer. The disease caused the affected cells to stop producing bile, and they could affect nearby cells even without the virus present. The disease was fatal if it progressed to the point where it affected most of the liver. And Dahnai *had* been on Goraga about three months ago, which fit in nicely. “What did you discuss about it?”

“My aunt had it, she wanted to know if treatment or just replacing her liver was the best course of action,” Emae answered. “I advised her that in the long run, getting a new liver is the best idea. It just gets rid of the problem entirely.”

“That’s surgery,” Jason noted, glancing at Zaa. “She’ll be laid up for a while.”

“It’s still the best thing to do. Hanniger’s Disease has a nasty habit of coming back again and again,” Emae told him. “Even after the virus is cleared out of her, a single malignant cell that resisted the treatment can spread it all over again.”

“It’s good to see you here, Denmother. I’m sure that Dahnai was very appreciative that you would come in person to make sure she’s well,” Semoya said.

“I came to bring the CCM additional intelligence gathered by my children,” she replied. “And I do rather like Dahnai, so I was happy to come see her.”

“So that was what that little conference you attended with her and Jason was about?”

“That was part of it,” she said. “The Syndicate has adjusted their tactics, and as a result, the battles against them are becoming much more costly. I

hope that the data I brought might help the CCM tilt the scales back in their favor.”

“I haven’t read any of today’s reports yet,” Emae admitted. “What are they doing now?”

“They figured out that the landers are their greatest threat,” Jason answered. “I was on a sortie that ran into these new tactics, and it was *ugly*. We managed to destroy the Syndicate ships, but they kicked the shit out of us in the process. We lost over half the lander teams before they even reached the super-ships, and we lost over half our task force when they tried to get the remaining lander teams to the ships.”

“I thought no task force went out without a ship capable of destroying a super-ship at range.”

“We *did* have them, we had two INS capitol ships with us,” Jason answered. “And they destroyed one of the super-ships. We managed to get a lander team on the other one and hold out long enough to set off a Megatron. But it was *messy*.”

“I think we should go read the daily reports, Semoya,” Emae proposed. “That doesn’t sound good. We’ve been relying on lander teams to make up for the fact that we don’t have a large number of ships capable of destroying their super-ships.”

“Exactly,” Jason nodded.

To their credit, they both got up, said hasty farewells, and hurried back to the summer palace...and Jason had to watch their two naked butts wiggling back up the pathway to the grounds. Emae and Semoya were getting up there in years, but both of them were still quite shapely.

Zaa elbowed him lightly in his armored side, and he laughed when he looked at her cool expression.

Jason had something of a surprise waiting for him when he got back to the palace with Zaa, when he checked in with Myri. He was sitting in *his* office in the summer palace, an office Dahnai had Red Horn set up for him to use when he was over visiting, and Jason was actually using it for that purpose. He had a flat hologram of Myri up over the desk—an imitation of the one in his office at the White House—getting a briefing of the other

action that had taken place today. Lorna wisely aborted quite a few scheduled sorties after the change in tactics that Jason's team ran into, and the CCM command staff was hammering out an adjustment to their adjustment. "Only two other sorties went out after yours earlier today," Myri told him. "Both had KMS command ships and fleet battleships with them, so they didn't rely on lander teams. The Syndicate hasn't quite come up with an effective counter to our ships yet, so their missions went much more smoothly than yours. And speaking of your mission," she said, giving him a slight smile, "it seems that you've been put in for a citation, Jayce."

"Yeah, like I care about a piece of paper," Jason snorted. "But she'd better have put in the entire lander team and the two CCM line vessels that assisted us in for that citation too."

"Oh, she did," Myri affirmed. "She doesn't know it was *you* she put in for the citation with HQ. Most of the CCM knows you're running combat missions in a Titan, but only the command staff knows which company you're with. We keep that a secret, else it might somehow get back to the Syndicate and the Storm Riders would get targeted. And why haven't you put the units in for a KMS medal, hmm?"

"Why don't you dig down into the bottom of your inbox, woman?" he retorted. "I put everyone in for a Valorous Duty Medal. Well, everyone except me."

"You deserve it as much as everyone else, Jayce."

"I'm not giving myself medals, Myri," he snorted. "That'll make me look like some two-credit despot."

She laughed. "So modest," she grinned.

"Yeah, push off, bitch," he said, which made her laugh again.

After going through the reports, Lorna called him, which surprised him a little bit. "Nephew, we may have a counter to the change in tactics, but it's gonna depend on you," she told him. "Can Karinne replicators replicate armor-quality metal?"

"Yeah, we can replicate a form of crystallized titanium that's nearly as strong as low-grade Carbidium," he answered. "Why?"

“Because your trick with the wreckage of that Jirunji ship is how we counter them,” she answered, and her hologram window split. A mockup of what looked like a large box appeared in the window beside hers. “We build these. Armored pillboxes with three layers of armor that our ships tow in and then we set down. With a diffuser running inside, it prevents them from using Torsion weapons to tear it up, and it creates a physical barrier they have to get through after they bring down the hard shield. We set an annealer ring on the inside to cut open the box so the lander team can bug out, and we have CCM line vessels supporting the box to make it even harder for the enemy to break through it. We can also install automated weaponry on the outside to further slow down the enemy. After all, the box only has to hold them off for seven minutes. We figured that the Karinnes could build these things the fastest if you could replicate an armor-quality metal.”

“Carbidium or Yterium would be better than replicated titanium, and we’ve got tons of it stockpiled,” he told her. “We’ll get all the armor we could ever want back when we salvage the debris of super-ships destroyed in battle. How fancy is this thing?”

“It’s just a box, Jason, with an annealer ring installed on the roof so the lander team can bug out, and maybe some old surplus-era weapons mounted on it, stuff we can afford to lose. I think the Imperium has about ten warehouses full of old hot plasma cannons that Dahnai would love to find a use for. Well, here’s a use.” She glanced to the side, then looked back. “The key to this, nephew, is deception. We send hundreds of these boxes at a time, but only a few are real. The Syndicate will have no choice but to respond to all of them, not knowing which ones are the real ones, and the automated defenses on the boxes will stall them, give our real lander teams time to do their job. The decoys also spread out their defenders on the hull and reduces the pressure on the *real* box to manageable levels.”

“That’s devious, Aunt Lorna,” he chuckled. “that’s worthy of 3D.”

“Why thank you, nephew,” she smiled.

“Hmm,” he sounded, looking at the simple drawing. “Send me the exact specs for this, Lorna, and I’ll run this by a few people. Now that I know the exact purpose of them, maybe we may be able to tech this idea up a little bit, and not slow down building them.”

“It’s your assets at risk here, Jason, feel free to change the design. It’s not really a design at all, it’s just a rough draft of an idea. Just don’t make it where you can’t build them fast enough,” she told him. “Remember, we need hundreds for each sortie, or the enemy will be able to counter it.”

“I’ll see what I can do, Lorna. Call me back in a few hours.”

“Will do,” she nodded, and her hologram winked out.

I have to go over to the mainland for a little bit, Jason sent openly across the island. I should be back soon.

It’s almost lunchtime, Dahnai protested.

War means you keep odd hours, love, he replied.

He got more than one thing done while he was over there. He sat down with Bo, Sioa, and Trenirk, and they hammered out a very simplistic design for Lorna’s armored box idea that also had some teeth, in the form of some automated weapons, engines so it didn’t need to be towed, a hinged door in the roof that would be annealed open, allow the landing team to escape, then close back up and re-anneal to keep out the Syndicate, and a few disposable 3D toys. And Trenirk assured him he could build two of them an hour, given how simple they were. After he hashed that out, he stopped by Miaari’s office after she paged him. “Princess Mrri finished the tests, Jason,” she told him. “And the results were good for us.”

“How so?”

“It seems that she can understand communion, but she can’t actively commune herself,” she answered. “She’s like a commune listener. She can’t mimic any other Generation abilities, either.”

“Well, that *is* good news. Now we just need to find out if she’s the norm for her species.”

“She is,” Miaari answered. “We secured permission to send an envoy to Paian and administer some tests to other Pai telepaths. *All* of them can hear communion.”

“Well...we can work around that,” Jason grunted. “But it means we go with Jeya’s idea to encrypt the local biogenic networks used on KMS vessels.”

“A wise precaution,” she agreed. “The Pai are an intriguing species. It seems that *all* of them are telekinetic. It’s something we have never seen before,” she mused. “The entire race is telekinetic, but they also have a very high proportion of telepaths among their species. Nearly 20% of them are telepathic.”

“Wow, seriously?” he asked in surprise.

She nodded. “It turns the theory that telepathy is the baseline psionic ability on its ear. It’s entirely possible that their environment may be why,” she mused. “They must have developed telekinetic ability as a species to help them survive on their home planet. A unique evolutionary trait.”

“How strong are they?”

“Most of them, not very, but as a baseline, they are the strongest telekinetics we have ever encountered. The average Pai can manipulate a mass weighing approximately four konn, in *their* gravity,” she answered. “Given their planet is lethal heavy gravity, they would be significantly stronger on Karis than there, since there is less gravity for them to overcome. But from what records the Pai released to us, some of their telekinetics are extremely powerful. And they have learned a great number of applications using it, given they’ve had thousands of years to practice. Microkinesis, spatial kinesis, micro-spatial kinesis, pyrokinesis, even energy and micro-energy kinesis, the direct manipulation of non-mass energy, like your trick with the light. In one demonstration, a Pai TK shattered the molecular bonds of a piece of metal, turning it to fine dust. He *disintegrated* it with his telekinesis. Another used telekinesis to cause one object to pass *through* another, by manipulating the object on a molecular level to place it into a singular phased quantum state. Our assessment team was *quite* impressed.”

“So am I,” Jason agreed after a whistle. “They’ve learned some ways to use TK to mimic some of our tech, and that’s *awesome*. We’d better not tell Samin that, he’ll jump on the first ship he can find and run over there. Maybe we should offer them teaching positions in the Academy, teaching advanced telekinetic skills to those that have them.”

“It wouldn’t be a bad idea,” she nodded. “And maybe one of them could find their way to Karis?”

“I was thinking the same thing. Get a couple of Kimdori over there and hunt for a suitable candidate.”

“I will,” she affirmed. “And we have also learned that the Muri are also hiding a few impressive secrets of their own.”

“What can they do?”

“They have a very high ratio of telepaths in their population, nearly 25%,” she told him. “But what is more impressive is that the entire race has a psionic ability that we have never encountered before. They are *finders*. That is literally what the name of their race means. The *finders*.”

“What does that mean?”

“They have the psionic ability to locate that which they seek, so long as they know exactly what it looks like,” she explained. “It seems to be a very specialized form of clairvoyance, based on sight. So, if you happen to lose your hat on the beach, you can *lock in* on it and locate it. The ability seems to work on anything they can see, or know exactly what it looks like, be it an object or a living thing. They could find a specific part in a pile of junk, so long as they know exactly what it looks like. Show them a picture of a person, they can locate him in a crowded city. We tested their ability against Kimdori, and we learned that they cannot find us if we’re in a different shape than what they are presented with, but can find us if we stay in the same shape if they know what something looks like, they can find it, no matter where it is. We showed them a picture of the Spires on Terra, and they pointed right at it, Jason, and our stargrams showed that they were *right*,” she said seriously. “They can point right to it and give you a general idea of its distance. They couldn’t exactly tell you how far away something was unless they were within about two hundred shakra of it. But beyond that, they could tell you if it was near or far. When we asked them how far away the Spires was, they only said it was extremely far away. It is a most intriguing ability.”

Jason gave her a long look. “Mee,” he said seriously. “Get some of them over here. Talk to Jerrim and prepare recruiting teams and tell Yeri to negotiate with both the governments to allow them onto the planets. We need both Pai and Muri in the house *fucking now*, but the Muri are far more

important than the Pai. And I'm gonna push as hard as I can to get both of them into the Confederation, as fast as possible."

"I see you comprehend the true power of this ability."

"I do," he nodded. "Finders, that's a narrow vision, and it limits them. They could be the greatest *navigators* the universe has ever known. If they can find something regardless of distance as long as they know what it looks like, you could drop a Muri anywhere in the *universe*, and they could find their way home by locking in on something they know on their home planet. Show them a picture of something, they could set a course right to it. And with us developing the drives, having a Muri aboard ship might be critical for a long-range scouting mission. If their navigation systems go down, the Muri can get them home. And that's just *civilian*. Get a Muri military officer on a KMS ship and show him a picture of an enemy ship, and he can find it. No stealth technology in the universe could hide it from him."

"I agree, cousin," Miaari nodded. "And I have asked Denmother to send a full scientific mission to their home system. That both their species developed race-wide psionic powers is very important. Something about that star system may have incited their development, and if we can discover what it is, it will greatly advance the field of psiology."

"Send me your findings, I'm curious. Now, maybe you can tell me what you have the *Javelin* doing."

"Oh, just setting a few devices and supplies on E Chaio, the Syndicate capitol planet, in addition to transporting a pack of infiltrators there so they can begin working their way into the Syndicate system," she replied with a slight, malicious smile. "There are places on the surface where things can be hidden, because the security there is surprisingly lax."

"It's so far from Consortium territory, they must feel it's relatively safe," Jason mused. "Let me guess, the further you get from their board HQ, the easier it is."

"Precisely. I needed the *Javelin* to get in past their orbital defenses, which are fairly strong. But the security on the planet itself is weak. A critical oversight we shall exploit," she sniffed.

"Did you send a tachyon burst array over there?"

“Of course I did. The infiltrators are tasked to locate the quantum computers they use to communicate with their fleet and prepare a plan of attack to take them out.”

“Outstanding,” Jason told her. “Is the ship still over there?”

“The frigate is currently at the quadrary, preparing for its next mission. I’m having them deliver infiltrators to critical Syndicate systems throughout Andromeda, as well as some in what remains of Consortium territory. They will also plant sensor beacons throughout Andromeda that will give us coverage of large swaths of territory.”

“Wise,” he agreed.

“I do nothing but what Denmother commands, Jason,” she said modestly. “I was tasked for this because of my access to your stealth frigates. We debated using our own stealth ships, but the *Javelin* can fight its way out if it is exposed, where our stealth ships cannot.”

“Let’s be honest here. The *Javelin* is more than a match for anything but a Syndicate super-ship,” he said smugly.

“That too,” she agreed with a slight smile. “We are also preparing for a face to face negotiation with the Board. The only way we will ever end this war is by forcing them to commit to peace with us, and that will take negotiating a treaty. We could never hope to defeat a government that controls an entire *galaxy* in a full war.”

“You know they’re never going to go for that,” Jason said. “At least not at first. We not only have to bloody their nose, we have to all but knock their fucking heads off to make them stay out of our galaxy.”

“There is more than one way to do that, Jason,” she smiled. “Once our infiltrators have enough information, we can do considerable damage to them from within Andromeda. Remember, the Syndicate only cares about money. If we prove that it is a *losing* venture to conquer the Milky Way, they will agree to peace if only to avoid losing money.”

“They’re also about power, Mee, and their lust for power may override their greed. But, you’re mostly right. It will eventually come down to a negotiation table. The only question is how much damage we have to do before they’re willing to sit down at it.”

“That is on them. It will be their own stubbornness that does them harm,” she said easily.

“Sounds like you have everything under control, Mee. I’m gonna go ahead and go back to the summer palace,” Jason said. “Get everything done.”

“Don’t I always, cousin?” she asked lightly.

“That you do. That’s the only reason I put up with you.”

He burst out laughing when she opened the drawer in her desk, and pulled out an old fashioned Terran newspaper, already rolled up. She swatted him over the desk with it playfully, her eyes luminous, then she shooed him out of her office. That was an *enlightening* discussion, on several levels, he pondered as he walked back out to the pad. The Pai and the Muri were both much more than they appeared to be, and he saw both of their races as tremendous assets to the House of Karinne. The Pai’s telekinetic skills were something Jason wanted to learn, but he *really* wanted to get some Muri into the House as quickly as possible. Their finding ability, it would be just so fucking *useful*, on more than one level. Navigation, law enforcement—no fugitive could hide from a Muri—espionage, even engineering, the Muri’s racial psionic gifts were incredibly useful, and would expand the capabilities of the House in many ways.

It was close to dinnertime when he got back, and he saw that the summer palace was almost full. The Highborn Grand Duchesses were here, most of his kids were here, Yila Trefani was here, and to his surprise, several rulers from the council were also here, in person. Jason came out from the landing pad over to the patio and pool, where the guards told him Dahnai was, and saw Kreel sitting at the table in his Terran Bermuda shorts, no shirt, his padded feet up on the table and large tankard of Makati ale in his hand. Krirara and Enva were sitting on the edge of the pool side by side, Sk’Vrae was in the pool with Sora and Zachary, playing with a beach ball no less, and Holikk was here as well, over on the grass beside the patio showing a few of Dahnai’s guards some Subrian wrestling moves. Dahnai was sitting beside Kreel at the table, holding court over friends, family, and allies. These were Dahnai’s closest friends on the Confederate Council, Jason knew, but he was a little surprised to see Holikk here. That meant that Dahnai must be schmoozing him over something. As usual for Dahnai

when she was out on her patio, she was nude. “What are you guys doing here?” Jason asked Kreel as he came up.

“Just here to lend moral support to Dahnai in this time of crisis, Jayce,” he replied lightly, then took another long drink.

“And drink all my ale,” Dahnai accused.

“It’s free when it’s yours, Dahnai,” he said shamelessly, and Jason laughed when Dahnai poured her own ale over his head.

“Did you get enough, Kreel?” she asked sweetly, which made him laugh himself.

“I can never get enough Makati ale, Dahnai,” he said in reply, giving her a buck-toothed grin. His teeth had been recently filed down. As if to prove it, he took another drink from his tankard as ale dripped out of his gray fur.

“Get out of that armor and sit down, Jayce, you’ve been running around all afternoon,” Dahnai ordered.

“I’m not done yet,” he replied. “I’m waiting for Lorna to call me back.”

“Over?”

“A counter to the Syndicate’s counter. If Tren stayed on schedule, and he always does, then the first of our jack-in-the-boxes should be coming off the assembly line any time now.”

“What is that?”

“How we’re going to get lander teams onto super-ships from here out,” he replied, putting a finger to his gestalt. A hologram projected out from it to show one of the boxes. “This ugly thing is almost like a little cheap ship. It has cheap grav engines in it, as well as old surplus-era guns, because the whole thing is built to blow up. The box is made out of armor-quality Carbidium, something we have so much of we don’t know what to do with it all. It will fly in and land on the surface of the ship, anneal itself to the hull, and the lander team inside it will then set off the Megatron. It has old surplus hot plasma cannons and some 3D toys as additional defense, not counting the firing positions set in the walls for all three sizes of defenders. Besides, since it’s disposable, mecha and infantry armed with the right

weapons can just fire *through* the walls. It doesn't matter if they blow holes in the walls, since the whole thing is gonna blow up anyway."

"How do the landers escape?" Dahnai asked.

"An annealer system built into the roof that will open the top, then close again after they leave and re-anneal to prevent Syndicate forces from getting in to stop the Megatron. Thus the name *jack-in-the-box*," he said, using the English words. "Similar to an old Terran toy where you turn a crank and it causes a little spring-loaded clown doll to pop out of a door on the top."

"That must really be ancient," Kreel said, a tiny bit of amusement in his eyes.

"Be nice, furball," Jason warned, which made him laugh.

"Better fur than scales," he replied.

"What was that, Kreel?" Sk'Vrae called loudly, which made him laugh again.

"You're just getting in trouble on all sides today, Kreel," Dahnai told him.

"It keeps life interesting," he replied dryly, then he finished off his tankard and stood up.

"We're going to build these in bulk and send hundreds of them at a time at the enemy super-ships as decoys, force them to attack *all* of them when only a *few* of them will hold lander teams. Lorna thinks that will get our teams safely on the surface and give them time to do the job."

"It probably will," Kreel agreed. "Now if you'll excuse me, I'm gonna go wash this out of my fur before it gets sticky. Be my best friend ever and have someone refill my tankard while I'm gone, will ya Dahnai?" He hurried over to one of the showers meant to wash saltwater off a swimmer.

"Go undress," Dahnai told Jason, making a shooing motion at him.

He humored her, taking off his armor and returning to the pool deck, as nude as everyone but Kreel—and he only wore the shorts because he really liked them, he wasn't afraid to get naked—and the seven leaders gathered around Dahnai's table, enjoying samples from Dahnai's deep wine cellar as

they talked. First about the “accident,” but they drifted into the boring politics that made the kids flee the table and stay in the pool. Jason explained the change in tactics the Syndicate had adapted and their counter in more detail but shared his concerns with them over the direction the war had taken. “This isn’t going to be short and easy anymore,” he frowned. “The Syndicate’s going to adopt the same tactics we are, preserve their forces and try to bleed us, whittling us down one ship at a time, picking and choosing their battles to inflict maximum damage with minimal losses. And once they’re confident they’ve weakened us enough, *then* they’ll go on the offensive. And so long as they continue to be constantly on the move, there’s not much we can do about it.”

“Isn’t it going to make it impossible for them to sleep?” Holikk asked.

Jason shook his head. “If they put their off-duty people in those jump units, they’ll just sleep until they’re back on duty. They won’t even notice that their ships are constantly jumping in and out of hyperspace. But it *is* going to impact their ship performance, with the on-duty crew constantly having to get into and out of the units. Most likely, they’ll do long jumps that swing them out of the galaxy and back into it from time to time to give their crews extended rest.”

“We could catch them when they do those,” Enva offered.

“Maybe, but they’re not going to be dumb enough to be predictable, not when one mistake on their part can end this war in our favor. That’s how they got most of their fleet trapped at Oasis,” he countered. He got a message in his gestalt, and he put a finger to it. “Lorna just told me that the CCM approved our design, so we’re gonna start producing them. And she just scrubbed all missions until we get enough boxes built to distribute out across the fleet. She’s ordering large task forces of the CCM to deploy to central locations through the Confederation to get them spread out, to reduce response time to other parts of the galaxy, and she’s putting it in the order that no task force sits at any system without an interdictor protecting them. It’s going to give Kosigi time to repair damaged ships to get our numbers back up,” he mused. “Maybe even give us a chance to finish some of the ships we had to stop work on to shift to repairs.”

“We may need those ships, if you end up being right, Jayce,” Kreel said seriously. “That’s our advantage in this. If we have time, we can replace our

lost ships. The Syndicate can't."

A red-coated doctor approached. "It's time for your medicine, your Majesty," she said with a bow, then she offered Dahnai a small cup holding a single pill. "You need to eat something after taking it."

"I'll have the kitchen send out a snack to hold me until dinner," she nodded, then she swallowed the pill. "Thank you, Doctor."

"Remember, your Majesty, you have an exam scheduled for first thing in the morning. I'll send a page once I'm told you're awake."

"Alright," she nodded.

"Medicine? For what?" Sk'Vrae asked.

"Hanniger's Disease," she said with a frown. "They found it in my liver after giving me an exam after the crash. I must have picked it up when I went to Goraga a few months ago, and it was perfect timing. I'd just had my regularly scheduled physical the day before I left, so it gave it all this time to take hold and spread."

"I'm not familiar with this illness," Enva said.

"It can be fatal if not treated, but it's curable, so that's not an issue. They caught it in time, and that's what matters. It attacks the liver, Enva, shuts it down. I don't think Sha'i-ree can get it, and I'm not contagious, so you don't have to worry about it even if you could," she said, looking at her. "I can either go through a treatment regimen, or they can replace my liver. I've decided to have my liver replaced, because Hanniger's Disease can spontaneously flare up again even after it's cured. But a liver replacement cures it for good."

"That sounds a bit extreme," Krirara noted.

"I know, but at least I never have to worry about it again," she shrugged.

"Yup, when Faey get old, they start to fall apart," Jason said lightly, leaning back in his chair. The others laughed when he brought up a hand and caught Dahnai's wrist when she tried to smack him.

"Watch it, buster, I'm still young enough to put you on your ass," she threatened.

“For now. I’m patient,” he said in a voice that made Kreel crack up.

“Anyway,” Dahnai said, glaring a bit at Jason, who just winked at her, “They’ll have a new liver ready for me in just a few days, they’re cloning a replacement. Until then, I have to take the medicine and I have a restricted diet, so it doesn’t cause me any problems. With a half-functioning liver, certain foods could cause me some problems. They also don’t want me doing anything strenuous, so no working out.”

“Well, I’m glad to hear that you’re going to be alright,” Enva said, putting a hand on Dahnai’s wrist.

“I’ll be laid up for a couple of takirs after the surgery. I’ve decided that Sirri will sit in for me during council. But, given I’m gonna be indisposed, I’m gonna abdicate my remaining time with the gavel. Assaba is next in the rotation, so he’ll get a few extra days with the gavel. At least if he doesn’t trade his gavel time with someone else, like how me and Sk’Vrae did.”

“He needs a good reason to do so. I had religious obligations that made holding the gavel during my rotation impossible,” Sk’Vrae noted. “And he can’t trade it, he must switch with who is next in the rotation. That would be Magran, would it not?”

“Yeah,” Jason nodded. “Then Ethikk, then Vizzie, then Grayhawk, then Grran, then Shakizarr, then this joker over here,” he said, pointing at Kreel.

“The war had better end before that disaster befalls us,” Sk’Vrae declared, which made them all laugh, even Kreel.

“Well, council sessions are certainly gonna be no-nonsense with Assaba at the lectern,” Kreel chuckled.

“He keeps guys like you on a short leash,” Dahnai grinned at him.

“I don’t mind a short leash, it just means I don’t have to go far to drag him along with me,” he replied with a sly smile.

A trio of servants came up to them and set down trays holding snacks. Most of it was Faey, but Jason saw what looked suspiciously like mozzarella sticks among the assorted foods, given a dipping cup of marina sauce was with it. And a tentative bite proved it. “You’re really getting hooked on Terran food, Dahnai,” Jason chuckled as he ate the rest of it.

“Those sugar chutes are *mine!*” Kreel said loudly, lunging at them. More than a few of them laughed when Krirara grabbed the plate holding them first and held them up and away from him.

“I have to admit, Terrans have some good food,” Dahnai chuckled as she picked up a mozzarella stick herself and nibbled at it.

The cooks had truly provided snacks for all of them, and everyone at the table had the training and courtesy not to shudder when Sk’Vrae picked up what looked like a small slab of raw meat, and she swallowed it down whole. Much as Grimja couldn’t eat meat, Urumi needed to eat a portion of their meat raw, or they’d become malnourished. They could eat cooked meat, and they enjoyed it, but it wasn’t as good for them as raw meat. After eating the four strips of raw meat, she picked up a plate of Makati *vodo*, which was a meat dish that, like all Makati food, was sorta bland but quite hearty and robust. They went back to talking about boring politics for a while, making Jason tune out a little bit.

After dinner, Jason pulled Dahnai aside and took her up to her bedroom and sat with her on the couch near her large windows that gave her a breathtaking view of the patio, rear lawn, and beach. “Alright, I think you’ve had enough time,” he told her, taking her hands. “It’s time to start practicing. I talked to Songa and she said that as long as you don’t exert yourself, you’re good to practice.”

“What are we going to learn first?”

He made sure the door was closed and the guards were in place, then he looked back to her. “Commune,” he said. “It shouldn’t be that hard, Dahnai. It’s instinctive to all Generations. Ready?”

“Ready,” she said, closing her eyes.

To her credit, it only took her about two minutes to figure it out, proving that it truly was genetic knowledge, that it was instinct, and those instincts were now a part of her. *[Like this?]* she finally managed, then she opened her eyes and gave him a bright, elated look. *[I did it!]*

[Perfect,] he nodded, patting her leg.

[It’s...it’s so simple. And so comprehensive. Why couldn’t I ever do this before?]

[Because you weren't a Generation before. Among us, Dahnai, this is how we communicate. Talking, sending, they can't hold a candle to this.]

[I can see why. It's so, so...pure,] she struggled.

[Exactly. And it's much faster than sending. And that's what we're going to practice now. Eventually I'm going to teach you how to access your entire bandwidth, love, but first, you have to learn how to split.]

[Split?]

[Divide your attention so you can concentrate on more than one thing at a time,] he explained. [That's instinctive as well, but it takes practice to master. And you can't access your full bandwidth until you learn how to split.]

[Okay, how do I do that?]

[You do it by not concentrating on anything,] he explained. [When I split, I'm not focusing myself on any one thing that I'm doing, I'm just sorta doing all of it at the same time. You can bring one thing to the forefront and pay more attention to it than everything else, but that takes practice too. Even though you can split, like me, your brain wants to focus on just one thing. When you focus on one thing, you lose your splits. And as you learn, each of your splits will be able to perform multiple tasks at the same time the way most anyone can, like how I both play the piano and sing at the same time, or how a drummer can use both his hands and both his feet and have all four do different things at once. That's a learned skill dealing with muscle memory and repetition. That's something anyone can do, they teach themselves how to do it. Well, as you get better and better, each of your splits can be like that drummer, until each split is doing many things at once. And that's when you've accessed your full bandwidth,] he explained.

[But, remember this love. No matter how many splits you do, you will always have what we call the dominant. That's the unsplit part of your mind, the part that controls everything else. When your dominant is focusing on something, it takes precedence over all the others, and part of this exercise is to learn how to not focus with your dominant, to let it sit in the background and allow your other splits to do stuff. That's why, when I merge to a bionoid, I can't walk around in my natural body while controlling the bionoid—well, actually, I kinda can, but I look like a

drunken two year old when I do it,] he amended, which made her laugh, [or control two bionoids at a time. It requires my dominant split to manage the bionoid or pilot a rig, and there's not enough left for me to fully control my natural body. And the more you split, the more passive each split must be. When a Generation does a bunch of splits, all of them are performing passive tasks that don't require her body or much of her attention, like thinking, she's not doing anything active when she splits that much. So while we can split our attention, it does have limits. And the biggest limit is, the more active a task you're performing, the more attention it takes, and the fewer splits you can manage while doing it. In a way, we have only so much attention we can give. It's like having a pocket full of coins, love, with your dominant coin being worth a hundred times the others, and every split costs coins. And the more intense the activity that split is performing, the more coins it costs to maintain it, to the point where you have to allot your dominant coin to perform the task. So, we have to allot that attention out to various splits, ration it, manage it. The more intense a task, the more coins it sucks up, leaving less for everything else. And when we have to spend our dominant coin, that severely drains our coin reserves and leaves very little for other things we want to buy.]

[Merging to something like a bionoid or a rig takes so much attention, I can't split to the point where I can fully control my own body or control a second bionoid. I spent my dominant coin on the merge, and now there's not enough coins left to buy enough attention to control something else, because buying a split with enough attention to control another bionoid or my own body is expensive. But, while I'm piloting the rig, I can split my attention among my rig control systems and sensor feeds, passive splits that take very little of my attention, and that lets me be aware of everything my rig is telling me. Using the coin analogy, I spent most of my coins on the rig merge, but I have enough coins left over to buy passive splits to monitor my rig's various telemetry feeds. That's a good example of how we ration our attention.]

[I get it,] she told him with a confident nod. [So, how many times can you split?]

[That depends entirely on the Generation. I can manage up to about thirty splits, but when I'm split that much, it's usually when I'm laying in bed thinking about shit. Myleena, that insufferable bitch, she can manage

about fifty. Using the coin analogy, I have thirty coins in my pocket that I can allot, twenty-nine one credit coins and a one hundred credit coin, my dominant coin. I can put one coin on each split, buying one credit's worth of attention, and hold back my dominant coin, or use my dominant coin and however many additional one credit coins it costs on one split, one that's doing a very difficult task. Myleena has way more coins than me to spend, because she's Myleena,] he grunted mentally.

Dahnai burst out laughing. *[There's enough Faey in you to be as competitive as we are,]* she grinned.

[Myleena puts most of us to shame,] he acceded, a bit grudgingly. *[The ability to manage splits is based a lot on the intelligence of the Generation, and well, Myleena's like a super-genius, so there ya go. And that's on top of her being the most powerful of us all in talent, at least among the elders. Siyara is going to be the most powerful of us when her talent fully matures. Myleena is the top dog around here in like about ten different categories.]*

[And I used to have her in Black Ops.]

[She's mine now, so back off,] he threatened, which made her laugh. *[When you unlock your full bandwidth, love, you'll be spending each of your coins on a passive split and using each one to commune in unison, which allows you to send far more information than regular sending, and do it much faster. Alright, let's begin. Before you can do thirty splits, love, you have to learn how to do one. So.]* He let go of her hands and projected out a hologram in front of them from his gestalt. On the left was a passage from a book, and on the right was a series of math problems. *[You're going to practice by doing two very different tasks at the same time, reading and math. Your task is to read the passage on the right while solving the math problems on the left, using your interface to project your work on the problems over my own hologram. And here's where it gets a bit tricky, love. Even though your brain can concentrate on both at the same time, your eyes can't. You're also going to learn how to share what your senses are telling you with both sides of your split.]*

[How do I do that?]

[To start off, try this. Scan your eyes across both sides from one side to the other. Let your eyes take in all of it, then let your splits figure out which

of them is supposed to be working on what your eyes just went over. There are other approaches as well, like looking at the math problems first and allowing one split to work on solving them while your eyes are reading the text, glancing back at the math problems from time to time to refresh your memory. There's no one approach to this, so do what feels most natural for you.]

[Alright, sounds pretty simple. Let's do this,] she declared.

Jason was very impressed, and it proved just how smart Dahnai really was. She picked up the trick of it after only about an hour, and was able to split her attention between the two distinctly separate tasks, doing them at the same time, reading the book aloud as she did the math problems.

[Well done, love!] he complemented.

[Thanks, babes,] she replied modestly. *[Let me guess, if we're using our senses, it restricts what we can do. But if it's all purely internal, like communing, or it's through a merge where my senses don't matter or a computer can feed me multiple sensory streams at once, we can do much more.]*

[Exactly, and well-reasoned, love,] he communed, respect shimmering through his thought. *[Thinking, communing, those are passive, so you can really spread your bandwidth out when you're doing them, because it's all internal. But your bandwidth gets choked down when, for example, it has to use your eyes, because your eyes still work the same way they did before. They can only focus on one thing at a time, so you're limited by them. And I think this is a good place to stop,]* he decided. *[You can practice on your own now, and knowing you, you'll be communing with full bandwidth by tomorrow morning.]*

[You bet I will,] she agreed with a smile. *[So, when are you giving me a gestalt?]*

[Not 'til all your guests are gone,] he answered. *[The very first time you imprint a gestalt, you can sometimes kinda lose control. Trust me, love, imprinting a gestalt is not a pleasant experience. And given how powerful you are in talent, I don't think I want the entire island wondering why you were sending wild gibberish at full strength.]*

[Imprint? What is that?]

[A Generation's version of the control chip in your jack,] he answered. [The gestalt has to work out how to best fit in with our brains, a process we call imprinting. After it imprints, you maintain a passive merge with it at all times, it entwines itself into your thoughts and reacts automatically whenever you use your abilities.]

[Will having a jack mess up the gestalt?]

[No, but you can't jack in the gestalt, the conflicting feeds might screw it up. I'll design a gestalt for you that you can jack into it and not have it conflict with your gestalt. You'll still need the jack to jump hyperspace without suffering jump shock.]

[How do you get around that?]

[Brain implants that shut down my natural senses when I'm in hyperspace,] he answered. [I use my gestalt the same way your jack uses your interface, replacing my natural senses with the sensory feeds off my gestalt or my armor.]

[Ah. Cool.]

[Thank the Consortium bugs and their brain implants, those are what gave Songa the idea,] he answered, then he stood up. [I'm gonna gather up the family and head home. I'll be back tomorrow.]

[Why not stay here?] she asked, sliding a sensual hand up and down his chest.

[Because Songa told you no exertion, and that's exertion,] he reminded her. [So keep your hands off Kellin, too.]

She laughed. [It's not exertion if you do all the work,] she winked, her commune turning lustful.

[Channel all that energy into practicing. I fully expect you to manage six splits by this time tomorrow.]

[And what do I get if I manage it?] she asked, caressing his bare belly.

[Me not kicking your ass for being lazy,] he replied, which made her laugh. He leaned over and gave her a kiss, then patted her on the hip. [Be back tomorrow, love. Keep practicing, and be good.]

Jason ended up with two additional passengers on the way home, because Kreel and Krirara decided to go over to the strip rather than stay at the summer palace. And that wasn't that unusual. They did like Dahnai, but they wouldn't be all that comfortable with all the other visitors there, for different reasons. Krirara preferred to rest somewhere not quite so busy, and Kreel was better off not being over there aggravating the Highborns, who took themselves too seriously to appreciate Kreel's humor. And Jason never minded hosting them, because they were his best friends on the Council. The three of them really got along. Kreel was like the frat brother Jason never had in college, and Krirara was a moderate influence on both of them that was still quite engaging and funny. And she wasn't above a bit of playing herself from time to time, but it was always subtle. Everything about Krirara was subtle.

They spent a warm, breezy evening sitting on the deck, watching a thunderstorm slowly make its way towards them that was out to sea, and Jason finally breached something he'd had on his mind for quite a while. "Krirara," he said.

"Yes, Jason?"

"How much longer do you have as Moderator?"

"About a year and a half," she replied. "I haven't decided what I'm going to do after that. I've already had several offers from companies to serve as chief operations officer, they think my skills in government would be a boon to them."

"Oh yeah, you're not allowed to serve anywhere in the government after your term ends, or even have anything to do with them," Kreel remembered. "Has the council decided on a replacement yet?"

"That's not how we do things, Kreel. When I step down, the council will debate among themselves until a successor is chosen. As in all things with the Kirri, whoever wins must convince the others he or she is the best choice. To become Moderator, you have to prove you have the skills to hold the job in the council chamber. If you are asking who I think will succeed me, I suspect it will be Krazrou," she mused. "He has all the skills and natural potential to be a fine Moderator."

“Well, don’t make any commitments,” Jason said. “When you step down, I want you to come work for me, Krirara.”

“I’m not leaving Kirri-arr, Jason,” she told him.

“I’m not asking you to,” he replied. “At least not permanently. I have plans, and they’ll be ready to go when you finish your term. So don’t hire on with someone else.”

“And what am I going to be doing working for you, Jason?” she asked lightly.

“Oversee a project to seed Kirri symbiotes into the Karisian ecosystem,” he answered. “When the time comes, you’ll have complete control over the project. I figure it’ll take about two years or so, *then* you can hire on with a company.”

“Still trying to lure some Kirri, eh Jayce?” Kreel asked with a grin.

“You know it,” he affirmed. “The only thing holding them back is the fact that Karis doesn’t have symbiotes. Well, I’m sure with Krirara overseeing the project, we can fix that.” He took a drink of his wine. “Songa estimates we’ll have enough symbiotes ready for the project in about two years, so that gives Krirara time to get things settled at home, get over here, and organize everything. She’ll oversee the project, and when it’s done, she goes home and gets a much more boring job with some Kirri corporation.”

Krirara put her hand under her muzzle and leaned on it, giving him a sly look. “And no doubt you’ll have some other project to entice me after that one is done.”

“Of course I will,” he said honestly. “You’re too talented to waste it sitting in some corner office in a Kirri corporation, Krirara, stuffed into a reduced role because of the strict laws against you or whoever you work for interacting with the Kirri government after you retire. I have quite a few projects in the first stages that you could undertake, things that would be perfect for someone with your organizational and diplomatic skills. Hell, woman, I’d put you on my cabinet if you joined the house, I’d kick Jerrim out of his post and appoint you as my secretary of member services. *Here*, you don’t run afoul of Kirri non-lobbying laws.”

“And what’s to stop me from simply retiring, Jason?” she asked him playfully. “I have enough saved up to have a comfortable retirement, with my mate still working.”

“You’d go utterly nuts sitting at home with nothing to do, Krirara, and don’t deny it,” Jason said, which made Kreel laugh and nod vigorously. “And the laws preventing you from lobbying or influencing Kirri government after you step down are going to shackle you at home. You’d be happier somewhere else, and what do you know, I could use someone as brilliant as you. And you don’t have to *join* the house, you can work as a consultant, commuting back and forth from Kirri-arr every day. I can give you the kind of work you love the most, you don’t run afoul of Kirri law, and everyone’s happy.”

“Well, you do propose a convincing argument,” she said with amusement. “But whyever would I be foolish enough to allow you to be my boss, Jason? I *know* you. I certainly wouldn’t want to work for you.”

Kreel fell over backwards in his chair, laughing uncontrollably.

He feigned smacking her with the back of his hand, which made her laugh in delight. “I’ll consider it, Jason. But I offer no promises.”

“Fair enough,” he said, then he accessed the tactical gestalt in the basement, grabbed Kreel with his power, and without moving a muscle, catapulted him all the way across the beach and into the ocean. Kreel screamed in surprise as he found himself flying out over the beach, then he landed in the water past the breaking waves with an impressive splash. That made Krirara start, then laugh in delight, especially when Kreel got back on his feet in the surf, screaming curses at Jason and shaking his fist.

“Tankards of ale are child’s play,” he said with just a hint of malevolent amusement, which made Krirara laugh even harder.

Chapter 12

Kaira, 14 Shiaa, 4404, Faey Orthodox Calendar

Friday, 31 August 2018 Terran Standard Calendar

*Kaira, 14 Shiaa, year 1329 of the 97th Generation, Karinne
Historical Reference Calendar*

The White House, Karsa, Karis

He hated being right.

Leaning back in his chair, feeling a little weird sitting there in nothing at all, Jason crossed his arms as he read through the latest report that the CCM HQ had sent him, reports that they didn't really send to other rulers, mainly because Jason had connections to Lorna. For the last five days, there had been no sorties, no battles, because the Syndicate was in a pattern of constant circular retreat. They were constantly moving, changing vectors to prevent the CCM from getting in front of them, and had not made a single offensive move for the last five days. They kept their entire fleet together, jumping randomly, stopping and taking as many sensor sweeps as they could in 37 minutes, then they jumped again. The 37 minute was a constant, it was their calculation of the maximum safe time they could spend in one place...and so long as they didn't come close to one of the major gathering points for CCM forces, it was more or less accurate. By the time Lorna got orders down and a task force organized, the Syndicate jumped out before the task force could arrive...if she sent one. The truth was, she wasn't about to take on the entire Syndicate fleet head-on. And Jason suspected that the enemy knew it.

Not even 3D could really pin them down. They'd tried several times to get a tackler either to their fleet or in front of them but had no success so far. The amount of time they jumped was also random, and they never jumped for more than four minutes at a time to prevent their course from

being charted and the CCM getting something in front of them. They also didn't linger every time they dropped out of hyperspace, sometimes they immediately jumped again on a new vector.

They were stalling, without *looking* like they were stalling.

Jason knew that because of the other report he'd gotten. Zaa's Kimdori on the inside had managed to discover that Sha Ra had sent a request back to her HQ asking for them to find a way to circumvent an interdicator. Her own science team was stumped, thanks to Zaa's SCM system, they couldn't get any readings on the how they were being pinned in. So they asked their HQ for anything they could come up with.

Yeah, good luck with that. Jason knew Syndicate power and propulsion systems, the simple answer to that question was *you're fucked*. And thinking that just made him smile.

But, the "Sitzkrieg" was giving the CCM time to repair damaged ships and them to build boxes, so they'd have plenty to unleash when they finally pinned the Syndicate down. It was also giving Dellin time to convert more frigates to IP, since he'd cleared out all the unfinished ones already. They had 150 frigates in for the refit, which took a considerable amount of time, and they'd rotate them through those 150 slots.

He glanced at a holo coming from Kosigi, as the *Javelin* slowly inched up to a landing dock extending from the spar over the command center. Gia and her girls had been over there for nearly six days, and they'd gotten everything set up the way Zaa wanted. Zaa had planted infiltrators at every critical Syndicate star system and seeded hyperspace probes and sensor beacons all over the galaxy, whose task was to map the galaxy for astrocartography and navigation so they could execute pinpoint jumps. They also had listener posts to pick up all regional communications.

And all that work had already produced results. One of the infiltrators on E Chaio had managed to penetrate their military HQ and had sent back a report. To put it simply, they were *freaked out* over what was going on over here. Many in their HQ thought Sha Ra was lying about small infantry squads destroying super-ships, even when presented with sensor logs and visual evidence. They couldn't fathom that their mighty ships were being taken down by *infantry*. And an entirely different group were freaked out

about the interdictors. They'd never seen anything like them before. The Syndicate had no FTL tech—well, they had the technological ability to build a form of FTL, but they didn't have any of the actual engines. They'd abandoned FTL tech some 10,000 years ago, so they didn't even have any archived plans or blueprints to go about building them. But, they'd also put an engineering team on the case, the report said, to come up with a way for the ships over here to either convert an engine to FTL or build one from scratch with parts they had available. FTL was the only way for them to breach an interdictor, something the Consortium figured out a hell of a lot faster than they did, but once again, their obsession with money had bitten them in the ass. They not only had no FTL drives, they no longer had any records on how to build them, because they weren't *profitable*.

And what warmed Jason's heart the most? The Oracle computer they had in the HQ predicted that Sha Ra's chance of successfully completing her mission were now 21%. Despite that, however, they'd ordered her to continue her mission, to find a way to break the Confederation's defense and establish a safe permanent outpost in the Milky Way. And if at all possible, capture the KMS *Tianne* or one of the other KMS capitol ships they could study its GRAF cannon and strange spatial warping defense system.

Yeah, good luck with *that*, too.

He really should either put on some clothes or put his armor back on. He'd taken a brief break from catching up on all his paperwork to take a bath, and since he was going over to the annex in about an hour to be there when Dahnai got out of surgery, he hadn't really bothered to put his clothes back on. It felt a little weird sitting at his desk naked, like he was doing something wrong or something. Songa's office was sending him constant updates, and everything was just fine. They'd already removed her damaged liver and replaced it with a new one, and they were in the process right now of making sure it was working properly before they closed up the incision. Songa was there, but she wasn't the lead physician. After all, Songa wasn't a specialist, and that was what they used for things like organ transplants. The head surgeon was a Karinne doctor, however, so he was using Karinne medical tech for the operation, medical spiders and the like, which made the transplant procedure much less invasive. They only needed an incision just big enough to get the old liver out and new liver in, and the

spider specialist then used the spiders to do things like sew blood vessels back together and reconnect nerves. So long as the transplant surgeon got the new liver in the right place so the spiders could line up all the blood vessels and other connections, it was faster and easier than if they were doing it on Draconis.

Just about everyone else was over at the annex waiting, but Jason would go nuts just sitting around over there, so he came over here to get some work done and distract himself. He *did* love that woman, and the idea of just sitting there waiting would twist him into a knot.

Chirk beeped him. *“Revered Hive-leader, Kumi wants to see you.”*

“Send her in,” he answered, shutting off the holograms and leaning back more in his chair. Kumi strode in, wearing her workout halter and shorts. “What are you up to?”

“Same as you, trying to keep busy ‘til Dahnai’s out of surgery,” she said, then she took a datastick out of her halter, grinning at him a bit as she pulled it out of her cleavage, and walked over to the desk. “I have the monthly report for you.”

“Just put it on the desk, I’ll get to it eventually,” he said. “Anything important in it?”

“Not really, outside of the fact that profits were down by half a point this month,” she frowned, reaching the desk and putting the datastick down. She then leaned over it a bit and gave him a big smile. “Now that’s the right way to greet me, babes,” she said with a dirty smile.

“I just got out of the bath, and I was too lazy to dress and not ready to put my armor back on,” he replied absently.

“Sooooo, you wanna keep each other busy ‘til it’s time to go back to the annex?” she asked with a hungry look down at his lap, reaching down and grabbing her halter, then whisking it over her head in a quick, practiced motion.

“Go back to your office, you tart,” he retorted, which made her laugh. “I’m trying to clean out my inbox before I leave and playing with you will derail me.”

“Nothing takes your mind off something like hot sex, baby,” she grinned, toying with her shorts, pulling them down to reveal her pubic hair, then back up. “And we haven’t had any fun together for almost a whole takir!”

“Kumi, not today,” he said with authority. “Now let me finish this.”

“Okay, but you’d better keep your schedule open tomorrow at lunch,” she said with a bit of a pout, putting her halter back on. “I’ll bring Eliara tomorrow,” she added with a hooded smile.

“Out,” he ordered, pointing at the door, which made her laugh.

Some things never changed, and Kumi was one of them.

He managed to clear his inbox and get over to the annex a good half hour before Dahnai was scheduled to be out of surgery, and he was pleasantly surprised when she was brought into the recovery room almost as soon as he walked in, her hoverbed pushed in by a tall, mature male doctor, the transplant specialist in the annex. She was covered in a thermal blanket that regulated her body temperature and was awake but looked a bit groggy. Kellin and Jason got the spots at each side of her head as she regained her senses, the rest of both of their families clustered around her bed, then gave them a weak smile. “Such a welcome,” she said in a near-whisper.

“How do you feel, love?” Kellin asked, putting his hand on her cheek.

“A little out of it. They didn’t use a sleep inducer,” she said. “So, I take it I have a new liver?”

The doctor that came with her nodded, looking down at her over Sirri and Shya. “The operation was a complete success. Your new liver is fully functional, your Majesty,” he told her. “We’ll hold you here only until we’re sure you’re up to being moved, and then you’ll be transferred to the medical room in your palace for recovery. As per your request, a merge pod has been converted into a convalescence bed for you.”

“Merge pod?” Jason asked curiously, looking down at her.

“My body is laid up, but there’s nothing saying I can’t just use a bionoid while I mend,” she replied. “I already discussed it with Songa, and she said it won’t cause me any complications, as long as I don’t do anything that causes me to suffer dump shock.”

“Huh. I hadn’t considered that,” Jason admitted. “So you’re staying on your work schedule?”

“Of course not, this is a chance to have a vacation,” she replied, which made Jason laughed. “No court while I’m recovering, and Sirri will be attending council meetings for about a takir, to give me a chance to rest. I’ve already got some plans for the next takir. Me and Rook had a long chat just before I went under, and I’m going to be helping him test some of his bionoids. That, and Saelle promised to start me on Gladiator training while I’m laid up. I don’t need to be *in* the Gladiator at first.”

“True enough, you can use a simulator,” Jason agreed. “That’s a pretty wise use of your time, love.”

“And when I’m recovered enough, you can start teaching me,” she finished, patting the hand he had on her shoulder.

“Yeah, you can’t do that in a sickbed, it puts stress on your cardiovascular system,” he nodded.

“Now then, where are my girls?” she asked, looking at Sirri and Shya.

Jason let her hold a little court with family at her bed as he considered her idea, and he had to admit, it was pretty smart. There was no reason she *couldn’t* use a bionoid while she was in bed recovering from the surgery, as long as she didn’t do anything that might cause her biorhythmics to feed back into her real body. Some activities caused psychosomatic reactions in the real body, like heavy exertion or sudden, intense reactive emotions, like fear or surprise. So, she wasn’t going to be doing any martial arts practice or watching any horror movies in her bionoid—and no sex either, which was probably going to annoy her a little bit—but things like lounging around the pool in her bionoid, helping Rook with some of his research, or even starting her exomech training would be alright, at least so long as Saelle didn’t run her through any combat sims that got her adrenalin going.

After about an hour, Songa declared she was recovered enough to handle being moved. They rode with her on the medical transport that carried them to the summer palace, then she was wheeled into the medical annex inside her palace, that held everything the doctors needed to take care of the Imperial family. There was even a surgical theater in the clinic, but her doctors had opted to have a specialist do the operation over at the Karsa

annex. They trusted the Karinne Medical Service to take good care of Dahnai. Jason saw that someone had taken the equipment of a merge pod and built something of an arch out of it, into which Dahnai's bed was placed. She didn't *need* a merge pod, but it was *safer* for her to use one, since the pod's control computer could delink her if her biorhythms went into what the doctors felt was a danger area.

She didn't need that merge pod mainly because both she and Kellin had already mastered merging as a Generation. It had only taken both of them about a day to get the hang of merging without using a jack, and they were both completely competent in it. Jason told them that merging as a Generation was almost identical to a jack merge, and they proved him right.

But that practice did reveal something very interesting. Kellin seemed to not only have a knack for merging, he also seemed to have a very unique skill, the ability to almost fully control his own body while fully merged to an external asset. Where Jason could barely control his own body while in a full merge, Kellin could walk around, talk, send, even perform basic tasks while in a full merge, but he couldn't do anything intricate or which required physical exertion for some reason. He could sit on a couch eating popcorn and watch vidy while his bionoid was out cavorting around, but he couldn't do something like go swimming, that broke his merge. It was almost uncanny, and Songa was already planning on studying his unique little trick. What it told Jason was that Kellin was not only much more intelligent than most people realized, that he also had a tremendous amount of willpower and discipline.

And it convinced Jason that he *was* going to learn how to do that. He'd learned ever since merging to his first exomech that the ability to control his body while in a full merge could be increased with practice, like learning how to play the piano, he just had to condition himself and practice. And if Kellin could do it with natural aptitude, he could learn how to do it through training and practice. After all, he couldn't even so much as open his eyes while fully merged when he first began, but now he could at least get his body to move while he was fully merged. And with practice, practice, and more practice, he *would* learn how to walk beside his own bionoid. He doubted he would ever be very graceful at it, but he *would* learn how to do it.

Splitting was a *skill*, and he could increase that skill through practice.

Once they got Dahnai fully comfortable and settled in, she wasted little time. She had the doctors connect a hardline from the merge arch to her jack—that was just for show in case one of the Grand Duchesses visited her—and she closed her eyes and went silent. Barely five seconds later, a brand new bionoid that Rook must have built for her opened the storage closet door and stepped out, and Sirri and Shya rushed over and gave her a hug. “There, this is much better,” she said in a loving tone, her arms around her daughters. She walked up to the bed, and Jason had to chuckle when she looked down at herself. “Trelle’s garland, I really do look awful,” she said with a frown.

“You just got out of surgery, you nit, you’re not supposed to look pretty,” Jason told her.

“You are showing a full merge, and your biorhythms are entirely normal, your Majesty,” the doctor in the room declared. “You’re good for some extended merge time.”

“Sounds good, Doctor. Do me a favor and clean me up a little bit while I’m out,” she said, looking down at herself and shaking her head. “At the very least, do *something* about my hair. I’m a walking embarrassment.”

Jason had to laugh. Only Dahnai would be more worried about her hair than the fact that she just got out of a six-hour surgery to replace her liver.

Jason stayed with her as she went out and greeted the Highborns, explained her bionoid idea to them and ensured them that she was just fine, and within half an hour, she was reclining on a lounge chair on the pool deck with a handpanel in her hands with Saelle beside her, acting entirely *normal*. And something about that just seemed...*absurd*. The woman had just gotten out of surgery, and here she was hanging out on the pool deck, chatting with Saelle as she read the first introductory texts on piloting an exomech!

Seeing that, seeing the absurdity of it, it really did truly hit him, and hit him hard. Bionoids were *game-changers*. They had the potential to fundamentally alter some basic societal norms across the galaxy, and Dahnai’s nonchalance about just getting out of surgery was one example of it. After all, why did she need to worry about having her liver replaced

earlier today when she could just merge to a bionoid and let her body heal while she went on about her business? It was like...like her body wasn't *necessary*. Well, it was, it kinda kept her from not dying, but she was no longer restrained by the limits of her physical body. Her body was recovering from having a big gash cut into it and an organ taken out, but so long as she had access to a bionoid, that fact wasn't going to slow her down, not when she could just jump into a new body, one that wasn't heavily medicated to subdue the pain of her invasive surgery and bedridden for the next takir or so.

Her body no longer held her mind prisoner.

He sat on a lounge and considered that idea for quite a while, as the others started to relax a little bit, Dahnai's return to her routine reassuring them and bolstering them. What limits were there? What need was there for a body when a perfect one could be built and used, and then replaced as necessary? And who says that they had to use the bodies they were born with? Merging to the Benga-sized macro bionoids showed that they weren't limited by their own concept of self. Why couldn't Jason merge to a *giruzi* bionoid and learn how to walk around on four legs? Learn how to control a tail? Merge to an Imbiri bionoid and learn how to fly? Merge to a Moridon bionoid and see the world as a reflection of the bioluminescent radiation they emitted from their optical organs? Merge to a Pai bionoid and experience the world from the perspective of a race that was only two shakra tall?

Merge to a *spider* and see the world at a microscopic scale?

There were so many different ways to explore the true potential that bionoids offered, and he felt a bit stupid for never seeing this before. Jason had seen bionoids as remotely operated extensions of self, when they could be so much more. But Rook *had* seen this potential, he realized. It was why he was doing so much work on the project.

The Sky Wolf sitting on his desk ghosted back into his mind. Now *that* would be a good reason to build something like that. What if he built an exomech that could shift to fighter mode? It would allow one mecha to fulfill two roles, take on other fighters in a space theatre and then land on a planet and fight it out with other exomechs on the ground. It would be the most useful when stationed on smaller line vessels, like cruisers, removing

the need to carry both exomechs and fighters. The fighter squadron attached to the cruiser could fulfill both roles if necessary.

From the pilot's perspective, it *could* be done, and Jason himself was the perfect example of that. He was combat rated on both fighters and exomechs, and while he didn't engage in fighter combat anywhere but a simulator or wargame, he was fully trained...and trained by Justin and the Ghost Squadron, no less. Jason could pilot both a Wolf and an exomech, and if *he* could do it, then just about *any* of his soldiers could. After all, he wasn't all that special.

But was an exomech the best option? The Parri flashed into his mind, a race that was *quadrupedal*. A Parri could run at extremely high speed despite them not looking very sleek or, well, fast. Instead of building a fighter that could shift into an exomech, what if he built a fighter that could shift into a giant *giruzi*? Something that moved with tremendous speed on the ground, could be even more dangerous than an exomech in hand to hand combat, and could easily be outfitted with any weapon in the arsenal?

He'd...he'd seem something like that before, back before the subjugation. It was some anime that his roommate watched, about giant animal-shaped robots that were used to fight some big war, and the protagonist's robot was this big cat-like thing that had blades that extended out from its sides. He couldn't recall the name of it, and he thought it was a bit silly when he saw it...after all, why build a robot based on a wolf when you could go *Gundam* and have humanoid robotic fighting vehicles?

Even if it couldn't transform into a fighter, the idea of a new class of exomech based on a *quadruped*...that had some potential. It would be insanely fast on the ground without glide drives, and its low profile and speed would make it a harder target to hit in combat. It could easily be armed with both melee weaponry and ranged weaponry, incorporating its guns into the shoulders, or mounted onto the back. They could even put a gun into the end of its tail to provide a wide arc of fire, a tetrayon wave weapon would be perfect for that, since the tail would be flexible. All that work they did on the Titans could be applied to them, giving them tremendous power, speed, grace, and agility. And those, he could outfit with *CMS*, turning them into stalkers on the battlefield, silent, deadly hunters capable of blending into the darkness when used at night. And it would

come with the added boon of being able to outfit them with IP armor as well, making them exceptionally tough.

What was the name of that anime? Maybe he could watch it and get some ideas.

The question was, was it worth the cost of researching the idea and building them? Could they serve a purpose in the KAS that current exomechs could not? Could he justify the expense? After all, they'd be specialist equipment. The lack of hands would restrict the mecha, because exomechs were often used for labor out in the field, heavy movers that built and broke down mobile command centers.

Well *duh*, build the mecha with the same ability as the Parri, able to operate on a vertical base, and make their front paws hybrids of hands and paws, just like the Parri. That way it could rise up onto its hind legs and manipulate objects with its front paws, just like the Parri could.

Actually...yes. He could justify a research project to look into the idea, see if it was feasible, and if so, if quadrupedal mecha would be an asset to the KAS.

He decided to broach the idea with Sioa, leaning back in his chair and merging to his bionoid he kept at the White House and going down to talk to her. He almost laughed when she took him over to a holodisplay table, and a what looked like a robotic panther projected up off its surface. "This is research project 40-A184," she told him. "Codename *Panther*," she said in English. "We considered using your idea a good four years ago, Jason, but the research project ended without a recommendation. The simulations showed that it while it was faster and more agile than other exomechs, it would have far too many expensive intricate parts that would be prone to breakdown to be viable. The best exomechs are *simple*, Jason, with the fewest number of moving parts. That means there's fewer parts to break down or get damaged in combat. The leg assembly in this unit alone has nearly as many moving parts as both the legs of a Gladiator. And there's four of them on this unit."

"Okay, was this project done before or after we developed the Titans and muscle strand technology?" Jason asked.

She gave him a surprised look. “Before,” she said. “You have something there, Jayce. If we redesigned it using Titan technology, it would improve its performance, and make it much less prone to breakdown or being easily damaged. The sims we ran once we had a design and some math to back it up did hint that the unit had some potential, but it was just too fragile to be viable. You want me to restart this project?”

“Yes,” he answered. “Let’s see if the advances we made with Titans can turn this into something viable. Oh, make sure that whoever works on it knows that it’s going to have CMS,” he added.

“Speaking of CMS, Jayce, has Project G come up with viable IP armor yet?”

“No, they’re still working on it. All we have are the frigates and their converted CMS IP.”

“Well, can we import CMS IP tech into exomechs?” she asked.

He blinked. “We *could*,” he stressed. “But it would take some real work, given that exomechs aren’t a contiguous carapace. Each section would have to have IP built into it, and we’d have to work out how to deal with how those two sections would behave where they join. Tell you what, I’ll send this up to MRDD and tell them to design an IP system for exomechs as fast as they can. I’ll send them the data I have on when I was considering putting CMS on exomechs, it will give them a good starting point.”

“It would be a good idea, Jayce. IP on an exomech would turn them into *beasts*. Even if it’s just a temporary measure, given we’d replace it when they finish over at Project G, we might be able to get some IP mecha into the field before this war is over. And that will only help us.”

“As a part-time rigger myself, Sioa, I’m gonna admit that I’ll put in extra credits to make my own mecha even more beastly,” he said, which made her laugh. “I’ll have MRDD focus on the Titans, because they’re the mecha we need to be the most beastly. They’re our primary counter to Syndicate mecha. If we have time to only come up with one system, I want it on the Titans.”

She nodded in agreement.

“Now, as to the other thing I was considering,” he said. “Using Karinne tech, Sioa, would a transformable mecha be useful?”

“What, you mean like that toy on your desk?” she asked. “I think every army out there that’s developed enough to build exomechs has toyed with the idea, Jayce, but they’re just not worth it. They’re so hard to build, complicated to pilot, and expensive to both build and maintain that it’s better to have two separate units. If you think a Panther has a lot of moving parts, Jayce, something like a reconfigurable mecha is a *nightmare* of moving parts, all of which can break down or be damaged. It has to be built with so much stuff, so many systems in it to make it useful, it makes it unfeasible. And besides that, the two separate units can do their respective jobs better than the reconfigurable one can. What got you on that tangent?”

“Something I saw earlier today,” he shrugged. “I was thinking that they might be useful on the smaller line vessels, that don’t have the room to carry both a fighter squadron and exomech company. You know, something that could do both jobs.”

“That’s why most people consider them, for that versatility. Then they look into the hard science behind them, and abandon the idea quickly,” Sioa told him.

“Well, it was a thought,” he said.

She gave him a look. “Jason, if you want one, build one yourself,” she told him. “You can afford it, and it doesn’t have to be Army.”

He laughed. “It *would* be cool, but I don’t think even I could afford something like that, at least not without plundering the treasury. And Kumi would *strangle* me if I did that. I think I’ll stick to the toys.”

“It’s up to you,” she told him with a smile.

“Oh, that reminds me. Not that I want something super-intricate but could the project team working on the *Panther* do some work to see if a limited ability to change modes might be viable?” he asked. “Something like the Parri. Make them just modular enough so they can rise up on their hind legs and use their forepaws the way another exomech would use its hands. They sure as hell wouldn’t be using that trick in combat, but it would make them more useful in non-combat scenarios. That would at least give them some flexibility.”

“That...might work,” she said, tapping her finger on her chin as she thought. “I’ll include that in the study.”

“Good deal.”

“Now, if that was all you wanted to talk about, I’m busy right now.”

“I’ll get out of your hair,” he grinned.

He spent the rest of the afternoon basically just hanging around the pool with Dahnai and their families, at least after school let out and most of the kids were ferried over from Karsa. But Jason did do some work, mainly communing with Rook and discussing building some radical bionoids, like a giruzi bionoid, or even insect-sized bionoids. He also caught up on his paperwork there from the pool deck, then went on a walk with Jyslin around the compound, including stopping a while to watch Mai and Kora drilling the Imperial Guard dispatched to the island on Gladiators, doing basic drills with them so they could get the hang of it. They were already rated on other exomechs, so they were learning very fast.

When they got back, he was both surprised and not to see Dahnai in her macro bionoid, showing it off a little bit for the kids. Symone was also in hers, and the two of them were sitting at the deep end of the pool with their legs in the water, with the kids clustered around them in excitement asking all kinds of questions. *Girls and their toys*, Jason accused to Jyslin as they walked up to the patio.

And how different are we compared to boys and their toys, baby? she countered.

Easy. Our toys are cooler; he replied, which made her laugh. They sat on loungers near the two of them, listening to them patiently answer the questions being peppered at them. *Jason*, Jyslin called, her thought turning serious.

Yes, love?

I have a question for you. It’s going to be a bit shocking to you, so please hear me out before you react.

Uh oh. Go ahead.

Understand that I ask this with complete sincerity, love, she said, looking him in the eyes and taking his hands. What happened to Dahnai and Kellin and Shya. Could that be done for me?

What? he gasped mentally, but she put her hand over his mouth, a purely token gesture.

Jason. You don't understand what it's like for me. I don't complain, I've never complained, but over the last few days, seeing Dahnai and Shya, it's made me realize that the fact that we're different will forever make us different. I...I feel like I'm being left out of a part of your life, for the first time since we found out about this. I want to be with you, in all ways, love.

Jyslin, do you understand what you're asking? he replied seriously. *And I'm not talking about you and me. You are asking me to restart the Program, to potentially open Pandora's Box.*

I'm not asking you to do that, love. I'm not asking for this because of some grand idea or design to further the house. I'm asking for this because I want to be completely, fully, totally within the circle of your life. There are things you can tell Dahnai that you can't tell me, she sent, her emotions bleeding into her thought, her eyes shimmering as she looked at him. *There are secrets you must keep from me, even from me, because they are that important. I...I want what Dahnai has, Jason. I want to not feel like there's something separating us.*

But still, do you see the consequences? The ramifications?

Not if we keep me as much a secret as Dahnai, she answered.

He could sense her jealousy, which was partially driving her, but he could also sense her *pain* at feeling left out, of feeling like Dahnai, his *amu*, could be even more intimately involved in his life than she, his chosen bonded wife.

Jyslin, you are asking me to create new Generations, he told her, his own emotions bleeding into his thought. The fear, the trepidation, the foreboding that he would be unleashing a darkness across the universe that would threaten everything...that kind of power in the hands of those who would use it for selfish reasons could doom everything...everyone... *everywhere*. With the invention of the drives, now more than ever, the power of the Generations had to be held in check. Even to do this for his

own wife felt like a violation of the deepest part of his moral core, but his deep love and bond with Jyslin conflicted with that, warred with it. He would give her anything...anything. But would he give her *that*? Would he violate his own morals and oaths to give her something he had sworn never to unleash upon the world?

No. I'm asking you to give me a gift, Jason, she said, putting her hands on his face and looking into his eyes. To give me the last piece of yourself you have always kept separate from me. I want to belong, love. Be a true equal in your life, the way Shya is now with Rann.

He closed his eyes, his mind in turmoil. He would give Jyslin his very life...but to restart the Program? To play God on that level the way his ancestors did, to run the risk that infecting Jyslin with a retrovirus might somehow get out and threaten the planet...the Confederation...the entire *galaxy*? To have Generations out there with no training, no control, using that power to do harm, and it would all be on him?

But how could he deny her? She wasn't asking for power, she was asking for *equality*. She wanted to take down the final barrier separating them, and a part of him would welcome that. Welcome not having to keep those secrets from her. She wasn't asking for much on a personal scale...but on the large scale, what she was asking for...it was, it was almost *appalling*. To restart the Program, even to custom design a retrovirus that would affect Jyslin and *only* Jyslin...it came with such terrible, terrible risk.

But, was it his right to determine Jyslin's life? Did he have the right to tell her no? It was her life. It was her decision. She'd seen what happened to Dahnai, she understood the risks...risks that he shared, since if she died, he would die too. They were too deeply bonded for him for to survive her death.

And what if he told her no? Would that permanently damage their relationship? Would he risk losing her if he denied her?

All I can ask, dear love, is for you to think about it. No pressure, no strings, no deadlines. I'm patient, I can wait for you to make a decision, she soothed him, leaning in and kissing him gently on the forehead. And yes or no, I will always be with you. You are my life, Jason, and that's the only reason I'm asking for this. Not for me. Not for you. But for us.

I...it's not a decision I can make alone, he told her.

Then I think you should call Zaa, she replied with a gentle smile. She then got up and walked over to Dahnai and Symone, leaned against Dahnai's side, and effortlessly joined their conversation.

And that left him just scattered.

He left the island and returned home and spent the entire evening and night pacing around the house, his mind whirling as he tried to make the hardest decision of his *life*. To give Jyslin what she wanted would make her happy, and he would move mountains to make that woman happy...but was this the one mountain that he would not touch? Was it fair to her to say no? Was it fair to the *universe* to say yes? Was it a violation of his oaths to do this for one person, for a very specific reason? Should he offer this to the others on the strip? If it wasn't fair to deny it to Jyslin, would it be fair to deny it to *Symone*? Tim? Lyra? Myri and the strip girls? Where was the line? Where did it stop? When did it stop becoming kindness and start becoming *the Program*?

Would the crest of the House of Karinne become the *universe's* version of a swastika?

He thought about it for hours upon hours, and after nearly an entire night, he finally called Zaa and asked her to come over. No matter what decision *he* made, Zaa could veto the entire thing with a single word. After all, it would require the Kimdori to do this, and without their support, then nothing was going to happen.

Zaa's reaction was predictable. "She wants to *what*?" she demanded after they entered his office and put it into secure mode, then Jason explained everything in more detail, including his all-night pacing as he tore his hair out over this. "Well...I can understand *why* she wants this. And what decision have you made, cousin?"

"I don't *know*," he said in anguish, leaning on his desk and looking at her. "I want to give her what she wants, Zaa, but it would violate the oaths. We could be standing at the top of a cliff, teetering on the edge and ready to fall over with the slightest push."

"Actually, it would not. Only your own vows to yourself," she corrected him.

“You’re not against this?” he asked.

“Was I against the original Program, Jason?” she asked pointedly. “I was alive when it began, but not yet the Denmother, and supported it after I came to occupy the Hearth. What Jyslin asks is not unreasonable, at least from my point of view. We would just need to take extreme measures to ensure that things do not get out of control. We do not need Jyslin’s relatives becoming the next Shya, Sirri, Kellin, and Dahnai. And if *we* do it, with all the proper precautions and in a controlled environment, that will not happen.”

“You’d do this?”

She nodded. “I could have a serum ready in just a few days. We still have all the original research from the retrovirus that created the Generations,” she told him. “But *only* for Jyslin. Not for anyone else, not even Symone. In this one very narrow instance, I would support such an action, because it is done out of *love*, not out of *science*. She knows almost everything as it is, Jason, probably more than even you think she does. After all, you have no defense against her, one touch and she would know your mind, without you even knowing. If anything, it would seal her and the secrets she carries to us permanently.”

“Like she’s not already due to the fact that she’s my wife?”

“Marriage is on paper. Family is *forever*,” she answered him. “If she is a cousin, she becomes one of us. In this one, and only one, instance, you would have my support. But if you were to come to me to ask for this for any other, even Symone, I will say no, to protect you from *yourself*.”

He looked over at her with a great deal of gratitude and respect in his eyes. He was so thankful that she *understood*, understood his worst fears. “I’ll...I’ll think about it some more. There’s someone else I need to talk to before I can make a decision.”

“Then I will be at my house in Jaxtra, cousin. Contact me when you know what you will do.”

There was only one person he could go to for a problem like *this*. The corvette carrying him landed on the outskirts of the Parri village in a misty rain just after dawn, but that wasn’t enough to prevent the *shaman* from coming out to meet him as he came down the steps. “It is good to see you

again, Jason Karinne,” she said in her husky voice, rising up over him and offering her hand-paws.

He took them with a troubled smile. “It’s good to see you too, *shaman*. Might we go to your hut and talk? I desperately need your counsel.”

“I am always happy to speak to you of affairs, be them large or small,” she told him with a gentle look, then ushered him towards her hut with a paw. “Have you eaten? I will have breakfast prepared.”

“I would appreciate that very much, *shaman*. I am a little hungry.”

As they sat at her firepit and ate some delicious hot, chewy cakes the size of an Eggo waffle that tasted of *oye* fruit, nuts, honey, and oats, he explained as much as he could to her without divulging any secrets. She listened intently as she nibbled on her cake, then took a sip from her simple wooden cup. “Truly, a vexing problem, Jason Karinne. Your sense of duty conflicts with itself, and it leaves you uncertain. You have a duty to your mate, but you also have a duty to this world, and you are torn between two forces that pull you in opposite directions with equal force.”

He gave her a wordless nod, finishing his cake.

“The question you must ask yourself, Jason Karinne, is what does your heart tell you?”

“It tells me that it has no freakin’ clue,” he replied honestly, leaning back on his hands, then rising back up and grabbing another cake. Those things were *good*.

“Then you must ask yourself on which duty does the light of your love shine brightest, Jason Karinne? Do you put your mate before the planet, or the planet before your mate?”

“I...I can’t decide,” he admitted. “As much as I love Jyslin, want to give her this, I don’t know if it’s what’s best for everyone else.”

“Perhaps you need a different perspective, Jason Karinne,” the *shaman* said calmly, finishing her cake. She stood up and beckoned to him, and he followed her out of the hut. The misty rain had stopped, leaving the grass shining in the dull light and with heavy, low clouds overhead. He followed her out of the village, out among the *oye* trees, him walking beside her as she walked on all fours, yet her back still came up to his lower chest. She

remained silent as they walked, further and further from the village, until they came to a stop in a V between two roots of the largest tree in the orchard, an absolute monstrosity whose top was brushing the clouds overhead. The *shaman* rose up onto her hind legs and then knelt down and she motioned with her hand. “Look here,” she said.

Jason leaned over, his hands on his knees, and looked down. There, in the blades of grass near the roots of the tree, he could see a line of tree ants marching back and forth from a small hole in the root. The tree ants were native to Imbria, living in the roots of the *oye* trees. From everything Jason had read, the ants were more or less parasitic, like termites, burrowing into the roots and making nests and giving nothing in return to the trees. Yet, despite that, when the Parri came to Karis, they brought the ants as well as saplings. “Tree ants,” he said. “What does that mean?”

“Watch.”

He did so. And he kept doing so, for nearly an hour, just standing there watching the ants. The whole time, they didn’t really do much of anything, just walking in and out of the hole in the root, doing whatever it was that ants did. They sometimes bumped into each other when the ones coming met the ones going, but they sorted things out and went about their business.

After a full hour of just watching, he finally spoke up. “I...I don’t understand, *shaman*. I don’t see anything. I don’t see what you want me to see.”

“Are you sure?” she asked, looking over at him with a gentle smile. “What *did* you see, Jason Karinne?”

“I dunno...ants being ants, I guess?”

“And is that not important?”

“Well, I guess it is to them,” he said.

“Then you must look closer,” she said, motioning with her paw again. Jason knelt down this time and put a hand on the ground and watched the ants yet again.

He realized something after a few minutes. They weren’t bumping into each other. They were doing that on purpose. They were *greeting* each

other. "I see...that my initial impression of what they were doing was wrong," he said.

"Ahh, and that is the lesson here, Jason Karinne," she told him, looking at him with a smile. "Often, what you see is not the reality of what you observe."

"But what does that have to do with my problem?"

"Perhaps, Jason Karinne, the problem as you see it is not the true problem you should be solving," she said gently. "Do you trust your mate?"

"With my life," he said immediately.

"Then what does your heart tell you when she wants something?"

"To give it to her," he replied. "But the consequences—"

"Are your first impression of the ants," she cut him off. "Is it not possible that you *make* a problem where none exists?"

"No, *shaman*, there is most definitely the potential for *catastrophic* consequences here," he protested. "If what she wanted was misused, if the very thing I give her gets out and others get it, it could be a disaster. Not just for us, but the entire Confederation. The galaxy. The *universe*," he said emphatically.

"If the consequences are truly so dire, then why is there even a decision to be made, Jason Karinne?" she asked. "Does the happiness of one compare to the entire universe? Would you not have already made your choice?"

He gave her a long look, a bit scattered.

"A decision made within the illumination of love is rarely wrong, Jason Karinne, when that decision is made by a mind unclouded by doubt. Let your heart guide you in this, as it has guided in you other things," she said, putting her large hand-paw on his armored chest, over the crest of Karinne etched into the breastplate. "Close your eyes." He did so and took a deep cleansing breath. "Listen to your heart, Jason Karinne. Remember what you felt when it guided to the place where you planted our first seed. Let it guide you now. Do not think. Feel. *Feel* what you must do. Let the light of your love illuminate the path before you."

He tried to relax, to remember how it felt that day when he was in the fighter, the little pot up in the cockpit, flying with the instruments and cameras off and just going in the direction he felt was best.

Don't think. Feel. *Feel*. What should he do? What did his instincts tell him?

Give it to her.

It was like a shockwave through his soul, a sudden searing light in the deepest part of himself...like something *awakening*. It spread through him with the speed of a heartbeat, leaving him momentarily dazed. He opened his eyes in surprise and looked at the *shaman* with a startled expression. "Your heart speaks with strength and clarity, Jason Karinne. And it seems, I am not the only one that heard it speak."

She motioned down at the ground, and he looked down. Among the blades of grass, all the tree ants had *stopped*. They were all standing motionless, and they were staring up at him, their tiny antennae twitching curiously in his direction.

"I, I don't understand. What was that?"

"It was your heart, Jason Karinne. You have finally learned that when your heart speaks in a voice pure and radiant, that it reaches beyond those illumined by the love you carry within. And that is the final lesson," she declared. She put a single finger on his upper arm greave and started to move it. He looked down, and to his utter shock and consternation, she was *drawing a jaingi on his armor*. And it was *visible*, her finger was leaving behind a ghostly white trail, leeching the color out of the metal itself, swiftly and skillfully drawing a design he'd seen on the arms of her apprentices, the same design on her own upper right arm, right where her shoulder muscle met her bicep and tricep. How was she *doing* that?

"You have learned all ten lessons, Jason Karinne. You are ready to learn how to listen. Today you walk forth from this place wearing your first *jaingi*, for it is what you have earned this day. I offer you my guidance down the path before you, Jason Karinne, to become a *shaman*. You would be a fine apprentice."

"Apprentice? What do you mean?"

“We are all students, Jason Karinne,” she told him calmly, removing her finger from his armor and standing up, rising up over him. Never before had she seemed so tall, so imposing. She stood taller than him when on her hind legs, but now she seemed a giant staring down at a mouse. “Even if we do not see the truth of the lessons we are being taught. You have learned the ten lessons, today you have learned that the purity of your heart and the light it casts upon the world can reach without as well as within. I told you long ago that you had it within you to be a *shaman*, Jason Karinne. Did you truly believe that I would not mold what I saw within you?” she asked with a gentle smile. “You have learned how to let your heart speak beyond the boundaries of your inner self, the final lesson to learn before you may begin to learn to listen to the trees,” she added, motioning towards the ground, where the ants still stood motionless, looking up at him. “They speak to you, Jason Karinne, and you are ready to learn how to listen. They believe in you. As do I.”

He was completely scattered. He looked up at her in dumbfounded shock, then finally shook it off enough to consider her words. He’d learned the ten lessons? How? *When*? She’d never taught him anything, nothing like *that*. Her lessons were always about common sense, patience, not mystical training in the “magic” the Parri could do.

“I...I don’t understand.”

“It is a simple thing, Jason Karinne,” she smiled. “Have you not spoken to your tree? Asked it not to grow so high that it discomforts your neighbors?” she asked. “And think of your little vulpar. Does she not always understand what you are saying to her? And does she not try to speak back to you?”

“Well, yeah, but she’s a vulpar. She’s much smarter than most other animals,” he replied. “She understands everyone in the house, not just me.”

“No, Jason Karinne,” she said with a shake of her head. “She hears your heart speaking to her, a language that *all* animals can understand, so she knows *exactly* what you are saying to her. And with time, patience, and training, you could learn to listen to her heart as well. Look,” she said, motioning again to the ants. “Your love for her is why she was always able to hear your heart speaking to her, where the ants could not. You have learned how to speak with your heart so that those not illumined by its love

can hear it, at least those who wish to listen. That is the last of the lessons, Jason Karinne, for you must use it to speak to the trees, so they may speak back to you. It is your greatest strength. It is your talent as a *shaman*, Jason Karinne. That is the gift in you I first sensed, your ability to speak to those illumined by your love, even those who walk on four legs instead of two,” she said with a slight, gentle smile on her muzzle. “It is part of what makes those of your house so loyal to you, Jason Karinne, because they hear your words with their ears *and* their hearts, and the voice of your heart gives them hope, because it tells them that your love for them is true. Speak to the ants, Jason Karinne. Ask a boon of them, because they can hear the voice that speaks from your heart. Your love is a beacon of gentle radiance that quells their fears, so they will trust you. Speak to them, Jason Karinne, with sincerity and love in your heart, and they will listen.”

He looked down at the ants and felt entirely stupid. “Uh, sorry I interrupted you. You can go back to what you were doing,” he said uncertainly.

The ants continued to look up at him, but then turned and went back to going in and out of the root.

“You have earned your first *jaingi*, Jason Karinne, for this day you have done willingly what before you were doing by instinct,” she told him, patting him on his shoulder. “And it could be the first of many, if you so wish it.”

“*Shaman*, I don’t have time to do something like that. There’s a war on! And even then, I’m not sure if I’m ready for something like that!”

“In all things, there is choice, Jason Karinne,” she smiled. “And there is time. I will always be here when you finally decide to follow your true calling. Until then, consider my words, and know that I am always here for you when you feel the need for my counsel.”

He left the village with an answer to one question, but more questions. He was just *blown away*. There was no other way to describe it. He could... he could talk to animals? Without using telepathy? Or did his telepathy have something to do with it? He had to admit, the *shaman*’s description of Amber was pretty much spot-on. She always *did* seem to understand him, would give her little yips in reply, and he always seemed to understand

what they meant. He remembered that day in the office days after the twins were born when he had her in his lap, telling her about the twins, explaining to her that the twins would take a lot of their attention, but it didn't mean that they didn't love her any less. She'd understood it. Understood all of it. And going back through his memories, he recalled time after time when Amber fully and completely understood what he was saying to her. He'd never thought anything about it. After all, the whole family talked to her, and in her own way, she talked back. Everyone knew what her barks and yips meant, almost like they could speak her language. But going over it again and again, he realized that she didn't *understand* the others the way she did him. The only one she came close to understanding as well as him was Rann, and her preference for him and Jason always made him think she was a daddy's girl. Or maybe...she preferred them because they were the two people in the house she understood the most? Maybe Rann could do it too, maybe Amber could understand him the way she could Jason.

What's the matter, Jason? Dera asked. *You've been out of it since you came back to the village.*

Jason touched the discolored metal on his right arm. *I think I just had some kind of epiphany, or maybe some near-religious experience,* he answered. *The shaman told me I earned this. And now I'm sitting here thinking back and realizing that she was right.*

About what?

About Amber, he answered.

What does that mean?

It means, this whole time, I've been talking to her, Dera. And she could understand me.

She's a vulpar Jayce. She can understand a lot more than most other animals. Older vulpars can understand Faey language. They learn it. It just means that Amber is an extremely smart little furball.

It wasn't just her. I—the shaman was being her usual self, you know, all mysterious and vague, and she had me close my eyes and have my heart tell me what to do. And then the strangest thing happened, he told her. *I felt something, Dera, like all the way down in my soul. Then there were these ants there by the tree where we were, and when that happened, they all just*

stopped. They stopped and all looked at me, every single one of them. And when the shaman told me that it's because they could hear my heart, she had me give them a command. And they followed it, he stressed. I...the ants could understand me, Dera. I'm positive of it. The shaman told me that it's my greatest strength, that animals and others who can hear whatever it was I was doing have been able to hear me for a long time, but I'd never done it on purpose. And I've been sitting here thinking of all the times I've talked to Amber, and I realized that she's always been able to understand me. Even the day that Miaari brought her to give to Rann. So yeah, my mind is kinda blown at the moment. It's like if someone came up to you and told you that your whole life, you could make flowers bloom just by touching them, and you think back through your life and see that it's no joke, that you'd been doing it your whole life and never made the connection. I've never had a pet until Amber, we moved around too much to have a pet and lived on military bases overseas, where it's more trouble than it's worth to have a pet, so I never had the chance as a kid to figure this out. I can talk to animals, he declared, rubbing the white jaingi on the arm of his armor.

Dera and Ryn gave him a curious look, then Ryn sat down beside him at the station in the corvette's tactical deck. *There's a lot of things about the Parri we don't understand, Jayce. Maybe she's right. Maybe you have some kind of unconscious telepathic talent that lets animals hear your thoughts. You wouldn't be the first case of it, there are tons of examples of Faey who can connect with animals on a telepathic level. Maybe you're one of them.*

This has nothing to do with telepathy, he said, continuing to rub the discolored symbol on his armor. I can't explain it. But for the first time, I...I feel a connection. To the Parri. To what they teach. I...I can't explain it. The shaman was right, and the more I think about it, more and more I see how right she's been about so many things. I almost wish I had the time to learn more, but I just don't, he told them. I'm more curious now than ever, but I don't have the time to sit over there around her fire day after day for the next ten or twenty years and learn how to listen.

Listen?

Yeah, that's what she offered to teach me. To listen.

To what?

To the trees. To animals. To the universe, I suppose, he sent wryly.

Jason, if you start telling people that trees talk to you, you may end up in a padded cell in the annex, Dera warned. Most people don't understand the Parri's mysticism, at least not like we do, since we've seen it first-hand. Yes, they can do things nobody else can. But most people don't understand it. You'd better keep this to yourself.

He looked up at her and gave her a single nod. She was right. Even he didn't fully understand the Parri, but the difference was, he believed that they were more than they seemed, and had abilities...*powers* beyond most others. Maybe it was magic. Maybe it was psionic. Maybe it was something so advanced that it was beyond his imagination. But whatever it was, it was *real*.

And after thinking about it a bit, he took off his gauntlet and greave and looked at his bare right arm, fully expecting to see what he saw there.

The *jaingi*, ghostly white on his upper arm, the exact same design as what was on the armor, and the exact same size. She hadn't just drawn that design on his armor, she'd drawn it on his skin, *through* the armor.

A *jaingi*. A visible indication to those who knew the symbols that Jason had learned something that most others had not, a symbol that today, his eyes had been opened to the fact that the universe was truly much larger than he ever imagined. Before, he'd known it. Today, he *experienced* it.

He sat there for nearly the entire trip to Jaxtra in silence as Dera and Ryn looked at him, his gauntleted left hand over the ghostly white symbol on his right arm, lost in thought.

And it had nothing to do with Jyslin.

It was nearly midnight when his corvette landed on the pad at the summer palace, and quite a few people were still awake. And of course, Dahnai had to fuss a bit about him not being there almost all day when she was "bedridden." He walked past her almost without seeing her, which made her even more fussy, walking along behind him and admonishing him loudly as the guards looked on with amusement. "Jason, wake up!" Dahnai

snapped, slapping him on the back of the shoulder. “What’s wrong with you?”

“Hmm? Sorry, love. I’ve had a lot on my mind today,” he told her. “How did things go?”

“Saelle took me out in a *real* Gladiator today,” she said with a smile. “I had no idea how much fun it is! Now I see why you’re doing rigger duty.”

“I told you it was fun,” he said, taking off his gauntlets. “What about Rook?”

“I helped him test a new model of moleculartronic bionoid, the generic naval crew member model,” she said. “I’m already talking with Yila about producing them for the INS. They’re super useful.”

“It’s why we have bionoids on every KMS ship now, so they can be activated in an emergency and provide additional hands for the crew,” he nodded. *Jyslin, where are you?*

In the living room, watching vidy with Kellin, she answered.

Come up to the room. We have to talk.

I’ll be right there.

“Not to be rude, love, but I need to talk to Jyslin,” he said.

“Well, I guess I’ll allow it,” she said with a smile.

He met her in their bedroom, and it was *theirs*. It was just off his office, a bedroom that Dahnai had set aside for them, and only they, Symone, and Tim were allowed to use it. Tim and Symone’s bedroom was adjoining theirs, with a luxuriant bathroom between them that they both shared. Since they were *amu*, giving them a single bathroom was entirely proper in Dahnai’s mind. She almost immediately noticed that he was nearly bemused and brought him over to the settee resting at the foot of the bed and sat him down. *What’s wrong, love?*

Nothing wrong, but it’s been a pretty eventful day. He explained his encounter with the Parri in exacting detail, and to cap off the story, he took off his gauntlet and greave and showed her the *jaingi* on his upper right arm. *I can’t explain it, Jys. I felt something, something I’ve never felt*

before. I wouldn't have believed it if not for the ants. I have absolutely no doubt, love. They heard me.

I'm not surprised, Jason. I've always known you're special, my love, she sent with love rippling through her thought, putting her hand on his cheek. It's why I wouldn't give up on you. And the Parri have always had an interest in you. Maybe you do have whatever it is they say makes a shaman. I've always thought of it as a different mindset, the ability to see things the rest of us don't because your mind doesn't see limitations. You have accomplished amazing things, love, because you always see another path, you see what the rest of us don't. And I'm not afraid of it. It's a part of who you are, it's what makes you the man I love, and without it you wouldn't be Jason Karinne.

That means a lot to me, he told her, taking her hands and touching his forehead to hers, sharing a moment of intimate love and support for each other. I don't know what I'm going to do. I'm more curious now than ever about the Parri and their mysticism, but I don't have time to indulge in it. There's a war on, the Consortium is coming, we may face a full invasion by the Syndicate after we defeat their expedition.

There's quite a few tomorrows, love, she told him. You don't need everything today, when there's a tomorrow out there that might be better.

Always so patient, he told her with gentle love. It's one of your greatest strengths, love.

It's the engineer in me, Jason. Take the time to do it right, or waste more time fixing what you just broke.

So, you can live with my new decoration?

She laughed aloud. I guess I can. At least it has a nice design. If it were ugly, you and me would be having a long talk.

Good, because I'm not removing it. It...it's a part of me, Jyslin. To remove it would be like chopping off my own hand. And I can't explain why I feel that way.

I completely understand.

He smiled at her. And I've made a decision about the other thing. I had a long talk with Zaa, and I went to the Parri to further discuss it, and we've

reached a decision. He patted her hand. And the answer is yes. But, with some conditions, he warned before she got too excited.

Which are?

For one, this stays secret. Jyslin, you can't even tell Symone and Tim. I'm willing to give you what you want, but it can't ever get out, anywhere, any way, that we have the ability to make more Generations. I think you can understand what kind of mess that would create.

We'd have to seal off the planet, she predicted, and he nodded in agreement.

And this will be done once. Only once, and only for you. It will never be done again, and on that Zaa has already promised to deny any additional requests for their help. Zaa understands your position, Jyslin, and she has sympathy for it. But this is the proverbial one-time deal. The virus she's having made will only work on you, it is being custom engineered so that not even Lorna or your parents or brother can be affected by this retrovirus.

That's fine, Jason. I don't want this to make myself or my family Generations, after all. I want this so I can be your wife, in every possible way.

And that is the only reason Zaa agreed to this, he told her. She said it'll be ready in about a takir. When it's ready, we're going to be taking a little trip to Kimdori Prime. Only you and me are going, and it's going to be done there.

Is this going to cause any row among the others? They're going to know about me. What if Jenn marries Meya and demands she get this same treatment? What if Rahne wants this for Adam? What if Saelle wants this for Evin? You know he's never going to leave her.

Tough luck, and I'll make that abundantly clear, Jason answered her. Or more to the point, I'll tell them that they have to convince Zaa to do it. And good luck with that. Zaa can be an iron bitch when she wants to be.

Jyslin had to laugh. That's Trelle's own truth, she agreed with a grin. Thank you, Jason. Thank you so much for doing this for me.

Only for you, Jyslin. Only for you.

Koira, 16 Shiaa, 4404, Faey Orthodox Calendar

Sunday, 2 September 2018 Terran Standard Calendar

*Koira, 16 Shiaa, year 1329 of the 97th Generation, Karinne
Historical Reference Calendar*

Foxwood East, Karsa, Karis

It was all anyone could do but stare, even Jason.

It was almost impossible not to notice, and Aya pointed it out to them as they approached the strip from offshore, and they gawked as the frigate came in for a landing.

The *oye* tree planted in the back yard, seemingly overnight, had *grown*.

Jason flew under and around that tree every day, and he could tell just by looking at it that it had grown and had grown significantly. It was a good 60 shakra taller now, and its canopy looked to be spread over a square *kathra*. That canopy was also adorned with thousands and thousands of small white blossoms nestled among its gold and green leaves, the green leaves new growth that would turn golden once they reached full size. The tree had not only grown noticeably overnight, it had also flowered. It was the flowers that had everyone staring, because none of them had ever seen so many flowers before. They were almost covering the entire canopy, turning it white from the multitude of small, delicate blossoms. The tree had flowered before, but it did so in a predictable pattern of about every three months and had never had so many flowers before.

Inspecting the trunk when they got home confirmed it. The trunk was nearly two shakra thicker now than it had been, and had grown enough to wrinkle the soil around the base of the trunk as it pushed it aside to grow, which wrecked the small garden of flowers planted around the trunk within the fence. Ayama and Surin were out there as they approached, on their knees with gardening supplies and doing what they could to save the displaced flowers, carefully putting them in transplant pots. “When did this happen, Surin?” Jyslin asked, looking up at the tree.

“It began early yesterday afternoon,” he answered, placing a small violet-looking flower into a pot. “We had a botanist come and examine the tree, your Grace. It’s growing at a rate of nearly six tikra an hour, and it’s still growing. We need to remove the fence and pull up the walkway before it destroys them.”

“It’s growing that fast?” Jason asked in surprise.

Surin nodded. “The botanist has no idea why, or if it’s going to stop. Jason, we may be looking at a situation where we may have to cut it down,” Surin said seriously. “If it threatens the house—”

“It won’t,” he cut him off. “It can’t grow like this forever. We just have to wait it out.”

“It’s been quite a nervous night, Jason,” Ayama told him. “It’s been making ominous sounds since yesterday afternoon. Creaking and groaning. The botanist said that the sounds are caused by its rapid growth. At first I wanted to evacuate the babies from the house, but he gave the tree an examination and assured us that it’s in no danger of falling over. The roots are growing as fast as the tree, and it’s keeping it solidly anchored. He said the roots have spread over a three kathra radius and gone all the way into the bedrock, have burrowed into it, giving it enough of an anchor to even stand up to a hurricane.”

As if to accent her description, they all flinched when the trunk made a very loud crackling sound, like splitting wood.

Yesterday afternoon...wasn’t that about when the *shaman* had taken him out into the grove? He put his gauntlet over the white *jaingi* drawn on the upper arm of his armor, almost as if expecting to feel something from it. Could what happened yesterday be linked to this sudden growth of the tree?

She always did call this *his* tree. Was...was this tree somehow connected to him?

He took off his gauntlet and carefully stepped over the fence, making sure not to trample any flowers, and put his hand on the trunk. And he...he *felt something*. He wasn’t sure what, but there was definitely something. Like a warmth. “What’s gotten into you, old friend?” he asked softly, looking up the towering trunk, now the size of a 25-story building. It looked to be nearly 400 shakra tall, more than twice the height of a sequoia or

redwood back on Terra. “I thought we had a deal. No towering over the neighborhood. You’re being naughty.”

Ayama and Surin both burst out laughing, as did Rann and Shya. But Jyslin was *not* laughing.

The tree seemed unimpressed by his admonition, to the point where the trunk groaned again, quite loud this time.

“Perhaps a Parri could explain this,” Ayama offered. “They know more about these trees than anyone else.”

“That might be a good idea. I’ll ask someone to ask a Parri to come here and check the tree,” Jason agreed.

About an hour later, after they had a chance to get out of their armor, take a bath, and get a light snack, the Parri *shaman* herself was escorted into the back yard. Jason, Jyslin, and the kids were helping Ayama and Surin save the flowers, so he was right there as Mai and Kaera escorted her up from the landing pad. He did get up and go over to greet her, and she stepped over to the trunk, reared up on her hind legs, and put her hand-paw on the trunk. “It is nothing to worry about, Jason Karinne,” she said mildly. “This tree is about to bear fruit, and its growth reflects that. It cannot do so until it reaches a certain size, so it is making its preparations. In about twenty days, the canopy overhead will be almost overburdened with fruits.”

“Really?” he asked.

“Yes. This tree is now mature,” she declared. “Truly, the love you have shown it has accelerated its growth, and now it seeks to repay your devotion by sharing its bounty.”

“How much taller will it get, honored *shaman*?” Ayama asked courteously. “So we know how to plan our new garden.”

“I do not know your measurements, my dear friend,” she said, looking back at her. “But it will grow approximately half of its current size more in height, its canopy will expand by nearly its current size over again, and the trunk will expand nearly half again the size it is now. Does that answer your question?”

One half of its current height...dear *God*, that would make it nearly 600 shakra tall! That was the height of a 45-story building, with a canopy

extending out two kathra in every direction! The trunk would be nearly fifty shakra wide, taking up nearly a quarter of the back yard!

Well, at least when it finished growing, it wouldn't be hard for frigates to get in under it anymore.

"And it has to do that before it can fruit?" Surin asked.

She shook her head, looking back up the tree. "It will begin to fruit in a matter of days, and continue to grow as the fruits grown and ripen. But it should finish its growth just as the fruits become ready to be picked." She looked back to Jason. "The fruits of this tree are not to be sold, Jason Karinne. They are not to bring profit to anyone. They are to be shared with any who wish them."

"Any fruit from this tree will *never* be sold," he declared adamantly. "Ayama, I want you to do me a favor."

"Yes?"

"Arrange a festival of sorts for 20 days from today, a harvest festival. Make it known that on that day, anyone can come and pick the fruits from the tree. Get with Aya and work out a security zone around the strip that people can't enter. Talk with Jrz'kii and arrange some hoverplatforms with safety harnesses and other means for common citizens to get up there to pick the fruits safely. And write up some rules, you know, no damaging the tree, no leaving the hoverplatforms and climbing around in the canopy. You know, common sense stuff to protect the tree and keep anyone from getting killed."

"I'd be happy to, Jason," she said as the *shaman* gave him an approving smile. "It shouldn't be that difficult."

"Thank you for your expertise, *shaman*," Jason told her, coming up and taking her hand-paws, looking up into her eyes.

"I am happy to help, Jason Karinne, but I must return to the village. I was in the middle of a lesson when the call came."

He was about to say something, but Cybi cut him off. [*Jason, Lorna wants to talk to you,*] she relayed.

[Alright, I'll go up to my office.] “I was going to ask you to stay and talk, but work just called me as well, *shaman*,” he told her. “Would be you be free tomorrow morning to talk?”

“Of course,” she smiled. “I will have breakfast waiting for you, Jason Karinne.”

“I’ll be there.”

After getting up to his office, he put the room in secure mode and brought up a holo of Lorna. She was in her office at the Spires, with that lovely view showing in the window behind her. “Nephew,” she said. “We’ve decided to try to cajole Sha Ra into calling off her fleet.”

“Okay. What are we doing that you need to talk to me for?”

“You said you have significant numbers of toys at Oasis. Do you have enough to scare her to the negotiating table?”

Jason laughed, and gave her an evil grin. “Yes I do,” he replied confidently. “The most important of which are the two hundred stellar collectors we have in close orbit to the star. You say the word, and I’ll tell Maggie to have them shift position, to get close enough to take shots at the enemy ships, far enough away so they’re almost impossible to detect but close enough so they won’t see the shots coming.”

“You’ll get that word sometime tomorrow,” she replied. “We’re still working out exactly how we want to do this. I need a complete list of all 3D assets you have hidden at Oasis and what kind of damage they can do, so we can build a timeline to plan around. We’re not going to tell you how to use them, we just want an idea of what they can do so we have an idea of how fast or slow things are going to move. We’re also debating whether or not to send out ships equipped with Hrathrari translight drives to demonstrate that we can move in and out of the interdiction effect at will, to try to intimidate Sha Ra into surrendering.”

“You don’t need their ships. We need a few of ours, ones with GRAF cannons installed,” he said. “Show that not even hiding behind a planet or moving out to the edge of the system to avoid a stellar collector is going to work, and Sha Ra may see that we can whittle her fleet down to nothing over a few years. And there’s nothing she can do about it.”

“Jason, I’m not taking KMS command ships off the board for fourteen days so they can go out there and come back,” she told him. “We *need* those ships if Sha Ra orders the fleet here to attack an uninterdicted system.”

“We only need one, Lorna. And the *Pegasus* is already here, so I’ll take it and an escort task force off the board and prep it for the trip out.”

She took a thoughtful look for a moment, then nodded. “As long as it’s only one, and it’s *not* the *Tianne*,” she acceded. “Don’t send them out until we have the specifics ironed out.”

“Alright. I’ll have Cyra send you a manifest of everything we have in the system and pull the *Pegasus* and about ten other ships off the board with drives installed to escort it. No flag vessels, just cruisers, destroyers, and frigates.”

“I was about to tell you that,” she chuckled.

“I’m also going to tow a Stargate out there,” he continued. “It might behoove us to have a fast way to get ships over there, and with that fleet trapped in interdiction and it being a one week trip for the rest of them to get there, it should be safe enough. I’ll just have to picket a defense squadron there.”

“That’s a good idea. Place it in the dead zone between the interdiction fields so ships that come through can jump to the border of the field.”

“Can do. I’ll load some diplomatic bionoids onto the *Pegasus*, just in case we can’t use the Stargate.”

“It may be a good idea,” she nodded. “Mesaiima and Ethikk’s at the very least. Maybe one for every member of the Council at the worst, just in case.”

“Not for this. Mesaiima and Ethikk are good at negotiating, and they should definitely be along to further the negotiations, but we also need someone that can scare Sha Ra into a cease fire. We need Grran, Orgik Vort of the Vekk, and Jokik Bor of the Ubutu,” he declared. “All three of them don’t take shit from anyone, they’re physically intimidating, and they’re three of the few rulers on the Council deeply versed in military strategy and tactics. Mesaiima can charm Sha Ra, but those three can scare the piss out

of her, and that's exactly what we need here. We need intimidation, not glibness."

"Can't argue with that," she agreed. "But we really shouldn't be making the Council's decisions for it here, nephew," she chuckled.

"Fuck them, they have no idea what we need here," he retorted, which made her laugh. "Besides, negotiating a cease fire is in the purview of the CCM, not the Council, so you have final say. Mesaiima and Ethikk can take over formal negotiations once we have a cease fire. I'll get Rook on the task of building them macro bionoids, they should be ready before you send down any orders. Actually, just to be safe, I'll order him to build a macro bionoid for *every* member of the council. Just in case."

"That's the objective. To get there, we have to soften them up," Lorna continued. "Jason, I want you to get 3D ready to do battle in their special way. I want you to take it to Sha Ra so hard she has no idea what happened, and what may come next. When we offer a formal negotiation, I want her to jump at it, then show up quivering like a frightened *kree*. I want you to empty the *entire* toy box on her."

Jason's grin was *savage*. "I've been waiting *takirs* for you to say that, Lorna," he told her in a voice of dreadful anticipation.

"Get everything ready, and sometime tomorrow, you should have authorization. Is that enough time?"

"Yes," he answered.

"Then I'll let you get over to 3D and get things going, nephew," she said with a smile. "I'll call back tomorrow morning your time to get a status report."

"I'll have one for you," he said, standing up. Lorna's hologram winked out, and he immediately moved into action, standing up and heading for his bedroom so he could get into his armor. *[Cyra, get the list of assets we have at Oasis from the 3D mainframe and send it to Lorna over in CCM HQ. Cybi, get 3D into the warehouse, all of them, we're having a meeting in two hours. Coma, tell Rook that I want him to build a macro bionoid for every member of the council, and they need to be done as fast as he can. Have them scale properly by height, that way the larger members of the council will tower over a Benga. Cynna, tell Myri to pull the Pegasus, four cruisers,*

eight destroyers, and ten IP frigates off the board, then get with Jrz'kii and gather up a towing detail of KMM tugs and other non-military assets and get a Stargate ready to ship out to Oasis. Non-drive ships, Cynna. The CCM knows we're moving that Stargate; it can't magically appear in the system in an hour. Cylan, get with Myri and organize a defensive task force for that gate once it arrives, and all those ships have to have drives. Cyvanne, just go back to skateboarding over at the park with your bionoid, we don't need you.]

[Push off, Jayce,] she snapped through the biogenic network, which made Jason laugh aloud.

[You talk to Tom and find out how many assets we can get over to Oasis in the next 30 hours. Cyra, when you deliver that list, tell Lorna that we're going to send more assets via one-way wormhole, but we can't report them to her until we know they made it through intact. That gives us cover to move as much as we can with drive ships and not have to account for it.]

[We'll get it done, Jason,] Cybi answered. [I assume we're about to go after the main fleet?]

[Yes we are,] he answered. [With the fleet in the galaxy beyond our reach, the staff at the CCM is going to try to scare Sha Ra into agreeing to a cease fire. Lorna wants them shaken up enough that when we offer a parlay, they jump to take it. That means that it's 3D time.] Aya, I'm going to the warehouse, get everything ready, he warned openly. Jyslin, you too. You're 3D even if you spend most of your time with the Paladins, and this is a full meeting.

I'll call in a frigate. When are you leaving?

As soon as it gets here.

I'll start getting ready as soon as I finish feeding Jon, Jyslin answered.

[Then let's get things moving,] Jason declared, opening the armory door in the bedroom and reaching for the breastplate of his armor on its stand before the stand even stopped moving.

Two hours later, Jason and Jyslin strode into the 3D warehouse with the entire team assembled, some of them having to come in from deployment in CCM task forces. Because of that, more than half the 127 people in the

warehouse's main floor were wearing armor. And not everyone in the room was a Faey or Terran. There were Shio like Emia, Siyhaa and her Moridon, and a smattering of other races from the Confederation, those who showed the right combination of skill and creativity that was mandatory in 3D. Scientists, engineers, and machinists, they all shared space standing on the floor, sitting on desks, or standing on platforms, arrayed around the center of the large room as Jason walked into it. Jyslin split off from him and sat on a desk beside Myleena. "Alright, it looks like everyone's here," he declared. "Lorna just asked us to scare the Syndicate into negotiating, people. That means we are going *all out* against the fleet trapped at Oasis," he announced, which caused a few cheers. "She asked me to literally empty the toy box on them, and that's *exactly* what we're going to do."

"About time!" someone shouted.

"Amen," Jason agreed. "That means that effective right now, everyone on deployment is off of it. I need everyone here to get things ready, because we're gonna do this *right*," he declared. "Tom."

"Yeah, Jayce?"

"Pull every toy you can from everywhere else that can afford to be without them and get them to Kosigi. And empty the warehouses. Everything goes, Tom, even the experimental units. We're throwing *everything* at them. We're gonna send it out to Oasis on those KT-2K freighters we installed with drives. Myleena, you organize the toys we have there and the ones coming, and monitor the shipping operation, make sure the freighters don't get close enough to the sensor units the CCM placed out there to monitor the enemy fleet. I don't want them to know we have ships out there. Bo, Maggie, you draw up a very general game plan with Tom and Myleena, but don't get too specific because we need to find out what Lorna's exact objectives are. You can tweak what you come up with once Lorna gets back to us. Rook, I need you to finish those macro bionoids as fast as you can, and then get back over here and help with the deployment. Leamon, did you finish the tweaks on the resonator? Is it good to go?"

"It's ready, Jayce."

"Then add them to the outbound. Siyhaa, did you finish that project with the sentinels?"

“I should be done within three hours, Jason. We are doing the final tests now.”

“Is that enough time to get some of them out there?”

“It is.”

“Alright, add that to the list too, Tom,” Jason said. “If anyone has anything to add to the list, just talk to Myleena. Bo, you and Maggie are going to be the operation commanders, you’re gonna run things from Kosigi with Tom and Myli. Talty,” he said to the Jhri standing on one of the desks.

“Yes, Jason?” she asked in her shrill voice.

“I want you to head up the on-site team. Unpack the mobile ops unit and pick yourself an ops team. Bo and Maggie are going to manage strategy from Kosigi, so they’re off limits. You’ll be in charge of deploying the field operation. You’ll have tactical command of the theatre.”

“I’ll get everything ready!” she said in excitement.

Talty? Why not Bo or Maggie? Myleena asked privately. They have more experience.

Because she’s ready, he answered.

And?

And nothing. She’s ready, so she gets the job.

I hate it when you think you’re in charge.

I am in charge, bitch, he retorted as he looked at her, which made her grin at him. “That’s it, people. Get everything to Kosigi and onto those freighters. Talty, gather your team. Bo, Maggie, Tom, Myli, get up to Kosigi and make Dellin very mad at you. Rook, Siyhah, get it done. We have 23 hours to get everything organized, that leaves us seven before our scheduled deploy. Let’s go.”

There was a loud cheer, then everyone in the warehouse rushed back to their desks or work areas to gather up what they needed. Myli and Tom were already shouting orders, and Talty was running after her first choice for the tactical team...and she chose wisely with Rook.

[Jason, you need to come out now,] Miaari communed through her memory band to him.

[Miaari? Where are you?]

[Outside the door. Zaa needs to speak to you immediately!]

It must be both top secret and serious for Zaa to send Miaari after him personally. “Jyslin, take over,” he called loudly. “The Kimdori just asked to talk to me, they must have found something.”

“No problem, love, we’ll get everything moving,” Jyslin smiled.

Miaari met him at the door, guarded by Marine Guards, and she hustled him into his frigate and rushed him over to Jaxtra. And the ship went *fast*. “What’s going on, Mee?” he asked as they raced over the Sarsei Sea towards Kirga.

“I know now, Jason. I only know that Denmother told me to find you and get you to her as fast as possible. She made it clear that it was dreadfully important.”

“Why not just tell Cybi?”

“Because I was close to the warehouse anyway.”

“Good reason, I suppose. I take it the infiltrators found something?”

“I know not, but I suspect that must be the case for such haste.”

Zaa was already in her office when they arrived, and they were hustled straight to her. “Cousin,” she said, standing up as he and Miaari came in. “Miaari found you quickly.”

“I wasn’t hiding, Denmother. What’s going on?” he asked as the door closed.

“Our infiltration of the Syndicate headquarters on E Chaio has already produced substantial intelligence, cousin,” she said as they all sat down. “And among them, I believe, is the identity of our insurgent within their fleet.” She leaned her elbows on her desk and looked at them. “My child within their headquarters managed to get her hands on a datafile concerning the Oracle system. Jason, the Oracle is not a computer. It is a *precog*,” she declared.

He gasped. “Are you *serious*? A precog? And she didn’t go insane?”

“No. The psionics they use in the Oracle system do not go insane,” she replied. “They all hail from the same race in Andromeda, a race known for its precognates. The race seems to be fully compatible with the gift, for it does not drive them mad because they don’t use it with their conscious minds. Their predictions come from their subconscious minds, in the form of dreams, which they then interpret. The name of their race translates from Benga into *the Dreamers*. Only the most powerful are placed within the Oracle program in the military. And we have data on the specific Oracle embedded within the fleet that invaded our galaxy. It is a child.”

“A *child*? Why would they send a child?”

“Because they fear them,” she answered. “Much like the Faey, the entire race is telepathic, but they do not teach them telepathic skills. As they get older, as their powers grow and mature, they start to learn how to use their telepathy, and the Benga have past experience that when their Oracles gain telepathic proficiency, they use that ability to engineer their own escape. To get as much use out of them as possible, they are placed into the program as young as possible, and when they reach the age of sixteen years, they are killed. They keep them in a state of induced sleep when not actively using their ability to prevent them from expressing telepathic ability and learning to control it. They utilize telepaths to torment that sleep with nightmares even as they insert the questions into their subconscious mind via telepathy. In that agitated state, their ability to see possible future outcomes is more clear. The nightmare is more accurate than the dream, so they inflict nightmares upon them.”

He gave her a look of shock.

“These children live a life of nightmares, Jason, until they become a threat. Then they are killed.”

“That’s...that’s...*monstrous*!” he said, outrage boiling over in his voice.

“The Oracle in the enemy fleet is, by our time measurements, about nine years old. And Sha Ra is petitioning her superiors for permission to terminate her. She thinks that because she failed to foresee the interdictors, she is either defective or actively resisting. Cousin, I suspect with high confidence that *she* is the insurgent. Our analysts agree, it is a very high

probability that she is leading Sha Ra down the wrong path intentionally, so the fleet is defeated, with hopes that it brings about her own freedom.”

It all *fit*. What the *shaman* told him, the way things had turned out so far, the series of events, Zaa was right. This Oracle had deceived Sha Ra, probably because she foresaw the opportunity that she would escape from the Benga. *Trapped in a nightmare that forces darkness upon it*, that was how the *shaman* described the insurgent within the enemy fleet. If they kept these Oracles asleep so they couldn’t think rationally, then tormented them with nightmares to incite their precognitive abilities, that was the very definition of it. *But struggles against its chains and seeks release* also fit perfectly. If the Oracle was deceiving Sha Ra, she was doing everything in her power to escape from her.

It explained *everything*. And since it was clear that the Oracle was deceiving Sha Ra, they had to act on it quickly.

“We have to do something,” Jason said. “Zaa, we can’t leave that Oracle there. If she starts cooperating, Sha Ra will regain the upper hand by predicting the success of her actions. If she’s on the fleet flagship, we have to find a way to get her out of there. We *owe* it to her, she may be the sole reason why we’re winning this war, by deceiving Sha Ra into making poor decisions.”

“She is the single-most guarded being in the entire fleet, Jason,” Zaa warned. “It would be impossible to abduct her. They would kill her before we got anywhere near her, that is their standing order. They will kill her if you even reveal that you know about her. The one thing they *never* want their enemies to gain is an Oracle. If we force Sha Ra to surrender, she will kill the Oracle the instant she makes that decision. Rescuing this Oracle will be impossible.”

“Nothing is impossible,” Jason said, leaning back in his chair. “But that also begs the question, what about all the other Oracles? If we ever want any hope to ever keep the Syndicate out of our galaxy, we have to take out the Oracles. I’ll bet they won’t be quite so willing to try to conquer the universe if they don’t have them anymore, when success is no longer *guaranteed*.”

“The entire race is strictly controlled, removed from their original home planet and placed on a moon in what appears to be one of the most heavily guarded systems in Andromeda, even more so than E Chaio. They keep a fleet of *one hundred thousand* ships in that system at all times. And you must also consider, cousin, that all of our actions will be foreseen by the Oracles that are *not* resisting, allowing the Syndicate to counter them. Freeing the race from the Syndicate would be virtually impossible.”

“Again, Denmother, nothing is *impossible*,” he said, looking down at the floor as he thought furiously. “All we have to do is come up with a plan that has *no chance of failure*, so that the Oracles report back that there is zero chance that the Syndicate can stop what’s happening.”

“You don’t ask for much, cousin,” Miaari said with a dark little chuckle.

“Or...we set into motion a plan of action that *cannot be stopped*,” he said with a sudden widening of his eyes. “How do you fool someone that can see the future, Denmother?”

“Is that a rhetorical question, cousin?”

“Yes. How do you do it?”

“As you said, you ensure that your course of action cannot fail.”

“No, Denmother, how do you *trick* someone that can see the future?”

“By hiding the true course of events,” she answered after thinking a moment.

“No, Zaa, by making them see *doom*,” he said. “If they see nothing past the doom, they can’t predict beyond it.”

“What are you about, cousin?” Zaa asked.

“It’s simple, Denmother. That star system you said they’re at? We’re going to destroy it.”

“*What?*”

Miaari gave him a look, then gasped and then laughed. “Brilliant!”

“I don’t see your plan here, cousin.”

“It’s very simple, Denmother. You said it yourself, they *can’t foresee their own deaths*. But what if they foresee something that kills *everything*

around them? A cataclysm? A natural disaster of such magnitude that everyone, even the Oracles, only see doom?”

“I...I still do not understand, Jason.”

“I get it! I see what he intends, Denmother! We trick that immense fleet to flee, and in such a way that they do *not* try to destroy the moon! They will let the cataclysm do it for them! We need only ensure that it happens so fast that they have little choice but to flee or die!”

Jason clapped his gauntlets together and pointed at Miaari with a smile. “I don’t have any specifics, but when the time comes, that’s how we go after the Oracles in Andromeda.”

“You intend to exterminate the species, Jason?” Zaa asked in disapproval.

“No, Denmother, to force the Syndicate to abandon them to what they see as their own doom. Then we just interdict the system after they leave, and they can’t get back in there.”

“That...might work,” Zaa said, leaning back in her chair and scratching her muzzle in thought. “But it would be very tricky.”

“Not as tricky as you think it will be. Just leave that to me when the time comes, Denmother, I have a plan. What I *don’t* have a plan for is the Oracle that’s at Oasis. It’s too bad we can’t build a person-sized Stargate,” he said ruefully. “We could get it in there and—”

Of *course*! The *bridges*! That was the answer!

“Jason?”

“I can do it!” he said with a sudden gasp, standing up. “Denmother, can you get an infiltrator close enough to that Oracle to touch her? Close enough to plant a homing beacon on her?”

“Possibly. What do you intend, cousin?”

“We’re going to use a *wormhole* to get her out!” he said with sudden animation.

“It would kill her, cousin,” Miaari warned.

“Not if we follow the rules!” he said. “I have to go, Denmother. I have to build something. You have one of your infiltrators wait for a piece of equipment I’m going to deliver to the system, then get it to the Oracle. I’ll be able to yank her right out of the ship! I have to go! I’ll send you a report!”

Miaari ran after him as he charged through the house and towards the frigate, which was already powering up since he sent in advance. “Jason, what are you about?” Miaari demanded as she ran up the ramp behind him.

“The *bridges*, Mee! I can build a stable two-way wormhole using a homing beacon and modifying a Stargate system using bridge technology, one with an aperture the size of a large *door*! I can build a *personal* Stargate! A stable wormhole between two points small enough for a person to walk through that doesn’t need a controller at both ends! Why didn’t I ever think of this before! I’m so *stupid*!” he said as he ran down the companionway.

“But that won’t work, Jason. They’ve tried it before.”

“For *ships*, Mee! I’m talking about something much smaller! The larger the gate, the more spatial volume you’re affecting, thus the more unstable it is! By building a gate only eight shakra across, and placing it far enough away that we’re not severely warping space to form the wormhole, it will make it stable enough to get that girl out of there! Hell, stable enough to *leave open*, just like a normal Stargate! I just need to know *where* to open the terminus, and that’s what the beacon is for!”

Miaari hurried after him, her face furrowed in confusion, then her eyes widened. “I see!” she said, then she laughed. “Brilliant! Absolutely brilliant, cousin!”

“I guess I never thought of this before because of the insane amount of power it’s gonna take, it makes it *infeasible* to build it just to send one person somewhere. But this *one person* is worth all that power, all the credits it’s gonna cost to build it. [Myleena!]

[*What, babes?*]

[*Change of plans. You’re off the mission. Meet me at my house, you and me are gonna build something, something so important that it may make the Syndicate surrender.*]

[What?]

[A stable wormhole generator,] he answered. [We're going to use it to abduct a single person.]

[A what? Jason, that's never going to work!]

[Trust me. Just get over to my house. Cynna, I want you to look around the Confederation and find me a deep space station. It has to be big enough to house six Class X singularity plants and about sixteen thousand cubic shakra of additional internal space, but only that big. The station has to have the smallest gravimetric footprint possible, what we're going to build is very sensitive to disruption by gravity wells.]

[I found one. A Potra deep space cargo station currently decommissioned and awaiting being recycled. I'll contact Palu Magara and ask if we can buy it.]

[Good. Tell all the CBIMs and Coma to prepare for a project. And we've gotta build it fast.]

[What are we building, Jason?] Cybi asked.

[I'll explain it when I get home,] he answered.

He had the frigate rush him home even faster than it got him to Jaxtra, and he literally ran from the landing pad and into the house. Myleena was already there, and he dragged her down into his workshop, explaining his idea over commune as they went down the stairs. *[Trelle's garland, babes, that might work,]* she agreed after absorbing his idea. *[The gate should be stable so long as we can predict the motion of the terminus in relation to the target point. And if we're trying to abduct someone off a Syndicate ship in orbit, it's gonna have a predictable vector.]*

[Exactly. With a locator beacon on the other side to direct the gate targeting system, it can hold the gate open and stable for several minutes, more than long enough for a team to go through, grab the girl, and come back. They'll never see it coming, and she won't tell them even if she foresees it, because it's what she wants. And thanks to that Godsend Emia's work on spatial bridges, we have everything we need to do it, we just have to adapt it from bridge technology.]

[Our rough calculations say it will work, Jason,] Cybi injected. [Given our target is outside the galaxy, it's far enough away for us to place the origin gate here at Karis. We'll just have to do some additional calculations to take the Flat Space Effect and time dilation into account when we open the bridge to keep the terminus in place relative to the ship into which it opens.]

[That's why you guys are on the case, the six of you can crunch those numbers before we so much as have a blueprint drawn up,] Jason told them.

[It won't take us long. We can almost fully use a bridge for this, with just a few tweaks,] Myleena predicted with a confident grin. [But we'll need more than us. Let's gather up what we need from your workshop and go over to 3D. We're gonna need Emia and Siyhaa for this minimum. We can work on this while the rest of the guys go kick the shit out of the Syndicate. They just have to be careful not to do so much damage that they decide to kill the Oracle before we can rescue her.]

[We need time, and this attack is about getting Sha Ra to the negotiating table. Once we get her there, we drag out the negotiations, stall the fuck out of her, and she'll go for it because she's also stalling. She's waiting for information to come back from her superiors about how they might be able to circumvent an interdicator. So her stalling just plays right into our hands. We build the bridge, steal the Oracle, and then we threaten her with horrors and tribulations if she doesn't surrender.]

[I like the way you think cousin,] Myleena grinned.

Chapter 13

Maista, 21 Shiaa, 4404, Faey Orthodox Calendar

Friday, 7 September 2018 Terran Standard Calendar

*Maista, 21 Shiaa, year 1329 of the 97th Generation, Karinne
Historical Reference Calendar*

Nexus One deep space station, 2.1 light minutes from planet Karis

It was a marvel of intricate coordination.

Jason helped five bionoids set in a piece of equipment in what would be the control center for their creation, and those five bionoids were just five of nearly 12,000 that were all over the station at that moment, virtually every single bionoid that they'd built so far. Rook had been mass producing them for days, and every day, more and more bionoids came in and contributed to the effort, up to this point. The station was crawling with bionoids, all with the same face and all working. They were laying conduit and datalines, annealing equipment down, building their project with tremendous speed, haste, and skill. That was because *every single bionoid* was being controlled by Cybi. It was 12,000 workers sharing the same mind, and because of that, they were moving with almost mesmerizing coordination. And operating 12,000 bionoids was using 0.00000037% of Cybi's overall processing power. She could operate several *million* bionoids in unison before the processing load started straining her external I/O stacks. It was another very stark reminder of the incredible power of a CBIM, a power deliberately hidden from the rest of the universe.

They were in a hurry. When Jason told Lorna of their plan, she delayed the 3D attack and formulated an overall plan where they would invade the ship and rescue the Oracle and leave behind a little *present* for Sha Ra, and the instant they were clear, 3D would strike to further add to the confusion. They knew what they were doing, and thanks to the CBIMs, the math

showed that their idea would work. Now it just came down to building it, and they had to get it done as fast as possible. At any moment, Syndicate HQ could approve Sha Ra's request to kill the Oracle, so they were in a race against time.

But Jason had already made one vow to himself. If she did that, if she killed that child, Jason would *eradicate* them. Down to the last ship. Down to the last *sailor*. The Syndicate and the Consortium weren't the only ones that had the technological capability to lay waste to entire planets...to entire *star systems*. If they killed that child, he would wipe out the entire fleet in the furious retribution of *hellfire*. He might even go after E Chaio itself. It showed in the starkest terms the utter *evil* of the Syndicate, that they were so merciless, so depraved, so devoid of any morality whatsoever that they would intentionally kill a little child in cold blood, it nearly made him furious just thinking about it, and it had driven him since the moment they set foot on this Potra space station. The Potra were one of the Coalition empires, a humanoid species about the same size as Terrans and Faey, so the station's layout was compatible with them. The controls were all at the right height, the doors weren't too small, and so on and so on. But, given the Potra were one of the least advanced of the Coalition empires, they'd had to gut most of the station's infrastructure and replace it with Karinne technology. Aside from the primitive tech, the station itself was *perfect*. It was just the right size, big enough to hold the bridge apparatus and power plants, but not so large that its gravity well would interfere with the system once it was active. It hadn't had artificial gravity, was meant to rotate to produce a gravity effect, and that radial design was actually ideal for what they had in mind. They were placing the actual gateway apparatus in the central core of the station with the power and spatial generation systems along the outer ring, allowing them to focus at the center.

They were building this fast, but they weren't going to throw this away when they were done. This technology had use, it had tremendous use. The ability to open wormhole gateways to anywhere they could get a beacon had strategic and tactical military value, it had political value, it even had *economic* value. Dellin was even now building two more of these stations using the exact same design—it really was just perfect, Cynna had knocked it out of the park when she found this station—and those two stations were going to be their literal gateway to Andromeda.

They'd already done the math. While they couldn't open a stable bridge to any point within six sectors of Karis because of the curvature of space, anything further from that was stable...and in the usual paradox of spatial applications, the further the terminus was from the origin gate, the more stable the wormhole and the less power it required to open it...at least within the galaxy. The power requirements did go up over extreme distances, but that power increase was far less than trying to connect two points in space very close together, giving the unit the mathematical power to open wormholes all the way to Andromeda. And the stability remained the same. It was the same reason that it took less power to connect a Stargate to a sister gate across the galaxy than it did one only a few light years away. Distance wasn't the issue here, it was the forced warping of the curvature space, and that was *easier* to do over vast distances than it was close together. Two points close together required more severe spatial warping to connect them, like bending a metal bar into a U, where two points far away took much less, only required a very gentle curve in the metal. It took more force to bend the metal into a U than it did a gentle curve, and warping space worked more or less the same way. The only thing that held the technology back was the inability to accurately *aim* that terminus over vast distances, because of the distance, but biogenics solved that problem by allowing the beacon to communicate with the gate system in real time regardless of distance. The beacon would allow the bridge to lock in on its location and open a wormhole, a *stable* wormhole, which would remain stable for about 270 seconds before the movement of both the origin and terminus gate locations started introducing excessive variables into the equation, and thus started destabilizing the wormhole.

270 seconds. Four minutes, 30 seconds. That was more than enough time to get in there, grab the child, drop the package, then get out. And even if they failed to do it in time, all they had to do was wait about 180 seconds for the bridge to cycle and create a new wormhole. Three minutes. They could hold a position for three minutes until the bridge could open a new wormhole at their location.

And after this was done, Jason had plans for this system. He was going to send bionoids to E Chaio, send bionoids to several locations in Andromeda, and assist the Kimdori in their efforts.

Really, the applications were almost limitless. This system could theoretically connect them to nearly any point in the *universe*. They just had to have a beacon on the other end to allow the bridge to lock onto it...and translight drives could get those beacons out there.

The Kimdori hidden aboard Sha Ra's flagship already had the beacon. They'd delivered it to him three days ago, and it had taken some very sneaky work to do it, including sending in the *Javelin*. The frigate slipped in close enough and jettisoned the beacon and allowed its momentum to carry it to the flagship. The giant ship's gravity captured it as it passed and caused it to crash onto the surface of the ship, and the Kimdori managed to get out there and get it out of its container before the maintenance robots that roamed the hull of the ship cleaned up the debris, and possibly alerted the ship's crew that something *artificial* had crashed on the hull. A ship that big was struck by space debris and asteroids fairly often due to its gravity, so cleaning off the burn marks and sweeping up the rubble was an endless task.

But there was a catch to the plan. The Kimdori couldn't get the beacon in the room with the child, due to the security. *Nobody* was allowed in that room, anyone even trying without authorization would trigger an automated system that would kill the child, and it was usually kept sealed at all times. He could get it fairly close, about 20 meters from her in a passageway leading to the compartment holding her. And that was close enough. A Generation could go through the wormhole, disable the guards and the automated systems in a heartbeat, then tear the door open and get her out of there. The infiltrator had already supplied them with some plans of the hallway by using spiders to explore both the passage and its void spaces within the walls, locating datalines and power feeds that operated the execution system for the Oracle, allowing them to kill her with the flip of a switch. A Generation could cut those lines, prevent that automated system from going off, in a matter of microseconds, since he or she would know *exactly* where it was and how to strike.

And that Generation was going to be *him*.

He'd already had that fight with Aya, and it was a *fight*. When he revealed his intention to undertake the mission himself, she completely flipped out, and it had taken physically subduing her to make her stop. She

was utterly furious with him at the moment, but he hadn't sent her packing. She and the other guards were out in the outer ring preparing for the mission, because two of *them* were going as well, Aya and Dera. Jason would accept nothing less than the Imperial Guard going in with him, Jenn would be going in as the backup Generation, as well as two additional members of the team to protect them in case things went south, Kyva and Liira. The six of them would go through the wormhole in Gladiators, storm the compartment holding the child, rescue her, drop the package, then get out. And as soon as the wormhole closed behind them, 3D would attack.

That was the plan. Simple, efficient, neat, and they had a very high confidence of success. The only piece of the puzzle left to place was getting the bridge built. And if they stayed on schedule, they'd be finished with it in about 21 hours.

"Alright, it's in position, let's anneal it," Jason called aloud after they carefully set the unit on the deck.

"Yes, Jason," Cybi answered through all five of the bionoids simultaneously.

"Stop that," he told her irritably as he knelt down and picked up his annealer, which made all five laugh. "You get the mounts, I'll get the conduit and datalines hooked up."

[Where are you at on that phase control unit, Jayce?] Myleena asked.

[In place, we're hooking it up now,] he replied. *[Siyhaa done with the main coding yet?]*

[I'm nearly finished, Jason,] she answered. *[The algorithm is programmed; I'm working on the variables now.]*

[Good deal. Where am I going from here, Myli?]

[Outer ring, deck 12, section 32. Get that last phase control unit in, and we can do a power-up test on the plants.]

[How's the plasma focusing system looking, Emia?]

[We're on schedule, Jayce,] she answered. *[We should have the last focusing array in by the time you have the power system up. Are we really going to leave the plasma feeds exposed?]*

[It won't hurt them, and we don't have time to enclose the pathways,] he answered. [The magnetic flux tunnel systems we installed should keep the plasma flowing coherently once it leaves the conduit. But I bet when we fire it up, it's gonna look pretty radical from the outside, those plasma streams firing from the outer ring into the core. We can come back and make everything nice and neat when we have the time.]

[Jason, Kyva and Liira just arrived in the main landing bay,] Cybi warned.

[Have Aya brief them on the mission. Where's Jenn?]

[About to leave Karis now. They're bringing your tactical Gladiator with him. They finished the modifications so they can restart from gate passage mode much faster. But you'll still be without your tactical gestalts for nearly four seconds after your mecha come back online, Jason.]

[We can handle it. How's Tom doing with the preparations?]

[On schedule. We should have quite a lot of firepower ready when they get the go.]

[Is the package ready?]

[They're putting the final touches on it now.]

[Then it sounds like we have everything in place,] he told her as he finished annealing down the unit. [I'm gonna go ahead and get over to the last unit location, you finish setting this up and bring it from the loading dock.]

He was a bit surprised when Kyva met him at the last location, requiring him to go about a third of the way around the outer ring. *Are you nuts, Jason?* she demanded as he came up to her. *You're going?*

You're damn fucking right I'm going, he replied. *I owe it to the Oracle. We all do. That brave little girl saved all our asses, and I'm not about to cower behind my desk when she needs me. Me and Jenn have more than enough to get her out of there. I need you, Liira, Aya, and Dera to cover our asses while we do it.*

Jason, you are the last person that should go. Bring Jezzi in.

No, he replied emphatically, with enough force in his thought to make her physically flinch.

You're too valuable, too important to do something this risky! she protested.

Aya said that too, right before I broke her nose. Do you want a broken nose too, Kyva? he threatened, balling his fist and presenting it to her.

Easy there, tiger, I'm on your side, she told him. *But I'd be in dereliction of duty if I didn't tell you that you have no business doing this. You're the Grand Duke Karinne. You have an entire military full of people to do this for you.*

And that's exactly why I'm going, he answered.

Huh?

I'm the most qualified person to do this, Kyva. I know more about that ship and Syndicate tech than anyone in the KMS, thanks to the intel Zaa's infiltrator got back to us. If anything goes wrong, I can get us out of there in one piece. And I'll be damned if I sit back and let someone less qualified for this mission take my place just because of my title.

She gave him a long look, then grinned mischievously. *That's all I needed to hear. You'll have me right on your six when we storm that ship, Jason Karinne.*

And I'll never feel any safer, he told her, taking her hand in solidarity. *Now go back to Aya and you two work on the plan. She has all the intel we're gonna use, and can get you up to speed on the device we're building to get us there and back.*

Will do.

It took him about half an hour to install the last phase control unit, then he stood up and took a couple of steps back. *[That's it, we're done with the power system. Myli, bring it up, let's see what we get.]*

[On it. Power systems now in startup.] The phase control unit began to hum loudly as its indicator lights blinked on. *[Plants are up. Getting green lights across the entire system, so nobody's gonna get killed today. Alright, here we go, initiating plasma feed sequence.]* The control unit gave a

sudden loud whine as it went into full power mode, and he could feel the deck plates under him vibrating slightly. *[All six systems are up and running. We're getting full power at the collector. No warning indicators. I think we've got it guys,]* she announced. *[Jayce, come in and help Emia with the spatial translator system and I'll start on the targeting array.]*

[The successful test puts us one hour, 46 minutes ahead of schedule,] Siyhaa announced. *[We budgeted that time for troubleshooting.]*

[Cybi's little army is doing a good job,] Jason injected.

[I do things right, Jason, unlike a certain Grand Duke.]

[Bitch, I am so pulling your plug when I get home,] he threatened as he picked up his tool kit.

Nearly sixteen hours of intensive labor later, with them catching cat naps here and there where they could, the four of them and Cybi's primary bionoid stood at the control system of their new bridge system, which Myleena had coined the Nexus System. Siyhaa was installing the last dynamic software patches as the others waited, having to hunch over a little bit because the console was at her lower thighs. They had everything installed, and now they were ready for their first test of the system. "The operating system is ready," Siyhaa declared, then she stepped to the side a little and let Myleena take her place at the console. "We can commence initial testing at your command, Jason."

"Did they set that beacon on PR-371?" he asked.

"Yup, it's been there for about ten hours, babes," Myleena answered as she looked down at the console.

"Then let's do this. Cybi, tell them to turn it on and get at *least* a kathra away from it. If the targeting system is off, it may kill them when it tries to open the bridge."

"I'm sending the order now, Jason."

"Let's fire this thing up," Myleena said, taking a datafiber and plugging it into her gestalt. That was a security feature, only the controller physically plugged into the control console could operate it. "Initiating power up sequence." Jason looked out over the chamber as the equipment around the main platform all activated. The room was circular, the heart of the station

where the power plant had once been, but now it was a vast chamber holding a raised walkway that held nine concentric rings. That was the focusing and stabilization system for the bridge, that would form a wormhole along the raised platform within the fifth ring, the four before and after it the anchors that held the wormhole steady and stable. “Power is stable, I have six threshold levels,” she announced. “Beginning beacon location and negotiation sequence.”

“How long will this take?” Siyhhaa asked.

“Given we’ve never done this before, no idea. But the math says that it’s going to take the targeting system about ten minutes to lock onto the exact spatial coordinates of the beacon. The beacon will act like the sister gate to a Stargate or bridge and let this unit negotiate a precise destination. In effect, it’s going to link to the beacon instead of a sister gate, but all the actual work will be done on this side.”

There was little to do but wait. They watched a progress bar on the holodisplay that showed the process, as the targeting computer in the nexus unit negotiated with the beacon. It moved very slowly at first, but then it moved faster and faster, and then jumped from 85% complete to fully complete almost instantly. “That’s it, we have a lock,” Myleena announced. “And it only took eight minutes, not bad. Alright, here we go, guys. Initiating nexus system.”

The entire room began to brighten as the nine concentric rings began to glow with power, and there was a shimmering hum echoing across the chamber. “We have a stable curve,” she declared. “We’re ready to form the wormhole. Are the people over on PR-371 clear?”

“They’re clear,” Cybi answered.

“Activating nexus bridge,” she called, and Jason ran from the console up onto the entry ramp, to get a better look. Emia followed him, but a barking call from below made them look down. “Helmets on, no chances!” Myleena snapped. Jason fetched both their helmets with his power and put his on, and Emia did the same. Arcs of pure energy began to flicker and dance inside the rings. “System activation, stand clear of the rings!” Myleena shouted. “Spatial curve still nominal! We have green lights across the board! Forming the nexus bridge! Here we go, people!”

Jason and Emia both flinched and skittered back a few steps when several powerful bolts of lightning lashed inside the rings, and reddish swirls of pure Torsion began to form between the rings. The Torsion began to pulse rhythmically, the frequency increasing by the second as the pulses flowed down the nine rings, creating a strobing effect. “Almost there,” Myleena shouted. The strobing stopped, and then the air shuddered when a swirling red Torsion field formed within the fifth ring, shuddered, and then turned shimmering blue. The four rings in front of it had pure energy flowing along them, flowing down to the wormhole ring, ribbons of light that undulated and swirled in a counter-clockwise rotation. The swirling blue of the wormhole began to rotate faster, and faster, then it shuddered and maintained a steady rotation.

That was it! A stable wormhole!

“We have a stable tunnel!” Myleena shouted. “Cybi, do they see it?”

“They see it, Myleena!” Cybi said with excitement in her voice.

“Alright, send through the test subject!”

Behind them, one of the worker bionoids stepped out onto the platform, then walked fearlessly into the first ring. It walked right up to the wormhole, then wasted not a second stepping through. “I’ve lost contact,” Cybi warned. “I see it. The bionoid’s systems shut down when it passed through the nexus bridge, it’s laying in front of it, and it’s offline. The power plant executed an emergency shutdown.”

“We forgot that they’re not shielded for gate passage,” Myleena laughed. “Okay, rule number one, don’t send bionoids through.”

“It does prove that this bridge will follow the same rules as a Stargate,” Cybi supplied.

“Then we need a living test subject,” Emia said, and before Jason could stop her, she surged ahead and ran down the walkway.

“Emia!” Jason shouted, but it was too late. She disappeared into the swirl of blue energy without hesitation.

“I have a visual on her. She’s waving to the platform,” Cybi said.

“Have her come back through so I can wring her neck!” Jason said angrily, which made Myleena laugh.

Emia came back through, moving a little sluggishly because the power was off in her armor, and Jason punched her in the shoulder when she reached them. “It works, Myli! It works!” Emia shouted. “I was standing on PR-371, and I forgot about the heavy gravity!”

“Don’t ever do that again!” he raged at her, then she laughed when he picked her up in a fierce hug and swung her in a circle.

“Alright, let’s see if our math was right. Holding the nexus open as long as possible.”

They watched as the gate continued to hold steady as seconds ticked by, and almost exactly at 270 seconds, the borders of the gate began to fluctuate. “Losing wormhole integrity, almost right on the mark!” Myleena declared. “That’s it, executing shutdown!”

“The math was right!” Emia declared gleefully. “And the test was successful! We’ve done it, friends! A stable one-sided wormhole!”

“The first test was successful,” Siyhaa said. “We must test it further. And Emia, you should be examined by a doctor to ensure there are no lingering effects.”

“Good idea. Cybi, get the closest ship over here and get the doctor to give her a check,” Jason agreed.

“We need one of the Gladiators up here to test how they respond to gate passage,” Myleena said. “The targeting system is reacquiring the beacon now. If the math is right, it should only take it a couple of minutes to complete the re-acquisition process. It already did most of the work with the initial targeting sequence. It just needs to correct for spatial drift, redo a few equations, and it’ll be ready to go.”

And again, they were almost dead on with their predictions. At 172 seconds, the system gave a green light. “We have a lock! Eight seconds faster than predicted!” Myleena said with glee. “Here we go, initiating nexus bridge!”

The process repeated itself almost exactly. The wormhole formed at the center ring at the same speed as the original, with the same beautiful light

show, until the wormhole's blue swirl of Torsion stabilized. "Nexus is stable! Send through the Gladiator!"

The door opened at the end of the walkway and a Gladiator stepped through, Kyva's Gladiator. Jason and Emia moved to the side as she walked past them, giving them a thumbs-up as she passed. "*Gladiator is in the alternate gate passage mode you programmed into it. Running at minimal power on shielded batteries,*" she announced over her external speaker. "*Am I a go?*"

"You're a go, Kyva! Take her through!" Myleena shouted. She didn't waste time, she strode up to and through the first ring, and in just three steps, she was through the portal.

"Cybi?"

"She's on the other side," Cybi answered. "The Gladiator didn't collapse like the bionoid did. Kyva reports that the unit came out of gate passage mode almost immediately and she had full power."

"Outstanding! Have her pick up the dead bionoid and bring it back so we can inspect it, see how badly it's damaged."

"So she is ordered to return?"

"Yes, tell her to return. And tell her not to forget to go back into gate passage mode before she does!"

Seconds later, Kyva came back out of the swirling vortex, carrying the motionless bionoid in her arm like a pet. The unit moved sluggishly as it came through the vortex, since most of its systems were in gate passage standby and it only had shielded power to its actuators to move, but it quickly shook off that lethargy and strode out of the rings with speed and confidence. She knelt the mecha down in front of Jason and Emia and laid the bionoid on the walkway. "*Here it is,*" she called. "*I'll take my mecha down to the hangar bay and inspect it for any hidden damage.*"

"I was just about to tell you to do that," Myleena called. "We'd better know *now* if the nexus blew out any systems before you use that bridge to enter an enemy ship to do the mission."

"I'll take the bionoid down to the maintenance bay and give it an inspection," Cybi said. Three of her bionoids stepped up and picked up the

inert machine, then they carried it off. Kyva walked her mecha out the doors, on her way to what was originally a cargo bay. And luckily for her, the Porta had built their station with very high ceilings to make moving equipment and cargo around inside it fairly easy, so the hallways in the station were high enough and wide enough for her to move the mecha around. She still had to stoop over to walk down most of the companionways, but at least the mecha didn't have to crawl.

Jason stayed in the chamber as Myleena extensively tested the unit, running the nexus until it destabilized and recycled it, over and over, then she linked it to a beacon on Exile and repeated the process, then did it again with a beacon on Janja. They ran test after test, and each of them got the chance to go through the nexus bridge to see what it was like...and it was fairly anticlimactic. Jason had gone through on the Janja link, and he had stepped into the swirling blue and instantly stepped out of it in the courtyard outside the operations center on the moon. He saw that they'd erected temporary barriers around the beacon, no doubt Myleena's instructions, and quite a few people were standing around the barriers watching. Jason waved to them once he was through, waited a moment, then turned around and walked back, a single step that took him one ninth of the way across the galaxy.

The other big test was sending a second Gladiator through on the Exile link, this one remotely piloted, to see if going through the nexus broke the merge. And those results were mixed. The sudden displacement of the biogenic unit across the galaxy did not disrupt the merge, but it did cause a bit of disorientation in the pilot. It *nearly* broke the merge but didn't *completely* break it. Ryn had volunteered to operate the mecha, and she had suffered about ten seconds of disorientation, where the mecha was unable to move or act, and then the merge stabilized, and she was able to control it fully.

The answer to that, Jason saw, was to partially delink from the mecha just before it went through the nexus bridge, allow it to walk through on autopilot, then reacquire a full merge once it was through. That cut the process down to only about three seconds of vulnerability before the mecha could move. So, they could work around that.

After about three hours, Myleena declared that the tests were over, and much to the surprise of all of them, it had worked perfectly. No glitches, no bugs, no problems. They had built it right the first time, and what was a rarity in experimental engineering, the theory and the math almost precisely matched the reality. There were a few minor issues to deal with, but they weren't so severe that it would prevent them from operating the unit.

It was ready. That meant that they could call Lorna and put the plan into motion.

Amazing. Absolutely amazing. And for months, *years*, they'd had the capability to do this, but had never put it together, never made the connection. Emia's bridges were the key to a stable one-sided wormhole, and they'd had the ability to build the nexus system since she invented them.

A stable wormhole that didn't require a Stargate. It was almost as incredible as the translight drives.

"That's it, I think we can declare that this unit is fully operational," Myleena said with an infectious grin as she shut down the Janja gate for the third time. "We've done it, guys. We built a stable personal wormhole system. Can you believe it?"

"It's truly a great advance," Siyhaha said with a nod. "This unit will be extremely useful."

"Yeah, we just spent nearly three hundred million credits to build a machine that will transport a few people somewhere else," Jason said wryly. "But it was worth every fucking credit."

"It's not very cost-effective, but I can think of *tons* of ways we can use this," Myleena grinned. "When the time comes to confront the Syndicate's government, we can get our negotiators to E Chaio. But first, we need to come up with a bionoid that won't blow out passing through the gate. We need Rook, Jayce."

"Rook can design one after we finish the operation against Sha Ra, we won't need them immediately," he answered. "I think it's time to let Lorna know we finished it. And I think we should do it in style," Jason said. "Cybi, have someone deliver a beacon to the Spires and set it on the plaza in front of the main building," he said with a grin.

Cybi had to laugh. “We’re bringing her here?”

“Yes we are, she deserves to get a look at it,” he replied. *[Guys, we’re done, and the unit works!]* Jason announced to the eight other living people on the station not in the nexus chamber, his guards, the doctor from the nearby *Veriven*, Kyva, and Liira. *[Thanks for all your help, everyone. We couldn’t have done it without you!]*

[Ooo, can we come up and see it, Jason?] Liira asked.

[Sure, we’re gonna fire it up one more time to bring Lorna here so she can see it. Just head over to the central core, all of you. Even you, Doctor.]

[I want to give everyone else who went through a cursory examination,] the doctor answered. *[And all of you are there.]*

[What’s the prognosis on Colonel Kyva?]

[Perfectly healthy. I can find no indication at all that going through the wormhole affected her in any way. And now I want to ensure the same applies to everyone else.]

[You’re the doc, doc, come on over. Anyone there can lead you to where we are.]

[We’re on our way,] Aya answered, still seething.

They got to see how it worked from the other end when they got a beacon to Terra, thanks to a remote camera. The beacon unit was placed on the ground, but when the nexus system started negotiating with it, it rose up to a hover about four shakra off the ground and the internal ring of the roughly circular beacon began to spin within the housing, part of how it supplied exacting coordinates back to the targeting computer. The spinning of the beacon in a way “triangulated” on an exact point of space that the nexus system then used as its point of reference. The wormhole then opened directly in front of the beacon’s forward face with the exact center of the wormhole at the center of the beacon’s circular core.

“That’s not gonna be easy to hide when we do this for real,” Jason grunted. “If any enemy crew happens to be in that companionway, they’ll see some piece of equipment they’ve never seen before hovering in the hallway. They might respond to it.”

“I’m sure the infiltrator will place it in a way that gives it time to form the wormhole,” Myleena said. “Look, there’s Lorna. And most of the command staff,” she chuckled, pointing at the hologram. Sure enough, about fifteen members of the CCM command staff boiled out of the front doors of the Spires, and they moved straight towards the beacon. “And, we have a lock. Initiating nexus bridge,” she announced.

Jason watched as Lorna took a staggering step back when the wormhole formed in midair in front of the beacon. *[Well, what are you waiting for, woman? Step through it,]* Jason communed directly to her. *[It’s safe. I’ve used it myself.]*

[Seriously, Jason? Is it safe?]]

[Completely. Step into my parlor, Aunt Lorna. Just hurry up, it’ll only remain stable for about four minutes.]

Lorna looked at her fellow flag officers, then all of them started towards the gate. And one by one they stepped through, which caused them to appear on the walkway over their heads. “Absolutely incredible!” he heard Lorna gasp.

Keep moving, Lorna, get out from within the rings! Jason warned. *Don’t stop ‘til you reach the wide notch in the platform in front of you!* “Everyone keep moving, get out from inside the rings!” he shouted as more and more of them appeared. “You can gawk when you’re at a safe distance!”

“This way, please. This way,” Cybi said through one of the maintenance bionoids that rushed up onto the platform waving them towards her.

“Is everyone through?” Myleena shouted.

“Everyone is accounted for and safely away from the unit, Myleena! You may shut down the nexus!” the bionoid called, looking down over the edge of the platform at them.

The wormhole flickered and shuddered, then it evaporated as the loud humming in the chamber faded.

Jason went up the steps and gave Lorna a huge grin as he took her hand. “Welcome to station Nexus One, Aunt Lorna. Currently in solar orbit halfway between Karis and Alakis in the Karis system.”

“Incredible!” the Verutan admiral Hezivarr said, looking around the chamber.

“You built it, nephew. Well done!” she laughed, then gave him a sudden hug.

“Do I ever fail to build something I say I can build, Lorna?” he challenged, patting her on her armored back. “And we’ve given it extensive tests. It’s ready to go. That means that Operation Oasis can commence as soon as you’re ready.”

“Do you have an invasion team ready?”

Aya visible bristled.

“Yeah, but we haven’t finished our training and drills. But we should be ready in time. My people are still putting the last pieces in place around Oasis, and the Stargate is still 34 hours away.”

“You have people there?” the Ogravian admiral asked.

“I have *bionoids* there,” he corrected. “We sent them through the one-way wormhole system before we built this. I lost over half of them, which was expensive,” he growled, “but we have enough there so I have people on site and capable of managing the operation locally. We even got an ops center through undamaged,” he grinned.

“That does say something. Nephew, can this system be opened into space? Does a vacuum on the other end pose a risk?”

“Nope,” he replied. “The wormhole boundary acts like a physical barrier, albeit a weak one. The station won’t decompress if we open the nexus bridge into a vacuum. Anything can pass through, but it has to exert physical force to do it, like walking through a soft shield.”

“That makes this even more useful,” Jarik Furystorm said with an appreciative smile, looking back at the rings.

“Just keep in mind that the nexus bridge can’t be any larger than it is now,” Jason warned. “We crunched the numbers, and what we built is the largest sized wormhole we can make and keep it stable. It’s just large enough for a Juggernaut to get through. And it follows the same rules as a

Stargate, meaning whatever we send through has to be in gate passage mode. We lost a bionoid testing that, it was unshielded.”

“Can you give us a tour of what you can show us, nephew?” Lorna asked.

“I’m a little busy, but Cybi can show you around,” he said, motioning to Cybi’s primary bionoid. “Just don’t dawdle too much, we have to get the operation timeline so we can get ready.”

“That’s very simple, Jason. When your invasion team is ready, then we go,” she replied. “This entire operation is being run by you, so you don’t need our input. You already know what the parameters of the mission objective are. You have authorization to begin.”

“That’s all I needed to hear,” he said, leaning down and kissing her on the cheek. “I’ll leave you guys with Cybi to tour the station while I get things moving.”

After a quick exam by the doctor, Jason set things into motion by warning the team that they’d be getting a start time very soon and to get everything set up, and he gathered the others in the landing bay. When Jenn arrived on a zip ship, he was brought into the group. Aya still looked absolutely furious, but she took control of the briefing. *We have everything we need for this operation*, she began, bringing up a hologram the infiltrator supplied them, showing a diagram of a section of the enemy ship. *Our entry point is here, around the corner from the chamber holding the target, so the enemy doesn’t get a visual on us immediately. We hold position for ten seconds, to give us time to set down the hard shield and activate it, and then we strike. Jason, Jenn, you will be responsible for severing these power feeds and datalines, here, here, here, and here*, she ordered, pointing to locations within the walls. *I’ve been told you can use your TK to do this even without being able to see your target. That disables the system inside the Oracle chamber that allows them to kill her by remote. Once those are severed, we assault the main entry, which is guarded by ten Tarks at all times. They’re going to call for backup as soon as we hit them, which will come from this guard barracks at the other end of the hall. Jenn, dealing with those reinforcements is your primary objective. Take them out with telepathy as quickly as you can, because they’ll be able to respond in five seconds. Jason, you protect us by bending away their Torsion shots until we*

sweep the hallway clear. Kyva, Liira, your job is to hold that hallway once we have it secured, she told them. Stall any reinforcements that resist Jenn to give Jason time to breach the Oracle chamber and retrieve the girl. Getting that door open is Jason's primary objective. It's going to take him time because of physical security in place around the chamber. It's heavily armored, and the door itself is much akin to a vault on Moridon.

Wait, wait, wait, Jason is going? Jenn demanded.

Yes I am. And if you have a problem with that, you can join the large number of people whose noses I've broken today, Jenn, he replied aggressively.

Not a problem at all, Jayce, he grinned. I happen to think that you're more than capable of running a combat mission.

Aya gave him a laserbeam-intense stare, then continued. Once we have her out, if we're still under time, we retreat back to the nexus bridge and escape. If we run over time, we get inside the Oracle chamber and activate the secondary beacon, then hold the room until Myleena can get us out. The heavily armored room can serve as a good defensive position until we can escape. Jason, you're carrying the secondary beacon. Activate it the instant you get inside the room, so it cuts down our vulnerability as much as possible if we run over time.

I can do that.

Dera will be carrying the hard shield unit. She'll deploy it behind the nexus bridge as soon as we come through to cut off any reinforcements from hitting us from behind. I'll be carrying a secondary hard shield unit to place in front of the door to the Oracle chamber if we run over time. Liira will be carrying the package.

What is that? Jenn asked.

A tachyon burst emitter, Jason told him. We found out that the quantum computer they're using to communicate with their HQ is close enough to the Oracle chamber that the emitter will take it out. It'll also take out about half of the other QE computers that are linked to the fleet inside the galaxy, but not all of them. They're spread out across four sections and six decks, so about half of them will be outside the emitter's range. That will let them recall the fleet once they surrender.

That's about it, Aya continued. This operation will be very fast, and if we do it right, we'll only be there for four minutes. If things go wrong, we'll only be there for eleven, and we spend most of that time in a heavily armored bunker defending the sole point of entry. We should strike completely by surprise. They have no idea we can open a wormhole inside their ship, so they will not in any way see us coming, and it is a very high probability that the Oracle will not tell them if she's foreseen our actions. Any questions?

There were several, and it took them about an hour to finish the briefing. *Jason, is 3D ready?* Aya asked.

They will be in about an hour. They're positioning the last of the toys now, and the bowlers are out fetching some additional asteroids to use as projectiles.

Then we go in one hour, she declared. Everyone prep your Gladiators. Jason, go over the blueprints the infiltrator sent you on the infrastructure and the door. Jenn, study those wall blueprints as well. And Jason, when we get back, I am going to kill you, she seethed.

Any other time I'd have followed your orders, Aya, but not this time. Not over this, he answered calmly. *I'm the best person for this job, and God help me, we will get that brave little girl out of that ship alive.*

She just gave him a long, cold look. *Everyone to your Gladiators,* she ordered.

After a lengthy inspection of his unit, he saddled up and picked up the gear he was taking. He was bringing an annealer he'd converted into a Torsion blade to cut the door open, and since his Gladiator had no weaponry on it except for monomolecular blades, it was all removed to make room for the tactical gestalt, he picked up a rail cannon to bring with him, just in case. He slung it and stood waiting as the others inspected their equipment, Cybi using a bunch of bionoids to go over the extra units they were bringing with them, and touched base with Zaa. *[My child is in position and ready to activate the beacon on your command,]* she relayed through her memory band. *[He will be forced to place the beacon in a storage bay about fifty shakra further down the hall. The hall is too well traveled to leave the beacon in place for that long, it will be noticed.]*

[We can work with that, Zaa. I'll warn the others. Which bay? I have the blueprints he sent.]

[The bay marked AB-171 on the blueprints.]

He brought it up from his gestalt, and in his mind's eye, he located it. It was just down the hall from the intersection holding the Oracle chamber, which was a gently curving passage that ran through the entire section, but within a high security area holding quite a bit of the ship's most sensitive systems. Only people with high security clearances would be in that section. That would only add about ten seconds to the mission time, but it would force Dera to advance up to the intersection to lay down the hard shield.

[Alright, I see it. It won't affect our plan very much, Zaa. Let me inform Aya, and I'll get back to you with an exact time for your child to activate the beacon.] Aya, I have an update. He told her about Zaa's warning. *We can disable the Oracle chamber from within the storage bay, we don't have to be any closer. And in a way, that might be useful, we can do it from stealth, as it were. When we sever the lines, Kyva and Liira can hit the guards in the hallway hard before they can respond to the sudden power loss while Jenn goes after the reinforcements in the barracks.*

That's a good plan. We go with it. Everyone get that? Aya asked.

I have it, Captain, Kyva answered.

Understood, Captain, Liira agreed.

Understood, Jenn added.

Dera, our role remains unchanged. We protect Jason and Jenn while they use their tactical gestalts, Aya called.

Understood, Captain, Dera answered.

[Talty,] he called, linking with the biogenic link in the ops center. *[What's the ETA to have all assets in position?]*

[ETA is 31 minutes, Jason,] she answered. *[Everything but the bowlers and the collector units are in position. We'll move the collectors at the last minute.]*

[You're firm on that? 31 minutes?]

[Firm, boss. 31 minutes.]

[Alright, then that's our schedule. We begin phase one in 31 minutes exactly. That means phase two begins anywhere from 34 to 41 minutes, so be ready as soon as you get the go call. Do me proud, Talty.]

[I won't let you down, Jayce. That's a promise,] she replied.

Aya, we have a timeline. 30 minutes, 45 seconds.

Then that's our go mark. Myleena, our go time is 30 minutes, 44 seconds.

Got it. Countdown is set, Aya, Myleena answered. You guys need to be up here and in position in fifteen minutes. Jason, tell Zaa to make sure that beacon is set eight minutes before that, so the nexus system has time to lock onto it.

Understood. We're almost done with our gear inspection.

[Zaa, get this back to your infiltrator. He activates the beacon in exactly 22 minutes, 43 seconds. We have a timeline.]

[Understood, cousin. I'm sending it to him now.]

Five minutes later, the eight Gladiators moved from the cargo bay to the main core and stood on the walkway facing the rings that formed the system. Jason felt decidedly nervous, since he was going in PIM, which meant that his life was very much at risk here. But he wasn't joking when he told Jenn that no other Generation was better qualified for this mission than him. He knew their tech, he knew how to fight, and some part of him, some deep part of his soul, was determined to free that little girl *himself*. She had risked her life to escape from the Syndicate, and in so doing she had saved countless Confederate lives by misleading and deceiving Sha Ra over the interdictors, which trapped the majority of her fleet at Oasis. He almost couldn't explain his near-obsession over this. It would be safer and more logical for the House of Karinne if he sent Jezzi, but this had nothing to do with safety, or logic, or even rationality. He owed that brave little girl, and he was going to make *damn* sure they rescued her. If she was willing to risk her life to escape from the Syndicate, he would honor that courage by going in there *himself* to get her out.

Ten minutes, Aya called, extending one of her pulse cannons and then reseating it. Everyone do a final diagnostic. Make sure your rigs have fully

integrated the new gate passage protocol. We don't need one of them burning out in transit.

Everything's on schedule, Jason announced. Where's Lorna and the others?

By now, they're at the White House to monitor the operation, Myleena answered. The Veriven took them to Karis. "Let's begin startup, Emia," she announced. "I want it to be up and running when the beacon is activated."

"You're the one plugged in, Myli, it's all you," Emia told her.

*They could do nothing but wait, but all of them were too seasoned for that wait to be overly nervous. They all knew exactly what they were going to do, and with two Generations in the boarding party, they all knew that the odds were in their favor. Jason monitored the nexus system as they waited, saw that it was operating exactly within expected parameters, and that truly impressed him. They'd built it in a matter of *days*, admittedly mostly using equipment they already had and using science they already knew, just applying it a slightly different way, but still, to have it work so well, to not have a single major setback or bug, that was truly remarkable. Maybe it was karma for the translight drives, the universe paying them back for that. Or maybe it was truly a sign that they were doing the right thing here, since even luck was cooperating with them to get that little girl out of there.*

"The beacon just activated," Myleena declared. "Beginning targeting sequence."

*Everyone get ready, Aya called, pulling the tetryon wave rifle from behind her back, beside the hard shield generator slung over her back like a pack. For close quarters, that weapon would be *devastating*, truly the right weapon for the job. *Move up to the line.**

*They moved up to a line Cybi painted on the walkway, the minimum safe distance, and they waited impatiently. The seconds seemed to drag by as the targeting system homed in on the beacon, and Jason watched the progress bar like a hawk. *Two minutes*, he warned, pulling his rail cannon into a firing position. *Keep you tactical offline until we're through, Jenn. It's faster to just cold start it than try to make it recover from gate passage mode.**

Got it. Tactical offline, he answered.

“Ninety seconds. Powering up the bridge,” Myleena called.

[Talty, we’re about to start phase one. Are you ready for phase two?]

[We will be in two minutes, Jayce. The last collectors are moving into position now.]

[Wait for the go call.]

[We’re standing by.]

The ops team is ready to start as soon as we give them the go, Jason announced. I’ll have them hit them once we’re clear. Sha Ra may order a course change if they strike while we’re aboard, and that’ll throw off the nexus.

“Eighty seconds,” Myleena called. “Everyone stand clear, the rings are about to power up!”

They waited, Jason nearly hunching down so he could sprint through the bridge as soon as it was stable. Ribbons of energy and arcs of lightning danced among the rings as Myleena brought them up, charging them in preparation to open the bridge. The watched as the area inside the rings began to shimmer and waver from spatial distortion, an effect that was oddly pretty.

“We are locked in! Activating nexus!” Myleena suddenly shouted. Jason watched as the Torsion filled the center ring, and then swirled into a stable bridge of blue energy.

“Go go go!” Myleena shouted, waving at them with her hand.

[Phase one begin!] Jason barked over the biogenic network, sending that to both the command center and to Talty. And in a simultaneous motion, all six exomechs started running down the walkway towards the nexus bridge, slowing to a walk just before going through as they shifted into gate passage mode, powering down almost everything but the emergency battery power to the actuators so they could keep walking forward.

Jason was the second one through, right behind Aya, and his Gladiator immediately began to power up as he found himself in a large storage bay, holding quite a few cargo boxes marked with Benga writing. Weapons...

this was an auxiliary weapons storage locker for the garrison dispatched to defend the Oracle! Jason brought his tactical up and waited impatiently as he already started his work, disabling all sensors in the room, then reaching out with his TK to those places where he *knew* the target conduits and datalines were located. Because he knew their exact location, he could affect them without being able to see them. his tactical came online, and as soon as he had a full merge with it, he struck. He severed all the power feeds and datalines leading in and out of the Oracle chamber, which would cause all their cameras and sensors to go dark, as well as disable their remote operated kill machines. He then went in and physically attacked the kill machines—all *five* of them—inside the Oracle chamber, ensuring that they couldn't even hit any manual on-site switches to kill her. Jenn did his work by severing his target power feeds and datalines as Liira and Kyva took up positions by the door.

Done! Jason announced.

Done too! Jenn called. *Going after the barracks! They're in my range!*

Kyva, Liira, go! Aya commanded, and she was the first one out the door.

They boiled out of the storage room and moved swiftly and decisively. The sound of Aya's wave rifle filled the corridor as she blasted two Benga wearing duty uniforms that had been walking in their direction, killing them, then they rushed up and turned the corner. Kyva and Liira attacked the ten guards that had been stationed in the hallway, two of which had started towards the intersection to investigate the sound of Aya's wave rifle discharging. Kyva killed the two advancing guards with single shots from her pulse weapon, then surgically shot all three guards that tried to lunge at the door to the Oracle, to kill her, while Liira went after the others, her pulse cannons blazing as she killed them in a spray of white blazing bundles of energy. The few shots the enemy guards managed were bent up into the ceiling by Jason, but none of them were on target anyway. A klaxon started blaring loudly in the hallway as Dera set down and activated the hard shield, and when Jason severed the last power feed, the entire hallway went dark. *Barracks secured!* Jenn reported. *All hostiles on our side of the shield are out!*

Jason, the door! Aya commanded. *Liira, get ready to set the package inside the Oracle chamber!*

Jason kicked the corpse of a guard away from the door and pulled out his converted annealer, and Jenn flinched a bit when a blade of pure Torsion extended from the device, nearly six shakra long. He plunged it into the door and quickly sliced his way through the metal, the blade encountering almost no resistance. He cut all the way down and through the floor, pulled it out, then repeated it on the other side, cutting a Gladiator-sized arch out of the heavily armored door. He finished his second cut, leaned back, then kicked the door with sufficient force to dislodge the section of door, then he ducked under it and charged into the room.

She was here. She was laying on a bed in the large room, the only thing in the room, with multiple tubes and wires extending down from the ceiling and attaching to her. She was naked, and her body was emaciated, skeletal. She was so tiny, so, so pitiful, so vulnerable, that his heart broke just looking at her. He took three steps up and extended a monomolecular blade—the Torsion blade was already overheating, that was how he got so much power out of it—and sheared all those tubes and wires in one powerful slash.

The instant he did that, her eyes snapped open and she took a deep, gasping breath, arching her back. He knelt down and looked at her, took his first very good look at her, and he almost completely forgot what he was doing.

My GOD! he sent in shock. She's a FAEY!

What? That's impossible! Aya snapped.

There was no denying it. The facial structure, the ears, the eyes, her lustrous pink hair, this little girl was a *Faey*! The only thing that looked different about her was her skin tone. Instead of being Faey blue, she was a more Terran mocha brown, almost like a Sha'i-ree or a Keelo. But put blue skin on her, and she'd pass as a Faey on the streets of Dracora!

How? *How*, in God's name? She was from Andromeda, and yet there was no denying it! Either this was the biggest case ever for Gora's Law, or this little girl, somehow, some way, was *Faey*!

Her eyes focused on his Gladiator, beautiful aqua-colored eyes. First they widened, then she gave him a soul-crushing smile. She reached up a

quavering hand, trembling from effort, reaching out for him. “You came,” she said in Benga. “You came.”

“I will get you out of here, my brave little girl,” he told her soothingly in Benga. *Aya, I have her!* he announced as he very gently, very carefully scooped her up in his Gladiator’s hands. She was so frail, all she could do was lay there limply, and it hit him that she didn’t even have the strength to walk. They kept her in a state of constant sleep, so her body had atrophied over the time she’d been subjected to their torment. It must have been all her strength just to reach out to him! He cradled her against his mecha’s chest protectively, covering as much of her as he could with his armored exo-body, like a man protecting a baby bird fallen from a nest.

And he had to *protect* her. He felt several minds reach out towards them, no doubt the telepaths that monitored the girl and tormented her dreams, trying to crush her mind. Jason was furious, and he used that fury to track them back and strike at them with all the power his tactical gestalt could give him. He felt their minds snap from his attack, felt them go insane, and unlike the other times he’d been forced to do that, this time it felt *sweet* to feel their twisted, evil brains scrambled by his power, like delivering rightful justice long denied. There was no greater justice than to drive insane those who had so much cruelty inside them that they could torture a *child*, to fill their minds with the same darkness and horror that they had inflicted on her.

Objective complete! We are under time, execute primary return plan! Aya barked. *Liira, set the package! Kyva, Dera, deactivate the shield and clear the hallway! Jenn, back them up! We have two minutes before the bridge destabilizes!*

Well done, Jayce, Jenn sent appreciatively as he rushed out of the room. *You gave them what they deserved.*

Jason carried his precious cargo out of the room as Liira knelt and activated the tachyon burst array, which would fire on remote command. They couldn’t be close to it when it did so, it would fry them. Dera already had the shield down by the time he came out, and Aya and Kyva were firing their weapons down both sides of the adjoining hallway. Red Torsion bolts were flying from both directions, and one very nearly hit Aya in her mecha’s head, coming through the metal wall of the corner, had she not

ducked. She returned the favor, taking a step back and firing her nested pulse cannon through the wall, then she swung out and fired several shots from her wave rifle down the passageway before ducking back out of sight once again. *What's going on, Aya?*

Dozens of Tarks! Jenn, cover our six! Jason, you need to sweep them out from in front of us!

I got 'em, you protect the girl, Jayce, they may try to attack her again! Jenn announced. Jenn's tactical spiked in power, and by the time Jason reached the intersection, the firing had stopped. He saw dozens of still forms laying on the deck when he turned back down the main passage, towards the cargo bay door. Jenn had knocked all of them out with his gestalt-boosted telepathy. *We're clear to the door! Go, Jason, go go go!*

With Aya leading him, Jason ran back for the cargo bay door with Kyva and Jenn right behind him, and Dera and Liira bringing up the rear. Aya reached the door and hit the control button to open it, then waved him in. He ran into the room and saw the nexus bridge still open, still stable.

What in the name of all profit is going on down there! came a furious sending. It was *Sha Ra*. She was within telepathic range! And she had talent!

It was every bit of his will not to crush her mind as he had the ones that went after the girl. She had to be alive to surrender the fleet. But he also couldn't resist rubbing her nose in it. *It's the Grand Duke Jason Karinne, you soulless, evil cunt! I have your Oracle! And I swear, I will crush you, your fleet, and your entire fucking Syndicate for what you've done to her! Do you hear me?! The next time you see me face to face, you'll be on your knees begging for your life! I am coming for you, you cruel, heartless bitch, and I will END YOU!*

Aya wasn't impressed. She pushed him from behind, pushing him towards the nexus bridge, and he almost resisted so he could hear her reply. But the precious little girl cradled in his hands was more important than his fury, and he deactivated his tactical and put his rig into gate passage mode and walked into the swirling vortex.

Three minutes, 44 seconds. That was all it took. They had bridged in, stormed the Oracle chamber, and thanks to Jenn's tactical gestalt to

neutralize the majority of the enemy defenders, they were able to get her out of there in three minutes, 44 seconds. Jason stepped back onto the walkway at Nexus One with the precious child still covered by his hands, protecting her. *Get a medical gurney here NOW! Get some doctors here fucking NOW!* he thundered, walking up to the safe line and kneeling down. He brought his hands out and looked down, and saw the little girl safe, unharmed, looking up at his mecha, still smiling, but with tears in her eyes. “You came for me,” she said again, a bare whisper. “You came for me.”

“*You foresaw it, didn’t you?*” he asked her gently, using a single finger to stroke her pink hair. “*Help is coming, my precious little treasure. You’re safe now. We are far away from the Benga’s ship.*”

She started to sob, and it nearly broke his heart all over again. Emia and Siyhaha reached him, and both of them gasped when they saw her. “*Get these wires and tubes off of her, Emia!*” Jason ordered. “*And Siyhaha, you tell whichever ship is closest that if they don’t get a doctor here in five minutes, I’ll kick their asses!*”

“No, we shouldn’t remove or touch anything without a doctor, Jason, we may hurt her more,” Emia cautioned.

He remembered himself enough to realize that there was more to this. *[Myleena, self-destruct the beacons! Cybi, fire the package! Talty, phase two GO!]*

[I burned the beacons the second you guys were clear of the rings, Jayce,] Myleena answered.

[Burst array firing,] Cybi replied.

[You got it, Jayce! Beginning phase two!] Talty reported.

One of Cybi’s bionoids rushed in with a medical gurney, and Jason very carefully placed the little girl on the bed, then stepped back and stood up. He opened his cockpit and jumped down, ripping off his helmet even as he rushed to the side of the gurney, as the others gathered behind him in their Gladiators. He put a comforting hand on the crying girl’s face, smiling down at her. “It’s alright, my precious treasure,” he told her. “A doctor is coming, to take these things out of you. You’re safe now, you’re safe and we’ll take good care of you.”

“It’s...it’s over. The nightmare is over,” she whispered in Benga. “My dream came true.”

“Your dream came true,” he affirmed with a gentle smile, his eyes sheening over with tears.

“Let’s take her to the landing bay, so they can load her on the ship when it arrives,” Siyhaa proposed. “She needs immediate medical attention!”

“We shoulda had a doctor stay behind!” Jason said, kicking himself, then he looked down at the frail girl. “We’re going to take you somewhere else, little treasure,” he told her in Benga. “We’re going to meet the doctor coming to help you.”

“Don’t leave me,” she said, reaching out with her wasted hand, grabbing his fingers in their gauntlet. “You’re the face from my dream. Don’t leave me.”

“I’ll be right here with you, I promise,” he told her, then he switched to Faey. “Let’s get her down to the landing bay like Siyhaa suggested,” he called. “Everyone come with us,” he added, looking back at the other Gladiators. “We will stay with her, all of us, she feels safer with us near her. After the hell she’s been through, she deserves it.”

With Cybi’s main bionoid pushing the gurney as quickly as she could without jostling the girl, they all moved with it, Jason staying right by her and holding her hand. Ryn, Shen, and Suri met them as they came into the outer ring, and the procession hurried towards the main landing bay. “You’re right about one thing, Jayce, she does look like a Faey,” Kyva said aloud. “Wrong skin color, but everything else, she’s a dead lock for us.”

“I know,” Jason said, looking down at the girl, who was looking up at him with relief and near adoration in her eyes. “But this is the biggest fucking coincidence in the entire universe, Kyva. A race that looks just like the Faey that live in another galaxy, that *also* happens to be telepathic as a species?”

“Where did you hear that?”

“Zaa, she got info on her people,” he answered. “What she *didn’t* get was a picture of one of them, because the Syndicate keeps such control over them. She’s gonna totally flip out when she sees her.”

“What are you saying?” the little girl asked weakly.

“Discussing why you look so similar to my friends here,” he said, pointing at Kyva, who smiled down at her. “It’s truly uncanny.”

“She’s blue.”

“Yes, and if you were blue too, you’d look just like her,” Jason told her. “What’s your name, little treasure?”

“My name is Aria,” she replied, looking almost defiant. “They tried to make me forget, but I didn’t.”

“Well, that’s a beautiful name, Aria. That means *delightful* in her language, but it also means *song* in mine.”

“Who are you?”

“My name is Jason,” he smiled. “This is Kyva. That’s Aya, that’s Dera, that’s Jenn, that’s Liira, and the woman pushing your gurney is Cybi. We’re the ones that came to save you, Aria. The six of us. Well, except for Cybi, but she helped very much to get us there and get you out.”

“Thank you,” she said.

“No, thank *you*, Aria,” he told her. “You are the bravest little girl I have ever known, and you saved all of us by tricking the Benga.”

“I didn’t mean to. I just wanted to be free of the nightmare,” she said. “I had a dream, that you would come and end the nightmare and take me away, take me to a place by the sea where they couldn’t find me. I had to hide things from them to make it happen. And it came true. It came true,” she whispered, then she began to sob again.

“Your dream came true, Aria,” he assured her. “And now you have the rest of your life to be happy.”

“Promise?”

“I promise,” he said, brushing his gauntlet over her cheek as he smiled down at her. “The place by the sea is my house. And if you want, you can live there. With me and my wife and my children, and you can be part of *my* family. You’ll be safe there, and we will never let them find you.”

“I want it,” she said immediately, reaching up and taking hold of his gauntlet.

[Maybe you should discuss that with Jyslin, Jason,] Cybi noted lightly.

[She’ll take one look at this girl and demand to take her in,] he answered confidently. *[And I’ve never been more sure of anything in my entire life. After everything she’s been through, after everything she’s done for us, I’ll give her anything she wants. If she wants to live with me on the strip, that’s exactly what she’s going to get. Besides, given who she is and what she can do, she’ll be safe in my house, under the protection of me and the Imperial Guard. I’ll protect her, both from the Benga and from those who would seek to exploit her power for their own gain.]*

[You’re a good man, Jason,] Cybi told him with a smile.

A dropship was landing in the bay as they brought in the girl, and two doctors rushed down the ramp as soon as it extended, a man and a woman, both looking rather mature. “Where’s the patient?” one of the doctors called, then they came up to the gurney. “Dear Trelle!” he gasped, looking down at her.

“We need to get all these tubes and wires out of her, Doctor,” Jason told him. “And as you can see, she’s in very bad shape.”

“Sweet Aris and her mercy!” the other doctor blurted. “We need to get her to the annex at Karsa, your Grace! Immediately!”

“Then let’s go,” Jason said. “This little girl has the highest priority, Doctors.”

“What in the seats of the Board is going on down there!” Au Mai Sha Ra, Fleet Commander of the 3rd Expeditionary Fleet of the Syndicate Navy, snapped angrily into a communicator she was holding as she ran down a long passageway. She was heading for a lift, heading for the Oracle chamber so she could see what was going on.

“There are one hundred thirty dead and two hundred forty injured down here, Fleet Commander,” came the reply. “Most were killed by some kind of high-energy burst, but some show signs of being killed by weapons fire. The Oracle chamber has been breached. The Oracle is *gone!*”

“Well *find it*, you incompetent jackass!” she snapped. “They couldn’t have gotten far! Check the homing device in the Oracle!”

“We *did*, Fleet Commander. The tracker showed that the Oracle was moved from its chamber to storage unit AB-171, and then the signal vanished!”

“That’s not possible!” she raged.

“There are the burned-out remains of alien devices in both the Oracle chamber and the cargo bay, Fleet Commander,” her adjunct continued. “But there’s nothing else in the cargo bay, just the cargo.”

“Fleet Commander, we have a situation!” another voice came over her communicator. “Sensors indicate that a tachyon burst was set off on deck 132, section AB-B37-14. It destroyed over half of our QE system!”

That was the section holding the Oracle chamber! “What was lost?” she asked.

“Half of our ship to ship units, but also both our primary and secondary HQ units! With the destruction of the *Gaibaro* eight days ago, Commander, we have completely lost contact with HQ!”

“What? How did it get down there without detection?” she gasped.

“We don’t know, Fleet Commander! We must have saboteurs aboard!”

“Of course we do, you dolt! They didn’t just magically appear, leave that device, then disappear! Go to stage three security alert! Check the entry logs of every hatch leading into that section!”

It was just a ten second ride down a lift to the Oracle section, and she met one of her officers at the door as she stormed out of them. “What happened, Major?”

“We had a sensor blip inside the storage bay at first, and then the sensors went offline. That triggered a passive alert, which was upgraded to an active alert when power was lost to the section,” he explained. “Initial inspection shows that the attackers came out of the cargo bay, and then assaulted the guards in the hallway. They are the ones showing signs of being killed by weapons fire.” They turned into the passage, lit by portable lights, and she saw the multiple burned corpses laying on the floor. “The

guards in the barracks showed no signs of responding to the alert. I suspect they were telepathically dominated, and then killed by the energy burst set off in the section. The invaders reached the Oracle door, then cut it open, entered, removed the Oracle, and left behind some kind of device that destroyed itself, which we suspect was what killed so many in the section. It was a high energy burst of some kind. Where they went after that, I cannot say, but logic says that they must have gotten outside the range of the device before it was set off, else they would have also been killed by it. No sensor unit outside of this section picked up any anomalies.” They stepped up to the door to the Oracle, and Sha Ra’s eyes widened. The door had been cut open by something that had sheared through pure Harvium like cloth! The hole was Benga-sized, which allowed her to duck her head and step inside. There were the charred remains of some kind of device laying on the floor in front of the bed that held the Oracle, but the Oracle itself was gone. The control lines and feeding tubes that extended from the ceiling had been cut, probably by the same device that cut through the door.

That sending...by the first coin!

“We have Confederate *bionoids* that appear to be Benga on board this ship, but we also have at least one Confederate spy here in person!” she declared angrily. “They have taken the Oracle! Shipwide alert, locate and capture the Terran Grand Duke Jason Karinne! Plaster his face on every viewscreen on the ship! He is on board this ship *personally*!” she raged into her communicator. “Find him!”

“How do you know that, Fleet Commander?” her security officer asked.

“Because he *sent*,” she replied icily. “He taunted me personally. I know it was him. I *know* it!” she seethed, balling her hand into a fist. “He is somewhere aboard this ship with our Oracle, Major! I want him found and found *now*!”

“Fleet Commander, the *Chogar* just exploded!” one of her bridge officers reported.

“What? How?”

“Sensors are reporting now. It was struck by a meteor moving at one third the speed of light!” she answered. “The ship is completely destroyed!”

That was the fifth largest ship in the fleet! And it had been *destroyed*, by...by a *meteor*?"

"Fleet Commander, the *Habvaru* just exploded! We must be under attack!" her first officer called.

Sha Ra nearly screamed in rage. "Find that Oracle, Major!" she snapped, then she ducked out the door and ran for the elevator up for the bridge deck. She had to find out what was going on!

The first crisis that reared its head was the sudden appearance of a swarm of meteors on Syndicate short range sensors, the only ones not being jammed by the enemy, and the Syndicate sensors officers couldn't believe what they were seeing. The meteors were traveling at nearly one third the speed of light, a speed far beyond any natural phenomenon, and they were on direct collision courses with some of the largest ships in the fleet. And while the smaller ships could see them coming and evade them, the super-ships were too large to move quickly.

The collisions were *cataclysmic*. The super-ships were built to withstand strikes from meteors, but not ones weighing half a ton and moving at 100,000 meters per second. The sheer energy invested into those meteors made them hit with the power of a thousand antimatter bombs, shattering the moon-sized ships and causing them to explode when their power reactors were breached. Hundreds of destroyers and cruisers were destroyed in the blasts, as vaporized and melted metal and energy was blasted back out into space from the force of the impacts and the detonation of the reactors. Ship after ship around the planet detonated like a miniature nova when they were struck by those meteors moving at relativistic speed, each one precisely striking the ships dead center, as if they were *aimed*. Ship after ship suddenly ceased to exist, dying in a miniature nova that destroyed the ships around it. Ten ships. Twenty ships. Fifty ships. *One hundred ships*. Ship after ship vaporized in a hellish funeral pyre of pure heat and fusion energy, exploding so fast that the crew aboard those ships died instantly, had never even registered that their lives had come to an end....which was, in a way, a great mercy.

The size of those meteors had to be carefully measured, else the power of the strikes would ravage the surface of the planet when they destroyed the ships.

Then, from the other direction, lances of intense solar radiation, concentrated into beams of pure heat and solar particles with temperatures reaching into the hundreds of thousands of degrees, illuminated the sky as they streamed in, and each one struck yet another super-ship with surgical precision. They melted deep into the ships, flash-heating the interiors as the energy of all that heat and radiation was transferred into the ships, causing them to lose power and go dead in space. Ships were being knocked out every second as lance after lance lashed in from the star, as if the star itself were attacking the Syndicate fleet.

Just as the Syndicate fleet started to respond to attacks from both directions, a squadron of cruisers breaking off and accelerating to find the source of those beams of energy and destroy them, all hell broke loose. *Thousands* of small objects appeared on short range sensors, all moving at high speed from every direction, converging on the fleet. And just as orders were sent out, everything just seemed to go completely crazy.

The tactical response officer on the fleet flagship could just watch in confused awe as so many things happened at once that he just couldn't process it. He saw a cruiser explode after being struck by multiple small pyramid shaped objects. Another had spinning discs with auras of energy extending out from them plunge through their armor and penetrate deeply into the ships, causing them to go dark. Another came under attack by small flying units that were equipped with some kind of energy weapon. There were enemy units everywhere, shooting, exploding, ramming, ships were exploding or being knocked out all over the fleet, and chaos began to set in as ships didn't wait for orders, they began taking action. Torsion bolts and missiles were flying all over the place trying to destroy those small objects, mecha were launched to intercept and destroy the small objects. The officer focused on one small metal sphere coming in at a battleship, then it *imploded*, which created strange wave of force to lash out in a halo. It washed over the battleship, and arcs of intense electrical discharge danced along its hull, causing it to lose power and start to list.

The readings were all over the place! Every kind of energy known to Syndicate science was being thrown around out there! Tachyons, metrions, radiation, atomic and subatomic particles, Torsion effects, gravitic waves, ions, hot plasma discharges, electromagnetic waves, chemical-induced explosions and implosions, hyperthermic and endothermic reactions, pure magnetic and kinetic energy, it was bedlam! Chaos! So many weapons, so many different things, no ship could defend itself against all of it! he saw what looked like a giant saucer hit the shields of a cruiser, then the shields flared into visibility and then *detonated*, which caused a sudden gout of flame from breach in the hull of the cruiser as its shield generator exploded violently! He saw a swarm of small machines gather, lock together, and they created a robot twice the height of a Benga, which then attacked the nearest destroyer with its bare hands, punching at the hull, and each punch dented the armor! Another destroyer had a small device come through its shields like they weren't there and attach to the hull, and the hull started to *melt* all around it! He focused on one of the larger battleships, and he saw it *disassemble* before his eyes! Not explode, not be torn apart, it was as if it was taken apart by some invisible giant in a matter of seconds, rendering it into pieces of hull sections and floating machinery and parts, all *undamaged*, drifting away from each other by the decompression of the atmosphere within!

They were losing two ships a second! And yet he had no idea what to do, what to tell the fleet to try to protect itself, it was happening too fast!

He was removed from his post physically, as another officer grabbed him and yanked him out of his seat and threw him to the deck. "All ships pull into tight defensive formations and activate diffusers! Set missiles to detonate sixty *omba* from the hull and launch, use the explosions as shields!"

"Commander on deck!" someone shouted as Sha Ra ran onto the bridge.

"What the bloody hell is going on out there!" she raged as she ran up to the tactical response station.

"A massive attack by a large swarm of small devices, Fleet Commander, with multiple methods of attack. We were also subjected to bombardment by meteors launched from ships moving at high speed and some kind of high-power laser weapon fired several light seconds from our position,

powerful enough to knock out main battleships! The energy output was nearly off the scale! I've ordered the fleet to form tight defensive clusters and use their missiles at short range, detonating them to allow the explosions to destroy these small devices!"

"Visual of the laser weapons, Commander! They're gathering and releasing solar radiation! They're old fashioned *lasers*, but with incredible power!"

"Break their line of sight! All ships, pull into the shadow of the planet and its moon! Do not present those weapons a line of sight!"

With Sha Ra at the station, she personally took command of the fleet, barking orders so the ships could protect themselves against the onslaught...and learning quickly that no matter what she did, the attackers were ready for it. The first group of ships to gather into a tight defensive formation managed to hold off the multitude of small weapons and devices flying all over the place, but the entire formation vanished in a hellstorm of fire and vaporized metal when the battleship of the cluster was struck by some kind of plasmic energy field that attached to the hull, quickly spread out to cover the entire ship, and caused the surface hull metal to *explode outward*, destroying all the other ships in the formation in the resulting explosion. The battleship itself was intact once the explosion cleared, though its hull was pitted and irregular, like the skin of a fruit peeled off, and it had several hull breaches venting atmosphere into space. Ships moving around the planet to get in its shadow were mercilessly harassed by clouds of devices, which were all *unmanned*, doing their best to avoid the mecha trying to destroy them as they homed in on ships, while other devices ignored the ships and went after their mecha. She watched as a main battleship was struck by one of those laser weapons, melting a hole into it and causing the ship to lose power, molten metal drifting out of the hole created after the beam dissipated.

"Shoot down those laser weapons!" Sha Ra raged. She brought up telemetry of a destroyer homing in on one of them, and then the feed went black a split second after the device exploded before they could shoot it down...a self-destruct! "Pull back to safe distance and destroy those laser weapons with long range missiles, they're equipped with bombs!" she amended her order.

She was about to say something else, but she saw one of their own destroyers start shooting at a cruiser, chasing it as it veered away, firing all its missiles at it, then firing ion cannons. “Commander, we’re losing control of ships to an external source! Something is taking over their control computers!” one of her officers barked.

“They’re hacking our ships?” the officer sitting at the station said in surprise. “How?”

“Order the crews on affected ships to disconnect power to the computer cores!” Sha Ra boomed.

“I’m getting a transmission, Fleet Commander!” one of her comm officers said. “Sending it to your station!”

Sha Ra looked at a monitor, and she nearly snarled when the face of Jason Karinne appeared on it. “You!” she snapped.

“I told you when we met that you had no idea who you were fucking with, Fleet Commander,” he said in Benga, his expression tight. He was *angry*. “You will recall the fleet within the galaxy to Oasis and agree to a meeting to negotiate your unconditional surrender.”

She gave a scornful laugh. “Why would I ever do such a thing?” she demanded.

“Because I have your *Oracle*,” he replied with a hiss. “She only needs to predict the movement of your fleet inside the galaxy correctly *once*, and they’ll end up trapped the same way you are.”

“You are a poor liar, your Grace,” she sneered. “You’re still somewhere on board my ship, and I *will* find you. This is one of your bionoids, one of your tricks.”

“Why don’t you have your officer bring up a visual of stateroom BX-392, middle shell, deck 1,294, section BX-359?”

“Do it!” she said, pointing at the officer.

“Bringing up the camera now.”

On another monitor, they saw a picture of a stateroom, someone’s quarters. Within it, there was a large glowing disc of swirling blue energy.

“Do you see that, Sha Ra? That is a *nexus bridge*. It’s a stable wormhole that connects two points in space. That’s how we got in. That’s how we took your Oracle. That’s how we got out. And if you want proof of it, keep watching.”

She looked back to the monitor. Someone *stepped out* of that energy and looked right at the camera! It was a figure in full battle armor and carrying a small device of some kind, a very small soldier by Benga reckoning. The figure knelt down and set the device on the floor, pointed at the camera and made some kind of odd gesture, then turned and walked back into the swirling energy and vanished! The swirling energy also vanished, evaporating like smoke, leaving nothing behind but the device.

“There’s your proof, Sha Ra,” the man said in a flat voice. “And if you want further proof, you have 39 *jiko* to evacuate that section before the bomb my Marine left in the stateroom explodes. I think that will get my point across better than any words ever could.”

“Close all blast doors in that section!” Sha Ra shouted hastily. “Get the nearest security detail to that stateroom and destroy that device!”

“Not even giving the people in there a chance to escape? I knew you were heartless,” Jason Karinne said with a dark smile. He lifted up something into the view of the camera, some small black box in his hand with a big red button on it, which had an internal light that blinked on and off. “May as well start the party early.”

He pressed that button, and the camera feed for the stateroom went dark.

“Ma’am, we’ve just registered an explosion in section BX-359, deck 1,294!” another of her bridge officers shouted.

“There you go, all the proof you need,” he said with hard glare. “You can call off the attack at any time, Sha Ra. Recall your fleet. Say the word, and I’ll call off the attack. I just wonder how many more ships have to be destroyed, how many more people have to die, before you finally do what’s best for your people,” he said with narrow eyes and a tight glare. “Because mark my words, bitch, I will kill *all* of you if you do not surrender. What’s going on around you is undeniable proof that *we* can move in and out of the effect trapping your ships, and without the QE devices we fried with our

tachyon burst emitter to communicate back to your headquarters, you'll die before you figure it out. You are in a cage, Sha Ra, and I can poke spears into it all day long until you bleed to death from a thousand little stabs, and there's not a damn thing you can do about it. It may take us a few orbits, but I can destroy every single one of your ships, with nothing but the automated toys, unmanned weaponry that you're up against now, and my nexus bridge. I can kill every single soldier and sailor in your expedition. To the *last man*. Every day, you will face a new attack, every day it will be something new, something different, something you can't defend yourself against, and you will be helpless to stop it. You will watch your fleet wither away, dwindle to nothing one attack at a time, until your ship is the only one left. And then I will *end you*. We can get to you in that trap, Sha Ra. You cannot get to *us*. And if you don't think I have the balls to do it, then *try me*. You're not the only person here who can be absolutely merciless when the situation demands it."

Sha Ra looked away from the monitor holding his face, looking at what was going on out there. She saw another main battleship struck by one of those super-lasers, leaving a molten hole in its spherical surface that gouted flame and atmosphere out into space. She saw an entire formation of destroyers destroyed in quick succession by a swarm of small, unidentifiable devices that lanced in through their shields and struck them, causing the ships to explode. She saw a mecha twisting and writhing as a swarm of small little robots with giant jaws covered it, *eating* through its armor, and then the mecha shuddered and went still when a puff of atmosphere escaped into space, killing the pilot. She saw a feed from a cruiser, where thousands of small balls were flying around inside the ship with lethal force, watching the crew members die one by one as they were struck by them, the balls tearing through their bodies and sending them crumpling to the deck, their lifeblood spilling out of them. Her eyes moved from image to image, and everywhere it was the same. Ships exploding, people dying, chaos and confusion up and down the chain of command.

And then she flinched when a white-hot bar of pure energy rampaged through the chaos, a weapon she'd seen in the telemetry feeds, passing dangerously close to her own ship before charging through the fleet and heading out into intergalactic space. She had the short range sensors turn in the direction from which it came, and there it sat, one of those triangular-

shaped ships that had that weapon that fired with such power that it could destroy a main battleship in a single hit. The ship was sitting nearly ten light seconds away, far out of range of any of their weapons, but within the range of its super-cannon.

A demonstration. The blast had been a warning shot, and if that ship was that close, it had to have come in through whatever it was that was trapping her fleet in the system.

She closed her eyes and bowed her head. "Call off your attack," she said in a low tone. "I will order the immediate recall of all forces inside your galaxy."

She opened her eyes and looked at the monitor, and the Terran turned his head. "Tell Talty to disengage," he said, speaking Benga for her benefit. "Recall the *Pegasus*."

On her scopes, she saw the attacking devices veer away, heading out into deep space. The lone ship too turned around, and then it vanished in a shimmering flash of white. Was that, that some kind of FTL engine? Was *that* the solution to the trap holding them?

"Expect a formal offer of negotiation to come from the Confederate Council very soon," he said, still staring hard at her. "But know this, Sha Ra. If that negotiation ends in anything less than your complete and unconditional surrender, I will wipe out your fleet, Confederation be damned. So think *very carefully* about how you approach that negotiation."

And the transmission ended.

She slammed her fists on the console. Damn that arrogant man! But what else could she do? He had demonstrated *very* effectively that they could move in and out of the trap at will, and further, she now believed that they truly had absconded with the Oracle...which put her abilities under *his control*. She had failed in the single most important duty of any Fleet Commander, to safeguard the Oracle from capture! Now he would turn its ability to predict the future against her! How was she supposed to fight against one who could foresee her every move, predict her deployments, see through her diversions and decoys?

Now...now she understood how the Consortium felt.

“Fleet Commander?” her officer asked.

“We’re not beaten yet,” she said, standing up suddenly. “That ship used an FTL engine of some sort to retreat. That is the solution to the trap, Colonel. Jump engines don’t work, so they’re using FTL engines to move in and out of the trap. There must be some way to convert some of our engines to FTL. I must speak with the engineering department immediately,” she declared, getting her dignity back. He may have the Oracle, but how quickly would he learn how to tap into its abilities? After all, they weren’t cognitive. She had a window here, a window to act before he learned how the Oracle’s powers worked and started using it the same way that she did. “In the meantime, send the order to recall the fleet in the galaxy. We have six rotations before they arrive, and I doubt they will open negotiations until they arrive, so it buys them an additional six rotations to prepare if the negotiations break down as the fleet returns to their galaxy. We have six rotations to devise defenses against what they showed us today, and to find a way out of this trap,” she said with growing confidence. “Gather all sensor logs from all ships and have them analyzed. We need to determine what each of those devices do and come up with counter-measures. And I think we can come up with a way to stop that...that portal device,” she said. “I’d bet that our *diffusers* would disrupt it, make it too unstable to use safely. It was clearly based on spatial energy, and that is vulnerable to diffusion. So have them activate the diffusers and keep them on at all times. That will keep them from sneaking onto the ship again. In the meantime, continue the stage three alert and scour the ship for any invaders or any equipment they may have left behind.”

“Fleet Commander, perhaps the best way to do that is to wait for them to use it, then rush our own soldiers through and attack it from the other side,” he offered. “We both saw that enemy soldier come out and go back in. That means it is a two-way portal. We could leave our diffusers off to bait them into using it, come up with some way to detect its use, then rush soldiers to the portal and get them through. Take the device from *their* side, and then its power will be ours to control!”

“A good suggestion, Colonel,” she nodded. “I’ll discuss it with engineering, see if they can come up with a means to detect those portals. In the meantime, we will leave the diffusers up, so we minimize our risk. We

have six rotations to prepare, and I intend to be ready,” she said with a more confident smile.

There was a way out of this. She could still pull this out, even without the Oracle. And concerning that...only two other officers on the ship knew that the Oracle had been kidnapped, and they could be...persuaded to never reveal that information, so she could conceal her failure from her superiors. And with the QE device down, she had nearly five orbits during the return trip to make sure that her failure would never be discovered.

She was fairly sure that the jump pods of everyone that knew the truth of the Oracle could *malfunction* during the return trip. And those who no longer had minds weren't going to be divulging their contents to anyone.

Maista, 21 Shiaa, 4404, Faey Orthodox Calendar

Friday, 7 September 2018 Terran Standard Calendar

*Maista, 21 Shiaa, year 1329 of the 97th Generation, Karinne
Historical Reference Calendar*

Karsa Medical Annex, Karsa, Karis

Jason was sitting right by Aria's bed when her aqua eyes opened, and she gave him an immediate smile. She'd just come out of surgery to remove several foreign objects from her body, which were all now being examined, and one of them was probably another kill device that Jason must have disabled when he sheared through all those wires. She'd nearly had a panic attack when Songa told her she was going to go to sleep, and Jason could understand why. Sleep meant the nightmare, it meant terror and pain and helplessness, and she feared it like she feared nothing else. Jason had to be in there holding her hand to get her to stop squirming long enough for Songa to activate the sleep inducer.

At least he was able to manage dealing with that *bitch* Sha Ra where she couldn't see it, hear her voice. He'd spoken to her from inside a construct in his gestalt, projecting the image he wanted her to see, while he was standing next to her gurney in the medical bay of the cruiser *Obori* on the way to Karis. He wanted Aria to never even *think* of the Syndicate again and

having her have to hear the voice of Fleet Commander Sha Ra would have been a torment for her.

“I feel...strange,” she said in uncertain Faey. “Wait. What am I saying?”

“You’re speaking Faey, Aria,” he smiled down at her. “We had a telepath teach you the language while you were in surgery. I never want you to even have to *speak* their language, ever again.”

“I like it. It sounds...musical.”

“I’ve always been fond of it,” he agreed. “Now, was that sleep so bad?”

“I didn’t dream.”

“You never do when you’re put to sleep like that,” he told her, stroking her hair back from her face.

“Can I sleep like that all the time? I never want to dream again.”

“It’s not healthy to use it that way, but we’ll see what we can do,” he said. “I’m going to have you talk to some people, Aria. Doctors. People who can help you. They’ll help you so you can put everything they did to you behind you and be happy.” He took her hand and squeezed it gently. “In the meantime, Doctor Songa is going to help you get healthy. You’re going to be here in the hospital for a little while, and they’re going to help you get strong again. You’ve been laying in a bed for so long, your muscles have wasted away. They’re going to help you get your strength back, and very soon, you’ll be running up and down the beach outside my house, laughing and playing with the other kids.”

“That sounds nice.”

“While you’re here, someone is going to be with you all the time,” he told her, stroking her hair again after it fell back over her eyes. “So you’ll never have to be alone. It’s not going to be me all the time, but I promise I’ll be here as much as I can. I’m kind of a busy person, little treasure, and I have a lot of things to do. But you’re very important to me, and I’ll be here as much as I can for you. And there are a few people I want you to meet.” He looked up and beckoned, and Jyslin, Rann, and Shya stepped over to the bed, Rann holding Amber in his arms. “This is my wife Jyslin, my son Rann, and his wife, Shya. And the little animal Rann is holding is Amber. This is your new family, Aria.”

“Hello, my sweetling.” Jyslin said with a gentle, loving smile, putting her hand on the girl’s shoulder.

“She’s blue, like the other ones,” Aria noted.

“Yes, Jyslin is a Faey,” he nodded. “And I’m not. I’m a Terran. In this place, Aria, you’re going to see a lot of people who look very different from each other. Our world welcomes people from all different races and species.”

“Oh.”

“How do you feel?” Jyslin asked.

“A little sore. Tired,” she replied.

“You’ve had a pretty busy day,” Jyslin told her with a smile.

“Your eyes look just like Lyra’s,” Rann told her. “They’re pretty.”

“Who is that?”

“The daughter of my best friend,” Jason told her. “You’ll meet her very soon, Aria. But first, you need to get healthy.” He leaned down and kissed her on the forehead. “Now, I’m going to let you get to know your new family a little bit while I talk to the doctor. I’ll be right in the next room, so I’ll be very close, alright?”

“Okay.”

He stood up and let Jyslin take his stool, and he stepped out into the hallway where Songa, one of her child psychologist specialists named Haln, Miaari, and Zaa stood. “What are we looking at here recovery wise, Songa?” he asked.

“We should have her muscles restored enough for her to be ambulatory in about eight days,” she replied. “She’s suffered severe muscular atrophy. I estimate she was laying in that bed for seven years, counting their trip over here from Andromeda, from the extent of the muscle degeneration. We’ll have to give her some biotine treatments, and then she’ll go on physical therapy once she’s able to walk. Outside of that, she’s in fairly decent health. She’ll be ready to be released in about nine days, but she’ll be on a recovery regimen at home. She’s severely malnourished, and it has stunted some of her growth. I also think the five-year journey over here may have

also affected her development, greatly slowed it down. She may look eight or nine, Jason, but she's actually fourteen."

"Seriously?"

"Seriously," she answered. "But we can get her to grow to her full height as determined by her genetics with the right diet and physical exercise, dear. She'll just be a little short and younger-looking compared to other girls her age for a while. Trust me, she will start growing *very* quickly once we have her on the mend."

"I'm sure you can get her back up and running dear. Haln, what did you find?"

"She's got some deep and severe mental scars, your Grace, and post-effect mental trauma is the least of them," he answered, his voice disgusted. "They tortured her in ways I don't think you can comprehend. My professional opinion is that we refer her to a psychic surgeon. She's blocking the most traumatic of her memories, and it might be best to seal them off behind psychic locks, maybe even purge them from her completely. But we'll need to leave some of them intact. They form the foundation of her personality, and to remove all of them would be to remove a part of her very core. She'll need therapy to come to terms with the memories we can't block."

"Do you think she can be rehabilitated with a minimum of intrusion?"

"It's possible, your Grace. She's going to need both psychic and traditional therapy and counseling, perhaps for several months. But the prognosis is good. She's a very resilient little girl. With loving fosters and a supportive environment, I think she'll be just fine. I need to check on her, your Grace, Doctor, Denmother, Handmaiden. Be right back."

"Songa, what else did you find out?" he asked after Haln went into the room.

"That little girl shouldn't exist, Jason," she said seriously. "She *is* a Faey. I can't explain how she came from Andromeda. I ran three DNA tests on her, and all three are conclusive. There are some very minor genetic differences that go beyond the color of her skin, but she's as Faey as I am. I can't explain it."

“She must be a descendent of one of the Exiles,” Miaari speculated. “The Consortium did take some of them back to Andromeda. It could be possible that the Syndicate captured them from the Consortium, and over thirteen hundred years, their telepathic powers evolved, granted some few of them the power of precognition. Precognition *does* appear in Faey history, but not in quite the way it works in the girl. It is not a stretch that it would appear in the Faey once again, this time in a way that does not drive them mad.”

“It is really the only explanation,” Zaa said. “That must be what happened. Anything else would be so illogical as to be absurd.”

“It’s possible, Denmother,” she acceded. “Like you said, it’s the only explanation that makes sense. I can run her DNA against the living Exiles, it might tell us which family she belongs to.”

Jason glanced back at the door to the room. “It does sound plausible. And given Faey exhibit the ability to genetically adapt to their environment, it explains her skin. I mean, look at Palla and Hara. Their skin colors are different from most other Faey because of their home planets. Wherever the Consortium or the Syndicate took her ancestors, it must have caused their skin pigmentation to evolve to adapt. And bam, brown skin.”

“True, Jason,” Songa nodded.

“I have to give that bitch Sha Ra one thing,” Jason grunted. “She looked right at Dahnai and didn’t even so much as twitch an eyebrow. She *had* to know that Dahnai and her Oracle were somehow related. That was one hell of a poker face.”

“And yet after seeing Dahnai, she carried out the attack anyway. She must have somehow known that the Faey don’t share the same gift as the Oracles, or she would never have dared attempt it,” Miaari said.

“A fact worthy of future investigation,” Zaa declared. “What do you plan for her, Jason?”

“Plan? I’m going to get her healthy, bring her home, and do everything in my power to ensure that she never thinks about the Syndicate or what they did to her again for the rest of her life,” he said fervently. “And I am *not* going to try to use her gifts. She’s afraid of them, and I won’t try to

make her use them, not even for our own benefit. I don't *need* an Oracle to kick the shit out of the Syndicate," he growled.

"That is a narrow train of thought, cousin," Zaa warned. "She *is* going to use her gifts, and you would be a fool not to listen to her and use what she tells you. You don't have to *force* her, but you should *listen* to her. Accept what she gives to you and appreciate it for the gift that it is, Jason."

"That's good advice," he said after a moment's thought. "But I will *never* ask her to look into the future for me. I made that little girl a promise, and I am going to keep it."

"That is why she's in good hands with you, Jason," Miaari told him with a smile on her muzzle.

"Speaking of that, why don't you two come in and introduce yourself? She's going to be seeing a lot of both of you from now on," Jason offered.

"I would like that, cousin," Zaa accepted.

"I'm going to go check her DNA against the records," Songa said. "See if she has any distant relatives among the Exiles."

"She might like knowing she has family here," Jason told her.

Jason led the two Kimdori back into the room, and he was not surprised at all that Jyslin had already charmed Aria quite a bit. She was smiling and holding Jyslin's hand when he came back in, and Amber was sitting on the bed with her, her two tails wagging in a hypnotic spiral pattern as she sniffed at Aria's other hand. "And we have a room in the house that will be all yours, Aria. It has a wonderful view of the ocean," Jyslin was saying.

"That sounds nice," she said, then her eyes widened a bit when she saw Miaari and Zaa.

"Aria, this is Miaari, and this is Zaa. They are very close friends of our family," Jason introduced. "They're from a species called the Kimdori."

"Hello, little cubling," Miaari cooed, leaning over Jyslin a bit and smiling down at her. "It's good to meet you."

"Is that real?" she asked, touching Miaari's furry hand. "It is real. What's it like to have fur?"

“Fuzzy,” she said with a smile, which made her giggle. “And you, I hear, had quite an adventure today. How do you feel?”

“Safe,” she said, smiling up at them, then she yawned. “I’m getting tired. But I’m afraid to go to sleep. The bad dreams come when I sleep.”

“Then we should let you get some rest,” Jason said. “And just so you feel safe, I’ll make sure the doctor gives you the sleep where you don’t dream, okay?”

“I think we can manage that, your Grace,” Haln said, stepping over. “You get some rest now, Aria. We’ll be here when you wake up.”

“That’s nice,” she said. She closed her eyes, and the sleep inducer did the trick, sending her to a restful, dreamless sleep.

“She’s an angel, Jason,” Jyslin told him, stroking Aria’s pink hair away from her face.

“You should have seen her in that bed, Jys, with all those wires and tubes in her. If Sha Ra had been there at that moment, I would have ripped out her throat with my teeth.”

“She seems afraid, but I can understand why,” Shya said, petting Amber. “They were awful to her, weren’t they?”

“As awful as anyone could ever be to a little girl, Shya,” Jason nodded. “So I’d appreciate it if all of you be gentle with her when she comes home. She’s going to need you to help her adjust, and she’s going to need friends to make her feel welcome.”

“I already like her,” Rann said.

Amber gave a supportive little yip.

“I’m sure she’s going to love you, Amber,” Jason chuckled, patting her on the head. “Just do me a favor and don’t play with her until she’s ready. You can see how timid and nervous she is. It might scare her.”

She yipped again.

“But, to tell you guys what Songa told me, it turns out that she *is* a Faey,” he told them. “Songa ran DNA on her.”

“How’s that possible?” Jyslin asked.

“She has to be a descendent of the Exiles that the Consortium kidnapped and took back to Andromeda,” Zaa answered. “The Syndicate must have captured her ancestors from them.”

“That’s possible. Really, it’s the only explanation,” Jyslin mused. “So, we Faey have cousins in Andromeda. Wild,” she laughed.

“You’re bad enough infesting one galaxy, God help us now that we know you’re in two,” Jason grunted, and the others laughed when Jyslin smacked him in the belly. “It also turns out that she’s much older than she looks. Songa said that she’s actually fourteen. What they did to her stunted her growth, makes her look like a child. But, Songa also said that she can fix that, so she’ll grow up to be what she was meant to be.”

“She’ll be starting puberty soon,” Jyslin noted. “And if she’s truly Faey, that means she should express any time now.”

“I wonder if she’ll turn blue if she gets in the tanning bed,” Shya speculated. “Like Ranny and Dad do.”

“That’s an interesting question,” Jason mused. “She might like it. I certainly don’t.”

“She should still have Faey melanin,” Haln said thoughtfully. “It just might react to the light of the Draconis sun the way yours does.”

“It might behoove us to have her do that,” Zaa said. “Her unique skin coloration makes her stand out. If she’s the same color as other Faey, she will be easier to hide.”

“That’s her decision, not ours,” Jason declared.

[Jason, Lorna wants to talk to you,] Cybi called.

“I need a few minutes, guys, Lorna needs to talk to me.” He went over to the window and leaned his hands on the sill, looking out over Karsa.
[What is it, Aunt Lorna?]

[The Syndicate fleet in the galaxy just jumped towards Oasis,] she answered. *[I’d say your attack was a complete success, Jason. You scared her to the table. Now we just need to get a treaty out of her.]*

[There won’t be a treaty, Lorna. I told her flat out that if she does anything but surrender unconditionally, I would eradicate her entire fleet]

and slaughter her sailors to the last woman. And I'm gonna hold to that threat. If she doesn't surrender, then I'm taking her out.]

[That's not your call, Jason,] she reminded him. [Even if I do agree with you. We'll let the council negotiate an end to this war. How much of your assets do you have left?]

[Enough to keep Sha Ra honest,] he answered. [Talty didn't go completely batshit with it, so she was able to recall quite a bit of equipment after I called her off. But she did do a good job.]

[I saw some of the feeds. She sure did,] Lorna agreed. [She destroyed nearly eight hundred of their ships in less than fifteen minutes. That was very impressive. Is the Pegasus still out there?]

[Yeah, sitting in orbit around planet seven, and it's gonna move to the Stargate location and be its defensive picket when it arrives] he answered. [It's carrying the bionoids, so we can open negotiations whenever. The Stargate should be out there and linked by this time tomorrow.]

[I was about to ask you about that. How is the girl?]

[Asleep at the moment, she just got out of surgery a little while ago. They removed quite a lot of stuff from her. Songa says her prognosis is good for a complete physical recovery, but her mental recovery is going to take some time. They traumatized her. I can tell just talking to her.]

[Is she really Faey?]

[She is. We think she's a descendent of one of the Exiles,] he answered. [The Consortium took some of them back to Andromeda with them. The Syndicate must have captured them.]

[Unreal. An Andromedan Faey precog that won't go insane. It's almost unbelievable. What are you going to do with her?]

[I'm taking her in myself,] he answered. [I have a spare bedroom, and she'll be well protected on the strip. Needless to say, she's going to need as much protection as a Generation.]

[And what will you do about that, Jason?]

[Nothing. She's afraid of her power because of what they did to her, and I promised her I wouldn't make her use it. And I'm honoring that promise.]

Nobody will ever force her to use her power again, Lorna, not even if it helps us. I'm not torturing that little girl to get predictions of the future. I'm not a monster like that cunt Sha Ra is.]

[That's what it takes?]

[More or less, yes. The intel Zaa got said that the more trauma they inflict on an Oracle, the more accurate their predictions. They tortured her for years, to get her to predict the future. And I will never do that, Lorna. Not to her, not to anyone.]

[I'm glad to hear you say that, Jason. I need to come see her. It seems that I have a new grand-niece.]

[That you do, and she's adorable,] he affirmed. [At least to me. Shya thinks she looks a bit weird. She has brown skin instead of blue, probably some kind of genetic adaption to whatever planet they put her people on. You know, like a Jeraman Faey. But outside of the skin, she looks completely Faey. She even has pink hair.]

[Send me a picture.]

[Sure.]

[I'll let you get back to what you were doing, nephew. Tell your people in 3D they did a great job.]

[Will do.]

He returned to the bedside and put his hand on Jyslin's shoulder. She was still holding Aria's hand, looking down at her. "What did Aunt Lorna have to say?"

"Sha Ra recalled the fleet inside the galaxy," he replied. "So things are looking good. Now we just need to see how things go at the negotiating table. And I'd better stay out of it. What's laying in this bed right now would make it impossible for me to keep any shred of objectivity. That, and I'd probably be jumping over the table trying to strangle her with my bare hands."

Jyslin gave him an approving nod. "I'd be holding her down so you could do it," Jyslin chuckled. "We have something much more important to do anyway, love. Get this little girl well and whole."

“I have a ton of stuff to do,” he grunted. “I just hope I can find the time, Aria’s going to take up a lot of it the next couple of takirs. She’s very much a frightened child, and she’s latched onto me for safety and protection. I’ll have to stay near her until she calms down.”

A hologram appeared near the wall of the recovery room, showing Myleena’s face. Before she could say anything, Jason looked at Haln. “Mind giving us a few minutes, Doctor? I think this is going to be a classified briefing.”

“Of course, your Grace. Just send if you need me,” he said with grace, then he left the room.

“Alright, go ahead, cousin.”

“We’re almost done with the recovery, Jayce,” she replied. “We used up about half of our inventory, and it was pretty productive. We took out 712 ships, 130 of them super-ships. And it was a beautiful display of pure chaos, I’m sure it scared the hell out of Sha Ra,” she grinned. “Gotta admit, Talty did a good job. She put on one hell of a show.”

“What about the Stargate?”

“It’ll be in position and linked in about 40 hours,” she answered. “But I’m not sure what purpose it’s going to serve now.”

“Oh it’s going to serve a purpose. I’m not leaving them at Oasis,” he replied. “We’ll put them with the other prisoners at R1DB-24, and move their ships to Skirasis for inspection and dispensation. We’ll ultimately return the prisoners back to Andromeda, but it may take a few years. The fleet gets divvied up among the Confederate members for their use. Once we have all of them cleared out at Oasis, we move in and take the planet as an outpost. I’m gonna set up a kick-ass long range sensor station there so we can keep an eye on Flat Space between here and Andromeda.”

“Not a bad idea,” Myleena agreed. “So, we still gonna work on the *other* ship?”

“Yeah, we are. Zaa still wants it for the big hole in the middle, it’s uniquely suited to fulfill the mission she has in mind for it.”

“That it does, cousin,” Zaa agreed.

“Myli, I want you to work up the design changes you made for Nexus One and update the construction blueprints you sent to Dellin for the other two stations,” Jason said. “And you can finish work on Nexus One, you know, make it much less dangerous. We did kinda barebones it.”

She laughed. “It worked, that was what mattered,” she grinned.

“You’re building two more?” Zaa asked.

He nodded. “They’re not cost effective to use for everyday traffic, you know, we’re not opening a portal service or anything. But that little girl proves that having those things at our disposal might be critical further down the line. And yes, you’ll have complete access to them, cousin.”

“I won’t need it, cousin,” Zaa said with a slight smile. “I would like the plans for it, Myleena. I will build a few of my own.”

“Not a problem, Denmother,” Myleena said. “Let me get with Emia and Cybi so we can get them cleaned up, and I’ll have something for you to pick up in a few days. In the meantime, send a few of your engineering Elders up here and we’ll show them around, explain the science behind it.”

“I will have them on their way within the hour. And I will inform them not to be critical of how unfinished everything looks.”

“Are you making a joke, Zaa?” Myleena demanded.

“Am I, cousin?” she asked, which made Jason laugh.

She gave Zaa a short look. “We’re going to do some renovating to the station, Jayce,” she continued. “Enlarge the passageways into the core so mecha can get in and out more easily. I saw how you guys had to almost crawl your Gladiators into the core. I get the feeling that more often than not, we’ll be sending Gladiators and Juggernauts through the nexus.”

“Good idea,” Jason agreed. “I may have Sioa begin work on a new class of exomech the same size as a Juggernaut but not as bulky,” he mused. “Make it easier to use with the nexus system.”

“May as well,” Myleena said. “Anyway, lemme get back to work, I gotta get this done so I can get back over to Project F. That’s still *kinda* important,” she grinned.

“Good work, Myli. You never let me down.”

“I’m me, after all,” she winked, then she cut the comm.

“Someone is getting too big for her gestalt,” Zaa noted, which made Jason laugh even more.

“Eh, give it to her, cousin, she deserves it,” he said. “I’m gonna take a short walk up on the promenade. I’ll be back in a bit.”

He made sure that Aya came with him, and as they walked up on top of the annex, along a path with trees and gardens built below the landing pad for emergency cases, he stopped them near a corner with a breathtaking view of Karsa and put his hands on Aya’s shoulders. *I know I overstepped my bounds, and for that, I apologize. But now, after you were there, can you deny that I was the best choice for that operation? From the perspective of the mission commander?*

She gave him a murderous look, but her silence answered the question for him.

I will accept whatever punishment you give me, Aya, but I had to do it. Both because I was the best qualified for the mission, and because I would have never been able to live with myself if I didn’t go. But I give you this promise, Aya. I won’t do it again unless I honestly, truly, and with complete impartiality believe that I am absolutely needed, else the mission will fail. And if that situation arises again, you will be right there with me, keeping me safe. Because I could be no safer than to be placed in these hands, he told her, taking her hands and turning them palms-up between them.

You will be punished, Jason, she warned. *But as the mission commander, I will put you in for a citation. You earned it. But I swear to you, Jason Karinne, you will never go on a combat mission PIM again. You’re going to ensure that another Generation will always be qualified for the mission at hand. Do you understand?*

I understand. This was a special case, Aya. I happened to be in the right place at the right time, and that made me the most qualified because of the circumstances. But I’m not going to start thinking that I’m going on PIM special ops missions, because that is not my job. I’ll restrict my need to contribute in my Titan with the Storm Riders from now on. Is that satisfactory?

Quite, she affirmed. But mark my thought, Jason. You had best be prepared for the whipping of your life when I get you home and behind closed doors.

He had to laugh. *Yes, Mommy. And I love you too,* he added, leaning over and kissing her on the cheek.

Chapter 14

Kaista, 23 Shiaa, 4404, Faey Orthodox Calendar

Sunday, 9 September 2018 Terran Standard Calendar

*Kaista, 23 Shiaa, year 1329 of the 97th Generation, Karinne
Historical Reference Calendar*

Karsa Medical Annex, Karsa, Karis

Jason had the feeling that Aria was going to be *just fine*.

She was definitely a remarkable little girl. He'd spent a great deal of time with her over the last two days, and he was already growing very, very attached to her. Her trauma made her a little timid, but as she got to know him, she lost much of that. She was a very intelligent, curious little girl, always asking questions and honestly quite interested in this new world, this new life. And she had tons of guts. The fact that she was resisting the horrific trauma the Benga inflicted on her to reach out to him and Jyslin and her doctors showed just how brave that little girl really was.

She was much like Rahne, a lost little girl with no past and very little sense of self or identity. Jason had talked with her about her past, doing it very gently, and learned that she knew almost nothing about herself, her people, or her family. She was taken from them when she was six, couldn't even remember the faces of her parents, but did remember that her parents were killed by the Benga when they took her from them. She remembered seeing them shot down, her earliest defined memory, and that made Jason even more enraged. Her very first memory was one of terrible pain and loss, and nothing past that ever got better. She barely remembered what happened between the death of her parents and her ending up on that bed, which were memories she had blocked, and were now safely behind powerful psychic locks to prevent her from accessing them.

Ryn had been the one to do that. And when she was done, he had never seen her that out of sorts. She had seen glimpses of those blocked memories as she sealed them deep in Aria's mind, and just seeing bits and pieces of them had nearly traumatized *Ryn*. That meant that they had to be beyond all belief as to how terrible they were.

For close to eight years, Jason figured, she'd been kept in a state of induced sleep, and that sleep had been tormented by Benga telepaths to give her the most dreadful nightmares imaginable, all in the name of drawing out visions of the future that they could use. She had had no childhood. She had had almost no contact with others, and what little there was had been negative. But despite all that, she had clung to the ethereal impressions of her life before this hell began, clung to what little she did remember from her earliest childhood before she was taken, and all of it was centered around one thing.

Her name.

They had tried to torture her into forgetting her name, to lose all sense of identity and self, and she had resisted. She had focused the totality of her being around one idea, one concept, and she clung to it with every bit of the incredible strength and courage she possessed. She would not let them take her name from her, because it represented everything that she was, everything that she wanted to be. And despite everything they did to her, everything they threw at her, they could not break her.

But they didn't use their telepathy to just excise her memories, program her to be a faithful little lapdog, and Jason knew why. To expose her to powerful, invasive telepathy of that magnitude would incite her own talent to awaken, the way Temika's talent was awakened by that mindbender, and they must have learned over time that to try to go into their minds like that just accelerated their talent expressing, which in turn made them *dangerous*. So everything they did was as passive as possible, implanting thoughts, images, horrors and emotions, torturing her mind without directly using telepathy against her in a way that might incite her to express, then observing her thoughts to find and interpret the visions that torture incited.

She had already shown some marked improvement. She'd undergone six biotine treatments over the last two days, and while she wasn't strong enough to walk yet, she was strong enough to sit up in bed and use her

hands without them trembling. He was sitting on the stool by her bed, playing a little game Songa taught her that was actually physical therapy, making her use her hands and working on her motor control skills. She was smiling and laughing as she tried to keep up with Jason's hands, taking pleasure in something as simple as the Faey version of *Patty cake*. "Stop cheating, Jason," she accused as she missed his hand.

"I'm not *cheating*," he protested. "You're just not trying hard enough. Tell you what. You catch my hand and I'll get you another ice cream."

Her aqua eyes lit up. "I like ice cream!" she declared.

"You and just about every other child I know," he smiled, holding his hands out tauntingly. "But you've gotta earn it." Songa had her on a very strict diet because she hadn't eaten solid food for *years*, had been fed pure glucose intravenously, so she was on a progressive regimen to get her digestive system going again, get it ready for solid food. She was restricted to broth and non-solid foods, like milk, gelatin, yogurt, and ice cream, and she *loved* what she'd had so far. Like just about every kid everywhere, she loved ice cream, and Songa allowed her to eat a lot of it, since it was infused with the essential vitamins and minerals she'd been deprived of for years. Everything she'd eaten so far had been like that, specially prepared by the annex cafeteria to be packed with nutrients but still very tasty, and it had certainly awakened a love of food and eating in her.

He could certainly understand why.

"Tomorrow you get to try your first solid food," Jason told her as she tried to smack his open palm with her own, and he danced his hand around to make her work for it. "Looking forward to it?"

"I don't know what to try first," she answered, biting her lip a little bit as she struggled to keep up with his hands. "What do you like?"

"I'm not tremendously picky," he chuckled. "I live with a wife that's not my species, so I eat a lot of the food she likes. And one of the people who live with us to help us is a Shio, and she cooks a lot of food from her own people. She also likes to make foods enjoyed by other races and species that live here on Karis, to let us experience all kinds of new things. But, if we're talking my favorite food ever, that would have to be steaks cooked on a grill, something my father used to make." He laughed. "He never was a

very good cook. After my mother died, we had nothing but steaks, hamburgers, and hot dogs made on the grill for months.”

“Your mother died?”

“A long time ago, she died in an accident,” he told her.

“Do you remember what she looks like?”

“Yes, but that’s not how I remember her,” he said, his hands slowing as memories of his beloved mother washed over him. “When I think of her, it’s always the same, me sitting at the *piano* with her, watching her as she played it. She had such amazing hands,” he said in reverie. “I used to watch them and just be mesmerized how they moved. It was like her hands were dancing, dancing with the keys on the keyboard, and she made the most beautiful music.”

“What is a *piano*?”

Jason put a finger to his gestalt, and he projected a small hologram between them. “This. It’s a musical instrument, Aria. Push down the keys, and they play notes. My mother played the *piano* for money, she was so good at it that people paid money to listen to her music. She was what we call a concert *pianist*.”

“What is money?”

He chuckled. “That’s a very difficult concept to explain. In the short term, let’s just say that it’s something that you will never have to worry about,” he grinned.

“I like the pictures in the air,” she said, looking at the hologram. “And the, the *viddy* shows on the big one over there.”

“I’m glad you do. They certainly make the time pass without being bored,” he told her. “What have you seen on the viddy when I’m not here?”

“Doctor Songa showed me all the places I could go when I get better. They were really pretty,” she said, going back to trying to slap his palm. “Then she showed me something she called a *program*. It’s like a dream put on the picture that anyone can see. It was called the *Imperial Rangers*.”

“Did you like it?”

“It was a little strange. What is math?”

“You saw the show, Aria. Did you understand what they were talking about?”

“A little,” she replied. “But what do you use it for?”

He had to laugh. “Math, my little treasure, is what got you in this bed,” he told her with a smile, stopping the game and taking her hands. “Math is the foundation of the entire universe, a way we can understand things that we can’t see or touch. It explains how things work, and we use it to build everything you see around you. We used math to build the machine that we used to rescue you. So, Aria, math is *very* important,” he said, tapping her on the nose. “My life revolves around math. I told you that I’m the Grand Duke, that I run this planet. But before I was the Grand Duke, I was an engineer. And I still am, really, I still do that kind of work. I build machines and devices, I’m always looking for new ways to make things work, and I use math to do it.

“When you get better, you *will* be learning about math. Math, and science, and history, and the other races that live on Karis, about anything and everything. We call it *education*, and it is the most important thing I could ever give you. And I think you’re going to like it. You’re a very curious and very smart girl, and in just the two days I’ve known you, I’ve seen that you love to learn. Well, we’re going to teach you everything you ever wanted to know, Aria, and probably a whole lot of things you never knew you wanted to know.”

“I’d like to know more,” she said, smiling up at him. “Jason.”

“Yes?”

“If you run the planet, why were you the one that came for me?”

He laughed. “Because, little treasure, I was one of the engineers that built the machine that rescued you,” he told her. “And we had to go very, very fast, so fast that we came to rescue you almost as soon as we were sure it worked. We were afraid that they were going to hurt you even more, and we moved so fast, I ended up being one of the ones that came to get you. And believe me, quite a few people were not happy about that,” he grinned. “That’s why I was sore yesterday. One of them made her displeasure very clear the night before. They don’t like it when I do things like that, they

think I should keep myself safe behind my desk, that I'm *too important* to risk myself that way. But, as the Grand Duke, Aria, I wouldn't ask anyone who lives on this planet to do anything I wouldn't do myself. So, when the time came to rescue you, I was more than willing to get into that big robot machine you saw and go in there with my soldiers to rescue you, because they needed me, and *you* needed me."

"I'm glad."

"I'm happy that you're glad," he replied, putting his hand on her cheek. They both looked to the side when the door opened, and Aria's eyes lit up when Jyslin came in. She was in a plain white tank top and a pair of cargo shorts.

"And how's my girl today?" she asked brightly as she came up to the bed.

"Jyslin! I'm feeling much better. Did you bring the present?"

She took her hand from behind her back and presented her with a *Paladins* baseball cap, then put it on her head. "Right out of the gift shop, pippy," she said.

"You're getting her hooked on batchi already?" Jason accused.

"She likes the logo and the colors, but I will eventually," she winked in reply.

Aria fussed with the hat a bit. "Does it look alright?"

"It looks fine," Jason told her.

"Did you go for your treatment?" Jyslin asked.

"Uh-huh," she said animatedly as Jyslin stood over and behind Jason, her hands on his shoulders. "I don't really like it. The needles are a little scary."

"Well, just think of how much better you feel when it's over and you have a chance to rest," she told her. "Now, let me get a certain naughty boy out of *my* seat, and you can tell me all about what happened today!" she said, and Aria laughed when she dragged Jason off the stool. She shooed him away playfully as she took his place, leaning over and taking Aria's hands.

“Hey now, you stool thief,” Jason called.

“You were getting up anyway. Myleena asked me to tell you that you need to go over to your office,” she grinned. *Seriously. She was about to send for you, but I told her I was coming down here anyway.*

Alright, but don't think this is over, bitch, he warned playfully. “I’d better go see what she wants. I’ll be back in a little while, Aria. I may as well do some of the paperwork that comes with running the planet while I’m there. I’m way, way behind on it.”

“Okay.”

Jyslin laughed when he kicked the stool a little bit, then he went out and picked up his guards, who were standing on each side of the door and the wall opposite, defending him and the room.

They went over to the White House, and after getting a short briefing from Chirk about the important things that hit his inbox since he was last there, he went into the office and flopped into the chair behind the desk even as he brought up a holo of Myleena. She was still on Nexus One, and he saw she was in the core. “Hey Myli. What’cha got?”

“We’re done here, Jayce, or at least *we* are,” she answered. “Naval Engineering is gonna do the finishing projects, and I’ve handed over operational control of the station to Myri. I’ve already written out the operational specs and trained three operation crews, so they can actually use it. I’m gonna be heading back to the island as soon as I button up the last few items on my list. But you’re gonna have to talk to Lorna.”

“Why?”

“She wants us to move Nexus One to Terra,” she replied. “She’s almost fighting Myri over the station as we speak.”

“She can’t have Nexus One, but I could see fit to build a fourth station and give the CCM access to it,” he mused, leaning back in his chair. “But the CCM has to pay the operation costs.”

“She’d write that check in a heartbeat,” Myleena laughed. “She’s like *totally* obsessed with our new toy, Jayce.”

“I don’t see why, it’s not as useful as she thinks it is,” he shrugged. “With a limited uptime on the nexus bridge, it’s really only useful for what we did with it. But for what we did use it for, it’s an awesome toy.”

She laughed. “Yup,” she grinned. “I think Denmother will get the most use out of them. But there is one thing I want to do with this, Jayce.”

“What?”

“I think I can make a stable nexus bridge by using it the same way we use the original bridges. Link two nexus bridges together, and the bridge will be stable.”

“That’s an awful lot of credits to cut an hour’s trip down to a minute’s trip, Myli,” he scoffed. “I mean, fuck, they have to take a ship out to the station anyway. What’s an extra forty minutes taking a Stargate or a bridge and getting where you were going?”

“I *know* that, dickhead,” she said, rolling her eyes. “I want to do it for research. This is brand new tech, Jayce, and we don’t know the limits of it yet. I want to see if we can refine the design, make it cheaper, more stable, more tolerant of gravity wells. My ultimate objective is to get this to where we can build the nexus system inside a gravity well, build one on Kosigi or Karis.”

“Ohhhh, okay,” he said, which made her laugh.

“So, when Nexus Two comes out of Kosigi, and after we finish Project F, I want it to do some research,” she said.

“Not a problem, I’ll designate them to 3D and MRDD for research, and if we need to use one, we’ll have Nexus Three,” he affirmed. “At least once you finish Project F. I’ll put this down as Project H and have Kumi set up an account for it.”

“Yeah, that’s first on the list. I’m gonna work on this when we finish that. Gives me something to do,” she grinned.

“Like you never have enough to do,” he challenged. “That all you needed?”

“Yup,” she replied. “Me and Emia will be back on the island tomorrow morning.”

“That reminds me, I need to check with Tren on those drives,” he mused. “Dellin’s already drawing up a schedule to completely refit the entire fleet. You’re sure you have a finalized design?”

“What we have has worked pretty well, Jayce,” she told him. “If we make any changes, they’re gonna be small. The ship’s engineers can do them themselves, without having to pull into Kosigi for a formal refit.”

“Alright, but if I have to cycle the entire fleet through Kosigi again, *you’re* paying that bill, woman.”

“I can *buy* the KMS, babes,” she said scornfully, grinning at him. “Seriously. I have so much money, I don’t know what to do with it.”

“Give it to Kumi, you know she’s jealous,” he said.

“And I *want* her to be jealous,” she said, which made him laugh.

“So competitive,” he teased. “Go buy yourself your own planet or something.”

Her eyes lit up. “That’s an awesome idea!” she said brightly. “I could be the only private citizen in the Confederation with my own personal planet!”

Jason shook his head with a sigh, which made her burst out laughing.

“Lemme finish this up and head home, babes. I’m gonna stop by the annex and see Aria. How is she?”

“She’s just fine,” he said. “She had her second biotine session of the day, and Jyslin is over there keeping her company. I’m sure she’d love to see you. She likes you.”

“And I like her,” she smiled. “I’m gonna bring Siyara and introduce them.”

“I’m gonna have most of the kids come over after school and meet her,” Jason told her. “She’s strong enough for it, and I think she’s ready. Just not all at *once*. They’ll come in and meet her in small groups, so I figure it’ll take a couple of hours. We’re gonna have to have a long talk with Maya about her,” he noted. “She hasn’t had any education at all, so she’ll have to do a lot of private tutoring until she’s up to where she can go to school. She didn’t even know what *math* is.”

“That’s a crime against Faeyity!” Myleena protested.

“I know. I want her to go to school, I want her to have the social interaction, but she can’t be so far behind. So I’m gonna talk to Maya and get some advice on what to do.”

“Revered Hive-leader, honored hive-officer Grik’zzk wishes to speak to you,” Chirk called over the intercom.

“Send her in, Chirk. Work’s calling, Myli, gotta go. Remember to send the final version of the blueprints to Zaa.”

“Already did,” she grinned. “A courier picked them up an hour ago. I got stuff to do too, so see you tonight.”

Her holo winked out as Jason opened the door, and the hulking Kizzik that ran his farming operations clattered in. *“Revered Hive-leader,”* she greeted.

“What’s up, Grik?” he asked.

“Did you peruse the presentation my office sent up to you yesterday?”

“I haven’t had time, Grik I’m sorry. I haven’t even seen it yet, I’m still two days behind on my paperwork. You’re here now, so tell me about it,” he said, motioning towards the front of his desk.

She came up to the desk but didn’t sit down—Kizzik didn’t *sit*—settling a bit on her four legs and folding her blade arms before her. She projected out a hologram from her interface of his desk, reversed so it was facing him. *“We completed our impact studies for the planet Alakis, revered Hive-leader. Projections indicate that it can be successfully terraformed, a process that will take approximately nine years. The planet would expand our in-system farming capacity by 1,700%, as well as support a population of over six billion. Terraforming costs would be recouped within 14 years of completion due to the fact that the planet is within the home system, dramatically reducing transport and maintenance costs.”*

Alakis was the second planet in the Karis system and within the “goldilocks” zone of habitation. Despite its greater distance from the star, however, the planet would terraform to become a planet much like Shio, a hot world with .93 gravity and a 25.7-hour day, which made it within tolerance of most life on Karis. Alakis was like a warmer version of Mars in

the Terran system, a waterless terrestrial world with no magnetic field, which meant it had a very thin atmosphere. The star's solar wind had stripped most of it away over the billions of years since its formation. What might annoy anyone who lived there was that the planet wobbled on its axis by nearly ten degrees in a fairly fast 14 year cycle, which created variations in its seasonal patterns that would create extreme swings in seasonal temperatures over time.

Karis and Alakis were the only real habitable planets or moons in the system. Everything else was either too hot, too cold, too deadly due to its environment, or not worth the cost to put in domes.

"Terraforming the planet would be fairly easy, once the radiation shield is in place," she continued. "It only needs atmospheric and water terraformer units, with organic infusion of the soil. We already possess all the necessary equipment. The process would take nine years to complete, due to the size of the planet, but it would be habitable in four. Estimated costs to terraform would be twenty billion credits."

"That's a pretty big investment when we can just find new planets out there, Grik."

"Yes, but the fact that the planet is within the system makes it economically feasible. I have already gotten Kumi's approval. She sees it as a good investment."

"Bottom line, Grik. Do we need it?"

"If current growth projections hold, in 54 years, yes, we will need it. So it behooves us to have it ready before that need arises."

"Then I'm sold. Terraforming falls under your department, Grik, so it's your project."

"I will begin the project at the start of the next cycle," she told him.

"Works for me," he nodded.

"There is one detail which will require your approval. My project managers want to stabilize the wobble of its orbit, to make it more amenable to major agriculture," she told him.

“That’s a pretty big operation, Grik,” he said. “It’s also going to take about a century to pull off.”

“Not so, revered Hive-leader. My project manager projects that if we place four of the Syndicate’s large ships in specific orbits around the planet, their gravitational effect on the planet will accomplish the objective. The wobble of the axis would be stabilized in four years, which is within the time it will take to terraform the planet. Add to that the fact that the current axis tilt of ten degrees is a highly favorable position for large-scale agriculture, which motivates us to move quickly on the matter.”

“They’ll have to be very careful. They could pull the planet out of its orbit, and that would alter the entire system’s orbits.”

She gave a nod of her wide, flat head. *“I already had astrophysicists do the calculations. They say it is possible. We just need the ships, so they can get an exact mass and finish the equations.”*

“Not that I don’t trust them, Grik, but I’ll want confirmation. So we’ll run this by the experts over in the Academy. If they get the same numbers, we’ll do it. But, one of those ships would have to be left there as an artificial moon to keep the planet stable on its axis.”

“I know, but it would not need engines. So we could take a derelict ship and insert it into the proper orbit, so long as it has sufficient mass.”

“Well, those things *can* be used for that,” he chuckled. “I’ll put the Academy on it to crunch the numbers, and we’ll see if they match what your team came up with. In the meantime, you have authorization to start terraforming. I’ll have Kumi open a project account for you.”

They discussed a few of the minor points of the project, and then Grik’zzk clattered out. He had Lorna’s office track her down, and he wasn’t surprised at all when he saw she was on Nexus One when she got back to him. “Woman, you’re worse than a ten-year-old on New Year’s Day,” he accused, which made her laugh.

“I’m up here with Myri and your command staff,” she replied. “They’re touring the station now that they have control of it. I take it Myleena told you?”

“You can’t have Nexus One,” he told her. “Myli’s going to use it for research, see if she can improve the technology. She said her ultimate goal is to be able to build a nexus bridge on a planet, so we don’t have to put it out in deep space. But I’ll make you a deal. I’ll build a fourth station and put it at Terra and give the CCM access to it. *But*, a Karinne crew will be operating it, I’ll have Karinne Marines on board to guard it because it holds Karinne tech, and the CCM has to pay its operational costs. And they’re not cheap,” he warned.

“It’s worth it just to have access to this thing, Jason. I don’t think you understand just how important it can be.”

“Oh, I do, but I think you’re overestimating just how useful it is,” he said. “They should finish the station sometime in the next couple of months, they’re kinda busy up there right now. We’re not really gonna need it for a while, and if we do, you can always ask to use one here.”

“Works for me, nephew,” she told him easily. “Now if you’ll excuse me, Myri’s giving me a bit of a glare. I’m holding things up.”

Jason laughed. “Talk to you later, Lorna.”

He cut the hologram and got down to clearing two days of backlogged paperwork, but he did check on a few things. The Syndicate fleet had left the galaxy and was out in Flat Space, en route to Oasis. Jason had wanted to put a trap down in front of it and pin them in interdiction, but the council had overruled him...which did not make him very happy. Magran had led that effort, on the basis that they couldn’t bargain in good faith if they go and attack the retreating fleet...but that having that trap ready to spring on them in an instant if negotiations failed was acceptable. The negotiations themselves were going to open when the fleet arrived at Oasis, and Jason expected that Sha Ra would fight to her last breath, at least in a diplomatic sense. Jason fully expected her to stall like nobody had ever stalled before, to quibble over every single word on every draft brought up when it came to negotiating the permanent end of hostilities, and to do everything in her power to avoid having to surrender her fleet unconditionally. And he wasn’t going to let her get away with it, even if he wasn’t there at the meetings.

Jason couldn’t really be there because of his inability to control himself in the face of that woman, but maybe he *should*. Jason had the feeling that if

she was staring at *him* across the table in those negotiations, she may not be quite so combative.

Maybe...he needed to put a hand in.

But not yet. He'd give the council a chance to get a surrender out of her. If she hadn't surrendered in what he considered a reasonable amount of time, then he was going to move. And he didn't give a shit if the council liked it or not.

Trenirk was going overboard, he saw. With the lull in the fighting and what looked like an ultimate victory, and Myli finalizing the design for the drives, the KMS was going to upgrade the entire fleet to drives and install IP armor on all the remaining frigates. To do that, they needed the drives and IP systems built, and Tren was outdoing himself getting everything built. They were going to take the opportunity to install stream weapons on all KMS ships as well while they had them in drydock, replacing several pulse or rail batteries on each ship with stream weapons, except for the frigates. There wasn't enough space to install even a single stream weapon on a frigate due to how much space the weapon took up, not if they wanted to keep its particle beam. But frigates didn't really need stream weapons. They weren't going to be trying to kill crew to launch a boarding operation, that wasn't their job. Their job was to sneak up on their target and murder it before it had any idea what the fuck just happened. Stream weapons would give his ships more flexibility, chief among them the ability to much more easily board and capture Syndicate ships, reducing the number of defending telepaths they may face.

The other huge factory job going on right now was bionoids. Cybi's little trick of controlling just about every maintenance bionoid they'd built simultaneously made those things *extremely* useful, so Trenirk was continuing to crank them out by the hundreds every hour. They were going to put a decent number on every ship in the KMS except for frigates, and when they were needed, they'd be activated from Karis to provide extra manpower. Rook had designed three classes of bionoids for Naval use, and all three were being cranked out. He'd designed operations bionoids, generic units meant to assist in repairs or damage control or act as additional crewmen on the ship, with "rubber stamp" faces and few extra systems in them that weren't centered around repair, maintenance, or

operation of the ship. He'd designed expedition bionoids, much more complex and more equipped units meant to be used to safely explore alien environments as well as conduct face to face negotiations with those they found when a telepath wasn't needed. Expedition units would look much more lifelike and have biorhythmics so they could more easily blend in with living things. He'd also designed combat bionoids, which would be realistic-looking bionoids that would wear standard issue Crusader armor, which would be heavily armed and meant to augment Marine and Tark units aboard a ship, useful either to defend or attack. Rockers still had a very important use in the Army, but for the Navy, they were going with combat-variant bionoids so they could also be used for other roles. A combat bionoid would have the manual dexterity to effect repairs in a damage control situation, where Rockers may not. And since it would look like a living thing, it could also assist expedition units in diplomatic situations.

And on top of those, all officers on board a Naval ship ranked Lieutenant or above and all enlisted ranked Master Petty Officer and above would be gifted personal bionoids for their use that would exactly resemble them, which would be built on the combat chassis. Officers would get two, one would be aboard their ship for use in diplomatic situations, the other would be left at home so they could merge to them when off duty. For the enlisted, they would get one, and it would be left at home for their use. They wouldn't need a personal bionoid aboard ship, since they'd have access to operational and expedition bionoids. It was a perk for achieving the rank, a gift to all O4s and E7s and above, and a pretty nice one at that.

Kumi and Yila were also cranking out the civilian bionoids, and Jason was surprised by how fast they were selling. Yila was backlogged from the orders by nearly two months, and Kumi was starting to run out of civilian factory space on Karis to build the ones she sold in the House. It wasn't just rich people buying them for personal use on Karis, Jason learned after reading Kumi's report. They were *wildly* popular, and even middle-class people were buying them. They were becoming nearly mandatory high-credit appliances. Jason didn't see why, at least until he read a report from Kumi and found that people didn't want to use generic bionoids that weren't *them* when they were using them for recreation. Couples using them to sit on a beach didn't like looking over in the next lounge and seeing an unfamiliar face. So they were buying their own bionoids and

having them shipped to the places where they wanted to spend their recreation. Some people were using them for their jobs, in exactly the same way Jason used his own, using them to visit remote locations in person to talk to people face to face. They were becoming standard equipment for salesmen and other executives. Companies were buying them to do dangerous work in their facilities, since a damaged bionoid was easier and cheaper to repair than an injured person.

Twenty-five thousand credits was a sizable chunk of money, but people were *taking out loans* to buy bionoids. They considered them as important and as useful as a hovercar, and banks were willing to finance bionoids the same way they would other high-ticket items.

That seemed a bit extreme to him, but hey. If they wanted them and they were willing to pay for them, he wasn't going to nanny them and tell people they shouldn't buy them. They were adults, they had the right to spend their money any way they pleased. But he also saw this rush on them as "new toy mania." They were the new thing, the hot item out there, and some people probably wanted them just so they could own the cool new thing. They could easily sell them if they found that they weren't everything they thought they were. It didn't cost that much to refurbish a bionoid to put a new face on it, put a new *head* on it for that matter, they were built to be modular so they could more easily be repaired, so there would be a market for used bionoids.

Rook had started working on Jason's other idea as well. Yesterday, the first *giruzi* bionoid came off Rook's lab factory line, as well as the first Pai models and subsequently some one-sixth scale humanoid bionoids. Jason had his own, a one shakra tall bionoid unit that looked just like him, half the size of a Pai, literally the size of a child's doll, but it was fully functional. It even had grav pods in it so it could fly around. Rook had promised to send it over to him as soon as he was done with the initial QA inspections—they were experimental—and let him play with it. Rook was working to make them even smaller, as well. His goal was to build a fully functional bionoid that was only six tikra tall, which would primarily be used by technicians to get *inside* the equipment they were repairing. On a frigate, having some of those would be *very* useful.

He was also experimenting with some pretty radical concepts as well. A four-armed bionoid was over in Rook's lab, not an Imxi but a standard Faey bionoid designed on an Imxi skeletal frame, as he experimented with Faey and Terrans learning how to control limbs they didn't have. Jason had toyed with that yesterday by merging to a Farguut bionoid, and while he couldn't use the two extra eyes, he'd messed around a little bit with learning how to control the tail. He'd gotten to where he could wag it by the time he had to get back to real life, when Aria had woken up. Dahnai had been there playing with Rook's experimental units as well, and she'd been in a Sha'i-ree bionoid for a few hours before he merged over. She'd managed to get a good grasp on controlling the tail herself.

Dahnai was healing rapidly, and the bionoids had a lot to do with it, Songa told him. While she was merged, she remained perfectly still, and that allowed her body to heal without distractions or risk of complications caused by motion. She'd be off bed restriction in just a few days, but Jason had the feeling that she wouldn't be getting out of bed very much at all except for mandatory physical therapy sessions, not when she could do whatever she wanted in a bionoid and neither suffer pain nor need to take pain medication. Soon, Jason would begin teaching her advanced applications of her Generation abilities, and Saelle would be teaching her the advanced telekinetic tricks. Her body had to be fully healed for both of those, since using her abilities put stress on her cardiovascular system, and Songa had already forbidden any such thing until she was fully healed from the transplant.

And as soon as Aria was released from the annex and sent home, Jason and Jyslin were taking a little trip to Kimdori Prime. They'd already scheduled that and worked out the security with Aya. Songa was projecting that Aria would be released in seven days, so in eight they'd be taking Jyslin over to Kimdori for her *treatment*. Aria would be going with them, as well as Rann and Shya, making it something of a micro-vacation where they'd take Aria somewhere cool as a present for getting out of the annex.

The Generations already knew about it, and Jason was pleasantly surprised that nobody had any real issues either with Jyslin joining them or the appearance of favoritism that *only* Jyslin would get this gift. Jason had used the elegantly simple argument that she already knew virtually everything anyway, so this was just sealing her to the Generations

permanently by making her one of them. Rahne had said that she didn't *want* Adam to be burdened with that "gift," since it would put some pretty severe restrictions on him, as well as make him a target.

Rahne did not want her husband to become a target.

He could understand that point of view and respect it.

So, Jyslin joining their little family wasn't going to cause any problems. She'd have to undergo the same training as any other Generation, take exomech and Naval training and eventually join Unit Alpha. Since she was an Imperial Marine, she'd be a natural at it. He had the feeling she'd be a kick-ass rigger, even better than Symone.

He finished up the last of the paperwork and leaned back in his chair, considering the next couple of months. Once they got the Syndicate dealt with, they'd have all those prisoners and ships to manage. As far as the prisoners, he was going to segregate them on Q3XD-19, put the Benga in one place and the rest of them in another, then go through them and see if anyone wanted to leave the Syndicate and ask for asylum in the Confederation. As far as the ships went, he could see quite a fight over the ships among the council, and they'd probably be mad at him for asking for a few of them himself...they didn't think he really *needed* them, he had the KMS with all its super-advanced cutting-edge tech. He wanted the *damaged* super-ships, though, so they probably wouldn't fight all that much about them. He wanted six inoperative super-ships and one undamaged one, four for the terraforming operation at Alakis for Grik'zzk and three for research and study. Two damaged ones would go to MRDD for inspection, research, and eventual refit to make them KMS support vessels, and the operational ship would go to the Academy so they could tear it apart and learn everything they could about it. That data would become public access.

Some empires would be like him, would want the damaged ships, so he'd be fighting them over the damaged ships, he supposed. A single super-ship was a king's ransom in raw materials for other applications, and resource-poor empires like the Kirri would be all but drooling over those ships not to use them, but to scrap them and use all that metal for their own purposes. The armor in a super-ship alone was enough to build *thousands* of warship hulls. So, resource poor empires like the Aridai and the Kirri, small empires like the Jobodi and the Shio and the Bolo, they would be his

primary opponents when it came to dividing up the damaged assets that were essentially going to be recycled for their materials.

He didn't think asking for seven super-ships was all that outrageous, given they'd have *thousands* of them. Plus, he already had operations going to recover the debris from the battles they'd fought against the Syndicate, collecting the debris for the metal and for intelligence, looking for intact equipment, bodies, and other things that might tell them more about their enemies. Kumi had that going the day after the first battle, she saw the raw profit in being salvagers. It was cheaper to scoop it up out of deep space than it was to mine and refine it, so she had sweeper teams out collecting the remains of past battles. Even though they were pretty thoroughly destroyed by the reactor breaches, there were significant amounts of remains of the super-ships. They'd already harvested nearly 987,000 *benkonn* of scrap metal from one battlefield, and that was from just *one* super-ship. Their teams were finding pieces of the armored hull that were hundreds of cubic kathra in volume. The bigger battlefields were going to yield *billions* of credits' worth of scrap metal, as well as substantial amounts of armor-quality metals.

They weren't the only ones who had that idea. There were salvage teams from *nineteen* empires at one battlefield, all of them running around collecting as much debris as they could. And that was the law of space, part of a series of laws agreed to by most spacefaring empires known as the *Maritime Pact*. Salvage was not owned by anyone, not even the empire that may have owned the ship from which that salvage originated if they abandoned it, didn't leave a claim beacon or other indication that it was not abandoned, and it was free for the taking by anyone *if it was in unclaimed space*. Debris within the territorial boundaries of an empire's planet, star system, or external deep space asset was considered the property of that empire, almost like the old-fashioned Terran "territorial waters" laws. The debris around Karis after the two battles fought here was the property of the Karinnes, but the ships of other empires damaged or destroyed in those battles were still the property of that empire, were not salvage, because they were not considered *abandoned assets*. But the remains of enemy ships... that was all Karinne property, because it became debris, was abandoned, within Karinne territorial space.

Out in the open space where those battles took place, the debris of *all* ships were fair game if there was no claim beacon out there declaring that an empire that had destroyed ships in the area intended to come get them. The claim beacon established that the assets were not *abandoned*, and thus salvage laws were not in effect. No beacon meant that if you get it in your ship, you own it, no matter who owned it before you did. Most empires did have claim beacons in place to keep their rights over their own ships, but independent salvagers often ignored those beacons. After all, way out there, who was going to stop you?

And that law was why the every KMS ship had a powerful self-destruct system, and why Karinnes were always so careful to recover their damaged and destroyed ships after a battle, went to such extremes to ensure that not a single biogenic chip was left behind intact. If they left a functional particle beam or biogenic chip out there and left no claim beacon, they couldn't demand their return because *they abandoned it*. And thus, they no longer had any claim on it. And even if there was a claim beacon, well, a salvager may not honor it. Or the debris may be under the control of the enemy that destroyed the asset, who wouldn't honor their claim to it.

That was half the reason why he had an entire division of the Navy that was dedicated to recovering damaged and destroyed ships, even to the point where they would jump in while the battlefield was under enemy control, grab the ships, then jump out with them. Jason went to great extremes to ensure that Karinne tech did not fall into the hands of anyone else, not even his friends.

Outside of the super-ships, Jason only wanted two of each class of ship for research, fully operational. One would go to the Academy, one would go to MRDD. The rest of the Confederation would be welcome to the rest of the Syndicate fleet.

After all, since he could get to Andromeda, he had the ability to get more Syndicate ships on his own, and he wouldn't have to share them with anyone. There were *millions* of derelicts floating around in Andromedan space, the victims of the millennia-long war with the Consortium, like the battleship and super-ship they'd already salvaged for their own use. They'd also found several smaller ships that they could get running, were fairly undamaged and repairable.

Then there was the greater problem, and that was Andromeda as a whole. The colonizing force was on its way, and the chances were good that the Syndicate would launch a full-scale invasion of the Milky Way, the minute they felt they could spare the assets from their war with the Consortium. And if the Consortium surrendered their remaining territory and joined the Syndicate as the newest mega-corporation, as Zaa's spies said they would, then they'd be facing the full might of the entire Syndicate *and* what was left of the Consortium's military. That wasn't going to be an easy problem to solve.

It was going to take a certain degree of utter ruthlessness that Jason wasn't sure he wanted to enact...but if he wanted his galaxy to *not* be conquered and enslaved, he'd *better* be willing to go there.

He did check in on one little minor detail, and that was to call Mikano and congratulate her on her promotion to the chair of the *Javelin*. Gia was now settling into her new office over in HQ and preparing to do her new job as the officer in charge of the frigate fleet, the woman responsible for the training of the crews and the maintenance and upkeep of the ships. Since they were so specialized, they needed a specialist to oversee them, and no captain in the KMS knew more about frigates than Gia. "How does it feel to be in the big chair, Mikano?" he asked.

She laughed, shifting a little in her Captain's chair. She was on duty, and the *Javelin* was with the *Pegasus* task force, currently picketed to defend the Stargate at Oasis. "It feels a little weird," she admitted. "I didn't think I'd be commanding *this* frigate for my first command."

"Hey, you know the crew, they know you, and that's important. Who did you pick as your XO?"

"Lieutenant Amai," she answered.

"Good choice," he said with an approving nod. "By the way, Jyslin wants me to pull you off duty so you can go shopping with her tomorrow, and meet our new adopted daughter."

Mikano laughed. "No," she replied with a smile.

"That's what you *better* say," Jason teased, which made her laugh again. "Tim was asking about you too, for an entirely different reason."

“Does that man ever give up?” she asked.

“No, he doesn’t,” he warned. “You’re the forbidden fruit, Mikano, and that drives him crazy.” She rolled her eyes, which made him grin a bit. “Face it, you’re gonna be popular with the boys now. Pretty *and* commanding a ship? You’ve got it all. You need to get married just to make them leave you alone.”

“Pssht,” she hissed, which made him laugh.

After that bit of business was settled, he finished up and went back to the annex. Jyslin had brought in the *entire* family, and Aria looked a little overwhelmed by it. The toddlers were running around the room, the babies were sleeping in hoverstrollers and being minded by Ayama, Surin, and Seido, and Amber was standing vigil on Aria’s bed, laying near her side and gnawing on a chew treat Ayama made for her to keep her teeth clean. It was the only “pet-like” thing that Amber would eat ...and maybe the fact that Amber didn’t like it when Ayama brushed her teeth had something to do with it. Since it was made by Ayama just for her and probably didn’t taste like *pet food*, that must be why she’d eat it. Myleena and Siyara were just leaving when he arrived, and he chatted with her a bit before going into the room.

“Well, this is a bit loud and noisy,” Jason mused as he came in and leaned over Jyslin, smiling down at Aria. “I see she brought the whole house.”

“Is it always this crowded?”

“No, they’re usually all spread out through the house,” he told her. “But I will warn you to watch Ayama over there. She’s sneaky,” he said with a conspiratorial smile. “Did you learn everyone’s names?”

“Mah,” she replied, which was a way of her saying *yes*. She didn’t use it all the time, usually when she was distracted or engaged, when she wasn’t thinking of what she wanted to say. Jason suspected it might be from her original language, so deeply inset into her psyche that not even what the Benga did to her dislodged it. She didn’t remember that original language, at least cognitively. “You have a lot of babies.”

“I don’t have enough babies,” Jyslin told her with a smile. “But Jason has even more.”

“Why?”

“Jason is one of only two people who were the last of their kind until just a little while ago, Aria,” Jyslin explained. “So he needed to have lots of babies to make sure that his race didn’t go extinct.”

“Did they kill them?”

“No, sweetie,” Jason told her, putting a hand on her chest. “It’s a little hard to explain. Let’s just say that before I came to live here, I lived in a place where there was no cure for a disease that my people are prone to catching. So most of my ancestors got sick and died before they had any kids. Me and Rahne, we were the last ones left, but then we came to live here, where they can cure the disease.”

“Will I catch it?”

Jason chuckled. “No, you’re fine. It’s not *that* kind of disease. And even if you did, Doctor Songa could cure it just like that,” he added, snapping his fingers.

Songa came into the room and took command. “Quiet down everyone!” she called, then came over to the bed. “It’s time for your treatment, Aria,” she told her with a gentle smile.

“I don’t like the needles.”

“I know, but I think that tomorrow, you might be ready to get out of that bed and walk,” she said with a smile. “So tomorrow’s going to be a big day for you, your first chance to eat real food and your first steps since you came to us,” she announced. “Have you decided what you want to eat first?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well then, how about I prepare a buffet of all sorts of different things for you to try,” she offered. “So you can find out what you like and what you don’t like. How does that sound?”

“That sounds good. Does food really have different tastes?”

“As many as you can imagine,” Songa smiled. “And different textures, and some is served hot and some is served cold, so there’s all kinds of

different things for you to try. And Ayama and Seido are going to help make it, so everything is going to be good.”

“We are?” Ayama asked lightly.

“You are now,” Songa smiled back at her. “You can come invade the cafeteria kitchen so it can be made here. Aria has some dietary requirements that means we have to make her food here.”

“I supposed we could do that, as long as you have a proper grill,” Seido said.

“I’ll have one brought in,” Songa answered.

They waited as Aria went for her biotine treatment, which took about two hours, and that was long enough for the babies to get a bit cranky and the toddlers to get *way* too unruly. Ayama, Surin, and Seido took them home, but they were replaced by Jason’s older kids when they got out of school. When Aria returned from her treatment, she looked a little tired, but she also perked up quite a bit when she saw the elder kids. She rather liked them and seemed to have a particular attachment to Aran. They all gathered around her bed and gabbed at her, which never failed to scatter her a little bit, but she also enjoyed it. She was making friends, and that was exactly what Jason wanted to see.

They stayed with her for a few more hours, then Songa more or less kicked them out so Aria could get some rest. As what had become usual, it was an extended goodbye because Aria didn’t like to be alone, and Songa understood that enough to where she kept a nurse in the room with Aria at all times, a nurse that Aria liked. “I’ll be back tomorrow morning, my little treasure,” Jason promised. “But I won’t be here all morning. I have a very important meeting in the morning that I can’t miss. And I think it’s time to introduce you to Dahnai and Sirri. I think you’re up to it.”

“Who are they?”

“Dahnai is a very, very close friend of mine,” he told her. “Sirri is her daughter. They’re very anxious to meet you.”

“Why didn’t you bring them before?”

He laughed. “That’s because I wanted you to be strong enough to handle it. Dahnai can be a little...pushy. But I think that you’ll like both of them.

She's a wonderful woman, and Sirri is a great girl."

The nurse came in, a young Faey man who was very handsome, with light pink hair himself. "Good afternoon, Miss Aria," he said. "How are you today?"

"Ovin! I'm feeling better," she replied. "Songa said that I might be able to try walking tomorrow."

"That's wonderful news! Your Grace," he said, giving Jason a bow.

"How you doing, Ovin?"

"Very well, your Grace. I brought a few games for Aria to play this evening, and I thought we might watch some viddy."

"I'm sure you'll keep her entertained," Jason said, patting him on the shoulder. He then leaned over and kissed Aria on the forehead. "You be good for Ovin, my little treasure."

"I will."

Aya herded them home on a frigate, and he was greeted at the pad by Dahnai in one of her bionoids. She'd had another one built, one she left on the strip just so she could jump over and see him. As what was normal for Dahnai when she was over on the strip, she was nude, wearing only a pair of sandals and a wide-brimmed straw hat. She must have been out on the beach. "Dahnai, you finish that work with Rook?"

"It was a blast," she said brightly. "I tested out the giruzi bionoid for him. I never realized walking on four legs could be so challenging. How is the girl?"

"Fine, and I think she'll be ready to meet you tomorrow. How about you come over after the council meeting? Bring Sirri with you."

"Sounds good to me. I'm dying to meet this Oracle."

"Just *never* call her that, Dahnai, or even mention anything about the Benga. She's terrified of her own power, because it's tied up in a lot of her trauma."

"I can understand that," she nodded. "I read that preliminary report your office put out, and dear *Trelle*. The Benga are beyond cruel."

“So now you know my position on the Syndicate is beyond justified,” he said darkly as they started towards the house. “Songa said she’s gonna let her try to walk a little bit tomorrow, test out her legs, and she also gets to start on solid food tomorrow too. Ayama and Seido are going to go over and cook her a buffet of different foods to sample.”

“That’s nice of them,” Dahnai noted. “I just can’t get over that brown skin.”

“I kinda like it,” Jason said. “It makes her look more Terran.”

“And how is that a good thing?” Dahnai demanded.

“It is from my point of view,” he replied lightly. “It’s the only thing about Jys I’d change.”

“Excuse me?” Jyslin challenged archly, which made both Dahnai and Jason laugh.

“The man with a Faey wife and two Faey *amu* suddenly decides he doesn’t like blue skin?” Dahnai asked.

“We all have our secrets,” he said playfully, then danced ahead before Jyslin could whack him.

Dahnai more or less hung out at the house while they settled in for the evening, including sitting at the table while they had dinner out on the deck. Jason traded a few messages with Zaa over Jyslin’s treatment, then he checked in on Aria. She was playing a board game with Ovin of all things, and he had to laugh when he realized they were playing the Terran board game *Life*. But then again, that wasn’t as silly as it seemed. Ovin would explain what everything *meant* while they played, teaching her some of the basics that she never learned while a prisoner of the Syndicate. It was a great way to teach her about the basics of society while making a game out of it and proved Ovin’s chops as one of the better nurses in the Medical Service. It was also keeping Aria entertained, and that was important.

“How did Kellin do in his lessons today, Dahnai?” Jyslin asked, making him pay attention again.

“Too well,” she growled, which made Jason laugh a little. “He’s gotten to where he can use his TK almost every time he tries now. I swear, the little punk is a natural. He’s making me look bad.”

“How strong does it look?”

“So far? Pretty strong,” she replied. “Today he managed to pick up ten konn, and Saelle doesn’t think he’s reached the limits of his power yet.”

“That’s not shabby at all,” Jason noted. “Nowhere near you, but still, not too shabby.”

“If he ends up being stronger than me, I’m gonna strangle him,” she stated fiercely, which made them both laugh.

“When is Songa going to clear you to start your own training?”

“Not for at least another takir,” she said with a sour face. “She said she wants me fully healed before I’m allowed to start doing anything strenuous. I’m starting to feel like a pig,” she complained. “The doctors have me on so much bio-accelerant, I’m eating six or seven times a day.”

“Look at it as your chance to eat all you want and not have to worry about gaining weight,” Jason told her.

“I don’t want to get used to that, it’ll just mean I’ll have to work out ten hours a day to keep it off,” she replied.

“I wouldn’t complain too much. That stuff is why you’ll be getting out of bed in one takir instead of four.”

“I’m not complaining, at least not in front of the doctors,” she answered. “It’s already done wonders. I barely feel any pain when I’m not merged now, even without meds. Just a slight dull ache. But when I move, it’s another story,” she chuckled. “It makes going to the bathroom a bit of an exercise.”

Cyra manifested a hologram by the table. “*Jason, Kreel is on the comm,*” she relayed. “*He wants to come over.*”

“Works for me, I can introduce him to Aria in the morning. Tell him I’ll clear him in.”

“*Of course,*” she answered, then her hologram winked out.

“He’s been coming over an awful lot lately,” Dahnai noted.

“Is it a crime to want to hang out with your friends, Dahnai?” he challenged.

“Where *he’s* concerned, it might be,” she replied. “Didn’t he almost get you two arrested once?”

Jason had to laugh. “Hey, we didn’t start that fight, it started at the next table over and boiled over onto us,” he protested. “And I bet that Bari-Bari he punched was all kinds of surprised. It’s easy to forget that he has *metal* in his bones until he hits you with them.”

“I seriously don’t see how he swims. He should sink to the bottom,” Jyslin chuckled.

“Because they’re not solid metal, just laced with metal,” Jason chuckled. “And Kreel is much stronger than he looks.”

“That’s the truth,” Dahnai noted.

“And how would you know that, Dahnai?” Jason asked lightly, looking at her.

“Shake his hand, Jayce,” she retorted. “What did you think?”

“That you may have gone to the furry side,” he teased, then laughed when she reached across the table and smacked him.

“That’s...perverted!”

“Well, past Empresses of the Imperium have been known for their depravity. I thought you might be finally following in their footsteps,” he lilted, then the others laughed when Dahnai literally chased him down the stairs and halfway down the beach, snarling curses at him.

The next morning, Jason learned that Kreel’s impish appeal worked on just about *all* Faey.

Aria was *delighted* by Kreel the moment he burst into her hospital room with Jason, making jokes, being silly, and generally just being Kreel. It took him barely five minutes to get her giggling, and Songa nearly brained him when he picked her up out of her bed and carried her up and down the hospital corridors piggyback, and being fairly loud and obnoxious about it to boot. After Songa chased them back into the room, he settled down a tiny bit, but still kept Aria quite entertained for nearly an hour.

When he went out to go get something to eat in the cafeteria, Aria gave Jason a huge smile. "I like him. He's silly."

"That's why he's one of my best friends," he laughed in agreement. "He has a job something like mine. He runs his people's government; they call it the Union."

"He doesn't live here?"

He shook his head. "We met when his people, the Grimja, joined the Confederation, and we've been friends ever since. He comes over to our planet quite a lot just to visit, because he has lots of friends here, and Grimja are very social people. They like to be with their friends. But don't let him acting silly fool you, my little treasure. Kreel is one of the smartest people you'll ever meet. He just knows how to have fun, that's all."

"Mah."

"Now, how did last night go?" he asked.

"We played some games, and watched a few of the viddy shows," she replied. "But I got sleepy early and went to bed. I didn't dream at all. I'm starting to like sleeping without dreams."

"Hopefully, soon you won't need the sleep inducer," he told her, tousling her pink hair. "That you'll be able to sleep and not have the nightmares, that you'll only have good dreams."

"Most dreams are bad."

"But not all. Was the dream that led me to you a bad dream?"

She considered that a moment. "No," she acceded. "But all dreams seem scary at first. Many of them start good, but then turn bad."

"I completely understand why you'd feel that way," he nodded. "But trust me, Aria. In time, you won't be afraid to go to sleep."

"I hope so."

Kreel came back in, with Songa and two orderlies in tow. "Uh oh, looks like your day is about to start," Jason chuckled.

"Yes it is, Jason. It's time for your morning treatment, Aria," Songa announced. "Afterward, we'll go down to the cafeteria for some ice cream."

This afternoon, after your second treatment, we're going to try walking a little bit. How does that sound?"

"It sounds good," she replied. "I hate being stuck in this bed."

"See? I totally had the right idea!" Kreel declared. "You acted like I was trying to throw her out the window!"

"Hush, you," Songa chided, which made Jason grin at Aria as she giggled.

"We'll clear out and let you get your day going, my little treasure," Jason chuckled, leaning down and kissing her on the forehead. "We'll be back after we have our meeting, and I'll bring Dahnai and Sirri."

"Okay."

After Kreel said his own goodbyes, in his own special little way by assaulting her with his whiskers, they picked up his guards and headed for the roof, where a frigate was standing by to take them to his office. *She's a cutie, but a little nervous*, Kreel noted privately.

They tortured her for years, Kreel, Jason answered, disgust and outrage threaded through his thought. *In ways I don't think either of us could imagine. And if we could, we'd probably think ourselves monsters for being able to.*

True enough.

They caught an early lunch—there was no telling how long the meeting was going to last—and headed for the White House. Chirk had brought in a merge pod for Kreel to use for the council meeting, sitting in his office and taking up quite a bit of space. He hopped right into it and merged to his bionoid over in the Hall of Peace, and Jason sat on the couch and did the same. They were nearly ten minutes early, but it turned out that they were among the last of the leaders to assemble. Almost everyone was already present and ready. Assaba was standing at the lectern, gavel in hand and looking almost like an impatient schoolteacher, waiting for the last of the leaders to merge to their bionoids and join the council. Dahnai was attending this council, the first since her *accident*, but Sirri was also attending in her very own bionoid, sitting beside Dahnai at their desk in the auditorium.

It took a little subterfuge to get away with that. Since Sirri supposedly wasn't allowed to have a jack, her bionoid had something of a backstory. Sirri's cover story was that the bionoid fed its sensory data to her on holograms, and she controlled the bionoid's movements with a Karinne interface, much akin to the one-way interface controls the Karinnes used for most of their military mecha and ships before developing jacks and merge capability. So, she could see and hear through the bionoid with speakers and video feeds put onto holograms but got no other sensory feed off of it. She could control its movements with some degree of finesse but didn't have full sensory merge with it.

Amazing how something like interface control was now *obsolete technology*. Well, at least for adults on Karis. Kids on Karis still used interface control for most of their toys and other things, since they didn't have jacks. It did still require a Karinne interface to pull off, due to the special biogenic chip that could sense and translate command thought, and that was the reason why the Karinnes hadn't released one-way interface technology to the Academy.

When the last leader joined them, Aktut Mobi of the Volarians, Assaba banged the gavel. "We are all present, so we are now in session," he boomed, his heavy tail slashing a little behind him. "The two main subjects of this meeting are to review the operation against the Syndicate at Oasis, and to discuss the upcoming negotiations for the surrender of Syndicate forces. To provide information on both matters so we are informed in our negotiations, I will call General Lorna Shaddale before the council to give testimony."

Good old Assaba. Right to the point, and no chasing butterflies.

Lorna also didn't disappoint. When she briefed the council on the Karinne operation to capture the Oracle and scare Sha Ra into negotiating, she didn't pull any punches. She made sure to describe exactly what the Syndicate did to Aria before showing them telemetry feed of the operation from the points of view of the Gladiators that went in, and she also revealed the Karinnes' newest little toy, the nexus bridge, showing them how the Karinnes got in and got out.

That brought Jason into it. He spent nearly two hours answering all kinds of questions from the others about the bridge, from how it worked to

how much they intended to allow other members of the Confederation access the technology for their own use. Jason sort of dimmed their hopes a little bit by explaining that the CCM would have operational control of one of the nexus bridges, and anyone who wanted to use it for their own empire had to pay the costs to operate it. And at about C120,000 per use, it wasn't something that they were going to use without a lot of thought beforehand. That was a serious chunk of money to move just a few people from one place to another.

But, a few of them had some good ideas with it, mainly to use it to hold face to face meetings with empires outside the Confederation. It would allow the council to send diplomats just about anywhere they could get a beacon, and that beacon could be delivered by probe. They wouldn't even need a ship to get a beacon somewhere, it was small enough to load onto a Karinne hyperspace probe. They could also use it to send scout teams to new planets that probes had discovered so they could get more detailed scans, alleviating the need to send scout ships. The nexus bridge was big enough to allow exploration teams to take small exomechs, hoverbikes, and other small conveyances through, given the exploration teams a good deal of mobility when they arrived at their destination.

Jason had to admit, he hadn't thought of using the bridge as a way to get exploration teams to a planet. And since the beacon had a biogenic comm unit in it so it could communicate with the bridge targeting system, it gave them a real-time means to communicate with the Confederation.

Things got a little pecky, however, when they discussed Aria herself. When Golbar Dro suggested that she be handed over to the Academy for *examination*, Jason nearly jumped up and charged across the auditorium at him. "Didn't you hear what Lorna said, Dro?" Jason said hotly, standing up and slamming his hands on his desk. "They *tortured* that little girl! For *years*! I am *not* handing that girl over to *anyone* that wants to study her, because to incite her visions, you have to *literally* torture her! She's suffered enough!"

"So you intend to hold her away from the rest of us and use her powers for your own ends?"

"Didn't you hear what we'd have to do to her to get any predictions out of her?" he asked in outrage. "Do you think me that much of a monster,

Dro? When I got her out of that room, I made her a solemn promise that I would *never* ask her to use her powers, ever again!”

“*You* got her out?”

“I was G1, and all of us were PIM on that operation, Dro. We were *in* those Gladiators, so our lives were on the line the moment we stepped through the nexus bridge,” he said with an angry look. “I was the one that cut open the door and picked up that little girl off the bed. I went in there *personally* to get that little girl out of that nightmare! And so help me *God*, nobody is ever going to exploit her again! Not you, not me, not this council, not *anyone*!”

“Then what do you plan to do with her?” Krirara asked.

“Do? I’ve already made up a bedroom for her in my house,” he answered her. “I’m adopting her so I can *personally* watch over her and ensure she enjoys a happy, carefree life. I promised her I’d take care of her, and I *meant it*. So she’s coming to live with me, where I can make sure that *nobody* ever hurts her again.” He saw the dubious looks on many of their faces. “Don’t any of you comprehend what that little girl did for us?” he said. “She misled and deceived Sha Ra into getting most of her fleet trapped at Oasis. She fed Sha Ra incorrect information to get her to make strategic mistakes that Lorna capitalized upon and made sure that she couldn’t predict our own movements and set traps for us that would have made us lose this war. That little girl *saved our asses*, and I’ll fight anyone in this room *to the death* that’s going to spit in the face of her brave act to help us and try to use her the same way the Benga did. Does everyone in this room understand that? Because mark my words, they are no idle threat,” he warned, sweeping a hot gaze across the room. “If you want to see her, that’s fine. You can visit me at my house and meet her, at least once she gets out of the hospital. I am going to have her tested by the Karinne Medical Service so they can get an idea of how her precognitive powers work, but they’re going to be *passive* examinations. And that information will be made available to all of you through the Academy, so you’re going to know exactly what we know, not an iota more and not an iota less. You’ll be able to see that I’m keeping my word both to this council and to her. But I’m going to protect that little girl, esteemed members of this council. From the Benga, and from anyone that wants to put her back in another bed and

torment that child to the point of madness just so they can see glimpses of the future. If anyone in this room has a problem with that, you say so now so I can come over there and punch you in the face.”

Kreel couldn't help but laugh, and there were a few other chuckles through the room.

“While I commend the Grand Duke's zeal in the matter, as chair, it is my responsibility to remind him that making such threats are against council rules,” Assaba said with the slightest hint of amusement in his voice.

Zaa put a calming hand on his arm, and he blew out his breath and sat back down, a bit aggressively. “I apologize to the council for my rudeness,” he said with a bit of a growl.

“Well, now that we know where Jayce stands,” Kreel said with a grin over at him, “we should start thinking about how we're going to deal with these Oracles when the Syndicate comes back.”

“We have a plan for that,” Zaa announced. “I'll explain in further detail after General Shaddale completes her briefing.”

Lorna worked through the rest of her material fairly quickly, discussing the options they had to deal with Sha Ra at the bargaining table. “I recommend that in addition to President Mesaiima and High Staff Ethikk, that Grand Emperor Shakizarr of the Verutans, Field Marshal Grran of the Jobodi, Emperor Orgrik Vort of the Vekk and High King Jokik Bor of the Ubutu attend the negotiations,” Lorna continued. “The four of them have the tactical and strategic mastery of military matters to handle any military issues the Benga might bring up, and all of them are large or physically imposing. My psychologists suggest that the Benga are not *used* to anyone being larger than they are, so it will present a psychological advantage.”

“But we're not larger than they are, General,” Jokik noted. “My people stand a good five Faey shakra shorter than a Benga.”

“You will be in a macro bionoid, your Highness,” Jason answered. “We scale them with Faey and Terrans being the baseline, the equivalent height to a Benga. You will *tower* over Fleet Commander Sha Ra, because you tower over a Faey.”

“Ah. Well, I’m not going to complain about being intimidating,” he chuckled.

Lorna finished up with the dispensation of the enemy fleet and Jason’s plan to trap them at Oasis if negotiations failed, then she yielded the floor to Zaa. She stood up and went down to the speaking podium. She first went over some of what she told Jason, giving the council a general overview of the Dreamers as a species and their powers of precognition, emphasizing what had to be done to get the predictions and that even among the Dreamers, Oracles were exceedingly rare, with only maybe one out of ten million having precognitive abilities “We Kimdori are currently working with the Karinnes to solve the Oracle problem,” she declared. “We are further studying the bridges recently built to try to use that technology to make a more stable one-way wormhole. When we refine the design, we intend to use the idea put forth by this council some time ago. We are going to get a Stargate to Andromeda,” she announced. “We will send the pieces through using a more stable one-way wormhole, and when we have all the pieces there, we will use the nexus bridge to send over a construction and operations crew. We have already selected our base of operations, discovered by the expedition I sent to Andromeda that arrived months ago,” she said, bringing up a hologram of the quadrary. “This is a quadrary supergiant system deep in Andromeda, close to its galactic core,” she explained. “It is so close that the latent radiation emanating from the core is lethal to 99% of all known life. We have chosen this system because the four stars are in an orbital system that creates a *natural* interdiction effect that extends out twelve light years, disrupting hyperspace jump engines. The effect is so powerful that it also burns out all forms of spatial propulsion *and* energy generation within one light year of the system, unless those systems are heavily shielded. Simply put, esteemed members of this council, the Syndicate has *no way* to get to this system. Even if they do find some way, their power plants will fail when they get too close to it, their radiation shields will come down, and the natural radiation emanating from the core will kill them in minutes. As we speak, I have Kimdori there preparing an area that is protected from the natural gravimetric flux in the system that would destroy the engines and power plants of any ship that enters it, as well as prevents the Stargate we intend to send from operating. When we have the Stargate in operation, we Kimdori and the Karinnes will prepare a base of operations for the rest of the CCM. Here,” she pointed.

“Planet 21 has *five* habitable moons in its planetary system, a truly amazing thing given the system’s location in the galaxy. It is because the magnetic field of the gas giant is powerful enough to deflect most of the radiation but is not strong enough to threaten the life that has developed on these moons, and each moon also has a magnetic field that deflects enough of the remaining radiation to make all five moons able to support life. We will construct large and comprehensive forward bases on three of these five moons, Moons B, C, and E, each with different environmental conditions conducive to large segments of species within the Confederation. Moon B has an extremely high proportion of carbon dioxide in its atmosphere, making it ideal for those who breathe that gas. Moon C and Moon E have very Terran-like atmospheres, predominantly oxygen and nitrogen. And while Moon K is lethal to most of us, its conditions are considered ideal for a Birkon. Once we have the moons properly shielded so our technology will operate, the CCM can safely occupy the forward bases. From that combined base of operations, we will be able to take the war to Andromeda.

“This assumes, of course, that this council votes to prosecute the war beyond the boundaries of our galaxy,” she noted. “We are not advocating a protracted war against a government that spans all of Andromeda, my esteemed colleagues, but a single operation designed to remove the Syndicate’s greatest military asset, their Oracles. Once that operation is complete, all military assets would be brought back to our home galaxy, and no further action would be taken in Andromeda. We plan to retain our forward base, but purely for scientific and exploration purposes. Even then, however, no member of this council is by rule *required* to devote assets to this operation,” she pointed out. “The rules of the Confederation make this clear. Thus, any who decide to aid us in this operation to take the Oracles away from the Syndicate will have to volunteer forces to that cause.”

She turned back to the hologram and pointed at a new hologram, showing an image of a very distant blue and green planet. “We are going to use our Andromeda base of operations to make a strike against this star system, the home planet of the Dreamers, the race of beings from which the Oracles hail,” she continued. “And we have a plan, a plan that not even our enemy’s ability to predict the success of future events will be able to counter. As Jason told me a few days ago, my friends, the key to beating someone that can see the future is to use it against them. We will set into

motion a chain of events that cannot be stopped, and that the Oracles will foresee as a cataclysmic disaster that will end all life in their entire star system. We will cause the enemy fleet defending the home planet of the Oracles to flee from this cataclysm, abandoning the Dreamers to what they see as certain doom, and once they are gone, we will interdict the system to prevent them from returning and send in an invasion fleet to destroy what remains of Syndicate military assets and launch a ground operation to free the Dreamers from Syndicate control. Once we have control of the system, we will undertake an operation to remove the Dreamers from Andromeda and resettle them in our galaxy, on a planet we will find for them that most closely matches their environmental preferences. Once we have the Dreamers evacuated from Andromeda, we will pull back and engage the Syndicate diplomatically, trying to avoid direct conflict and negotiate a permanent peace that keeps them on *their* side of the galactic cluster. After all, their sheer size would make conflict with them a fool's errand. And we believe that the best way to bring them to the negotiating table in good faith is to strip them of their Oracles.

“We predict that this has a high probability of success, for two reasons. First, we have learned through the expedition getting access to the Syndicate's computer network that the Oracles' ability to see the future has a flaw, a fatal flaw. They cannot foresee or predict their *own* deaths. We will use that against them by making them foresee a cataclysm that kills *everyone else* in their home system, so by association they will also believe that it kills *them* as well. That will convince the Syndicate to flee their system, to abandon them to what they will see as their fate and thereby deny the power of the Oracles to anyone else. When the cataclysm spares the home planet of the Oracles, we move in and interdict the system to prevent the Syndicate from returning, then take the system by military force. We believe this will work because of the Oracle we have now. They resist the Syndicate, my friends. They are tortured to make them see the future, and the data we stole indicate that the Oracles *resist* this, that there are many documented cases of Oracles attempting to escape from Syndicate control. The Oracle that came with the fleet that attacked us saw a chance to escape from them when she was far, far away from the Syndicate's main force, in a place where she would be taken in and given asylum from them, and she took it by deceiving them into losing the war with us. We believe that if that opportunity presents itself in *Andromeda*, the Oracles under the Syndicate's

control will rebel against them in order to secure freedom. They will help us, because they will foresee that with us, they will be safe and protected.”

“That sounds convincing, but why didn’t they do that against the Consortium?” Vizzie asked.

“Because the Consortium would use them the same way the Syndicate did, so they would see that as trading one torturer for another,” she answered. “If we are sincere in our desire to help them, to protect them from those that would use them, then they will help us defeat the Syndicate, and thereby protect our galaxy from Syndicate invasion in the future. We can turn the Oracles against the Syndicate, so long as we show them mercy and kindness.”

“There’s another fact that you need to know. The Dreamers are *Faey*,” Jason announced, which caused several gasps and more than a few looks at Dahnai. He put up a picture of Aria and let them look at it. “We believe they’re the descendants of the Karinnes that the Consortium abducted and took back to Andromeda about 1,300 years ago, and that was long enough for them to lose their blue coloration and cause their telepathic powers to evolve to where a small portion of them gained precognitive abilities. So, in a way, that makes the Dreamers *my* people, and I’m going to go to Andromeda and free them from the Syndicate,” he declared.

“Not just you,” Dahnai said firmly. “They are *Faey*, and I will not allow my people to be tortured like that. You have the full support of the Imperium in that operation, Jason. We need to get our people out of there, both because we can’t let the Syndicate keep that kind of advantage and because they are *us*, and it’s my duty as the Empress to protect the Faey people.”

“My analysts suggest that without the Oracles, the Syndicate will be much, much less likely to invade our galaxy, as their guarantee of victory will be removed,” Zaa continued. “The Syndicate is all about profit, esteemed friends. Remove the guarantee of gain, and their desire for war will be greatly diminished. That is why we have only this one military operation planned for Andromeda. We believe that if we can wrest the Oracles away from Syndicate control, that they will be much more peaceful neighbors.”

“That does sound like it has some possibilities,” Assaba said from the lectern. “I open the floor to general debate.”

They discussed Zaa’s idea for nearly four hours, and the end result was that just about everyone thought that establishing that forward base in Andromeda was a good idea, even if they weren’t going to attack the Syndicate’s home territory. Having that base gave them options, and options were always good. However, not everyone was sold on her idea to capture the home planet of the Oracles. But those were the posers and wannabes, and they would probably refuse to devote assets to the operation. The leaders on the council with real military chops, rulers like Grran, Orgrik, and Jokik, they liked the idea, and the chances were good that they would devote assets to it. Shakizarr also liked it, and while he wasn’t a true military expert, he was far more versed in military matters than most rulers. In that respect, he was much like Jason. That was because while Shakizarr wasn’t a general or admiral in his military, he did happen to be a genius, and he made his command staff *explain* everything to him, and that gave him a better understanding of military tactics. That did, though, mean that they might get a sizable number of Shakizarr’s *very* large navy to assist in the plan.

It was almost dinnertime by the time Jason and Kreel picked up Dahnai and Sirri and returned to the annex. Jyslin was sitting with Aria when they came in, and Aria’s eyes lit up when she saw them. “There’s my little treasure,” Jason said, coming over and taking her hands. “Do your last treatment?”

“Mah,” she said brightly. “I got to walk!”

“She managed four steps,” Jyslin said proudly. “I got some viddy of it.”

“That’s amazing,” he told her with a smile.

Kreel came over and grinned down at her. “Couldn’t wait for us to get back, eh, you naughty little thing?” he asked playfully.

“We waited and waited for you,” she replied.

“I’m sorry, our council meeting went way long,” Jason apologized, then he offered his hand to Dahnai. “Aria, this is Dahnai Merrane,” he introduced as she and Sirri walked up. “And her daughter Sirri. They’re part of my family. And now, they’re part of yours.”

“Hello, pippy,” Dahnai said in an instantly tender voice, the voice of a mother. “It’s nice to meet you.”

Aria gave her a long look, then gasped. “It’s you! The other face from my dream!” she blurted.

“I am? What did you see in your dream, pippy?” Dahnai asked seriously.

“You’re the Valkyrie!” she said. “The woman in golden armor riding the dragon!”

“My, that sounds impressive,” she said, leaning over a bit. “And what do I do in your dream?”

“You have your dragon eat the giant,” she replied.

Remember, most of her visions are part of a dream, they’re couched in metaphor and symbol, Jason warned privately. “Is it a good thing or a bad thing that her dragon eats the giant?”

“It’s a good thing,” she replied, looking at him. “The giant was about to step on a village, but her dragon eats it before it does.”

Jason put *that* together quickly. It was a stark warning to him that he needed Dahnai’s help to save the Dreamers. The dragon had to be her Navy, and the giant the Syndicate. “Well, then, it’s a good thing I’m here,” Dahnai smiled.

“Mah. You’re like Jason and Jyslin,” she said, pointing at Jason. “I know you from my dream, just like I know them. I know you’re nice.”

“You’ve seen me in your dreams, sweetling?” Jyslin asked.

“Mah, but I didn’t recognize you at first, because you wear a mask in my dream,” she answered. “But I figured it out.”

“What does she do in your dream?” Jason asked.

Aria sniffled a bit. “She loves me and takes care of me, like my own mother would have,” she said.

Jyslin’s eyes just *melted*, and she collected up Aria in her arms. “That already came true, my sweetling,” she cooed to her. “I already love you.”

Well, that certainly explained to Jason why Aria warmed up to Jyslin so fast. She must have seen her in her visions, Jason's wife and her foster mother. But why the mask? That seemed unusual, and it also seemed strangely important. "Do you know why she was wearing a mask in your dream, Aria?" Jason asked.

"Neh," she answered, which was her word for *no*. "I take the mask off in my dream, I just don't remember what's behind it. She just smiles at me and puts it back on and tells me that I'll understand when I'm older."

"And you didn't have any dreams of me? I'm hurt, little whisker! I thought we were friends!" Kreel declared in an insincere voice of anguish.

"It's okay, Kreel. I like you anyway," Aria said with a smile from Jyslin's hug.

"She can see right through you, rodent," Dahnai grinned.

"We spent the morning together," Kreel replied. "And she liked me *before* she liked you, so nyah."

Jason just had to laugh.

They had quite a nice visit with Aria. She warmed to Dahnai and Sirri very quickly, and Kreel certainly kept her spirits up. She even managed a few more steps for them, walking very slowly and carefully with Jyslin holding her hands, almost like a baby being taught to walk.

Ryn came in with Aya, and Aria gave her a guarded smile as Kreel carried her around the room on his shoulders. "Hello, Miss Ryn. Are we going to try again?"

If you think you're up to it, kitling, she answered, sending so that Aria could hear her.

"Try what?" Dahnai asked.

"Aria forgot her original language. Ryn thinks it's still in there somewhere, and she's been trying to find it," Jason answered.

"Oh. Well, that would be nice. And useful," Dahnai nodded. "Zaa didn't get a datafile on it?"

“*They* keep almost everything about *them* top secret,” he answered. “Zaa’s people haven’t found anything else about them yet.”

Councilor, if you could bring her here, Ryn asked, patting the couch beside her as she sat down. Kreel carried her over and set her down, then tickled her a little bit and made her giggle.

“Do I look like a *Councilor* when I’m dressed like this, Ryn?” he challenged as he rose back up.

Of course you do, she replied with a light smile, which made him snort. Aria managed to stay pretty stable as she sat up—the treatments really had been doing wonders for her—and smiled up at Ryn trustingly as she put her fingertips on the girl’s temples. *Remember, if I do anything that seems scary, you tell me immediately*, she told Aria.

“Okay,” she nodded, then she closed her eyes and bowed her head. Ryn did the same, and then they both fell silent and motionless.

Jason could sense what was going on, and quite simply, it was a master at her craft doing her magic. Ryn wasn’t the most powerful telepath on Karis, but it was a very good bet to say that she was the most *skilled* telepath on Karis. Ryn could do things that would make most telepaths shake their heads and declare it impossible, and Jason could feel the edges of it as she focused all that skill and training on Aria’s fragile mind. She moved very carefully, very lightly through the tunnels of Aria’s conscious and subconscious, delicately sifting through memories buried deeply in her mind, many of them blocked because of the pain involved with them. She touched those memories in a way that didn’t allow Aria to see them, to relive them, saving the girl from that trauma as she pursed her lips, clearly unsettled by what she was seeing herself.

After nearly twenty minutes, Ryn raised her head slightly. *I found it*, she declared to the room. *At least pieces of it. But I know where to look for the rest. It’s fragmented in her mind, bound up with memories she’s blocking and some of them I sealed. Give me a little while to rebuild it.*

Just be careful, Ryn, Aya warned.

I’ll separate them from her other memories, and make sure that hearing and speaking it doesn’t trigger them, she answered. *Jason, I’ll upload it to my interface and send it on to Cybi.*

Sounds good, but you're teaching it to both me and Jys.

That goes without saying, she replied, then lowered her head again, clearly done talking to them.

It took her another half hour, thirty minutes where they remained motionless and the entire room watched on in tense silence. Then, suddenly, Aria's eyes opened wide and she gasped, and Ryn opened her eyes as well and removed her hands. *I'm done,* she replied. *I rebuilt the entire language and implanted it in her. She knew far more of it than I expected. It seems that it was telepathically inserted into her mind when she was a toddler, the entire language, both spoken and written. That's highly unusual, teaching that way usually don't hold. Especially in a child.*

The Dreamers may be different from the Faey in more than one way. It stuck with her, so it might be normal for them, Aya speculated.

Or, one of the Oracles foresaw this and had the language implanted in her knowing that we would find it, Dahnai suggested. *So we could talk with our kin when we rescue them from the Syndicate.*

That's entirely possible. When it comes to someone that can see the future, who knows what's an accident and what's intentional, Kreel agreed sagely. *We may be walking down a path the Oracles foresaw years ago, and they put markers on it to help us along.*

That's a pretty deep thought there, Kreel. I'm surprised it came from you, Dahnai teased.

I live to surprise you, Dahnai, he grinned in reply.

I'm all done, Aria, Ryn told her with a smile. *Can you remember now?*

"I...I can! I can remember!" she said excitedly. *"I remember!"*

I'm very glad. It didn't seem fair that you couldn't remember your original language. Do you like it?

"Yes! It's musical, like Faey is! It's very pretty!"

Ryn stood up. *Alright, who's first?*

"Duh," Jason said, stepping forward and offering his hand.

"Hold on a second, I'm the Empress here!" Dahnai protested.

“She’s *my* daughter. So get in the back of the line.”

They all laughed when Dahnai gave him a rude gesture.

Jason took Ryn’s hand, and they began. And almost immediately, he was very, *very* surprised. The language was called Merai, which in her native language, simply meant *the spoken word*. He was expecting a language based roughly on Faey grammar but with different words, as was somewhat usual when a branch language formed from an original, but the language of the Dreamers was *drastically* different from Faey. There wasn’t a single word in their language that matched up to its Faey counterpart. Not *one*. It even had a significantly different syntax, with some pretty big differences in basic sentence structure. Faey put the predicate before the verb, following a subject-predicate-verb structure roughly similar to Japanese, but in her language, the predicate came *first*, almost like speaking like Yoda from the *Star Wars* movies. In her language, the basic sentence construct was predicate-subject-verb, where the subject of the sentence or clause modified the predicate and then was put into action by the verb. *I went to the store* in her language was *to the store I went*. *I had spaghetti for dinner* became *spaghetti for dinner I had* or *for dinner spaghetti I had*, both were acceptable in her language, since dependent clauses and prepositional phrases had no rigid position in their syntax. Because of that, her language was very dynamic, where so long as the sentence’s basic structure was maintained, the order of its clauses didn’t matter.

How could it have changed so much in just 1,300 years?

When she finished, he took a step back and rubbed his chin in thought. That was *not* what he expected. Something pretty significant had to happen for his ancient ancestors to so drastically change their language that it no longer resembled even the Faey spoken at that time, the Faey spoken by Aura and the Exiles. Or had it evolved from Faey at all? Could they have started speaking some other language that the Exiles knew, maybe some language one of them learned at the Academy, for some reason?

You teach Jys, Ryn, I’ll upload this to Cybi, Jason said. He dumped the language into his gestalt, then let Cybi pull it. *[Go through the archives and the database, Cybi, find out what language it most closely resembles. Because it’s not Faey.]*

[It matches no language in the archives, Jason. Nor any in the Academy mainframe,] she answered. [It most closely resembles Amju, a language spoken by one of the races of the Crai Empire.]

[Well, that doesn't make any sense,] he complained. [The Crai Empire would have been too far away for them to be visiting the original Academy. There's no way the Dreamers could have learned it.]

[Correct. My best guess is that they didn't learn it from the Amju, that it just resembles Amju. There are only so many ways a language can be constructed, Jason, so there are bound to be similarities between languages that form entire quadrants away from each other.]

[True,] he agreed. [What about the written form?]

[It bears no resemblance to written Faey whatsoever, except that both languages have thirty letters. It is written from right to left, which is also different from Faey, which is written from left to right.]

[Bizarre. Even though the spoken language could radically change over a thousand years, how could the written language change direction? They wouldn't be able to read their own old writings. The only real answer is that this language isn't based on old Faey. It must be some other language they picked up and learned while in Andromeda, and they forgot their ancestral Faey over the years.]

[That's entirely possible.]

[Do me a favor and dig a little on this, Cybi. This is weird, and it needs some investigation.]

[Of course. But I can tell you that you need to talk to Songa, she's working on a similar problem. It sounds related to this.]

Ryn taught everyone in the room over the course of an hour—a testament of her skill as a telepath—and then they talked about it while Aria was taken for her final treatment of the day. Ayama, Surin, and Seido were down in the cafeteria preparing the promised banquet of foods for her to try when she was done, and they'd made a party out of it, inviting most of the strip over as a party of sorts to celebrate Aria's graduation to solid food. They discussed Jason's theory that the language of the Dreamers wasn't based on Faey while Aria was out, then they took her down to the cafeteria

when she came back. She was a little intimidated by all the people there when she came in, but the smells of the food put on the table in front of her overwhelmed her trepidation. “Now remember, Aria, small bites, and eat slowly,” Songa warned as Seido put down a large platter holding about 20 different dishes, all in sample sizes. “And expect a sudden bout of queasiness the first few times you swallow. Wait until that goes away before you take your next bite.”

“Okay,” she said, looking at all the food with wide eyes. “I don’t know what to try first.”

“You’re eventually gonna try it all, silly, so just pick something,” Kreel told her, snagging a Menodan sugar chute from another plate and gnawing on it.

It was quite an awakening of senses for Aria. She nibbled on this and that for over an hour, following Songa’s orders, trying everything put in front of her. She got over the initial queasiness quickly, and Songa kept her from eating too fast by monitoring her. The cooks had done a great job making everything meant for her a very small portion, giving her the chance to try it out without getting full, and she managed to go through every dish they made for her with those very small sample servings. They really did give her just about everything, dishes from every major food group, cold foods, hot foods, dozens of different meats and vegetables and grains, appetizers to desserts.

Just about when Aria was done with her meal, Jason sat beside Songa at the table beside Aria’s. *Cybi said I needed to talk to you about something.*

I was going to call you up into my office after this, but we can discuss it now, she sent privately. *Jason, Aria is not what we think she is.*

How do you mean?

I mean, I’ve run four tests on her DNA, and all of them come back with the same result. She’s not a Karinne, she replied seriously. *She doesn’t match any of the DNA in Cybi’s archives, not one.*

That’s not possible, Songa, he protested. *Maybe she’s descended from a Karinne family that’s not in the database?*

There are none, Jason. The DNA of every single child in the house was sampled and stored in the archives for centuries as part of the Program, she answered. Even if they weren't actively a part of it. You know, looking for potential breeding partners for those in the program within the house. Aria doesn't match anyone.

Maybe she's from a family that immigrated to Karis?

They didn't do that, Jason.

What other answer is there?

Oh, there is one, but it's one that doesn't make any sense, she sent wryly. I told you I ran four tests on her. The first three were confirming what I know now. I didn't believe the first one and ran it again, then again. When I realized that it wasn't the test, I ran a different test on her looking for more generic DNA markers to determine how closely related she is to us.

What does that mean in non-medical talk?

It means, Jason, I ran a test on her to see just how not related to Faey in general she is. And the test result was so shocking that I'm having them run it again just for confirmation.

And?

And, her DNA deviated from ours forty thousand years ago, she sent intensely. Actually, closer to 41,000 years ago to be precise. That's how far back I had to go to link her DNA to our DNA, Jason. She is a Faey, but she's had forty thousand years to deviate from blue-skinned Faey. She's still as much a Faey as I am, just with different colored skin and a few very minor genetic differences that are basically cosmetic. I guess that after that many millennia, her peoples' telepathic powers had time to evolve, to give her people the power of precognition.

Do you realize how impossible what you're saying is, Songa?

Yes, I do, Jason, but science doesn't lie, she answered. I can't explain it. That little girl is a Faey, Jason, but she's a Faey that deviated from us blue-skinned Faey forty thousand years ago. The only possible conclusion I can give based on the data I have, dear, is that somehow, some way, forty thousand years ago, her ancestors left our galaxy and traveled to

Andromeda and settled there. Or, we came from Andromeda and settled here.

Songa, he sent, giving her a nearly hostile look of suspicion.

I know, that's why I'm running the test again, dear, she told him. Because I couldn't believe it when I saw it either. But these tests rarely come back with a different result, Jason. We may be looking at this impossible scenario.

The Faey were still in their stone age back then, Songa. How could they have possibly built a spaceship capable of intergalactic travel?

Don't ask me, dear, I'm a doctor, not a historian, she sent with a slight smile. My only guess is that they didn't do it. Perhaps they were visited by a space-faring species that picked some of them up and moved them.

To Andromeda?

Got me. But one interesting thing I did find in my research is that at about that time, dear, the Faey race was reduced to about five hundred breeding pairs, much like a time in Terran history when the entire race was reduced to approximately a thousand breeding pairs about 70,000 of your years ago, after the eruption of a supervolcano drastically changed the planetary climate. There is a similar record of such a thing on Draconis at about that time, but in our case, it was a meteor strike that caused a major disruption of the planet's ecosystem. We were very nearly made extinct by that meteor, then our race rebounded. All Faey can trace their lineage back to one of those five hundred ancestor families. Maybe at about that time, some ancient spacefaring race visited Draconis, found a different small group of survivors on the cusp of extinction, and decided to pick them up and move them to another planet? To prevent the Faey race from dying out?

Yeah, but to take them to Andromeda? he asked. I could understand it if they moved them like to Melavar or Kiramina, they're close to Draconis, but why take them to another galaxy? That doesn't make any sense.

I have no answer for you, dear. I can only tell you what the science tells me and propose a wild theory. The only viable theory is that, 40,000 years ago, a group of Faey were taken from Draconis and moved somewhere else. And somehow, some way, they ended up in Andromeda. How, I have no idea. I couldn't explain it even if I was an engineer like you, dear. But facts

don't lie. And the fact is, Aria's DNA deviates from ours at a point 40,000 years ago. I told you that every Faey can trace her lineage back to one of those five hundred breeding pairs. Aria cannot. She does not descend from one of those lines. She descends from another, Faey from a different family group but who are still Faey, that somehow got picked up off Draconis and moved elsewhere.

So, we've just found a long-lost branch of the Faey species?

Precisely, dear. But the question is, the mystery is, how did they get there? How did they end up in another galaxy?

That...is something I don't think we're going to answer here, he told her, leaning back in his chair and thinking furiously. Recorded Faey history only goes back twenty thousand years, everything past that is the realm of paleontologists and paleo-biologists. So if you were visited by a space ship that abducted some of your people and moved them elsewhere, it wouldn't be anywhere in your history. But maybe we can learn more when we liberate the Dreamers from the Syndicate. Maybe they know how they ended up there, something Aria would be too young to have learned when she was taken by the Benga. It's possible that the Dreamers' history goes back forty thousand years. Maybe they have the answer.

Entirely possible, dear, she nodded. It's going to give me gray hair trying to figure out. But in the meantime, it's really nothing to worry about. It doesn't change who Aria is, or the fact that she is as much a Faey as I am. But it does potentially explain her precognitive abilities. Give any race 40,000 years, and they can evolve in surprising ways.

Especially the Faey, given your species' knack for genetically adapting to your environment, Jason nodded, looking over at her. You're a very hardy species, Songa, even if you don't look it.

I don't like that thought...hardy. It makes me sound barrel-chested, she sent primly, which made him laugh despite himself.

So vain, he teased.

Of course I am, dear. I'm a Faey, she smiled in reply.

Songa went over to take charge of Aria once again, helping her back into her hoverchair, then fighting a bit with Kreel when he wanted to push

her around the cafeteria, much to the amusement of everyone else. This was definitely a mystery, Jason pondered as he leaned back against the table behind him. There was no way for the Dreamers to leave Draconis that long ago, when the Faey were still in their stone age, so the only answer was that some ancient spacefaring race had visited Draconis, saw the Faey in *big trouble* because of that meteor strike, and took some of them with them when they left. An act of mercy, to be sure, trying to protect the species from extinction, but still...why take them to *Andromeda*? That just made no sense. Why not move them to the nearest habitable planet, which was only 5.7 light years away?

Could these visitors have been *from* Andromeda, and decided to take them all the way back home with them because they were running out of time for their mission? Perhaps they hadn't done any other exploration and didn't know about the nearby habitable planets? Maybe they took the Faey as a slave race, a stone age society, and the Faey somehow survived that experience? Perhaps the Faey even back then were telepathic, and they took them for research? Though the last two seemed pretty dangerous...one didn't just *take* a group of telepathic beings for *anything*, due to the tremendous danger involved in such a thing. There had to be some logical reason to do such a thing.

The bigger question rose in his mind. Was it *only* the Faey that were picked up from their galaxy and relocated to Andromeda? Could they have done the same to other races? Were there Confederate races in Andromeda? Or were there Confederate races that were originally *from* Andromeda that were moved *here*?

He needed to do a little study on some ancient history, to see if any other races had records, stories, or legends of being visited by a spacefaring race around that time. Who knows, they may find Shio or Colonists or Verutans or Grimja in Andromeda as well, other "transplants" picked up from here and taken there. Maybe they were all picked up and reseeded in Andromeda by this ancient spacefaring race as some gigantic science experiment.

He could start with the Jakkans. They had records going back nearly 37,000 years, which was very nearly when the Dreamers were taken from Draconis. There was a four-thousand-year gap there, but still, maybe there

were some Jakkan myths or old legends or maybe some cave paintings or something that might show some evidence of them being visited by aliens.

But that would be something he would pursue some other day, when he had nothing else going on. In the short term, he had way too damn many things on his mind to stress over it, and the little girl laughing as Kreel spun her hoverchair around was one of the biggest concerns.

He'd only known her for a few days, but he already thought of her as his daughter. And so did Jyslin. She'd never want for anything with them, and they would protect her from those who would exploit her for what she could do.

He couldn't wait to take her *home*.

Daira, 28 Shiaa, 4404, Faey Orthodox Calendar

Friday, 14 September 2018 Terran Standard Calendar

*Daira, 28 Shiaa, year 1329 of the 97th Generation, Karinne
Historical Reference Calendar*

Foxwood East, Karsa, Karis

This...was going to be tricky.

Not Aria, that was for sure. She was enjoying her first ever visit to her new home, on a field trip from the hospital on a fine, sunny, breezy morning. Jyslin had her upstairs in her room, which was completely empty, the two of them discussing what furniture and what color sheets and curtains she wanted. Aria's hoverchair was sitting in the living room as she walked around—albeit very slowly and carefully—with Jyslin almost hovering over her. Songa had told her to walk as much as she could, to walk until she got exhausted all the time, because it would rebuild her muscles that much faster. She was still undergoing biotine treatments and was scheduled to do so for the next five days, but now she was officially in her rehabilitation phase. She went from treatments to physical therapy, and Songa didn't want her to just sit around and be lazy. She made her walk to

exhaustion even outside her therapy, telling her that every step she took would allow her to take three more when she recovered.

And that *really* motivated that little girl. After years of laying in a bed, the last thing she wanted to do was sit or lay in one place. They certainly didn't have to cajole her into exercising, she pushed herself beyond exhaustion every time she got up and walked. She'd seen the beach, seen the kids running up and down the sand, and that was what she wanted to do. So she was doing everything she could to be able to join the other kids and *play*.

The tricky part was going to be the negotiation today. It was scheduled to start in three hours, and Jason's part of it was already in place. His interdiction trap was set for the fleet that would arrive *during* the conference. No, what was going to be tricky was getting Sha Ra to actually surrender. The Kimdori spies in her fleet were reporting that for the last Terran week, she'd been rushing around madly trying to find a way to build an FTL engine that could move her ship, and thus far, her engineers had come up empty. He wasn't sure if she was being realistic in her expectations, trying to get her ship's engineers to build something they had no experience with out of what was available on the ship, and do such a good job that they could let her ship escape.

And it said a lot about that bitch that she was only trying to escape *herself*. She was going to abandon the rest of the fleet and save her own skin.

Because of what Sha Ra was doing, it was going to make her *very* reluctant to agree to *anything*. She was holding out hope that her engineers would find a solution, and because they needed time, she was going to stall. And considering she was in a no-win situation, that was going to take some *balls* to sit at that table and stall with a straight face.

Well, Jason had a little plan for *that* too. Zaa's children on E Chaio had been very busy over the last few days.

But Jason could give Sha Ra a little respect in one very small area. She hadn't folded when she lost her Oracle. Jason would have almost expected the entire Syndicate fleet to surrender at that point, because the Oracle represented so much of their overall planning and strategic thinking that

without one, Jason would have expected the Syndicate military to be paralyzed with indecision. But not Sha Ra. She had moved straight to a contingency plan, continued planning and scheming despite losing her “I win” button. In that one very narrow instance, Jason could respect Sha Ra for her tenacity. She didn’t give up, and even now she was working to try to salvage something out of this situation...for herself.

He went upstairs and up to Aria’s new room, and saw that she was standing at the window with Jyslin behind her, her hands on her shoulders, looking out the window as she gabbed at his wife in her native language. She’d used it almost exclusively with them since Ryn had pulled it from her memory, like regaining a lost piece of herself, so Jason couldn’t really fault her for it. This *had* been Danelle’s room, but she had graciously given it to Aria and taken the room across the hall so Aria could have a room whose window looked down at the beach and ocean. After all, Danelle didn’t use her room in his house all the time and had been using it less and less over the last few months since Myleena hired a nanny to care for her and Siyara.

“Hey there, girls. How’s the room planning going?” he asked in Merai.

“We’ve about settled on everything, love,” Jyslin answered, looking over her shoulder and smiling at him. “We’re going with neo-noir Faey furniture with dark gray and navy-blue accents, blue curtains, and this little sneak here talked me into getting her her own viddy unit.”

“Well, I have to have *something* to do while I’m resting after therapy, don’t I?” Aria asked innocently, which made Jason laugh. Aria was wearing an interface—she needed it for anything outside the hospital—and was running a finger along the tine that ran under her left eye. It had taken a couple of days to teach her how the interface worked, but now she had no problems with it. “Besides, I like the games that Rann and Shya showed me on the hospital viddy. They were fun!”

“I’ve adopted a gamer girl. I’m doomed,” Jason sighed, which made Jyslin burst out laughing. That attracted Amber, and she pestered Jason into picking her up.

“I was wondering. Why does she get to come into my room when nobody else can without my approval?” she asked, looking at Amber.

“Because she’s a vulpar, pippy,” Jyslin chuckled. “Vulpars have an instinctive need to patrol their territory. If we lock her out of the room, she’ll obsess over getting in so she can make sure everything’s alright. I find it nice when Amber pops in and visits us,” she added with a smile. “And since she likes you, she’ll come in just to say hi.”

“I like her too,” Aria answered.

Amber looked around the room, and Jason could tell looking down at her that she was a bit disapproving. “It’s not going to be empty for long, Amber, calm down,” he chuckled. “Aria’s picked her furniture, so we’ll have it made up for her by tomorrow.”

“She doesn’t like the room because it’s empty?”

“Partially. Partially because the room has changed,” Jason answered. “Whenever we empty out a room, it makes her nervous.”

“Well, we’re going to go get her furniture, probably right now,” Jyslin declared. “At least if Aria’s new armor is ready.”

“It’s ready and on its way,” Jason answered.

“Why do I have to wear that? It looks uncomfortable.”

“It’s not bad at all,” Jyslin told her. “And yes, you have to wear it. You’re a part of our family now, pippy, and that means you have to wear armor when you leave secured areas. At least for a little while longer. We’ll be going back to normal soon.”

That was true enough, and Jason didn’t even have to fight very much with Aya about it. She’d already told him that as soon as the Syndicate was dealt with, they’d be off restriction. Jason would be allowed to go back to wearing normal clothes and not being shuttled around in a warship.

“Do the people here not like you that much?” Aria asked.

Jason had to laugh. “No, pips, that’s not why we wear it,” he answered her. “I have absolutely no fear walking down any street in any city on this planet. I trust my people. We wear armor because whenever we’re at war, there’s always a small chance that some enemy might sneak people onto the planet, so we always wear armor as basic protection in case that happens. Aya, the captain of the guards that protect us, always makes sure that we’re

safe. And she plans for every possible contingency, even ones that are as outlandish as someone sneaking onto the planet. It's almost impossible for someone to sneak onto this planet, so Aya plans for everything, even the *almost* impossible."

"Oh. That doesn't sound so bad."

"Exactly, my little treasure. It's just a precaution, nothing more. And the armor itself isn't really that uncomfortable. In fact, it might be really useful for you, because it's powered. You're not going to feel its weight at all when you put it on, because the armor more or less moves *itself*. It moves with you as you move to make sure that you don't feel its weight. It's even going to help you stay on your feet when you get tired, because you can have the armor take over for your muscles a little bit. You can use your interface to make the armor move, and you can just go along with it for the ride, sorta like riding in a hoverchair."

"Ooohhh, that sounds cool," she said.

"You'll have to practice a little bit before you can do that," Jyslin told her, patting her shoulders.

Once the armor arrived, getting her into it showed one of the ways Aria was a bit different from other Faey...she had *modesty*. That was something they were going to have to work on, since she'd be living in Faey society where clothes were a fashion accessory, not a social requirement.

And he felt weird just *thinking* that.

They gave her a few lessons in dealing with armor, and then they separated. Jyslin took Aria out into Karsa so they could buy her furniture and some clothes and other goodies for her room, preparing her for her new life once she was out of the hospital, and Jason went back to his office. He caught up on all the reports that piled up while he was gone, including ignoring about fifty requests for conference from other Confederate members, concentrating on the reports about the upcoming negotiations, as well as his own preparations. The interdictor trap was set, and he had most of the KMS at Oasis as a precaution, every active ship he had on the board. There were 237 ships in Kosigi undergoing drive installation or IP armor upgrade, but everything else was sitting at the Stargate, which was located in the uninterdicted space between the two interdiction layers. There were

nearly 3,000 other ships there as well, a major piece of the Confederate fleet that Lorna had stationed there in case things went wrong, which Jason felt was only wise. A holo of it was fairly impressive, the gigantic *Tianne* sitting in the middle of a cloud of smaller ships, hovering over them like a guardian angel, with the *Aegis*, the *Pegasus*, and the *Iyaneri* nearby. That was a *tremendous* amount of firepower, and that was *just* the KMS ships. Dozens of command ships from the larger empires in the Confederation were also there, and some of them were nearly as formidable as a KMS command ship, such as the Faey, Subrian, Urumi, Verutan, Maluki, and Skaa vessels, each powerful in its own way. From the sheer firepower of the Faey and Subrian ships to the incredible durability of the Urumi and Skaa, they were cogs in Lorna's machine, each fulfilling a role within the fleet to create a whole much more powerful than the sum of its parts. From the largest to the smallest, like the squadron of Shurai Warhawk fighters that prowled the edge of the fleet as protection, it was a grand display...that wouldn't impress the Syndicate much at all.

He wondered if they would follow the KMS and the Faey to Andromeda. That was far more than they'd signed up for. They were in the Confederation to protect their home territory from the Andromedan empires...would they cross over into Andromeda to prosecute that war, or would they decide that it wasn't worth the risk and the effort? He felt that they'd definitely be aboard when it came to dealing with the Oracles, because removing the Oracles from the equation held a very high probability that it would cow the Syndicate. To lose the ability to win any war may cause them to decide that conquest was no longer *profitable*, especially when the Board digests the fact that war with the Milky Way was not a steamroll. The Confederation had proved to them with their expedition that they had the tools to take on the Syndicate, could defeat them in battle. And without the Oracles, they would have to fight a *real* war, against an enemy so far away that it made prosecuting it difficult, yet that enemy could get at *them* very easily. There would be no requirement to go on the offensive, and in one case, he didn't *want* them to go on the offensive...the Jun. It would be best if the Jun sat this one out, else their cultural outlook on war would get the Confederation into something they couldn't finish.

He worked right up to the scheduled beginning of the negotiations, and he probably irritated most of the council by not being present. He monitored things from his office as he worked on other things, and he was almost disappointed in how right he was. Sha Ra was stalling, she even drug out the introductions with the negotiating teams, spending nearly half an hour wasting time. When they sat down for the actual discussions, she again stalled everything, even went so far as to waste nearly half an hour quibbling over the chair arrangements.

Oh no. That wasn't going to happen.

He watched a moment, then he slowly stood up, picking up his helmet. *Aya.*

Yes, Jason?

I'm about to make you hate me all over again, he warned. We're going to go put a stop to this ridiculous shit Sha Ra is pulling.

And how are we going to do that?

I'm going to go to Oasis and kick her ass, that's what I'm going to do, he replied pugnaciously.

And how is that going to stop her?

Easy. The key to defeating someone who's all for themselves is to make all about them, Aya. We're going to put this on very personal terms for her.

I'll have a bionoid—

No bionoids, he retorted. I'm going out there myself, and I'll kick her ass myself.

What did I tell you about ever going into any hostile theatre PIM again, Jason?

I won't be in a mecha either. I won't need one for this, he seethed.

Dera, lock the door, Aya demanded hotly.

Aya, you don't want to turn this into another fight. Just trust me. I'm not being rash. I know exactly what I'm doing.

And what are you doing?

I'm going to show that bitch Sha Ra what I can really do, he answered tightly.

There was a long, pregnant silence. *Dera, open the door. I'll call in a frigate.*

Thank you, Aya, he replied in a steely mental state.

It took him two hours to reach Oasis, time he spent in quiet, nearly meditative preparation. He knew what he was going to do, and he needed to maintain his composure, to not turn Sha Ra inside out and then rip her head off and yank her brain out through her mouth. The frigate crew didn't reveal he was on board when they negotiated for safe passage, declaring that they were bringing an additional member of the Confederate negotiating team, before traversing through the enemy fleet to reach the planet. He transferred to his personal dropship loaded in the landing bay of the frigate *Jacanne*, which took up the entire thing and nearly scraped the paint when it took off. He looked down at the negotiation, taking place at the same table under the same pavilion on the same beach as the original one, then took a deep, cleansing breath and stood up when his dropship landed. The hatch opened, and he waved Aya off as he stepped out through the hatch.

They were all staring at him. The Confederate rulers were turned in their chairs to look back at him and the Benga were all standing, looking over or between the large, imposing Ubutu, Vekk, and Jobodi leaders as Jason Karinne stalked up towards the pavilion, wearing only a casual man's robe in the Faey style, loosely belted at the waist.

Sha Ra and her officers gave him a surprised look, then Sha Ra smiled, ever-so-slightly. That smile faded when he seemingly jumped from the sandy ground up onto the surface of the table, a child among them. "I've seen enough," he declared in Benga, unbelting his robe. "I told you that this was not a negotiation, Fleet Commander. This was a meeting for you to offer your unconditional surrender. And I *also* told you what would happen if we ever met face to face," he said in an icy voice, letting his robe fall to the table, revealing that he was wearing nothing but skin-tight black knicker-like pants, Faey men's athletic training pants. He reached up, and with deliberate slowness, removed his gestalt and dropped it to the table at his feet, falling onto his robe.

“And what do you intend to do, Grand Duke Karinne?” she asked in a purring voice.

“Kick your ass,” he replied in a flat voice, staring up at her. “If this is what it’s going to take, then so be it. You’re going to offer your surrender, Sha Ra. You can either do it sitting in that chair, or you can do it on your knees while you’re begging for your life. Admirals, my esteemed companions from the council, this does not concern you, only the Fleet Commander. So if you would be so kind as to remove yourselves from the pavilion, we can get on with this. I have more important things to do today.”

“Jason,” Mesaiima called, but he slashed a hand towards her.

“Stay out of this, Mesaiima,” he called harshly. “This is between me and Sha Ra.”

“I have no desire to pick a fight with someone so much smaller than me,” Sha Ra said silkily.

“That’s too bad, because this is not a fight you get to choose,” he replied. He thrust his palm out her, and Sha Ra gave a scream of surprise when she was flung back out of her chair and then landed in the sandy soil a good ten shakra outside the perimeter of the pavilion tent. Jason jumped off the table through the hole he created by knocking Sha Ra out of the tent and started slowly walking towards her as she got up onto one knee, shaking her head.

“Jason Karinne! Stop this!” Mesaiima shouted angrily.

“Are you going to fight back *now*, Sha Ra?” Jason demanded as he stalked slowly towards her. “Am I worth fighting now, or do you save your aggression for helpless little children, for those who can’t fight back? I won’t even use my psionic gifts against you, because it would be over too quickly. I’m going to beat you into submission the good old-fashioned way,” he declared, cracking his knuckles.

Her smile turned flat, and she narrowed her eyes. “If you want a fight, you little man, I’ll give you one!” she snarled. She struck not with her fists, but with her talent, and Jason could admit that she was both powerful and highly skilled...but it wasn’t enough. He slapped her telepathic attack aside like it was nothing, causing her eyes to widen in surprise, and he gave a scathing laugh as he continued to approach.

“Is that all you’ve got, bitch? I’ve faced stronger attacks from children,” he taunted. “Come on, mighty Benga warrior! You’re three times my size! Come at me, you fucking *coward!*”

With a scream of rage, she lunged from her kneel and did just that. He watched her with narrow eyes as she charged him, then she came up short and made her strike. Instead of trying to punch or grab him, she instead tried to kick him. But her foot met nothing but empty air as he slid to the side with surprising speed and agility, and she committed so much to her kick that her plant foot slid out from under her on the loose, sandy soil. She gave a cry of surprise and landed flat on her back, and Jason almost insulted her by darting in and slapping her on the cheek with his right hand before darting back out to a safe distance. She rolled up to her knee and took a lunging swipe at him with her fist, which he ducked effortlessly, then he ducked again when she swung with her other fist. She then raised her clasped hands together and tried to crush him in an overhanded blow, but he avoided that as well with surprising ease, then almost contemptuously darted in again and punched her in the stomach. She hunched over with an explosive release of breath, both hands on her belly and gasping for breath as Jason danced back out to a safe distance, then he took a very casual posture and crossed his arms at his chest.

“That’s what I thought,” he said dryly as she wheezed. “You have no idea how to fight someone my size. I guess all your life, everyone’s been afraid of you because you’re so big. Nobody my size was ever willing to take one of you on. Well, I’m *not* afraid of you, so you better come up with a better plan than flailing around like a little kid throwing a temper tantrum.”

She lunged at him again, and he evaded with ease as she fell to the sandy ground on her belly after missing. He ducked under an attempt to grab him, slithered around another attempt to smash him into the ground, then kicked the back of her hand, making her yelp in pain and recoil her hand, bringing it close to her chest as she got back onto her feet. He evaded several more of her attempts to punch or kick him, starting to get some form into her movements as she stopped reacting on emotion and started thinking critically. She was three times his size, strong enough to kill him with one well-placed blow, and surprisingly fast for her size. She had some formal hand to hand combat training, but she lacked *real* combat instincts. She

only trained enough to be proficient, she had never trained her body to fight the way Jason had, had never extensively trained in hand to hand combat. Her reaction time was almost in slow motion to him, and she had no subtlety in her attacks, just trying to smash him or club him with brute force, trying for that *one hit* that would knock him out. And that was exactly what Jason was expecting, which allowed him to all but toy with his much larger opponent.

She got more and more frustrated with each missed punch or kick, each failed attempt to grab him and squeeze the life out of him, but she was also tiring. Her reaction slowed even more, she started to pant for breath, and it took her longer to recover from every punch or kick. She got easier and easier to avoid, but Jason could sense that it was a trick, that she was trying to bait him into not reacting. And sure enough, after progressively slower and slower punches, she lashed out with a lightning-fast jab, tightly controlled, with much more form and discipline than her other attacks. Jason didn't bother to avoid it, he set his arm and he took the full brunt of it on his left arm and shoulder, which drove him down to one knee on the sandy soil. It did, however, give him a bloody nose when his head recoiled enough to hit his own arm from the downward force of her blow, driving his protecting arm into his face, but he barely even registered the pain. She gave a look of surprise when he grabbed her fist with both hands—his hands on hers was like a six year old holding the hand of his mother—and he turned and wrested her hand with every bit of his strength. She gave a yowl of pain and recoiled, tearing her hand out of his grip, cradling her hand to her chest and giving him a wild, surprised look as she backed up a few paces. He had sprained her wrist with that move.

“You haven't figured it out yet, have you,” he said in a calm, icy voice as the bionoids and Benga at the table looked on in shock, wiping the blood away from his lip absently. “I may be a Grand Duke, bitch, but before I sat on my throne, I was a *soldier*. I've trained to fight since I was a child. I fought for my throne, where you've done little more than skulk around back passages and plot and scheme to get where you are. It doesn't *matter* that you're three times my size, bitch. I've felt you out, and found you lacking. Now I'm going to beat the shit out of you.”

She managed a scornful laugh, still protecting her sprained wrist. “You're not even the size of a Benga child!”

“And yet there you stand, nursing your nearly broken wrist,” Jason retorted, which made her scowl. “You can spare the beating I’m about to give you, Sha Ra. All you have to do is surrender your fleet.”

“Ha!”

“So be it,” he declared, walking slowly right at her.

She tried to kick him like a puppy when he got within range, but he again just leaned to the side, evading her attack with contemptuous ease, but then lanced in like lightning, got right next to her plant leg, then turned his torso and drove the back of his elbow into the side of her knee. She cried out in pain and nearly fell, staggering back, but he moved with her, getting under her and outside of her field of vision, skittered back, then planted a powerful kick in the exact same spot, on the side of the same knee. That made her leg buckle and caused her to fall to one knee, throwing out an arm to try to balance herself, and as soon as her face came into reach, her head snapped back when Jason gave her a punishing, powerful uppercut under her chin. He ducked under a sweeping club of her arm, then darted to the side when the other hand whipped in, giving her enough room to stand back up. He came right back in on her fearlessly, evading three darting jabs from her fists as they punched down at him, and again went after her knees. She backed up to get out of his reach, but was startled when he dove forward, rolled, and then slid to a stop and pincer her ankle between his calves as she tried to take another step back, hooking her leg. She whipped her arms out and windmilled them as she fell over backwards, and almost as soon as she landed on her back, Jason was literally in the air as he jumped over her arm, fist clenched and cocked back over his shoulder, and he delivered a punishing blow to her cheek as he came back down. Her head snapped to the side as he recovered, then he raised his foot and stomped it on her throat, causing her to jerk reflexively and roll to the side, wheezing for breath. He again literally dove through the air, this time away from her as she tried to grab him, rolling through his dive and coming up onto his feet as he rotated to face her. She wasn’t expecting him to reverse again and lunge in on her, and she doubled over with an explosive release of breath when he again punched her in the stomach, right on the diaphragm, the upward angle of his blow driving most of the force of his blow up and under her ribs. She sank to one knee involuntarily while still holding her stomach and hunching over, and that put her head in reach of him. Her head

snapped to the side when he delivered a powerful right cross, then a left hook, then she kiltered backwards when he kicked her right in the mouth, showing a surprising amount of flexibility to plant the heel of his foot that high. She laid there for several seconds, wheezing for breath as she moved jerkily, then flailed her arms and her legs as if to strike him before rolling to the side and getting to a kneeling position. But he was nowhere near her. He was standing nearly five paces away, standing with his arms folded in front of him and giving her a scornful look.

“Not so mighty now, are you, Sha Ra?” he asked tauntingly. “You’re getting your ass kicked by a *child*. You have no chance against me, so you should save what dignity you have left and surrender.”

“Fuck you!” she snapped, spittle flying from her mouth as she charged at him. He made no move to avoid her until the last possible instant, and even then he didn’t even move his feet, he just leaned and twisted to the side as she tried to drive her fist through his face. Her momentum sent her on past him, where she stumbled and fell almost face first into the sandy soil. He turned to face her again as she struggled to her feet, panting for breath, her face twisted into a mask of rage, incredulity, and even fear.

“This is your last chance before I beat you senseless, Sha Ra. Surrender your fleet.”

“I will never lose to someone like you!”

He gave an exasperated sigh. “Alright, then. Playtime is now over, bitch. I think you’re due for a little lesson about who and *what* I really am, Fleet Commander Au Mai Sha Ra.”

He raised his arm, hooked it around his body slowly, then made a whipping backhanded motion with it. Sha Ra gave a breathless “*Whuaaff!*” as she was seemingly clubbed by an invisible hand, which sent her flying nearly twenty shakra across the sandy soil to crash into the side of the Benga transport that had brought her to the surface. She managed to stay on her feet, swaying a bit woozily, blood from where he kicked her in the mouth dripping off her chin. She was dragged forward, her feet leaving furrows in the sand by her transport, then she screamed in both surprise and pain when she was blown back yet again, landing heavily on her back past the transport. “My people are telekinetic, Sha Ra,” he said easily as he

strode forward like a stalking cat. “I didn’t *have* to fight you. I did that just so I could take some satisfaction out of kicking your narrow ass all over this beach warrior to warrior, skill against skill in a duel of honor, in the traditions of my people. And, also out of making you live with the humiliation of being beaten in a fistfight by one of the *little races*. I could have killed you where you stood at any time. I could stop your heart, burst your organs, sever your spinal cord, cut off the blood flowing into your brain, without ever touching you. But I prefer a much more *impactful* lesson,” he said, swiping his hand to the side, which caused Sha Ra’s head to snap to the side, a line of green blood flying from her mouth with the motion. She kiltered to the side and fell, giving a cry of pain and shock from the powerful phantom blow. “Killing you in an instant doesn’t teach you anything, after all. I want you to have time to fully understand just how big a mistake you made when you decided to invade my home before I’m done with you. And you can’t regret anything if you’re dead.” He swung his hand down in an overhanded motion, and Sha Ra was slammed to the sandy ground as if she’d been stepped on by a Titan, then she struggled up to a kneeling position, down on one knee, panting and looking a bit bewildered and dazed, blood flowing from the corner of her mouth and both nostrils.

“I told you the day we met that you have *no idea* who you were fucking with, bitch,” he said in a hissing voice, continuing to stalk towards her with slow, dangerous steps as she struggled to her knees. She made a sudden motion, grabbing something from her boot, then she raised a very small firearm of some kind and pointed it at him. He made no move to dodge as a lance of reddish-green energy erupted from the muzzle of the weapon, just raised a single hand palm out as if to intercept it. Sha Ra’s eyes widened in shock when the blast bent up and into the sky, sizzling up towards the heavens. Jason made a hooking motion with his hand and pulled his hand back, and the pistol was yanked out of her hand, then sailed way up over the pavilion to land on the beach down the slope. He spread his feet and pulled one hand back, then thrust it forward with a snarl of hate. A brilliant lance of lightning erupted from his hand and flashed across the distance between them, striking Sha Ra in the upper right shoulder, making her pitch over backwards in a scream of pain. She was again dragged through the sand towards him, then she was hoisted up into the air, her feet kicking and squirming under her as she tried to grab and clutch at nothingness. Jason yanked his hand down, and Sha Ra was rammed down onto the beach

before him on her hands and knees, her body jerking and shuddering as she tried to get up from that prone position, but held fast by that same invisible force. He made a slashing motion, and all her clothes were torn off her body in an instant, leaving her naked before him.

“Look at me,” Jason said in a deadly hiss, stepping up to get within his arm’s reach of her head. With her in that position, it put her eyes very nearly at his level, just a little lower. “Surrender your fleet. Now,” he ordered.

“F—fuck...you,” she managed to say, her voice unsteady and her words nearly slurred.

“Surrender your fleet,” he ordered once again.

“No.”

“This is your final chance. Surrender your fleet.”

“Never.”

“Then so be it.”

He never made a move, but Sha Ra gave a shuddering gasp, her eyes rolled up into her head, and she collapsed nervelessly to the sand, face first, her green butt sticking up in the air.

“*That* was for Aria. So,” he said, turning around casually, brushing some sand off his hands. “Who’s next in command? I think you’ll be a bit more reasonable than your *former* Fleet Commander.”

The remaining ten Benga officers looked at him like he was a ghost, their green skin pale and their expressions incredulous. Mesaiima and the others were gaping a little bit as well.

One of the Benga shakily got to his feet. “I am Adjunct Commander Mor Jo,” he said in a tremulous voice.

“Well, then, Adjunct Commander,” Jason said, walking towards them slowly. “I offer you the same chance that was given to Sha Ra. Offer the unconditional surrender of your entire fleet and its crew, and you will see your homes in Andromeda again someday. Refuse, and you will spend the rest of your lives trapped in this star system, which will be very short. We don’t *have* to fight you. You are no longer any threat to us,” he said bluntly, again vaulting impossibly high, onto the table, and fearlessly walking right

between two Benga with his back to them as he strolled towards the bionoids on the far side. "All I have to do is set a few of my shipkiller weapons in this system out of your reach and allow them to destroy your fleet one ship at a time. It will take them a few orbits, but just imagine all the anticipation you'll feel over those orbits as you wait to see who dies today," he said in a cold, brutal voice, stopping and turning around on the Confederate side of the table, but almost tauntingly within reach of the Benga officers, looking down at them. Him standing on the table put him about a head over the seated Benga. "We can kill you to the last sailor, without ever putting a single one of our ships in harm's way. You can avoid all of that, Adjunct Commander Mor Jo, by offering the unconditional surrender of your fleet and all its crew.

"In return for your cooperation, I promise you that will eventually be returned to Andromeda. It may take a few orbits, and it won't be on your own ships, but we will get you home. While you are in our custody, you will be treated well. You will be put on a planet with a favorable climate and simply left alone until such time that we can arrange to return you home. No guards, no forced labor, no interrogations. You'll be permitted to keep all your personal possessions, as well as all the equipment you need from your ships to make your stay on that planet comfortable while you're there. The conditions won't be very luxurious, but you'll have the freedom to do as you will until we can organize a means to get you home. We are not barbarians like the Consortium are, Adjunct Commander. We believe in the fair treatment of a foe that is honorably vanquished, so long as he willingly surrenders. Say the word, and you will eventually see your family again. Refuse, and you will spend what remains of your life right here," he said, pointing at the table.

"You must ask yourself. Is a few years on a planet better or worse than watching your fleet die, one ship at a time? Would you rather rule in hell, Adjunct Commander, or serve in heaven?" he asked, putting his hands behind his back and spreading his feet slightly, staring at them with complete confidence and fearlessness, despite the fact that three of them were close enough to reach out and grab him. And they could kill him easily with their bare hands.

He gave a nervous swallow. "We will need some time to confer," he said. "Without the Fleet Commander, it's a decision that we should reach by

consensus.”

“Fine,” Jason said, motioning vaguely with one hand. “You have my permission to return to your ship to make an informed decision in friendly and private surroundings. I give you six divisions to discuss the matter. But you will leave Sha Ra where she is,” he warned. “Her body belongs to *me*, as a trophy of my victory over her in the traditions of my people, and I want her to lay there as a reminder to all of you what awaits you if you make the wrong decision.”

The ten Benga all stared at him, clearly understanding that he had taken control of the conference, then Mor Jo stood and gave him the Benga salute. The others followed suit, and they turned and walked away from the pavilion. All of them looked at the still form of Fleet Commander Sha Ra as they passed, naked, defeated, and humiliated in the moments before her defeat, heading for their transport.

When they were aboard their dropship and heading for space, Jason turned and faced the six macro bionoids that were all looking at him. “Jason Karinne, I am *very* cross with you,” Mesaiima said frostily, but Shakizarr was chuckling.

“Well done, Jason. Well done,” he complemented.

“Thank you, Shakizarr,” he said modestly. “Do you think it set the proper tone?”

“I believe that it did,” he nodded, looking over at him. With them sitting and him standing on the table, Jason’s eyes were over the heads of Mesaiima and Ethikk, almost even with Shakizarr, Orgrik, and Grran, and well below Jokik’s, given the massive size of the Ubutu’s bionoid. “I take it there’s a tactical gestalt somewhere nearby?”

“In my dropship,” he admitted easily, which made the Verutan chuckle. “I sure as hell couldn’t do all that without one.”

“I must say, Jason, I had no idea you were so adept at paw to paw combat,” Jokik noted. “It was clear that she was outmatched, even with her great size and strength advantage.”

“We all have our hidden talents, Jokik,” he answered easily. “It’s a form of self-defense from my home planet known as *Aikido*, a defensive martial

art which specializes in turning the strength of an opponent against him. I'm sure you could learn it if you were interested."

"I still can't believe you, Jason!" Mesaiima fumed. "You *killed* her!"

"Did I?" he asked lightly, glancing back at Sha Ra. He snapped his fingers, and almost by magic, the woman's body jerked and she gave a ragged groan, rolling over on her back and coughing the sand out of her mouth and nose. She then went still once again.

"Wha?" Grran blurted.

Jason chuckled. "There are many things you can do with telepathy, Field Marshall. If you're well trained," he said with a smile. "Field Marshall Grran, your Imperial Majesty Orgrik, High Lord Jokik, do you think I might impose upon you to perform a low act of manual labor? Could you kindly toss that miserable bitch into your shuttle? I would be forever grateful," he asked, pointing at Sha Ra. "She's going to stay unconscious until a Faey mindstriker can release the lock I have on her mind that's making her comatose. That will keep her out of trouble until she's imprisoned aboard the *Tianne*. No matter what happens to the fleet, she's going to stand trial before the Council for her crimes against the Confederation."

All three of them gave little smiles. "I've always believed that a little manual labor is good for the soul," Orgrik Vort of the Vekk said easily. The Vekk were a bipedal, raptor-like reptilian species like the Skaa and Crai, but had leaner, longer heads and snouts. They were large, tall, very heavily built, and physically powerful, however. "Jokik, Grran, my friends, shall we?"

"I believe we shall, my friend," the Ubutu said grandly as all three of them stood up. The three large, imposing bionoids went over and picked up the still form, then started dragging her towards the Ogravian shuttle they'd used to get to the planet. And they weren't being very gentle.

"Jason, we cannot just *kidnap* the Fleet Commander!" Mesaiima protested heatedly as Shakizarr and Ethikk just chuckled.

"Sure we can. I told them that her body belongs to me, and they acceded to my demand. That means we can do anything with her we please. I never *said* she was dead," he said pointedly. "I may have acted like it, but I never

once said that I killed her, now did I? And they never bothered to check to see if she was breathing.”

“Deceiving the deceivers. Quite clever, Jason,” Ethikk said with respect in his voice as Jason picked up his gestalt and put it back on, then donned his discarded robe, tying it at the waist

“Thank you, Ethikk,” Jason said modestly. “Now, I’d better get back to Karis so Aya can beat the shit out of me for this stunt in private, so I’m not humiliated in front of my peers,” he said lightly, which made Ethikk laugh. “And I think this is all wrapped up,” he added, moving between Mesaiima and Shakizarr and dropping back down to the sandy ground. “I don’t think the rest of them have the balls that Sha Ra did. I think they’ll surrender. We just needed to get rid of Sha Ra, and we’ve done just that.”

“Truly,” Shakizarr agreed, looking down at him. “You are a formidable fellow, Jason Karinne. I am honored to call you a friend.”

“Why thank you, Your Grand Imperial Majesty,” Jason said, looking up at him. “And be assured, I hold you in the highest respect as well. I’ll see all of you in a little while, once I get home and am properly chastised.”

Aya gave him a strange, amused look as he came back into the shuttle, her arms crossed in front of her. *Well?* Jason asked with a dry mental tone.

I’m not sure if I should spank you or not, she replied honestly. *That was perfect, Jason. Sha Ra was the only true obstacle to the surrender of the fleet. And you removed her both from the equation and from the eyes of her peers. They saw her lose to a little race, and I saw it in their eyes. They lost all respect for her.*

All part of the plan, he said, rubbing his upper arm, which was starting to develop a spectacular, huge bruise from shoulder to elbow. *Fuck, that woman hits hard. She almost broke my arm when I blocked that punch.*

She would have killed you if she landed a solid hit, Dera told him.

That’s why I didn’t let her, he replied with a slight smile, rolling his shoulder and wincing. *I think we’d better go straight to the annex...and not just to see Aria.*

That might be a good idea.

Eight hours later, as he sat in his home office with his left arm and shoulder bandaged and feeling the effects of the bio-accelerant doing its job under those bandages, Jason leaned back in his chair and read the formal surrender of the Third Expeditionary Fleet of the Syndicate Navy. He hadn't been in the council session observing the official signing of the document, since he'd been in the annex getting treatment for three microfractures in his humerus, a slight tear in his rotator cuff, and major swelling and bruising in his shoulder and arm. It was well after dark, with the light of a half-full Kosigi filtering in through his open window, letting in the refreshing early night air with its hint of salty smell.

Sha Ra was currently residing in a security cell on a space station in orbit around Terra's moon, a special prison built to hold telepathic inmates. In a demonstration of how quickly the Confederation adapted to new technology released by the Karinnes, the station was manned *only* by bionoids and Imperial Marines, and had a no-fly zone around it in a 100 kathra in radius, well outside the range of all but the most powerful telepaths, which prevented the 173 telepathic inmates from any opportunity to use their abilities against their jailors. The only living guards on the station were guards that were far more powerful in talent than the inmates they jailed, there to keep the inmates from attacking *each other* with talent. And from what he was told, Sha Ra was *pissed off*. She didn't expect to wake up in the custody of the enemy, in a jail cell that was converted from a small cargo bay, with a wonderful view of the planet Terra's moon with the planet in the distance through the transparent titanium wall set over where an airlock had once been. That open-walled cell set the tone for the former Fleet Commander; why try to escape, because you have nowhere to run. She felt that she was betrayed by her officers, that they just gave her up to the enemy, and Jason's intervention ruined all her carefully laid plans to escape the Oasis trap and return to Andromeda.

Over at Oasis, the process had already begun. The Syndicate was behaving, at least so far, preparing to be moved to Q3XD-19 to join the other prisoners, and Jason had kept his word. They were being allowed to keep all their personal possessions and to remove necessary equipment and supplies from the ships to make their stay on the planet as comfortable as possible for the three or four years they'd be there. Palla had taken the fleet

staff officers there to let them see the planet, see how it was being done, and they were much more amenable about the idea of surrender once they saw that Jason wasn't lying. A schedule to disembark all the crews had already been drawn up, where in small groups, ships would be towed out to the Stargate, pass through it to the sister gate being relocated to Q3XD-19 at that moment, disembark the crew, then the ship would be jumped by enough ships to tow it to the system of its new owner. The schedule would begin with the ships that had been in the galaxy, were not in the Oasis trap, and to their credit, they were following the orders of their commanders. They had formally surrendered their ships when the order came down, and as soon as the Stargate was linked, the first group of ships would be towed in.

The council was currently in session, but Jason was blowing it off. They were already haggling over the spoils, deciding who was getting which ships and how many were going to be proportioned to each member. Cyra was sitting in for him, and he wasn't surprised that the House of Karinne's modest request for just a few ships of each ship class out of the enemy fleet had been granted by unanimous vote. Cyra had, however, taken it upon herself to add one more operational super-ship to the request, and she'd had the holographic balls to ask for the enemy flagship to be the one sent to the Academy, arguing that it would have the most technology in it from which they could all learn. The council had agreed to that request, to Jason's surprise. So Sha Ra's command ship would be the one systematically disassembled by the Academy to learn the secrets of its construction and its technology, and the Karinnes were going to get a second operational super-ship for their own use. The full negotiating savvy of the various Confederate members were on display in the council chamber at that moment, as they jockeyed and schemed to get the ships that they wanted, either to use in their own militaries, to research Syndicate technology as the Karinnes were going to do, or for the metal and other valuable materials they contained. Jason figured that was going to keep them busy for at least a takir, and as far as he was concerned, that was just fine. They needed these little diversions to keep them occupied and out of his hair, which would let him and certain others, like Zaa, take care of the real business.

Dellin was already preparing an assessment team for the super-ships that would be delivered to Karis. Unlike the others, Jason had already

claimed his super-ships out of the ones at Skirasis, both damaged and operational, and the KMS was preparing to move them to Karis. They were getting seven, six damaged super-ships and one operational one, and all but one of the damaged ones would ultimately be refitted to become support vessels. It would take *years* just to refit one of them, given their sheer size, but it was worth the time and the effort. A super-ship would be a mobile base of operations for the KMS, holding everything they needed, even fresh-grown food, and the ship itself could be a deadly threat in battle, at least if the KMS used them properly. A ship that big could *easily* be equipped with multiple GRAF cannons, like the ones on Kosigi, as well as an absolute arsenal of other weaponry. But the KMS wasn't going to use those ships for front-line combat. They had fatal flaws that the KMS themselves had exposed in the brief war with Sha Ra's fleet, and they weren't going to hang them out there to be destroyed. But as support vessels, as rear-line support assets that could selectively bring that immense firepower to bear from a protected position, and the ability to carry tens of thousands of troops and enough equipment and supplies to feed and equip them, they were ideal. They were nearly perfect.

"I'm alright, you big worrier," Jason chided Amber as she sat in his lap, licking his left hand almost in an act of motherly consolation. He ruffled her head a little bit, making her purr. "Songa says I'll be fine by tomorrow afternoon. But I gotta admit, that Benga woman can *punch*."

Amber looked up at him with disapproval.

"Hey, sometimes you have to defend your territory," he smiled down at her. "Besides, it did the job. Sha Ra was trying to stall to find a way out of the trap she was in, so I went over there and beat her up to put a stop to it. And I *enjoyed* it," he said fiercely. "She had it coming to her with all the people she got killed on both sides, and all of it was completely unnecessary."

She gave a noncommittal little growling yip.

"I know, but at least Aya didn't kill me afterwards," he said in a low tone, which made Amber growl a bit in amusement. "Yeah, yeah, you jump too when Aya gives you *the look*, don't deny it." He put aside the handpanel holding the formal surrender agreement, then leaned back in his chair and turned it around to look out over the moonlit ocean, his fingers digging into

Amber's sinfully soft fur. She settled on his lap and purred in contentment. "Tomorrow's gonna be busy," he mused. "The harvest festival will start tomorrow, and we may have put it off too long. The fruits on the tree look about ready to fall off and given how far they'll fall before they hit the ground, they could do some real damage," he chuckled. "I made you a little sling so you can go with Rann and not fall out. We're gonna have a meeting with Songa, too. Aria's doing much better than she expected, and she might release her to come home early and set up a schedule where we bring her over to the annex for some of her treatments. Songa was never one to want to keep a patient in a hospital bed any longer than absolutely necessary," he chuckled. "And that means that we'll be going to Kimdori Prime for Jyslin's treatment. That might work out for the best. Provided she doesn't have any complications, it means she'll be recovered right about the time Dahnai's recovered from her surgery, and that means they can learn together. I'd rather teach both of them at once than one at a time," he observed. "I am a little worried about that. The treatment for Jyslin does have some risk, after all. I mean, look at what it did to Dahnai. I know that the Kimdori will do everything they can to make it as easy on her as they can, but she's my wife. I'm gonna worry just to worry."

Amber patted his hand with her paw.

"I'm sure she'll appreciate your concern," he told her. "I have to say, Amber, I'm *glad* that Jyslin is doing this," he continued. "I hated keeping secrets from her, and she never complained about it. And all because she was feeling jealous over Dahnai," he had to laugh. "I swear, Faey are even worse than Terrans when it comes to pettiness. But they do have their bright spots. I did marry a Faey, after all."

"I'm so glad to hear that," Jyslin said from the door, startling him a little bit. He turned enough in his chair to see her, wearing a *Paladins* oversized shirt that went all the way down to her thighs. "You talking to Amber again?"

"She's a great listener," he said, patting the vulpar on the head. "Where are you off to?"

"Over to Tim's," she said with a trill in her voice, speaking because he was. There was little doubt what she was going over there to do. "Since you're ignoring me, I have to go find my fun elsewhere."

“I’m not done with the paperwork yet,” he sighed. “Just taking a little break.”

“I did hear that they signed the surrender. So that’s a good sign.”

“I guess it’s hit the news by now,” he chuckled. “The war with the Syndicate is officially over. At least round one,” he sighed. “You know there’s gonna be a round two.”

“No, love, the war with the Syndicate *here* is over. The war with the Syndicate *over there* is just about to begin,” she said with a grin.

“True enough,” he agreed. “Lorna, Myri, and Navii are already working up the plan for attacking the Dreamer homeworld, along with a couple of Zaa’s military Elders.”

“Why is Lorna in it?”

“Lorna’s not doing it as the CCM commander, but as Dahnai’s senior military advisor, representing the INS. We’re assuming that it’s only going to be us, the Kimdori, and the Imperium until we know otherwise. After all, taking the war to Andromeda isn’t what most of the Confederation signed up to do. So we can’t use the CCM. Each empire has to pledge assets to the operation independently.”

“Ohhh, okay,” she replied. “Any of them commit yet?”

“We haven’t asked officially. But going on what I’ve seen so far, we’ll get at least a couple dozen of them to commit to the operation,” he answered. “The biggest one will be Shakizarr. The Verutans have a *huge* Navy, and them devoting some ships to the plan will help out a whole lot. Getting Holikk on board would also be a huge plus. The Subrians can leverage the rest of the Coalition into supporting us, and that gives us a lot of ships.”

“He’ll probably go for it. He’s smarter than most of them,” Jyslin declared.

“True enough,” he agreed.

“Well, I’m gonna head over. They’re waiting for me,” she purred.

“Have fun, love.”

“I always do,” she told him, then turned and sauntered out of the office.

Amber gave a little sighing growl, which made Jason burst out laughing. “I can’t argue with that,” he agreed, scratching her behind her ears, in one of her favorite spots. “Alright, let’s get back to this. I’d like to finish before midnight. I have the feeling that tomorrow’s gonna be nearly as momentous as today.”

She gave a little bark.

“I don’t need to be an Oracle to predict that, you silly thing,” he teased as he swung his chair fully back in front of his desk and brought up the next hologram over the surface. “Sometimes I wish you and me could trade places. I’d love to lay in your lap without a care in the world while you handle all this annoying crap.”

She put her head down in his lap and purred contentedly.

“Meanie,” he accused, scratching her behind the ear.

Raista, 29 Shiaa, 4404, Faey Orthodox Calendar

Saturday, 15 September 2018 Terran Standard Calendar

*Raista, 29 Shiaa, year 1329 of the 97th Generation, Karinne
Historical Reference Calendar*

Foxwood East, Karsa, Karis

It was a small first step in the rest of her life.

With tender care, Jason helped Aria—now *officially* Duchess Aria Karinne—out of the hatch of the frigate *Mairu* on a glorious sunny morning and out onto the dock that extended out into the ocean not far from his house. Her eyes were bright and her smile dazzling, because she was home to stay. The furniture had been delivered and set up that morning, Jyslin had went in there with Ayama and Surin and they’d fixed up the room with everything that Aria had wanted, and Songa had released her just an hour ago. She’d still be making daily trips to the annex for both physical and psychological therapy, but she’d be sleeping in her own room and spending

most of her time in her house, with her new family, and surrounded by those who loved her and cared for her. And Songa said that that in itself was a big part of her therapy. She wasn't in armor, wearing a *Paladins* tank top, a pair of white shorts and a pair of leather sandals she'd bought the day before when Jyslin took her shopping, and she looked quite excited.

"Wow, it's a long way to the shore," she noted.

"Well, the dock has to go out a ways to get into water deep enough for the ship to land," Jyslin told her. "If you don't want to walk it, pippy, we can bring up a hoverchair. And I'd be happy to carry you if you want."

"No, I can do it, I walk further than that in therapy," she assured them, keeping hold of Jason's hand as Amber dashed out of the frigate and ran a few dozen shakra, then turned and gave a commanding little yip and sat down.

"We're coming, you little terror, don't kink your tail," Jason retorted "Ready for the walk, Aria?"

"Mah."

"Amber wants to show you your new room," he chuckled. "And if there's anyone in the house you don't wanna keep waiting, it's her. So let's go," he winked down at her.

Rann and Shya came out of the frigate behind them and kept the same slow pace as Aria navigated the long dock, looking around as they walked slowly. It took them a little time to get down to the beach, and the going got slower when Aria had to deal with the loose sand under her feet, then climb the stairs up onto the deck connected to the house. They paused there a moment as Aria rested a little bit, taking the opportunity to look over the rail and down at the beach and ocean. "It really is pretty here," she said.

"It sure is," Jyslin said. "And to think, Jason wanted to live up on the northern continent, where it's cold," she added, giving him an accusing look.

"I grew up in the cold, I prefer it," he defended himself.

"I grew up somewhere even colder than you, and I hate it."

“Well, that just shows that you’re a weakling,” he teased. Aria laughed when Jyslin slapped him on the shoulder.

“I’m ready,” Aria announced, turning back around.

They had one more set of stairs to navigate, getting up onto the second floor where her bedroom was, and then Jyslin opened the door and they led her inside. She looked around in wonder, at the pictures and posters that Jyslin had put up, at her bed, dressers, viddy, and writing desk, then at the little mobile in a corner that had pictures of her new family on it. Jason was honestly surprised that instead of looking around and exploring, she instead buried her face in her hands and began to cry. He folded her into his arms and comforted her as Jyslin tried to do the same, and Rann and Shya also came close and put their hands on her back and shoulders in support. “We can change anything you don’t like, my little treasure,” he assured her. “There’s no reason to cry.”

“No. I’m crying because I’m happy,” she said from his shoulder. “I have my own room. My own room in my own house, with my own family. It’s the dream come true. A good dream came true,” she said, then started sobbing again.

It took a while to get her to calm down, and after Jyslin cleaned up her face with a handkerchief and a smile, they stepped back and let her do what Jason expected her to do first, explore her room. She made a bit of a mess doing it, dumping all the clothes they bought onto the floor and going through them, which would make neat-freak Ayama nearly have a conniption when she had to fold everything and put it back, then tried out both chairs and the bed, then went inside her closet and looked around. She came back out and sat on the bed again, and Jason did the same. “There’s something I want you to see,” he said, pointing at her nightstand. It had a holo-clock hovering over the surface, but it also had a small console with two buttons. “Doctor Songa had a sleep inducer built into this bed,” he explained. “That’s the machine that lets you sleep without dreams. Now, she said that you can’t use it all the time,” he warned. “But if you ever wake up in the middle of the night and you’re afraid to go back to sleep, it will be there to make sure you have a sleep without dreams. Eventually, you’re not going to need it, Aria, but until that day comes, it’s going to be here for you to help you.”

“Good. I like to not have dreams.”

“It’s not healthy for you to sleep without dreams *all* the time,” he warned. “But for right now, Songa said it’ll be alright. She wants you to start trying to sleep without it, but if you can’t get to sleep or have a bad dream, it’s here for you. We know it’s going to take you a little time to get over what happened. But eventually, you won’t be afraid to sleep anymore, my little treasure,” he said, taking her hand. “That’s our goal here, that you get to where you’re not afraid to go to sleep. It’ll take us a little time and a lot of work to get there, but we will.” He pointed at the console. “It has two buttons. The blue button turns it on, and the red button lets one of us turn it off if we need to wake you up early for some reason. It’s already been programmed with a timer that wakes you up in the morning, and also lets you wake up if you need to go to the bathroom. When you press the button, pips, you have two minutes to get in bed and get comfortable, then it turns itself on. But it won’t turn itself on unless you’re in the bed, so you don’t have to worry about accidentally turning it on. Got that?”

She nodded. “Mah. Sounds simple.”

“It is,” he agreed.

She took off her interface and set it on the nightstand, then fidgeted with it a bit. “So that’s what that’s for.”

“Yup,” he chuckled as she put it back on. “Since you can’t so much as flush the toilet without an interface, that’s the first thing you’re going to be reaching for when you wake up in the morning.”

“I like that. I think it’s neat making things happen just by thinking at them.”

“Now, we’re going to let you settle in a little bit by yourself. This is your room, your private space, so we’re going to give you a little bit to look around without us here,” he grinned. “We’ll be in the house, pippy, downstairs, and we’ll only be a call away if you need us. When you’re done, let us know with your interface so we can come up and help you down the stairs.”

“And remember, we’re going to the harvest festival in about an hour, so don’t spend *too* much time in here,” Jyslin winked. “It’s starting soon.”

“Will we really get to fly up and pick the fruit off the top of the tree?” she asked.

“Sure will, pips,” Jason told her with a smile. “I’ve already got a platform ready for you. I built a chair into it so you can sit while you’re picking fruit. That way you won’t tire yourself out.”

“We’re using our hoverbikes!” Rann said eagerly.

“What are those?”

“Kind of like flying seats, like your hoverchair, but they go *much* faster,” Jason told her with a smile. “Rann and Shya got them as presents last year, and I’m amazed they haven’t crashed them yet.”

“Maybe we can take you for a ride on one, Aria,” Shya offered.

“Not on yours, they’re too small. I’ll take her for a ride on mine if she wants,” Jason declared.

“That sounds fun. I’d like to go really fast.”

They cleared out of her room to let her spend a little time alone, then got involved in the preparations for the festival. His tree was now completely dominating the entire beachfront district of northwest Karsa, having grown out to the dimensions that the *shaman* had predicted, which caused its canopy to cover a diameter of nearly five kathra of land some 600 shakra below on the average. The tree was *gigantic*, rivaling some of the smaller mature trees in the grove near the Parri village...and to think it grew to that titanic size in just three years...it defied logic. Even from that distance, Jason could see the tiny reddish-purple dots that were clusters of mature fruit among the golden leaves high above. All around them, in neighborhoods up and down the oceanfront and almost all the way down to the business district, people were getting ready. There were 30 different rally points for this festival, where people could get access to flying platforms to go up and pick their own fruit, and it was scheduled to last for three days, to give everyone plenty of time to pick every fruit from the tree.

Not all of it was staying on Karis. Jason had already arranged to send a crate of fruit from his tree to every Confederate ruler that could eat *oye*—which was the vast majority of them—as a gift of sorts. Dahnai had Saelle and quite a few of her Imperial Guard over here to pick fruit for her while

she and Sirri were in council, fully intending to get enough to last her for a month. And that was fair, since the only rule about these fruits were that they couldn't be sold. Anyone could pick as many as they wanted, and if someone could pick a full month's worth of fruits, then more power to them.

Aria didn't stay in her room very long at all, maybe twenty minutes, and Jason went up and brought her down to the landing pad. They let her inspect the various vehicles sitting on the pad, let her go inside the dropship and skimmer and Jason let her sit in the cockpit of his Nova, then Jason took her for a ride on his hoverbike, which she *really* enjoyed.

[Jason, we're about ready to begin,] Ayama called from where the fair was set up, where they had games, rides, and booths set up for the entertainment of the visitors. She was managing the festival from there. *[Are we good to go?]*

[If Aya says we are, we are,] he replied.

[Security is arranged, so we're ready here,] Aya answered.

[Then let them loose, Ayama,] Jason declared. *[We'll be over to the site after we've picked a few baskets.]*

One of the emergency sirens began to blare, and others picked up its tune. And seconds later, all manner of flying transports rose up towards the tree up and down the coast and well inland. The harvest festival had begun. Aria giggled as Jason swept her into the seat on the converted flying platform, and Jason hooked his safety harness to the rail after strapping her in. Jyslin got on behind him as the kids took off on their hoverbikes, Amber in a pouch slung on Rann's side and tethered to it with a harness for safety.

"You ready, Aria?" Jason asked as he started up the engine in the platform.

"Yes! Let's go!" she said eagerly, pointing towards the canopy high overhead.

They weren't the only ones rising up from the strip. Just about everyone else was doing the same, from Tim and Symone on a platform with Lyra rising up from next-door to Temika and Mike with their kids down at the other end of the strip, and all of them went out to sea instead of inland,

since nearly half of the tree's canopy extended out over the ocean. That was where they'd have the least competition for prime clusters of fruits.

Aria had a *blast*, and Jason had to admit, so did he. Her enthusiasm to do something new was infectious, and there were so many fruits that he had no problems finding clusters that were easy for Aria to reach. They talked to friends and neighbors up under the canopy as they moved from cluster to cluster, filling the three baskets Jason had on the platform, and it gave Jason a chance to introduce Aria to her neighbors in a friendly, exciting atmosphere. She met everyone from the strip, most of the Generations, and quite a few of the highest ranking government officials up there, with mecha and Wolf fighters prowling at a lower altitude, ready to catch anyone who fell or whose platform went out on them, as well as enforcing the no-go zone around the trunk of the tree, which encompassed the strip. Other security was up among the branches of the canopy wearing armor, making sure nobody got off their platforms and tried to climb among the branches.

In all, they were out picking fruit for about three hours, and then they visited the fair set up not far from the strip and let Aria play a few carnival games and try some of the food that had been prepared for it. Jason had quite a haul of fruit himself, picking about three crates of fruit for family use—they went through a *lot* of *oye*—and he ate maybe a little too much cotton candy and *haka* nuts. Aria tried just about everything the fair had to offer, since she was still enjoying the ability to eat solid food but enjoyed the games even more.

It showed much about her. After spending half her life in that bed, she wanted to see and experience everything she could, and the sights and sounds of a street fair were a delight to senses long denied any kind of stimulus whatsoever.

They were about to pack it up for the day when Cybi got hold of him. [*Jason, you need to go to Project G,*] she called over the biogenic network. [*RDX has some news for you.*]

[*Sounds good, tell her I'm on the way,*] he answered, a bit bolstered. News worthy of calling him there in person? It sounded good. "Afraid work just called, guys," he said, patting Aria's shoulder. "You be good for Jys, Aria. I'll be home as soon as I can."

“You’re going?” Aria protested.

“Afraid so. Work waits for no one, Aria, not even me.”

“Don’t worry, pippy, there’s still plenty for us to do,” Jyslin told her.

“But I wanted to do it together.”

“This is the first ugly reality of being in my family, pips,” Jason chuckled, leaning down and kissing her on the forehead. “I’m not just your father, in a way, I’m the father of everyone who lives on the planet. And that means that I’m usually pretty busy. I’ll be home as soon as I can, I promise.”

Aya relented in allowing him to get on a frigate without armor, but she was sneaky in that she had his armor on board. So, it was an armored Jason that got off the frigate after it landed beside the test facility up on Virga, greeting Scientist RDX in the Ruu manner when she scurried out of the main building. *Scientist, you sent for me?* he asked.

Yes, your Grace, she answered with a bright smile. *I have a major breakthrough to show you!*

Awesome! What did you find?

Simply put, your Grace, I have produced viable results! she declared eagerly. *Come, check my findings!*

Jason nearly ran into the facility with her, and she took him straight to the main work room and put him in front of a hologram hovering in front of a piece of compressed Neutronium. *As you know from my last status report, I’d come across a composite frequency that was achieving 387% increase in integrity of the sample. Well, today, I discovered that I’d been using insufficient harmonics in the base frequency. By including molecular harmonics across multiple quantum states in addition to base state harmonics, I’ve achieved a composite interphasic frequency that increases armor integrity by 10,700%. Given that the base metal of the armor is compressed Neutronium, that makes the armor section virtually invulnerable,* she declared brightly.

Really? Show me!

She did just that. They retreated behind a safety shield and hard shield, then she activated the IP lab system. She then had a rail cannon fire on the section, and the results were *astounding*. Compressed Neutronium could resist a rail cannon shot normally, but the rail slug did deal damage to the armor. Repeated hits in the same point could penetrate it. But the armor section energized by RDX's frequency showed that it absorbed all the energy of the attack and then used that energy to reinforce the molecular structure of the armor, literally taking the attacking energy and using it to defend. The energy distribution graph showed it in super-slow motion, and he matched it to the power consumption graph of the IP system. Going on those numbers, he could see that this armor could stand up to *any* weapon that was based on three-dimensional physics even a *particle beam*. It would even hold its own against a stream weapon, which was *designed* to conduct through the armor and get into the ship behind it.

Simply put, it *worked*.

I am yet unable to reproduce the effects gained in the IP system used on frigates, your Grace, she apologized. I suspect it might be because of the slightly different molecular arrangement of laminated Neutronium compared to the carapace. But, with additional research and testing, I should be able to achieve a similar result. In the short term, I believe that what I've discovered is viable for production, she continued. When I achieve the desired result, we can simply retune the existing IP system with the new frequencies and make whatever changes need to be made to the equipment.

You didn't make any changes to the IP system?

A few, which I've documented in the specs. We had already devised a suitable insulator to place between the hull bulkheads and the armor, which prevents interphasic bleed into the hull.

Sounds good.

Further, your Grace, I believe that we can install this system in the frigates without interfering with the CMS, by installing a new type of emitter, she continued. I designed a dual-use emitter that can energize both armor sections but does not need to be placed inside the carapace the way the current emitters do. That removes the pinpoint weaknesses in the frigate

carapace caused by the emitters. The CMS waveform can be transmitted through the carapace with only a 17% loss of signal strength, and we can compensate for that with some signal boosters in the system just before the signal reaches the emitters. The CMS effect only works on the laminate, the carapace only conducts the signal to it. As with the original system, the CMS and IP can't be used at the same time. Even if you install different emitters, the IP system absorbs the CMS waveform while active, which renders it inert. But this small design change does remove the pinpoint weaknesses in the KMS frigates by putting the emitters behind the carapace instead of within it.

Jason looked up at the Ruu, and a huge grin bloomed on his face. *Absolutely outstanding, Scientist, he praised, his thought overflowing with respect. You have truly outdone yourself. And to think you did all this alone.*

To be honest, the solitude gave me time to think about the work we'd done before the others left without distraction, she admitted with a small smile. Further, as per your request, I've done some work on creating IP for other armor systems. I was working on that when my efforts with the carapace system were unproductive, to see if that work progressed my work on the carapace any further. I have a viable composite frequency for basic Neutronium, Adamantium, Lovarium, Telvasite, Meklium, Pyrium, and even refined Carbidium and all forms of armor-quality Titanium. Those are the basic armor types used by the majority of the Confederation. As with the carapace, these frequencies are not yet fully optimized, but they produce results that are viable and make the system worth installing on our ships. With additional research, we can achieve optimal power, but the basic system itself is now viable.

RDX, that is outstanding, he told her reverently.

To be honest, your Grace, most of the other armor types were relatively easy to discern, because they lack the molecular complexity of Neutronium. The Telvasite, Carbidium, and Titanium were the easiest, since they are atomic substances, and thus I only had one atomic frequency to consider for each of them. But, as I said, I haven't yet found the optimal composite frequency for any of them. I have simply discovered a composite that makes installing the system on Confederate ships viable. The increase in armor integrity outweighs the power consumption, which in turn makes the system

worth installing. With time and more research, we can optimize those systems to give them far more protective power. I have even designed a generic emitter based on shared Confederate technology that any of our allies can use. Further, I can certify that the emitter itself is ready for production. I designed it to be capable of emitting any composite frequency, so when we change the frequencies to increase the IP power, the emitters will not need to be replaced. The only changes will be to the IP generator.

Girl, I should have let you do this by yourself from the start, he noted, which made her laugh.

Not so, your Grace. I was working on the foundation we laid as a team, she answered modestly. Without Tom and Bo, and specifically Rook, I would not have gotten half this far by myself.

Well, you're going to be getting them back tomorrow, he told her. With the Syndicate fleet defeated, they'll be coming back. And I want you guys to work on the IP frequencies for other empires' armor, he added. What we have for our carapace hulls will be good enough in the short term, now we need to work on our allies. What kind of results do you get for standard Neutronium? That's what several of the most important Confederate Navies use.

Approximately 8,380%, your Grace. When energized, it makes it roughly equivalent to the IP system in a frigate. However, it comes nowhere near the defensive power of an IP carapace.

What about Confederation standard Adamantium?

The best I've managed so far with standard Adamantium is 780%. However, now that I've finished work on the carapace system and Neutronium, I'm going to focus my attention on Adamantium, given how many of them use it. I see no reason why we can't achieve 8,000% with Adamantium as well.

Yeah, I'd say that's more than viable, Jason agreed, then he gave a sudden laugh. Well done, RDX. Well done indeed.

It was nothing, your Grace. And as I noted, we aren't anywhere near done yet. What I've discovered is only a part of the puzzle. There is much left yet to do. But I am confident that with further research, we will discover the optimal composite for every armor used by our allies.

Give me what you've worked out so far and put it on a handpanel, he told her. Specifically for the other armor types. Emitter installation procedures, distances, insulation requirements for spars and bulkheads, everything you've managed to discover. I'll take it to MRDD and Naval Engineering and let them design a system our allies can use. I need everything on carapace hulls on a different handpanel, and everything on standard Neutronium on another handpanel. I'm going to have different departments work on each of them. Oh, and include a fourth handpanel for coherent polarized Neutronium, let's give you something you can present to the Council of Science and get you quite a few ranks' worth of promotions. I'm sure you've done some work on your own people's armor.

Of course I have, she nodded. But that was not what I was hired to do, your Grace. I was going to do that work on my own after completing this contract.

As much as you've done for us, we'd be happy to help you with the fine points and give you something far beyond theory and laboratory models you can present to the council, RDX, he assured her. I'll put an entire department of MRDD on designing an IP system for the Ruu. And they won't even need to see the blueprints of your ships, just make sure to include the installation requirements on the handpanel and your people's engineers can adapt what they work up to their ships.

I would be most grateful for that, your Grace, she told him modestly.

You help us, we help you. That's how friends do things on Karis, he told her with a smile. And I think a bonus triple your consulting fee is also required here, which just barely shows how impressed I am with your work.

You are most generous, your Grace, she sent, her thought surprised and grateful. It was very bad manners in Ruu society for one to turn down such a gift.

It only took her about fifteen minutes to download all the specs onto four handpanels, then she handed them over to him. There you are, your Grace. If you don't mind, I'll get right back to work while you get things moving. I'll concentrate my efforts on Adamantium and Lovarium, as those are the composites I've made the least progress on so far.

Then I'll leave you to it. You have more than surpassed my expectations, Scientist, and I'm going to make note to Observer A personally of the quality and excellence of your work.

You are far too kind, your Grace, she sent almost girlishly.

Jason was barely back in the frigate before he was talking to Cybi. *[Have you been keeping the installation specs current with RDX's work?]* he asked.

[Of course I have. I take it you have something?]

[Stop playing coy, woman, I know you know everything in their mainframe.]

[I'm just trying to be conversational, Jason,] she replied lightly. *[To answer your question, yes, I have everything updated with the latest results RDX has managed to produce. We can begin the refit process for all KMS ships as soon as the emitters are produced and ready.]*

[We can start before that, they can go in and start installing the insulators on the bulkheads,] he corrected her. *[How long do you estimate it will take to refit the Tianne?]*

[Given its sheer size, perhaps 26 days,] she answered. *[And that's if we put the majority of Kosigi on it. If we start with the Tianne, we will make virtually no progress on any other ship.]*

[Yes, but the work on that one ship will teach us the best way to do the work on all the others,] he reasoned. *[Tell Juma to pull the Tianne off the board and warn Coma. And tell Dellin to suspend all other refit activity once the current ships are done. Then make both Juma and Dellin very mad and tell them that the entire schedule just got changed. Now every ship is adding the IP upgrade to the drive installation refit.]*

[So, we're delaying the operation in Andromeda?]

[Yes. It's more important to get our ships ready for action in enemy territory than it is to press the advantage we have. Our ships need maximum survivability to get back to the quadrary in one piece. And I think the entire Confederation could do with a brief respite from the war to gear up and get ready for round two, both for the ships and for the soldiers. Besides, the IP armor refit for Confederate empires won't stop our own

weapons, so we'll always have a means to put down any illegal activity one of the empires may pull off. It also won't completely stop MPAC and disruptor weaponry either, so that gives the Coalition and Dahnai some breathing room. And I'll make sure to point that out and look Anavan in the face when I say it. That should keep her from getting any bright ideas.]

[So, you intend to release IP to the Confederation?]

[Yes,] he answered. [We're going to need our side to be as tough as possible to hold back the Syndicate if they decide to invade in force. The combination of IP and diffusers will render virtually their entire arsenal useless, at least as long as the ship captains aren't idiots, and the only thing we'll really have to fear are the main plasma cannons on the super-ships. If they send their entire three million ship fleet over here, we'll need ships that they need those three million ships to destroy to hold them back.]

[I can't deny that logic, Jason,] she agreed sagely. [I should have something we can release to the Academy in a few hours. The system itself isn't really that complex, we just need the correct distances between the emitters depending on the armor type.]

[RDX already worked that out,] he reminded her. [And she has the specs in this handpanel for a generic IP armor unit based on Confederate technology. Where they install that unit is up to them, but we already have virtually everything we need. I'm going to run these panels up to MRDD and let them finalize the designs for each armor type, then we'll have something official to put on the Academy mainframe. Put Cynna on getting our own ships refitted, it'll be good experience for her. Besides, it falls under her authority since she's the Kosigi CBIM.]

[Cybi just sent me everything, Jason,] Cynna cut in. [I'll inform Dellin and begin changing the schedule immediately. I'll also warn the dock masters of the other empires that something major is going to come down very soon, so they may want to prepare for a major refit operation.]

[Good idea. Do it,] he agreed. [How are the IP systems for exomechs and small ships coming, Cybi?]

[MRDD is almost done with the Titan design,] she answered. [They should have a final design certified by Daira, then they shift to Juggernauts and Gladiators. They've completed the IP design for corvettes, gunboats,

and Wolf fighters, so we can start the refit process on them as well. What you may not know is that Juma had MRDD design CMS systems for corvettes, gunboats, and Wolf fighters,] she told him. *[And given the system that RDX designed, that might be useful. We can just install a laminate skin over the carapace on them, and we can piggyback the CMS on the IP system the way it's done in frigates. We just don't do it for all of them, only certain select squadrons. That way we have stealth capability for our small ships for certain operations.]*

[That's a damn good idea, go with it,] Jason agreed. *[How long will it take MRDD to convert those plans to RDX's designs?]*

[Not long,] she answered.

[Then I'd better see some results quick, or you CBIMs won't be worth all the time and effort it took to build you,] he replied.

[Don't get cocky, Jason,] Cybi teased. *[It would be a shame if that frigate you're on suddenly crashed into the ocean.]*

[You crash my frigate, I'm paying your core chamber a personal visit with a crowbar,] he threatened, which made her laugh. *[Get everyone into the offices that needs in and start explaining things to them, and get the ball rolling, Cybi. Hunt down Tren and explain what we need and get him to get the factory space for everything. I'll swing by the MRDD facility on Kosigi and drop these handpanels off, talk to Naval Engineering about the frigates, then inform the council what's going on.]*

[Alright. I'll work up some holos you can use to explain it to the council.]

[Good deal. Most of them need pictures to understand things anyway.]

[Be nice,] Cybi chided lightly.

Jason crashed into Kosigi's MRDD facility like a tidal wave, hijacking the office and getting them to work on the four different IP systems, then he went over the IP system on the frigates with Gia and several frigate specialists brought over to MRDD from Naval Engineering, discussing the major refit they'd have to do on them with RDX's changes in how the emitters were installed in the armor. They'd have to all but completely re-install the entire IP/CMS system in every frigate to move the emitters to the

new positions and install the signal boosters along the lines...and in a frigate, installing anything *new* was usually a massive headache. The signal boosters were very small, only about six tikra by four tikra by three tikra, but given there was virtually no empty space *anywhere* inside the hull of a frigate, fitting so many of them into the spaces under the armor and within the bulkheads was going to be a major headache. But the good news was, they were all fairly confident they could work it out. They'd have to do some work moving a few things around, and in one case they'd have to reduce the size of a series of crew quarters on deck 5 by about four tikra by moving the bulkheads inward to provide more space behind it for equipment, but they were certain they could do it.

Since the council was still in session, them all fighting over the spoils, Jason came back from Kosigi and landed right outside the Sora Karinne complex. They were still haggling over the ships when he walked into the council chamber, and they all went quiet when he stormed right up to the witness box and stepped up to the lectern there. "If I can have everyone's attention," he called loudly. "In a few days, we're going to release something new to the Academy mainframe, but it's important enough to give everyone advance warning, because it's going to cause a bit of disruption in our immediate future plans."

"You have the floor, your Grace," Assaba said from the lectern behind and above him.

"Cyra," he called, looking at her hologram which was sitting in his usual spot, and a few holograms appeared in the well between him and the tiers. "This is a new defensive system we're currently developing called an Interphasic Powered Armor system, or IP system. What this device does is reinforce the molecular bonds of the armor into which it's installed, absorbing hostile energy used against the armor and then redirecting it, causing it to actively reinforce the armor into which it's installed." Cyra put up an animation showing a ship's hull being struck by a weapon, the affected area turning red and spreading out through the local area of the armor. "Simply put, the more energy you use against it, the stronger this system becomes, up to a saturation point where the armor's power system overheats, similar to how shields work. This system works against any weapon that works on three-dimensional physics," he said. "Which means that weapons like Torsion weapons, Coalition disruptors, MPACs, and our

own pulse weaponry work against them, but virtually nothing else does. While that may not be very important, what *is* important is that neither the Consortium nor the Syndicate have any standard weapon that can penetrate this armor when it's paired with a diffuser, at least within reason. The two completely nullify almost everything they have, but like shields, the armor can be overloaded and brought down if it takes too much of a pounding. So, it won't make our ships invincible, but it will drastically increase their survivability against our Andromedan foes. Only the main plasma cannons on the Syndicate super-ships and the orbital and planet-based megaweapons the Kimdori have scouted on some planets in Andromeda work against this armor. Simply put, friends, once we have this system installed, it will turn our ships into heavily armored tanks against our Andromedan enemies, make them *extremely* hard to be taken out in battle. And given their vast numbers, we *need* this, we need this on every ship we can build."

He had their *undivided* attention.

"How well this system works depends entirely on what kind of armor the ship has that's using it," he continued. "Our researchers have been researching using Neutronium as a base, so they've gotten the best results from that. But they've done some research on every armor type used in the Confederation, and they've come up with something *viable* for every member. However, that's only *right now*. My lead researcher assures me that with additional research, she can come up with a much more powerful form of the powered armor for every member of the Confederation." Cyra put up a graph showing the increase in armor integrity depending on the type of armor used. "As you can see, we've gotten better results with some armor types than others, but even the weakest system increases armor integrity by 291%, which makes it worth installing as-is. And that result is only going to go up as my research team has more time to do their work. Eventually, my research team thinks we can reach a minimum of 8,000% increase for every armor type, not just Neutronium, which would turn even something like low-grade Carbidium or laminated Titanium into a major piece of armor that the enemy would be hard pressed to penetrate. But that's just an example. Remember, this powered armor increases the *base* strength of the armor into which it's installed. More durable armor makes more formidable powered armor, so everyone should continue to use the strongest armor they have available. We know that everyone is working to upgrade

their armor to Confederate standard Adamantium baseline, but we've still designed IP for your original armor systems so you can at least get it installed on the ships that have yet to be refitted, or on ships you don't intend to refit. We want everyone to have the ability to provide maximum protection for your ships, even older ships that you may not deem worth the expense to upgrade to Adamantium armor. This way, you can go with a much less expensive IP system to turn older armor into something much more formidable. And the best part is, as my researchers optimize this system and increase its power, it won't require extensive refits to upgrade. It will just take a few very minor tweaks to the main IP generator. That way everyone can install the system even if it's not all that powerful, because it *will be* once my research team has enough time to finish their work.

"We haven't completely worked out all the bugs in this system yet for other empires in the Confederation," he warned. "But we're very, very close. Like within a few days of having something we can release close. Given what this does and how important it could be to us, I've decided to warn everyone now, when usually I don't release anything until the specs are put on the Academy mainframe. The main reason is because it's going to require a major refit of every ship to install this system, and it's best to give the dock masters as much advance warning as possible so they can get everything ready. This refit is going to be time-consuming due to the way the IP system works, but it won't be very expensive.

"The other reason is because, in my personal opinion, we should postpone the upcoming operation to liberate the Dreamers in Andromeda until we can get this system refitted into every ship that's going to participate," he continued. "We're going to need every advantage we can get when it comes time to strip the Syndicate of the Oracles, and for one, I'm not sending my ships over there until I have this system installed on every ship that goes to Andromeda."

"Seriously, Jayce? Eight *thousand* percent?" Dahnai asked.

"For standard Neutronium armor, yes, at least something close to that. Actually, I rounded *down*," he nodded, his voice confident. "I've seen the recordings of the small and large scale tests my research unit did, and it's *very* impressive. I'll have it released to the council as soon as I can. My lab team set up a piece of powered armor and threw almost everything they

could at it that's based on three-dimensional physics, and they didn't even so much as *scratch* it. The large-scale tests we did showed that it can even partially resist a *particle beam*, the most powerful weapon based on three-dimensional physics possessed by any Confederation member. Everyone here has seen what a particle beam can do to most any ship, but against this armor, it couldn't slice it apart in the blink of an eye. It did manage to penetrate the armor, but not by very much, and it took it a while to do it. But, when it comes to the weapons our Andromedan foes use, dark matter weaponry, ion weaponry, even powerful weapons like hot plasma and high-yield missile warheads, the armor took it all and didn't so much as get a dent. The only weapons they use that it can't defend against are Torsion weapons, but that's what the diffuser is for. With both a diffuser and IP on a ship, it renders our ships virtually immune to most of the weapons they use, at least so long as the captain's not a gung-ho moron that charges a thousand enemy ships by himself. And *that* is why I'm standing up here right now telling you about this instead of waiting until we have a final product that we can release."

"I think you made the wise choice," Assaba said from behind him. "What results with Adamantium armor?"

"Right now, we've achieved a 780% increase in armor integrity," he said, pointing at the hologram. "But I have my research team focusing on Adamantium, since that's the strongest baseline armor available to any member of the Confederation. Give it time, and that number is going to increase, your Imperial Majesty. And if I know my team, it's going to go *way* up."

"What's involved with this system, your Grace?" Gau asked.

Jason spent nearly two hours explaining the system in detail, exactly what comprised it and how it worked, using holograms to provide visual examples of the physics behind the system and how it interacted with energy shields. He got a bit hung up trying to explain interphasic theory to a good half of the council, since they weren't physicists. Quite a few of them couldn't wrap their heads around the paradox that was interphasic physics, how something could exist in multiple states and only one state simultaneously. Eventually, though, he got enough of them to understand enough of it to have a very basic understanding of how the system worked.

And he honored RDX in his explanation. “This is based on two disparate projects, Karinne CMS technology developed by the research arm of 3D and the work of a Ruu scientist, Scientist RDX, who spent some time studying the tempering effect in silicon conduit, trying to increase the effect to produce armor-quality silicon,” he said. “We brought her into the project to consult, and I’ll say right now that she’s a critical reason why we’re as far as we are. Observer A, I can’t tell you enough good things about the work she’s done,” he said, looking at the Ruu, who was smiling at hearing that. “We may never have developed this technology without her assistance.”

“This is the very reason I sit in this council, your Grace, to combine our scientific knowledge with the Karinnes for the benefit of all,” he said magnanimously.

“Well, in this case, it paid off,” Jason said with a smile of his own. “We put a Ruu and a Karinne in a room together, and they came up with something brilliant. Anyway, friends, that’s basically how it works. The interphasic waveform infuses the armor and causes it to absorb any energy used against it, which then strengthens the molecular bonds holding it together. The stronger the weapon used against it, the stronger the armor becomes to resist it. Give us some time, and we’ll have a final version we can officially release to the Academy mainframe. In the meantime, what you *can* have your factories build are the emitters, my team says that design isn’t going to change. I’ll have the specs for them on the Academy mainframe as soon as the research team certifies the emitter for production. Any changes they make are going to be to the IP generation unit, the device that generates the interphasic waveform used by the system. So you can get a head start on emitter production and get with your navies and prepare a refit procedure based on the data we *can* put on the mainframe, and once we have a final IP unit ready for production, you can get those built and start the refit process.”

Cybi manifested a hologram, standing beside Cyra. *I’ve already placed all pertinent data onto the mainframe, Jason,* she announced. *It’s ready for all members’ engineering divisions to download and study.”*

“And there we go,” Jason said, waving a hand. “What everyone in this room should stress to your engineering and science divisions when you

confer with them is that this is not purely *naval* technology. My research team has already determined that this can be installed in *fighters and exomechs*,” he stressed. “So you should have your people look into using this technology anywhere you use armor, from static defensive positions to exomechs and tanks to fighters to line vessels. The IP generation unit can be as large or as small as required based on its power output. The larger the surface area it has to cover, the larger the unit has to be, so it can easily be installed in much smaller military assets. My team hasn’t determined how much they can miniaturize the IP generation unit using shared Confederation technology, but they do know for sure that we can install it on exomechs the size of Karinne Juggernauts. Anything that size or larger can take a Confederate IP system, which are most exomechs and armored mechanized units used by Confederate army and marine units.”

“That makes this even more useful,” Dahnai said sagely, to which Jason nodded.

“Now, if you’ll all excuse me, I have quite a few people I need to talk to,” Jason declared. “So with the chair’s permission, I’m going to leave the meeting.”

“Permission granted, your Grace,” Assaba declared. “I think we should all follow suit. I move that we adjourn for five standard hours to study the data released by the Karinnes and discuss this development with our internal advisors. Is there a second?”

“I second,” someone called.

“All in favor?” Assaba asked. He barely had to look at the voting results board on his lectern. “Motion passed. We are in recess for five standard hours,” he declared, then banged the gavel. He then took a step back and sat on the chair behind the lectern, and it sank quickly into the floor to stow his bionoid.

[And just how much of that was for show?] Dahnai asked over the biogenic network. [I’m sure your version of it is much further along.]

[Not by much,] he answered. [The only leg up I have over everyone else is the Karinne version of the IP armor is ready for production. I haven’t even started refitting the ships yet. Fuck, we haven’t even started building

the units yet, that's where I'm going now. I gotta get with Tren and have him hammer out a production schedule.]

[Then why is every KMS ship hovering around Kosigi?]

[That's for a different refit, but now our entire schedule is murdered,] he told her as he walked down the hall with Aya and Dera. [The ships that already finished have to go back and get refitted again. I'm sure Dellin's pretty mad at me right about now.]

[I was going to come over, but not now. I need to read what you put on the mainframe and talk with R&D and Black Ops,] she told him. [Basically what you're doing.]

[Just don't push yourself love, you're still recovering.]

[I have a bionoid over at the palace, I'll just jump over and call them in,] she assured him.

Jason hurried over to the White House, and he was almost kidnapped by Myri, who literally grabbed him and yanked him into the command center as he walked by on his way to Trenirk's office. *Cybi spread the word, she sent with an eager smile. Are the IP units ready?*

They're ready, and I was going to go arrange it with Tren to start building them before you dragged me in here, he accused. Get everyone together and I'll explain everything after I talk to him. No wait, actually, he trailed off. [Tren, I need you down at the KMS command center,] he called over the local network. [Meya, Myra, Jrz'kii, Kumi, I need all of you here as well.]

[We'll be over in a few minutes, Jayce,] Meya called.

[I am in the building and on my way, revered Hive-leader,] Jrz'kii responded.

[Kumi. Kumi!]

[She's in the pool, Jason, she doesn't have her interface on,] Cybi warned.

Kumi, workout is over. Dry off and get up to the KMS command center, he sent.

I was on my last lap anyway, be right there, babes.

I take it the meeting's going on here?

May as well, most of the people I need to talk to are in this room anyway.

About ten minutes later, Meya and Myra hurried into the room, and they were the last. Kumi was there, still in her bathing suit, and most everyone else was either wearing office clothes or duty uniforms. Jason and the guards were the only people in the room wearing armor. Dellin and Navii were present as holograms, and the CBIMs and Coma were also present as holograms. "I'm sure it's gotten around the building by now, but just in case you were in the pool and didn't hear," he said, looking over at Kumi, who laughed, "3D and our Ruu consultant cracked the IP armor system. Actually, it was mostly the Ruu," he chuckled. "But the bottom line is, we have a unit certified and ready for production and installation. The specs are final, and Tren, you should have the templates in your database by now."

"I do," he nodded.

"So, I don't think I need to say it, but I will anyway. We stop *everything* and we refit absolutely everything we can to IP. Ships, corvettes, gunboats, fighters, exomechs, anything we can get IP into, we're gonna do it. Jrz'kii, Meya, Myra, that's why you're here. The KMM and the KES are *also* going to get this system," he told them. "The power consumption on it is minimal, which means we can put it on KMM freighters with minimal power issues. I'm going to leave it up to you if you want to upgrade the tugs, Jrz'kii, but I definitely want any freighter the size of a KPS 400 or bigger refitted with powered armor, just for basic protection. And no matter what, *any* ship with a drive installed gets IP armor, period. So if you put drives on tugs, Jrz'kii, they have to be refitted with armor."

The huge Kizzik nodded in understanding.

"Meya, Myra, you need to get with Dellin and work out a schedule to refit the scout ships with armor, pulling them in from their current missions, refitting them, then getting them back out there," he told the twins. "Military ships are going to have priority, but Dellin, I want you to work in at least one scout ship every three days. We need those scout ships back out

doing their jobs. Start with the two scout ships that already have drives installed, work through them, then start on the rest of the KES fleet.”

“*That won’t be a problem, Jason,*” Dellin assured him.

“The same goes for the drive-equipped freighters, Dellin, except I want you to refit the KT-2K freighters we have with drives as fast as you can. We may need those ships to run supplies to Zaa’s people in Andromeda, so we have to get them back on the board as fast as possible.”

“*Again, not a problem,*” he answered. “*But I don’t think MRDD has a refit procedure ready for the non-military vessels yet.*”

“They’re working on it right now,” he answered. “Oh yeah, that reminds me. Change in policy, girls,” he said, looking at Meya and Myra. “Any scout ships that leaves the galaxy to do exo-galactic missions has to be *armed*. I’m going to have MRDD refit the scout ship class vessel with some defensive armament, and when the ships come in for the refit, any scout ship we refit or built with a drive will also be fitted with some weaponry. Not enough to make the ships KMS line vessels, but more than enough to deter anyone that comes after them.”

“I don’t see a problem with that,” Myra said. “As long as we don’t arm *all* of them. We need to keep some scout ships unarmed for diplomatic missions.”

“You two run the KES, you figure that out on your own,” he told them. “But I’ll give you that much. You can have *two* drive-equipped scout ships without armament, but I want those to only leave the galaxy if they’re on diplomatic missions. They stay inside the galaxy the rest of the time. The rest have to be armed.”

“That’ll work,” Meya nodded.

“Tren, Dellin, this is gonna be all on you,” Jason said, turning to the Makati and the hologram. “Tren, you get the IP systems built as fast as you can, it has complete priority over *everything* until you’ve built an IP for every current ship in the inventory already refitted with a drive. Keep in mind that we’re gonna need *tens of millions* of the emitters, Tren, so be ready to mass produce the ever-living *fuck* out of them. I think the *Tianne* alone is going to need close to two million emitters to do the install. I don’t remember the exact number, but it had seven digits in it. Once you have

enough IP units built for the ships with drives already installed, you produce the new drives and the IP for the ship meant to get that drive at the same time. Work it out with Dellin so he knows what's about to come off the production lines and can have the ships waiting in the docks for the units, just like you did with the diffusers. And Tren, be ready to branch out with the IP systems. Keep in mind that systems for fast attack ships, fighters, and exomechs are gonna be designed and put on the queue, so be ready for it when you get the templates. I already understand that we have way too many tactical assets to get all of them refitted quickly, but do your best to get as many of each class built as you can so we can get some upgraded mecha up and running."

"I've got a large block of new factories about to come online, Jason," Trenirk said. "I'll have the production capacity."

"Dellin, Juma, I know it's a gut punch, but our old refit schedule just got wiped out," he told them. "We need to get a new schedule that takes all the ships we've already refitted with drives and send them back for *another* refit," he chuckled. "Dellin, I want you to focus on those ships first for the IP refit. Once every ship in the fleet with a drive has IP installed, start on the rest of them. And just do it all at once. The drive, the IP, the power plant upgrades, all of it. I want you to start with the *Tianne*, and you pull whoever you need to pull to get it done within 26 days of when you start the refit. Coma, you're in charge of the refit for your ship," he told the hologram. "Take the data and specs on the Project G mainframe and get with the Shield's Hammers and work up an installation procedure. While they're doing the job, watch, see what works and what doesn't, then use that experience to design installation procedures for every class of line vessel except frigates, we already have a procedure ready for them. Take what you learned from your ship and alter the procedure to make it as efficient as possible for everyone else."

"I'll begin immediately, Jason," she answered. "I should have an initial draft ready for inspection by tomorrow morning."

"Sounds good. Kumi."

"What? I'm not sure why you even brought me into this meeting, babes."

“You’re the one that’s going to pay for all of it, Kumi,” he told her, which made half the room chuckle. “But the main reason you’re here is because the refit to the KMM might disrupt some of our commercial cargo deliveries. Have your office get with Jrz’kii’s office and figure things out, and if it does, well, you know what to do.”

“Reschedule,” she grinned.

“Just do what you can to make sure none of our customers are mad enough to take their business elsewhere,” he chuckled. “I know this is gonna cause some major issues for just about everyone, but as far as I’m concerned, this is absolutely necessary,” he told them all. “I don’t want any ship to leave this galaxy that isn’t prepared, and that means IP armor. And we’re going to need it when we go to rescue the Dreamers from the Syndicate. If our plan to trick the Syndicate into leaving the system undefended fails and we end up having to take the system by force, we’ll need every single ship we can muster with IP installed. So, that’s it. Everyone knows what to do, and there’s plenty enough of it. So meeting’s over. Go get it done.”

The non-KMS people hurried out of the command center, all the holograms winked out, and Juma and Myri all but ran over to the board so they could start planning the new schedule. Jason didn’t linger, he left the command center himself, but he didn’t run up to his office. There really wasn’t much more he could do, so he was going to go home and check on Aria and let his people do their jobs. He had full confidence in their ability, after all. They’d proven themselves again and again over the years, and he was honestly humbled that he had such a great staff to keep everything running. He didn’t have to micromanage them...and in Myri’s case, trying that would just get him the stool in the corner.

They would do exactly what he wanted them to do, and they would do it far better than he ever could. And that was a lesson that it had taken him more than a few years to finally learn. It was hard for an engineer to *not* want to have his hands in everything. It was sort of what they did.

Koira, 36 Shiaa, 4404, Faey Orthodox Calendar

Saturday, 22 September 2018 Terran Standard Calendar

*Koira, 36 Shiaa, year 1329 of the 97th Generation, Karinne
Historical Reference Calendar*

Kosigi Lunar Station, Karis

He honestly wasn't sure if he should really be looking forward to this, or terrified of it.

Things were under control enough for Jason to fulfill his promise to Jyslin, and they were on their way to Kimdori Prime so she could undergo the treatment to become a Generation. And while a part of him wanted it for her, the other part of him was more than aware that this was not a risk-free procedure. He had every confidence in Zaa's medical team, but given Jyslin's age, there was always a risk that she would reject the treatment, and that could put her life in jeopardy.

But there was certainly one person in the family that did not want Jason and Jyslin to go, and that was Aria. They'd originally planned on taking her with them, but Songa had more or less shot that in the foot. She refused to medically clear Aria for a trip to Kimdori Prime, and not even Jason could make her change her mind when he sicced Luke on her. It was one of those things that reminded Jason that Songa was a doctor first and foremost. Aria was her patient, she felt Aria was not ready for the rigors of a journey like that and the restrictions it would place on her, and that was that. Jason couldn't intimidate her into changing her mind, Luke couldn't sweet talk her into changing her mind, and Aria couldn't sad baby doll eyes her into changing her mind.

So, it was a very weepy and more than a little frightened Aria that clung to Jyslin at the loading ramp for the capitol ship *Pegasus*, docked to one of the main spars in Kosigi, and Jason could tell that leaving Aria behind was threatening the entire plan. Jyslin looked torn, and the tears in her eyes were not in any way feigned or faked. Aria didn't want them to go, and that alone was almost enough to make Jyslin change her mind.

But Zaa was not a woman who changed schedules based on emotions.

"Oh, pippy, you're going to be fine," Jyslin sniffled a bit as she hugged the pink-haired Dreamer. "Ayama and Surin and Seido are going to be there, and we're only going to be gone for two nights. We'll be home the

day after tomorrow. I know you like them, and they'll take very good care of you," she assured her, patting her on the back. "And it's not like we're not going to see you. We'll be checking in every hour while we're on Kimdori, so you're going to see us over the hologram."

"It's not the same," Aria said, clutching at Jyslin's shirt. "Rann and Shya are going. I'll be alone."

Jason saw that Jyslin wasn't going to leave so long as Aria kept her there, and Aria had learned enough to know that she could get her way if she made Jyslin feel sorry for her. In that respect, Aria was as devious and cunning as any Faey girl. So he intervened, kneeling beside them and pulling Aria free of his wife, then giving her a hug. "It's going to be alright, pippy," he told her in a calm, gentle, reassuring voice. "And you're not going to be alone. Remember what I told you about this?" he asked, tapping her interface.

"That you can talk to me anywhere, and I can talk to you."

"Exactly. We're only going to be a call away, or at least I am, the whole time. Jyslin is going to be asleep for a little while so she can let the doctors do their work, but you can talk to her before that and after that as much as you want. Trust me, Aria. You'll be just fine. You may even have fun while we're gone, who knows," he said as she pulled back to look up at him.

"I don't want you to go."

"Look at me," he said, and she did so, her eyes sheened over. "Do you not want us to go, or do you not want us to go without you?"

"I don't want you to go without me."

"Well, my little treasure, welcome to one of the bad things about being awake. The fact that sometimes, you have to do things you don't want," he told her evenly. "We don't want to leave you here any more than you want to be left behind, but that's life. Songa says you're not ready for a trip like this, and we can't postpone it. So, here we are. I'll use the robot that looks just like me to check on you while Jyslin's in the hospital, and you can talk to us using the interface while we're on the way over and after Jyslin wakes up."

“Tell ya what, Ari,” Rann said. “Me and Shy stay here so you’re not alone.”

“Really?” she asked, looking back at Rann.

“I think you need us more than Mom does,” he declared. “Besides, Dad can put some bionoids on the ship and we can use those to see Mom when she wakes up.”

“Yeah, we can do that,” Shya agreed.

That’s very mature of you, son, Jyslin sent with some pride in her voice.

I don’t really wanna stay behind, but I think she’s about to freak out, he answered. *Me and Shy can just use the bionoids Rook made us to see you when you wake up.*

“Oh, thank you than you guys!” she said, giving him and Shya a hug. “I won’t feel alone if you’re here!”

I’ll call down to the house to have their bionoids brought up, Mai offered.

Yeah, go ahead, Jason nodded.

It took a little bit to get everything organized. Rann and Shya’s bionoids were brought up from the house, along with another guard detachment, and they took the kids back home with their luggage, at least after a lengthy farewell on the ramp. Jason and Jyslin boarded the ship and went to the stateroom not far from the personnel ramp along with a full detachment of eight guards led by Dera, and they had a seat on a nice couch in front of one of the large viewing windows as the *Pegasus* released its docking clamps and slowly pulled away from the column. After the chaos of the last month, it was nice to just sit on a couch with his wife, her snuggled up against him and his arm around her, spending some quiet, quality time together before her procedure. They’d fought a short but very violent, costly war, they’d adopted a new daughter, and the last seven days had been a chaotic whirlwind of activity as the entire Confederation geared up to prepare to refit their fleets to IP armor. Jason must have spent two straight days running around getting everything ready, including spending some time over at Project G helping RDX, Tom, Bo, and Rook as they got back to work, and their focus was increasing the power of Adamantium IP armor.

They'd gotten it up to 1,007% when he had to go back to his day job, breaking that 1,000% barrier.

But things were slowly getting back to normal, and what Jason found most relieving, Aya had partially removed her wartime restrictions on Jason and the family. He still couldn't drive himself to work in a hovercar, but she'd removed the armor restrictions in what she considered to be safe zones on the planet. That meant no armor to leave the house or his office as long as he stayed on the strip or on the White House complex grounds, no armor to go to the Parri village, and no armor in controlled military facilities like on board a ship or in Kosigi. But she did say that once the transfer of Syndicate sailors to Q3XD-19 was complete and all Syndicate ships were transferred to Confederation custody, then all restrictions would be removed. Any further action against the Syndicate was going to take place in Andromeda, and Aya considered that far enough away to not lock everything down.

Things were looking up on several fronts. Myleena was close to finishing her testing on the drives and was close to officially certifying them. But that certainly hadn't stopped Jason or Zaa from getting as many ships as they could upgraded, once Myleena stated that the base design of the drive wasn't going to change. Any further changes would be made to the base design, which meant small refits that the ship's engineering department could make themselves. Project F had worked out almost all the operational specs for the drives, determining their safe operational ranges and their unsafe ones, learned just how far they could push them before they broke, and so on and so on. Myleena's last report said that she may have the final specs certified by the middle of Hiraa, including having all the documentation written up, both operational and maintenance docs. Jason had told Zaa that Myleena was literally writing the book on the drives, and that book was nearly finished.

It was enough to give him hope. With both the drives and the new IP armor, he was starting to feel more and more confident about taking on a government that controlled 90% of a *galaxy*. It would not be a head-on war, not if they could help it, but the House of Karinne preferred not to fight wars that way. Their method of warfare was much less straightforward, and a whole lot meaner. In that respect, the House of the Karinne and the House of Trefani got along *very* well.

The Kimdori had already begun their great exodus from their home planet, just as Jason expected. As exploration ships were refitted with drives, they headed out to explore the galaxies on their side of the cluster. Zaa was building exploration ships with nearly as much zeal as she was military vessels...and after things were settled with Andromeda, most of those military vessels were going to become exploration ships. The Kimdori were going to all but scatter to the winds in their mad rush to satisfy their curiosity about the galaxies surrounding them, going out to explore. At their heart, that was what the Kimdori were, explorers, almost obsessive in their quest to know what was over the next hill, to know what was around the next curve in the road.

He could admire that. And the Karinnes were more or less going to do the same thing, that was why he had 650 new scout ships ordered for the KES, which would keep Kosigi busy when the need to build military ships ebbed, and many of their frigates and destroyers were going to be pulling starcharting duty as well once the war was over, paving the way for the scout ships to come in behind them and explore in more detail what the frigates and destroyers discovered. They'd have all those ships, there was no reason to just mothball them. They may as well use them to go out and explore.

Well, one part of what was coming *was* going to be a head-on war...the capture of the homeworld of the Dreamers. Myri and the military minds were busy at that moment designing the plan for that operation, and the number of participants had expanded to 82 empires, and with some very important members among that number. Both Skaa empires, the Verutans, the Haumda, they were all in, and what was most important, the Subrians had done what Jason hoped and leveraged the entire Coalition through their mutual defense treaties to contribute assets to the operation. Sure, they were only chipping in maybe 20 or 30 ships each, but those ships were going to *matter* when the time came to take the Syndicate's queen off the chessboard.

Once they had the Dreamers out of the Syndicate's clutches, Jason hoped the Syndicate would back off.

Mmm, this is the way to travel, Jyslin purred mentally, putting her head on his shoulder. *Nervous?*

A little. This isn't completely risk free, he admitted. But on the other hand, Zaa's confident they can keep you from having any major complications.

The only thing I'm really looking forward to is the TK, she told him. I've always wished I could do it, since I was a little girl. It's been the one real regret in my life.

All because of your best friend, he teased lightly.

Jealousy is a major motivation for a Faey, baby, she admitted shamelessly. It always burned me up that Liki had TK and I didn't, since I was so much stronger in talent than she was.

You said she could barely move a feather.

Well, yeah, but she could do something I couldn't, she protested, which made him chuckle.

And I'm sure she was jealous over how much stronger in talent you were.

So? I wanted her to be jealous.

He had to laugh. Why did I ever marry into this species? he lamented.

Because you have more sense than most Terrans, baby, she replied cheekily. Admit it, you'd be miserable if you had a Terran wife like Temika. I don't see how Mike stands it.

Maybe because he has the same beliefs she does? he challenged.

Two wrongs are still wrong, she retorted. All these years we've tried to get Temika laid outside her marriage, and that stubborn bitch just refuses to budge.

Jason laughed raucously. Just remember, you're playing with fire, love. Someday she's gonna make her displeasure with your meddling abundantly clear with a right hook.

If it wasn't dangerous, it wouldn't be fun, she told him lightly.

They watched as the vast gloom of the interior of Kosigi yielded to a very close view of the exit tunnel for the capital doors, the wall beyond looking like it was sloped because the ship had to turn at an angle to get out,

lining up its stern with the widest aspect of the tunnel. Widening the tunnel yet again was on the board for after the war was over, widening it just enough to make the process of getting a fleet flagship in and out less daunting. As it was, it was a process that required all three navigators on the ship and about 30 tugs deployed at the widest part of the stern to make sure the ship didn't drift into the wall. The ship crept through the tunnel at a speed that took it nearly twenty minutes to clear the doors, and once they were out, the ship turned towards the center of the galaxy. *We're about to jump, your Graces*, Jeya warned as the view outside *snapped*, a visible indication that they'd gone mode one to get to jump distance. *Are you ready?*

Ready to go, Jeya, Jason answered.

"All hands, prepare for jump. All hands, prepare for jump," Jeya's voice came from the ship wide intercom. *"Estimated jump time, seventeen minutes, fifteen seconds."* The viewing window's blast shield lowered—standard operating procedure when jumping hyperspace—and seconds later, they jumped out of three-dimensional space. And thanks to all the advances they'd made in recent years, they weren't in jump restraints and Jason wasn't already wishing it was over.

But there were a few things to do. *Jyslin, you need to armor up*, Dera reminded her. *We're in a section abutting the hull.*

Oh yeah, she nodded, looking towards the newly promoted Lieutenant. *Can one of you girls get it out of the storage room, please?* she asked as she stood up.

Look at the bright side. You won't need it on the way back, Jason smiled as she took hold of the tail of her shirt and pulled it over her head, revealing her lovely breasts.

She laughed. *That is so gonna take getting used to*, she answered as Mai went into the storage closet holding their luggage. *Just knowing I'm gonna be resistant to radiation after this is over is a weird feeling. Almost like I'm turning into a superhero.*

It's not all that much of a super-power, but it does have its uses, Jason chuckled. *But it is somewhat rare company. Only us, the Kimdori, and*

Jakkans have strong resistance to radiation. And the other two blow us away, their resistance is much stronger than ours.

I've always wondered exactly how that works, Jyslin mused.

Simple. Radiation deals damage by breaking down and killing cells and damaging DNA. It doesn't do that to us, at least up to a certain point, he answered. Our cells are much more resilient against high-energy particle bombardment, which is more or less what radiation is. Kimdori get around that because their bodies are built on viral structures, and Jakkans metabolize most forms of radiation, their bodies actively absorb it. Which is why Jakkans have to wear radiation containment suits, because they're radioactive, he sent with a chuckle. But, after this, you'll be able to shake a Jakkan's hand without either of you having to wear a suit. And trust me, it's not all that great an experience. Jakkans are even uglier out of their suits than they are in them, he sent distastefully. They look like withered zombies.

No offense to the Jakkans, but I shiver a bit whenever I see one. That no nose thing just creeps me out, Jyslin admitted.

My opinion of them went way downhill there for a while because of Graith, but I've gotten over that.

And what are you looking at, baby? she asked playfully as she started unbuckling her belt.

What do you think I'm looking at?

You'll see plenty more in just a moment, she winked. Maybe on the way home we can join the hyperspace club.

He had to laugh.

Jyslin got her armor on in plenty of time, wearing a helmet with a transparent faceplate, but it turned out to not be needed. The ship's shields came up just as they came out of hyperspace, which protected everyone near the hull. "Jason, Jyslin, Zaa's people say that everything is on schedule," Jeya called over the stateroom's intercom. "You'll land at the medical center and go straight in. They're waiting for you."

"Good, because I really don't want to wait around," Jyslin answered. "The sooner we get this done, the sooner I get home to the kids."

They loaded themselves and the kids' bionoids into a skimmer and exited the huge ship, and Jason piloted them down on the vector supplied to them by Kimdori's traffic control with Jyslin in the co-pilot's chair. She was in good spirits, bantering with him and the guards on their way down, but she got a lot more serious when they landed at the medical center and saw ten Kimdori standing there waiting for them, Zaa, Grun, Miaari, Kiaari, and Kemaari among them. Jason felt more gravity about the situation himself as they came out and greeted them. "Your Graces, I am Hervaani," the most mature of the ten Kimdori declared. "Elder with the most experience in this procedure. We have everything prepared, and we can begin the procedure whenever you feel ready."

"I'm ready right now, Elder," Jyslin declared. "Am I going to need armor?"

He shook his head. "We have a special room set up with radiation shields for you," he answered. "And we must get you inside before the ambient radiation works its way into your armor and forces you to decontaminate it."

"Oh yeah, I forgot about that," she laughed. "Lead on, then."

In a nearly shocking amount of time, they had everything prepared. Jyslin was again nude and laying on a medical bed in a room deep in the center, a room set up with radiation shielding. The Kimdori placed an IV in each of her arms as he stood at her bedside with Rann and Shya in their bionoids, holding her hand as she tried to get comfortable. Aria was also attending in the only way she could, a hologram of her hovering at the foot of the bed as she looked on in concern. "How long will I be out, Elder?" she asked.

"About thirty hours, your Grace," he answered. "You'll be asleep through the entire process."

"And I'll be here the whole time," Jason assured her.

"I'll watch over you while you sleep, Pamma, just like you do for me," Aria said, which made Jyslin smile in the hologram's direction.

"I'm sure you'll make sure I have good dreams, pippy," she told her. "Alright, Elder, doctors, let's get this going."

Moments later, Jyslin was asleep, and they were evicted from the room to an observation room next-door. Rann and Shya took turns sitting with him, splitting their time between him and Aria, but Jason didn't leave the room. Hour after hour he sat on the comfy chair and watched over his wife, watched the status hologram behind her as her body's cells were rewritten by the retrovirus introduced into her body, and he worried. He didn't have to worry that much because her vitals were strong and the Kimdori kept him apprised of her progress, which was very good, but he still worried. Her body showed early signs of accepting the therapy, and they had her on several medications that both eased her body through the process and kept her comfortable.

He stood vigil over her through the night—at least night on Karis—while the kids slept, and they were right back with him when they woke up. About halfway through the procedure, Hervann came in and told him that the largest part of the danger had passed, that her brain, heart, liver, bone marrow, and pancreas had all been completely altered by the retrovirus, and that the prognosis for a complication-free procedure was very good. As darkness fell on Kimdori he continued his vigil, catching little naps while Rann or Shya watched for him.

He was taking one of those small naps when Hervann woke him up. “Your grace,” he said.

“Ya?” he asked sleepily.

“The procedure is complete,” he announced. “Duchess Jyslin suffered no complications, and we'll be waking her up in just a moment.” He leaned back and motioned towards the room, and Jason saw that they'd taken down the radiation shields. After all, they weren't needed now. “You can go into the room now.”

He hurried in as Aria popped up on a hologram in the room, and Dahnai and Sirri popped up on another. Rann and Shya both jumped into their bionoids and rushed into the room with him, and he took her hand as Hervann removed the two IVs. Seconds later, Jyslin's eyes opened, and she focused them on him with a sleepy smile. “Hey you,” she said in a low voice. “I take it we're done?”

“The procedure is complete, your Grace, and was a success,” Hervann said before Jason could answer. “You are now a *cousin*.”

“I don’t feel any different,” she mused. “No, wait. I feel something strange looking at you, at all of you.”

“That’s all the proof we need,” Dahnai chuckled.

“Why can’t I hear anything?” Aria demanded. “I see your mouths moving. Is something broken?”

“Dahnai, guys, remember, nobody outside of the Generations can know, not even Tim, Symone, and Aria,” Jason warned, then he enabled the audio for Aria’s hologram. “Sorry pippy, I forgot to turn on the sound,” he apologized. “Pamma Jyslin is all done with her treatment, and she’s just fine.”

“See, pippy? Awake and feeling fine,” she said, waving to the hologram.

“She’s just fine, young cubling,” Hervann agreed, taking on a very gentle, nurturing voice. “And she’ll be home tomorrow morning your time. We just need to keep her here for a little while to make sure the treatment didn’t cause any side effects, and then she’ll be free to go home.”

“Hear that, baby girl? I’ll be home in time for breakfast,” she smiled at the hologram. “And since I’m awake, I can come see you in one of the robots.”

“I like the robots. I think it’s neat that you can see and hear through them from so far away,” Aria declared. “How do they work?”

“That would take a long time to explain, pippy,” Jason laughed. “Uh, she *is* cleared for that, right?” he asked Hervann

“After an exam, a meal, and a brief rest,” he answered.

That was taken care of quickly, while Jason and the kids waited in the observation room. Jyslin returned about an hour later, walking confidently on her own and looking entirely recovered. She gave Jason a deep kiss and a hug, then knocked his socks off. [*This isn’t that hard at all,*] she communed. He gave her a surprised look, then had to give a bright laugh.

[I shoulda known,] he smiled back at her. [You always were an overachiever.]

[It's how I keep up with you, love,] she winked in reply. [And I can't wait for the TK lessons.]

[I'll enjoy ordering you around,] he grinned. [You'll have a few other things to learn as well, like splitting and accessing a gestalt. Those parts aren't instinctive. But I can say this, my love. It feels so right being able to commune with you. I'm glad you asked for this.]

[So am I,] she smiled, gazing lovingly into his eyes. [I'm with you now, Jason, I'm a part of you and your life, and the lives of my children. I belong now. You don't have to hold back from me anymore.]

[Never again,] he vowed, then he gave her a long, lingering kiss.

And kids, being who they were, always knew the best way to ruin moments like that. Rann pestered her for his own hug, and she finally relented and attended to her son and adopted daughter, then her other adopted daughter once a hologram of Aria appeared in the room. "All done with the exam, Aria," Jyslin said with a bright smile. "I'll be over in the robot in a few minutes to see you. So will your pam," she added, poking Jason in the side.

"Are you okay?"

"Doctors say I'm just fine," she assured the Dreamer with a smile. "No complications at all. They said I'm perfectly healthy."

"Then why do you have to stay? Can't you come home now?"

Jyslin laughed. "Because the doctors say so. And in Faey society, one *never* argues with a doctor," she said firmly.

"Well, I do, but I'm special," Jason said lightly.

"Yeah, and how many of those arguments with Songa have you won, baby?" Jyslin challenged.

"Enough to keep doing it," he replied with a shameless smile that made her laugh. "Besides, I love the look on Songa's face when I remind her that she doesn't run the house."

Aria brightened right up when Jason and Jyslin merged to their house bionoids and sat with her during breakfast, hearing all about what she, Rann, and Shya had done yesterday while waiting, then they saw her off when Ovin came from the annex to take her for her therapy. After she was off to start her day, Jason and Jyslin went for a walk outside the medical center, along purple-plant lawns with those strange wispy trees and bright green flowers planted in a small garden, and Jyslin almost acted like a little kid. She touched all the plants, more than once put her palms up to the sky to feel the radiation emanating from the sky, and even dared wade through a small stream that flowed over the grounds. *[You're just being silly now,]* Jason accused as she leaned down and ran her hands through the water.

[Hey, we didn't have sensor mesh tech the last time I was here,] she reminded him. *[It's an entirely different experience when you can feel everything. This water is radioactive.]*

[Love, everything on this planet is radioactive,] he reminded her with an audible chuckle. *[That's why you have to leave your clothes here. They'll be irradiated by the time we leave. And we'll have to take a decontamination shower once we're back aboard the Pegasus.]*

[Like I need a reason to take my clothes off for you,] she said with a grin at him, then she waded out and back to the lawn and put her slippers back on. *[So, are you going to bother trying to explain everything to me, or stipulate here and now that I already know everything?]*

He had to laugh. *[There are a few things I think you don't know,]* he told her. *[And now I know what you're up to when I wake up and you're already up, looking down at me.]*

[The biggest job of any girl is to make sure she keeps hold of her man,] she communed shamelessly. *[And if that means I have to do a little spying, then I'm gonna do a little spying.]*

[Oh please,] he scoffed, which made her laugh. *[And remember, woman, I can do the same thing to you.]*

[I don't have any secrets from you, baby, so go right ahead,] she grinned at him.

[That is such a lie. All women have secrets.]

[Maybe Terran women.]

[I'll make a Terran out of you yet.]

[Don't ever think that again,] she retorted forcefully, which made him laugh.

[I'm not as well trained as you think I am.]

[I've seen how crazy you drive Aya,] she winked. *[So, what do you think I don't know?]*

[Let's see. Do you know about the Kimdori?]

[Yup. I know why you call them cousins. And I knew what it meant when I looked at Hervann when I woke up. I know you can sense each other.]

[Okay. What about the Program?]

[I know enough to know why it was so hard for you to make the decision,] she answered. *[I get the feeling there's more there, since you bury it pretty deep in your memories.]*

[I'm going to explain some of that to Dahnai, so you can learn at the same time. Now, the biggest question. Do you know how to keep a secret?] She gave him a flat look, but it didn't deter him. *[I'm not being funny, Jyslin. Tim and Symone may know about Dahnai and the kids, but they will never know about you. The only people who will ever know about you are the people that you can't possibly hide from, the Generations and the Kimdori, and the Imperial Guard, because we can trust them. That means you have to keep a secret from someone that close to you, and it's a pretty big one. Tim can never know. Symone can never know. Maer can never know. Your parents and brother can never know. Lorna can never know. Ayama, Surin, and Seido can never know. The strip girls can never know. Aria can never know,]* he stressed. *[Everyone closest to you in your life that aren't Generations will never know that you're a Generation, Jyslin. Take it from me, sometimes that can be a burden. And if I'm not enough of an example, talk to Saelle. Dahnai is her best friend, but before she was changed, she had to keep those secrets from her, and it did affect her relationship. That's why you see the Generations all living around the strip. It's not so much that we stay together out of some common bond, it's just that it lets us talk to people who understand, people we don't have to hold*

back a part of ourselves from. It can be a little lonely to bear this burden, Jyslin, so we live near each other so we can support each other and bear it together.]

[And that's the secrecy part. You also bear the same burden we do, love. You will have tremendous power,] he communed soberly. [And it's your responsibility to use it carefully and use it wisely. I try to avoid any semblance of arrogance, Jys, but it's just a simple fact that we are much stronger than those around us, and we can pose a danger to them. But Jyslin, don't ever think that just because you have more power than they do, that it makes you better than them. That is the trap that our ancestors fell into just before the destruction of the house. Just because we have more power, it doesn't make us any better than anyone else. It doesn't make any more right, any more deserving, any more entitled. It is our responsibility to respect both the power of our heritage and the rights of those around us not to be victim to the power we can wield. We use our power only for self-protection and defense, and if there is any one lesson I want you to learn, it's that. We have the potential within us to become monsters, Jyslin. Far greater monsters than the Syndicate and the Benga ever were, exactly because of the tremendous power that we can wield. It's the most solemn duty of the house to make sure that never happens. My primary goal as the Grand Duke Karinne isn't to protect ourselves from the galaxy, it is to protect the galaxy from us. That is why being a Generation is much more than just what we can do. It's about who we are, both where the rest of the world can see us and when the only person looking at us is our reflection in the mirror. Being a Generation is about having the moral conviction to not become the monster within, Jyslin Karinne, to protect home and planet, to use our abilities in the defense and aid of friend and ally, but to never become what the Benga have become. And now, that is your burden as much as ours.]

[And now you're a part of our very small family,] he smiled, taking her hands as she came up to him. [And I have to admit, I'm very relieved that you are. Now, instead of having to keep these secrets from you, we can keep them from everyone else together.]

[That was all that I wanted, my love,] she smiled, gazing into his eyes. [And I promise you, I can keep this secret. It won't be that hard, since I have a jack. Any time I commune, people will just think I'm using my interface.

We can make up some story that I had latent TK all along and never developed it. I believe that I'm going to spend some time with Ayuma after her work's done the next few takirs, going through the exercises she used with Shya.]

[We may have to,] he acceded. [It would be best if you kept your TK a secret, but if you make a big production out of seeing if you have any latent talent, that might work. And nobody would really be surprised if you developed it. But just how strong you are, yeah, that'll be a secret. Cause I get the feeling that you're going to be very strong.]

[As for the rest of it, I've been with you since the beginning, Jason,] she smiled. [I think you can admit that if there is one person in this world that understands the responsibility that comes with this, it's you. And you're all the role model I need. You have so much power, both personal and political, yet you're the most humble man I've ever known,] she told him, putting her hand on his cheek. [And now that I know what I know, it shows me just how incredible you truly are, Jason Karinne. To have what you have, yet be who you are, you are truly special. I am truly the luckiest woman in the world to have you as my husband.]

[And, you just saved yourself from divorce,] he communed, his thought light and playful, and that made her burst out laughing. [Now, why don't we go back inside and see if we can talk Hervann into letting you go home early?]

[You hold him down, I'll tickle him until he gives in,] she grinned.

They didn't get to go home as early as Jyslin wanted, but that was Zaa's fault. When they went back in, she took Jyslin aside and had a four hour long talk with her in private, no doubt telling her everything Jason had but with more formality and making sure she understood the situation, lecturing her as only Zaa could. Jyslin managed to survive that conference, coming out of the room with a smile and rolling her eyes a bit, but Jason was a bit surprised at just how much Zaa told her. Zaa had revealed the Kimdori's greatest secret to Jyslin, their ability to share...mainly because she knew that Jyslin already knew about it. That was one of the things that she'd picked up from Jason, and to her credit, she'd kept it a secret for years.

And it said much about Zaa's opinion of Jyslin that she had left her alone all this time. She'd entrusted Jyslin with that secret, and Jyslin had not disappointed her.

Eventually, however, they did manage to get out of there a good six hours early, after Hervann gave Jyslin another exhaustive exam and decided that there was no chance of a complication showing up late. And Jyslin all but ran out of the medical center as soon as Hervann signed off on her release, afraid they'd drag her back. They escaped back up to the *Pegasus* and had Jeya get them on their way home, again as fast as they could. But it wasn't about Jyslin rushing away from Kimdori, it was about her getting home before Aria woke up so she could surprise her. Jeya didn't disappoint, getting them back to Karis within half an hour of them boarding, taking Miaari and Kemaari with them back to Karis, and Jyslin just barely managed to change into some fresh, non-irradiated clothing before they came out of hyperspace.

It was 6:30 when the skimmer landed on the pad, a good three hours before sunrise, but Ayama was standing on the pad waiting for them. *Good grief woman, get some sleep*, Jason chided her as they landed.

I was already up, she replied as Jason opened the hatch. *Would you like something to hold you over until breakfast?*

Actually, that sounds awesome, Ayama, Jyslin answered. *We kinda hustled out of there before we had dinner. Breakfast, whatever. The time difference on Kimdori Prime is pretty big right now. I'm gonna have space lag today*, she sent ruefully.

A quick nap always takes care of that, Jason told her as he came out of the skimmer behind her, and the guards filed out behind him.

Ayama didn't get too fancy, pulling the leftovers from dinner out of the fridge and heating them, then she made a pot of coffee and sat down with them at the table after serving them. Jyslin got her first experience at keeping secrets as she had to explain what the trip was about to a curious Ayama, going with the prepared story and sticking to it, and doing just fine. After eating, Jyslin went to take a nap before the kids woke up, but Jason didn't join her. He decided to enjoy the pre-dawn breeze out on the deck, leaning on the rail and looking out over the starlit ocean.

Jyslin, he felt, was going to be just fine. He'd been worried about the gene therapy, and she'd come through. But what was more, the *shaman* was right that he didn't feel guilty over giving her what she wanted...mainly thanks to Zaa and her assurance that she wouldn't allow the Karinnes to restart the Program. Not that he was worried about anything like that happening anytime soon, but there was always a chance that in a few centuries, long after Jason and Rann were gone, that one of their descendants might decide to change Karinne policy. Thankfully, Zaa would always be there to keep his children's children in line.

But there were lots of other things on his mind as well. With the new IP armor, the Confederation was going to have a much easier time of things with Andromeda. It would give them a decided advantage in battle and would give them a real shot at taking the homeworld of the Dreamers if his plan to trick the Syndicate into leaving the planet undefended failed. Their giant fleet would come up against ships that would shrug off their missiles and their converted ion cannons like they were nothing, then proceed to kick the ever-living shit out of them. The only real trick there was going to be taking the planet—moon, it was a moon—before the Syndicate destroyed it. All it would take would be one super-ship set on a collision course, and that would effectively wipe out the Dreamers. But he had faith in Lorna and the others. They'd take his ideas and use them to come up with a solid plan.

And he couldn't forget, the Consortium was coming. Their colonization force was only two and a half years away, a gigantic fleet escorting *hundreds of thousands* of civilian transports. The council still hadn't entirely decided on what to do about that, but one thing was for sure. If it came down to a war with the Consortium, it would be *ugly*. A fleet that size could spread across the entire galaxy and wreak havoc, do untold destruction before the Confederation could stop them.

And there was still the threat of the Syndicate. Taking their Oracles may not quell them, and they very well may see the attack on the Dreamer homeworld as a declaration of all-out war with the Confederation. There was the possibility that they would send their entire fleet at them, *millions* of ships, so they had to be careful. The Syndicate problem was the most daunting that they faced, and they couldn't afford to screw that up. The solution to them had to be diplomatic, but the big question was, how long it

was going to take the Syndicate to come to the bargaining table. It might be after losing their Oracles, it might be after the Karinnes had a little time to romp around their galaxy and blow enough stuff up that it started showing up on their profit margins. And there was always the chance that they would *never* accept any kind of real, lasting peace, that their lust for conquest and spoils would drive them to break every treaty made with them. But they had to find a way. Getting into an all-out war with a government that controlled all the resources of an entire *galaxy*, and a *big* galaxy at that, was going to doom the Confederation to centuries of endless war. It might turn the Milky Way into Andromeda, with entire sectors laid waste by an enemy that didn't value life, that saw the systematic genocide of *trillions* of people as little more than the cost of doing business. The risks were great when it came to the Syndicate, but there had to be a way to secure a lasting peace.

But he had hope. And here lately, he was almost feeling optimistic about things. He wasn't sure if the Parri had anything to do with that—just thinking about that made him put his hand over his *jaingi*—but he just has this good feeling, something that came from deep inside. That feeling told him that the worst of it was behind him, and while the road ahead was certainly not going to be easy, it did ultimately lead in the direction he wanted to go. And he wanted to believe that his feeling was right.

The alternative was the bitter cynicism of a man who watched his entire world burn.

But there were also some mysteries for him to solve. Aria was one, and the Parri was the other. He still couldn't fathom how her people ended up in Andromeda, and it was his hope that he would find out when he talked to her people once they were liberated from the Syndicate. Perhaps they remembered who took them there, when it happened, and why they did it... because he just could not understand why they would do such a thing. Truly, it just made no sense to him for some ancient spacefaring race to pick up a species and transplant them to another *galaxy*. Was it part of a plan, or just dumb luck? Were the Dreamers placed in Andromeda for a purpose, or just because that was where that spacefaring race came from? And what of that ancient race? If they were traveling between galaxies 40,000 years ago, where were they now? What had become of them?

Then there was the Parri. His curiosity about their “magic” had not waned one iota since he discovered a new part of himself, and he wanted to know more. He didn’t want to become a *shaman*, but he wanted to learn what the *shaman* was willing to teach him about what the Parri could do. Was it magic, or was it psionic? What kinds of things could they do that they hadn’t showed him yet? He was almost driven to distraction by his questions whenever they bubbled up to the forefront of his mind, but he’d just had no time to satisfy his curiosity.

Soon, hopefully, he would. He could use the lull in action over the next few takirs to take a few trips to the Parri village and have a few long talks with the *shaman*. He could do it in the evenings, after he finished teaching Dahnai and Jyslin.

He rose up from his leaning posture on the rail and took in a deep breath. It really was just heaven here, with the sea and the breeze keeping it from getting too hot. His home, this was his home. And now, it felt a little bigger, but also much better. He had an adopted daughter he loved like his own, and a wife that he no longer had to treat as something *other* than what he was. His kids were all healthy and happy, his babies were showing quite a bit of promise and potential, and the house was showing great resilience and resolve over the last few months, dealing with several changes to the basic way things worked and dealing with the short but ugly war with the Syndicate’s invasion fleet.

Things were good. And he had this good feeling that maybe, if he was careful and didn’t fall into any traps, that things would get better.

Thus ends the story of Conviction.

In the next story, Retribution, the

Confederation takes the war to

Andromeda to free the

Dreamers, playing a dangerous

*game of escalation that very
well may plunge two entire
galaxies into total war.*

And there will be other stories to tell.